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Chapter 1



Even when there are no prisoners, I can still hear the screams. They live in the walls like ghosts and echo in between footsteps. If you travel down deep into the belly of the castle, beneath the barracks where the guards sleep, beneath the Telling Room, that is where they linger behind the quiet moments.

The first time I was brought down here I asked my guards what they did to make them scream so. One of them, Dorin, had looked at me and shook his head, his lips pressed together so tightly they turned white, his pace quickening towards the Telling Room. I remember at the time feeling a thrill of fear, the idea of something so terrible, so horrifying that even my calm, strong guard couldn't say it aloud. I promised myself that I'd find out, that I'd discover this dark secret hidden underground. In my thirteenth harvest year I

was naïve. Hopelessly, blindly naïve.

When I first came to the castle, many, many moons ago, I was awed by it, by the decor and the beauty and the richness of it all. There are no rushes on the floor here, no straw embedded with lavender and basil to keep it sweet-smelling. The queen demanded carpets, rugs, runners woven especially for her to tread upon and so our footsteps are muted as we walk.

The walls behind the rich red and blue tapestries are grey stone, flecked with mica that flashes when the servants pull the hangings aside to wash the walls. Gilt and gold adorn the antlered candelabras above my head; cushions are velvet and tasselled and replaced as soon as the pile is rubbed the wrong way. Everything is faultless and pristine; everything is kept ordered and beautiful. The roses in the tall crystal vases are all cut to the same length, all the exact same colour and arranged the same way. There is no room in this castle for things that are not perfect.

My guards walk carefully at my sides, holding their bodies rigid and keeping a good distance between me and them. If I raised an arm to reach for one of them they would recoil in horror. If I tripped, or fainted, if reflex sabotaged them and they tried to help me, it would be a death sentence for them. They would find themselves with their throats slit where they stood as an act of mercy. Compared to a slow death by my poisonous skin, a slit throat would be lucky.

Tyrek was not lucky.

*

In the Telling Room my guards move to stand against the door and the queen's apothecary, Rulf, nods curtly towards the stool I am to take, before turning his back on me and checking his equipment. The walls are lined with shelves containing jars of murky substances, strange powders and unnamed leaves, all jumbled together with no obvious order to them. Nothing is labelled, at least not that I can see in the dim light the candles cast, for there are no windows this deep under the castle. At first I thought it strange that something like the Telling would be performed here, hidden away in warren-like passages carved underground, but now I understand it. If I were to fail. . . Best for that not to happen where the court, the kingdom, could witness it. Better for it to happen in this secret little room, halfway between the underworld of the dungeons and the relative paradise of the Great Hall.

As I arrange my skirts around me on the stool, one of my guards, the younger one, scuffs the floor with his feet, the sound too loud in the stone chamber. Rulf turns, dealing him a sharp glance and as he looks away he catches my eye. His gaze is blank when it skims over me, his face a mask, and I suspect even if he weren't mute he'd have nothing to say to me now.

Once he would have smiled and shaken his head as Tyrek told me about the trees he'd climbed and the pastries he'd filched from the kitchen. He'd have waved a hand at Tyrek to tell him to stop showing off, even as his eyes shone with affection for his only son. Though the Telling itself only

takes a few moments, I used to stay down there for an hour, sometimes two, sitting opposite Tyrek, two arms' lengths between us as we exchanged stories. My guards would hover close by, keeping one curious eye on Rulf as he went about his experiments and the other on Tyrek and me as we chatted. Back then I had nowhere to be after the Telling, save my temple or my room, and there was nothing to stop me having those few stolen hours down in the Telling Room under my guards' careful watch. But things are different now; these days I have other demands on my time.

