

## 《 *The Palace* 》

OVER one thousand years ago, a great fire swept through the city of Amenkor. Not a fire like those burning in the bowls of standing oil that lined the promenade to the palace, all red and orange and flapping in the wind that came from the sea. No. This fire was white, pure, and cold. And from the legends, this fire burned from horizon to horizon, reaching from the ground to the clouds. It came from the west, like the wind, and when it fell upon the city it passed through walls and left them untouched, passed through people and left them unburned. It covered the entire city—there was no escape, it touched everyone—and then it swept onward, inland, until it vanished, nothing more than a white glow, and then nothing at all.

It is said the White Fire cast the city into madness. It is said the Fire was an omen, a harbinger of the eleven-year drought and the famine and disease that followed.

It is said the Fire murdered the ruling Mistress of the time, even though her body was found unburned on the

wide stone steps that led up to the palace at the end of the promenade. There were bruises around her throat in the shape of hands, and bruises in the shape of boots on her naked back and bared breasts. There were bruises elsewhere, beneath the white robes that lay about her waist in torn rags, the robe held in place only by the angle of her body and the gold sash of her office. There was blood as well. Not gushing blood, but spotted blood.

But the legends say the Fire killed her.

Fire, my ass.

Tucked into the niche set high in a narrow corridor of the palace, I snorted in contempt, then shifted with a grimace to ease a cramped muscle. No part of my body moved out into the light. The niche sat at the end of a long shaft that provided airflow into the depths of the palace.

Any blind-ass bastard could tell what had really happened to the Mistress. And the blind-ass bastard who killed her should have rotted in the deepest hellhole in Amenkor. There were quicker ways to kill someone than strangulation. I knew.

I drew in a slow breath and listened. Nothing but the guttering flames of the standing bowls of burning oil which lit the empty corridor below. The airflow in the palace was strong, gusting through the opening at my back. A storm was coming. But the wind took care of the smoke from the burning oil. And other smells.

After a long, considering moment, I slid forward to the edge of the niche and glanced down the corridor in both directions. Nothing.

With one smooth shift, I slipped over the lip of the opening, dangled by white-knuckled fingers for a moment until steady, then dropped to the floor.

“You, boy! Help me with this.”

## THE SKEWED THRONE

3

I spun, hand falling to the knife hidden inside the palace clothing that had been provided the night before: page's clothing that was a little too big for me, a little loose. But apparently it had worked. I was small for my age, and had no breasts to speak of, but I definitely wasn't a boy.

The woman who'd spoken was dressed in the white robe of a personal servant of the Mistress and carried two woven baskets, one in each arm. One of the baskets was threatening to tip out of her grasp. She'd managed to catch it with the other basket before it fell, but both baskets were now balanced awkwardly against her chest, ready to tip at the slightest movement.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Her face creased in irritation and anger, but her eyes remained focused on the baskets.

I straightened from the instinctual crouch and moved forward to catch the basket before it fell. It was heavier than it looked.

My hand brushed the woman's skin as I took the basket and a long thin slash of pain raced up my arm, as if someone had drawn a dagger's blade across my skin from wrist to elbow. I glanced at the woman sharply, tensed.

The woman heaved a sigh of relief and wiped a trembling hand across her forehead. "Thank you." After a moment to catch her breath, she motioned to the basket again. "Now give it back. Carefully!"

Relief swept through me. She hadn't felt the contact, hadn't felt the slash of pain or anything else out of the ordinary at all.

I set the basket back into the woman's arms, careful not to touch her skin again, the woman grunting at its weight. Then I stepped aside and let her pass. She huffed out of the corridor, vanishing around a corner.

I watched her receding back, then my eyes narrowed. I wasn't supposed to run into anyone, especially not one of the true Servants. No one was supposed to know I was here.

I'd have to be more careful.

I fingered the knife again, considering, then turned away, moving in the other direction, shrugging thoughts of the woman aside. She'd barely glanced up from her baskets, too intent on not dropping them. She wouldn't remember meeting a page boy. Not inside the palace. And there wasn't any time to spare, not if I was to get to the Mistress' chambers before dawn. I was in the outermost portion of the palace, still needed to get to the linen closet with the archer's nook, get past the guards at the inner sanctum. . . .

I shook my head and moved a little faster down the narrow corridor, running through the mental image of the map of the palace in my head, reviewing the timing. The incoming storm prickled through my skin, urging me on. I reached into an inner pocket and fingered the key hidden there.

I had to get to the Mistress' chambers tonight. We'd waited too long already . . . had waited six years hoping that things would get better, looking for alternate solutions. Six long years since the Second Coming of the White Fire, and since that day things had only gotten worse. Legend said that the first Fire had cast the city into madness. The second Fire had done the same. A slow, subtle madness. And now winter bore down on us, the seas already getting rough, unsuitable for trade. With the mountain passes closed, resources low . . .

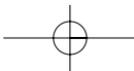
As I turned into a second corridor, I frowned, with a hard and determined expression. We'd tried everything to end it. Everything but what legend said had worked the first time the Fire came. Now there was no choice.

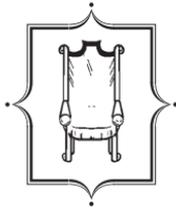
It was time for the Mistress to die.