I keep my eyes down as Rulf performs the Telling, cutting my arm and catching a few drops of my blood in the bowl held beneath it before he carries it across the room. He'll add a single drop of blood to the Morningsbane, deadly poison with no earthly antidote, before bringing the mixture to me. I wait silently, my head bent as he mixes the blood and poison together, as he decants it into a vial. I hold still as he approaches me and drops the vial into my lap. I lift it, the oily liquid crystal clear in the candlelight, no sign my blood is even in there. I remove the stopper and drink.

We all pause, watching and waiting to see if the poison will take me this time. It doesn't; I play my part to the letter. I place the vial on the table beside my stool, smoothing my skirts down and looking to my guard.

"Are you ready, my lady?" Dorin, the elder of my guards, asks, his face eerily pale in the torchlight. The Telling is over, but I have another duty to perform and I feel Rulf's baleful glance on my back as I leave the Telling Room.

I nod and we walk to the stairwell, Dorin at my right and the second guard, Rivak, to my left. And then we descend to the dungeons where the prisoners wait. For me.

As we arrive outside the Morning Room we startle the servants removing the last of the captive's final meal. They press themselves against the wall when they see me, their heads bowed and their knuckles whitening on the dirty plates and goblets as they scurry past. Dorin nods at Rivak and he enters the small chamber. A mere moment later he appears in the doorway and nods the all-clear.

Two men sit at a small wooden table, both clad from neck to ankle in full-sleeved black shifts, their arms bound to those of the chairs. Their eyes rise slowly to meet mine as my guards take up their stations by the door, both with their swords drawn, though I'm as safe here as I am anywhere, even with criminals, traitors to the crown and realm.

"As Daunen Embodied I offer you blessing." I try to sound regal and strong, righteous in contrast to the churning in my stomach. "Your sins won't be eaten when you are gone, but I can offer you the blessings of the Gods. They will forgive you, in time."

Neither man looks grateful for my words and I can't blame them for it; the words are hollow and we all know it. Without the Eating they're damned, regardless of my blessing. I wait to see if they will speak. Others have cursed me, or pleaded for my intervention, pleaded for clemency. I've been begged to let them die by the sword or the rope – one desperate

soul even asked for the dogs – but these men say nothing, keeping their flat eyes on me. One man has a tic above his left eye, making the eyebrow twitch, but that's the only sign that either of them cares that I am here.

When they say nothing, do nothing, I bow my head. I thank the Gods for blessing me and then I take my place behind the condemned, standing between them. I reach out, resting the palm of each hand on the back of the men's necks, curling my fingers around to cup them, seeking out the hollow in their throats where I can feel the blood pulsing through the veins beneath their skin. Their heartbeats are almost synchronized as I close my eyes and wait. When their pulses begin to quicken – again in near-perfect harmony – I step away, bunching my hands under my sleeves, the itch to wash them immediate.

It doesn't take long.

Moments after I've touched them they are slumped against the top of the table, blood streaming from their noses and pooling on the already-stained wood. I watch as a thin red river flows over the edge, spattering the bolts that pin the chairs to the floor. If it wasn't for those bolts, and the ropes binding the legs of the dead to those of the chairs, their bodies would be at my feet now. Morningsbane is a violent poison. The eyes of the man whose eyebrow had twitched are open and staring and it is only when my own start to burn that I realize I'm staring too. It doesn't matter how many men, women and children I execute, it still tears at me inside. But then I suppose it would, because every time I perform an

execution it's as though I'm killing Tyrek all over again.

Tyrek was my only friend, one of the two people at the castle who were always pleased to see me. My position in the court meant we could never be in each other's company outside of the short time I spent in the Telling Room. But in the Telling Room I would see him and we could talk about everything we'd seen and, in his case, done. I'd never met anyone like him; he was fearless and opinionated and, back then, the days between each Telling lasted for ever. They dragged by until my guards escorted me down and there he would be, waiting in the doorway, grinning at me and pushing his blond hair out of his face impatiently.

"There you are," he'd say. "Hurry up. I've got something to show you."

He'd wanted to be one of my guards when he was old enough and he'd taken great delight in challenging them to fights, him with his wooden training sword and them with their steel. I would sit on my stool, grinning at their antics while his father took my blood for the Telling.

"And then thrust." He'd jabbed his sword towards Dorin, who'd parried it easily. "Obviously I wasn't trying to hurt you then."

"Obviously," Dorin agreed, and I laughed.

"And then sweep, and then thrust, and then sweep back and then – ha!" he'd crowed when he managed to prod Dorin in the arm.

I had clapped as Dorin held his sword out. "I yield."

"See, my lady," Tyrek turned to me. "I'll be able to keep you safe."

On the day my world caved in, he didn't call for me to hurry up, or tell me how hard he'd been practising; he didn't look at me at all. For the first time during the two harvests I'd been at the castle he didn't grin at me; he bowed. I should have known then that there was danger ahead but I didn't see it. I thought it was part of a new game; that we were playing at chivalry. I'd bowed back to him, acting the lady, excited in a way I couldn't explain. Even Rulf's silence was different and he'd pulled Tyrek away from me before he took my blood, handing the bowl to Tyrek to carry to the Telling table.

When the door flew open and the Queensguard rushed in, my first thought was that we were under attack and I'd raised my hands to defend myself. Something smashed as the guards rushed past me and I'd twisted in my seat in time to watch them seize Tyrek, his face grey with fear, his father motionless beside him.

"What is this?" I'd cried but the soldiers ignored me, dragging my friend to the door.

I'd darted between them – my presence was enough to stop them in their tracks. "Unhand him and explain yourselves," I'd demanded, but they'd shaken their heads.

"The queen has ordered that he should be arrested," one had said.

I'd laughed. The idea of Tyrek having done wrong was too much, too ridiculous.

"On what charge?"

"Treason."

There was a choking sound from behind them and I'd moved involuntarily towards where Rulf stood clutching his chest, one hand braced against the wooden counter. When I'd turned back the soldiers were moving again, Tyrek gripped between them like a straw doll, shaking his head from side to side.

I'd moved to follow but Dorin had stepped between me and the door, holding out his sword.

"My lady," he'd said, a warning in his eyes and I'd stopped.

"Take me to the queen," I'd said and he'd nodded.

But there was no need, for as we left the Telling Room she had appeared in the corridor, alone, as if my demand had summoned her. Her face was beatific and still above a gown of white-and-gold silk. She'd looked like a May Fire bride, innocent and angelic, and I'd been relieved to see her; she must have realized this was all a mistake and come to pardon Tyrek herself.

As I'd opened my mouth to thank her for coming she'd thrown up a hand; the motion sliced through the air and silenced me. "Follow me," she'd commanded, sweeping past us, and we had to, hurrying to keep up with her. When we'd reached the bottom of the stairwell she'd stopped abruptly. I'd nearly stumbled into her and I'd heard my guard's sharp gasp behind me as he came to a sudden halt too.

"Leave us," she'd ordered my guards and they'd turned immediately and left, climbing the stairs we'd just descended.

I'd looked at her, waiting, a creeping feeling stroking my spine, warning me of danger.

"For two harvests I have held back part of your role, Twylla. I wanted to be sure you understood the gift you've been given and could bear the burden of it." She'd paused, her eyes searching mine before she continued. "Because that gift comes with a cost. The price, if you will, of what it means to be special, to be chosen. But womanhood is fast approaching and I can protect you from it no longer. Now you must truly act as Daunen Embodied."

I had kept my eyes on her, not understanding what she meant about costs and prices. I took the poison as she willed; I did everything she wanted. What more was there?

"The boy in the room at the end of this hall has committed treason," she'd said, raising a hand to stop me from interrupting her, "though I know you won't want to believe it, trust me when I tell you that I have been thorough in my investigations and there can be no doubt of it. What is more, you have been party to it." She allowed her words to sink in.

"He has probed you for your secrets – our secrets – courted your friendship and all the while he has been trading your words to our enemies."

"He wouldn't! He can't have! I've told him nothing. . . I know no secrets."

"You have been his cloak and his informer, Twylla. Fortunately you are right: you know little of consequence. But it remains that you have told him of your life and duties

here – secret, sacred rites that concern us deeply. And so you must be the one to mete out the punishment. Being Daunen Embodied means more than singing, more than praying. There is more to proving yourself than merely taking the Morningsbane. Both it, and you, have another purpose.

I had stared at her, trying to understand. What more? What punishment could I give out? Then with clear, cold horror I realized she meant for me to touch my friend.

Ever since I'd arrived at the castle I had taken the Morningsbane once every moon to prove to the kingdom I was Daunen Embodied, truly the Gods' choice. It was the mixing of my blood, the drinking of the poison and surviving it that showed I was divine, something more than a girl.

I'd thought the price I paid for my new life at the castle was that I could never touch anyone, because the poison I took willingly stayed in my skin and would kill anyone who came into contact with it, save for those also blessed by divine right: the queen, the king and the prince. It didn't seem such a terrible price, to not touch and not be touched; after all I'd left behind the only person who'd ever shown me love and affection. But that wasn't the price at all.

The price was that I *would* touch and I would do it deliberately. I would touch on command, knowing full well that it would kill. There is no antidote for Morningsbane, even the lightest brush against my skin is enough to kill a grown man in seconds. And that was the extent of my role, the price I paid for being favoured by the Gods; I was to become an executioner. A killer. A weapon.

"I can't," I'd said finally.

"You must, Twylla. Because I cannot vouch for your safety from the poison in your veins if you deny your duty to the Gods. It is their will that keeps you immune to it. It is their will that you do this for them."

"But surely they—"

"Enough, Twylla," the queen had snapped. 'To be Daunen means to do this. Every incarnation of Daunen since we began has been both hope and justice. You are here to show the kingdom we live in a blessed age. And you are here to strike down those who would hurt us. You will go and do your duty. You don't want to anger the Gods, do you?"

"No."

The queen had nodded. "Your dedication does you credit, Twylla."

"No, I mean I can't," I heard myself say. "I can't kill someone."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I don't think I can be Daunen Embodied if that is what it means. I'm not right for this."

The queen had laughed: a brittle, crooked sound. "Do you believe the Gods have chosen wrong? Do you believe it a mistake that you survive the Morningsbane at the Telling? And what of your family, your little sister? Will you truly sacrifice the food and coin I send them because you don't like the Gods' path for you?" She'd shaken her head at me. "You know you can't go back," she'd said softly. "The Gods would never allow it. They gave you to me, to Lormere, and I

accepted you. You came here with no dowry, no alliances for us to make. And yet I accepted you because this is what you were born for, Twylla. We obey the Gods. As must you."

"But—"

Her eyes had stolen the words from my mouth.

"I'm going to forget you attempted to question me," she'd said quietly. "I'm going to forget you spurned my generosity and patronage. I'm going to forget that you were ungrateful. I am going to be merciful. Pray the Gods will be too."

I did as she asked. I entered the barren room where my best friend was tied to a chair, his mouth cruelly gagged with dark cloth that cut into his cheeks, his eyes streaming with tears. His wrists were already red where he'd pulled against the ropes that bound him. He'd wet himself; the front of his breeches were stained dark with urine and I had blushed, ashamed for him. His head shook wildly from side to side as I approached. He was fifteen, the same age as me. The queen stood in the doorway and watched as I placed my hands on his neck, the only exposed skin I could see. When nothing happened I thought the Gods had intervened, proving him innocent. Then he had shuddered, his body convulsing and jerking, and I'd pulled my hands away but it was too late. Blood trickled from his nose and his mouth, and he was dead before me. It had taken less than a minute for my touch to kill him.

I was still staring at him with wide, unseeing eyes when the queen cleared her throat.

"You needed to be the one to do it. To see what it meant to be chosen. You cannot take it back, not now. This is your destiny."

Two harvests have passed since I executed my best friend. Twenty-four Tellings. Twenty-four times I've had to walk into the room Tyrek was dragged from and take the poison that made it possible for my touch to kill him. I've killed thirteen traitors, including the men today and Tyrek, in those twenty-four moons. For Lormere. For my people. For my Gods.

Because I am Daunen Embodied, the reborn daughter of the Gods. The world has always been ruled by two Gods, Dæg, Lord of the Sun, who rules in the day and his wife, Næht, Empress of Darkness, who rules the nights. And once, millennia and millennia ago, when Lormere was nothing more than a collection of feuding villages, greedy Næht decided that ruling the night was not enough for her. She hatched a plan and seduced her husband, tiring him so much he couldn't rise. Then she took the skies for her own and ruled alone, plunging all of the world into darkness. Nothing lived, nothing thrived and death was everywhere without the Lord of the Sun to light the world and give warmth and joy to the people.

But as Næht seduced Dæg she conceived a daughter, Daunen. And when Daunen was born her song as she entered the world woke Dæg from his slumber and he rose back to his place in the sky. Dæg's return brought light and life back to Lormere and in his gratitude he vowed that whenever

Lormere needed her most, he would return the spirit of his daughter to the world as a symbol of hope. They would know her by her red hair – hair the colour of sunrise – and by her voice – a voice so beautiful it could waken a God. They would call her Daunen Embodied in her returned form and she would be a blessing to the land.

However, Daunen was the child of two Gods, light and dark, life and death. When Dæg vowed to return his daughter to the world, Næht insisted Daunen Embodied must represent her too. So Daunen exists as the balance between both God and Goddess; she must be death on behalf of her mother, as she is life on behalf of her father. Each moon, Daunen Embodied must prove herself chosen by taking the Morningsbane and living despite it. And she must keep the poison in her skin so that that her touch would mean death to traitors, as her mother's touch is death.

Of the two guards with me on the day the queen had me kill Tyrek, one chose to leave his role almost immediately. But before he did he told me why the prisoners screamed so loudly. He'd waited until Dorin had gone to fetch my supper and then he'd leant in, as close as he dared, smiling viciously.

"You want to know why they scream?" He hadn't waited for my response. "The queen's men cut them. They take the bluntest knife they can find and they cut them, wherever they please." He'd grinned. "And in those cuts they pour brandy. And it stings. By the Gods, how it stings. Brandy burns, little girl. It's liquid fire in the throat; in a cut, a deep,

messy cut it's hotter than Dæg himself. Not nice. Not nice at all. Sometimes they have to do it again and again, for the especially bad ones."

He'd paused, licking his lips as he watched my face to see how deep his words cut me.

"But that's not why they scream. They scream because of you. Because no matter what the torturers do to them, it's nothing compared to what you'll do. So tell me, little girl, does that explain to you why they scream?"

I never told anyone what he told me. I'd seen enough death on my account. Sometimes I can show mercy. Like the queen.

Chapter 2



I'm standing in my solar, scrubbing my hands, rinsing, repeating it again and again in the small basin when there's a knock on the door.

"Enter." I reach for a cloth to dry them, though they still don't feel clean, as I turn to greet my visitor.

Dorin stands before me, bending into a small bow.

"Forgive the interruption. A hunt has been called, my lady."

"Now?" I look at him. I can't think of anything I want to do less than chase an innocent creature through the woods. I continue rubbing the cloth over my hands, hoping his next words will be to tell me that I don't have to go, that he's merely letting me know the queen's plans for the day.

"The queen has insisted you attend, my lady."

I turn away, closing my eyes and then opening them again when the eyes of the dead men stare back at me. Why is