Part I

†

*The Dredge*





## Chapter 1

**I** FOCUSED on the woman with dark eyes and a wide face, on the basket she carried on her hip, a cloth covering its contents. The woman wore a drab dress, had long, flat, black hair. A triangle of cloth covered most of her head, two corners tied beneath her chin, easy to pick out in the crowd of people on the street. She moved without rushing, head lowered as she walked.

An easy mark.

My gaze shifted to the basket and my hand slid down to the dagger hidden inside my tattered shirt. My stomach growled.

I bit my upper lip, turned back to the woman's downturned face, tried to catch her eyes from across the street. The eyes were the most revealing. But she'd moved farther away, paused now at the edge of an alley.

A moment later, she ducked into the narrow.

I hesitated on the edge of the street they called the

Dredge, fingers kneading the handle of my dagger. People flowed past, not quite jostling me. I scanned the street, the people, noticed a guardsman, a cartman with brawny shoulders, a gutterscum thug. No one openly dangerous. No one overtly threatening to a fourteen-year-old girl pressed flat against a wall. A mud-streaked girl, clothes more tattered than whole, hair so dirty its color was indistinguishable. A small girl—far, far too small for fourteen; far, far too thin to be alive.

Eyes hardening, I turned back to the mouth of the narrow where the woman had disappeared, watched its darkness.

Then I cut across the Dredge, cut through the crowd so smoothly I touched no one. I slid against the wall of the narrow, crouched low, until my eyes adjusted to the darkness. I listened. The noise of the street faded to a background wind, the world grayed. . . .

And in the new silence I heard the sound of footfalls on damp stone, steady and quick. I heard clothes rustling, heard the creak of wicker as a basket was shifted. The footsteps were receding.

In the cloaked darkness of the alley, I glanced back out toward the street, toward the movement, the sunlight. No one had seen me follow the woman. Not even the guardsman.

I turned back, slid deeper into the darkness, into the stench of refuse and piss and mildew. I moved without sound, with a cold, hungry intent, my stomach clenched and empty, thinking only of the basket, of the food it might represent. The woman's footsteps continued, shuffling ahead on the dirty stone, splashing in unseen puddles. I drew in the stench of the alley, could

## THE SKEWED THRONE

9

almost smell the woman's sweat. My hand closed on the handle of my dagger—

And the footsteps ahead slowed, grew wary.

I halted, drew close to the wall, hand pressed against its damp mud-brick.

Ahead, feet shuffled in place. The cold of the alley grew deeper, a coldness I felt echoed in my chest like the harsh burn of hoarfrost.

Then I heard another footstep, a heavier tread, a gasp as the woman cried out, the sound suddenly choked off.

Something heavy hit the cobbles, followed by rolling thuds, by the sound of a struggle: clothes rustling, harsh breaths, a horrifying gasping sound, choked and desperate. Like the gasping sounds of the man I'd killed three years before. Except these gasps were not wet and slick, choking on blood. These were dry and empty.

A sick, feverish shudder of horror rushed through my skin and I pressed against the mud-brick at my back, trying not to breathe. The coldness of hoarfrost prickling in my chest tightened, began to burn white, like the touch of the Fire that had passed through the city three years before. Fresh sweat prickled in my armpits, the center of my chest, making me shudder. My hand clenched on the handle of my dagger.

The gasping quieted, slowed. A strained grunting filtered from the darkness. It escalated, tight and short, then released in a trembling sigh. Almost like sobbing. This faded into soft breathing. Then there was a weighted thud, heavier than the first, and even the breathing faded.

I fidgeted, breath held close, hand gripping the

sweaty hilt of the dagger. I'd let the dagger slip completely free without thinking. Had brought it to bear.

But no one emerged from the darkness. Not after twenty shortened breaths. Not after fifty.

And the icy Fire in my chest had died.

I relaxed, drew a steadying breath, then edged forward. A trickle of black water appeared, running through the alley's center. I kept to the left wall, the bricks wet, left hand against the dampness, right hand holding the dagger.

Eleven paces farther on I found the basket turned on its side, potatoes littering the cobbles. The cloth that had covered them was already stained with filth.

Three steps farther, I found the woman's body.

She lay crumpled to the ground, on her back, her feet bent beneath her thighs. One arm lay thrust out, the other close to her side. The kerchief covering her hair had been pushed askew and tangles of her hair lay matted to the stone. Her head lay in the trickle of scummy water, tilted slightly away.

I hunkered against the wall, scanned the darkness ahead, listening. But there was nothing but the sound of dripping water, the taste of damp growth.

I turned back to the woman, edged past her out-flung arm, and knelt.

A dark band of blood encircled her neck, cut into her flesh. Her eyes were open, staring up past me into the darkness of the alley. Her lips were parted.

She looked like she was asleep, except she wasn't breathing and her eyes were open.

I looked at the line of blood across her neck again, leaned forward—

And saw a thin cord loop down in front of my face.

## THE SKEWED THRONE

11

I brought the dagger up instantly, but not before the cord snapped tight across my neck, not before I heard a guttural, masculine grunt as a man crossed the cord behind my neck and jerked it tight. The cord caught the dagger on its flat side and yanked it flat against my neck.

Then the man leaned upward and back, pressed his knee hard into my spine and pushed.

My body arched outward, the cord drawing tighter across my neck. My head fell back against the man's shoulder so that his bearded cheek rested against mine, his breath hot against my chest. It stank of ale and fish and oil.

"A little young and thin for my tastes," he gasped, drawing the cord tighter with a jerk, "but I'll take what gifts the Mistress gives me, eh?"

The icy pressure flared again in my chest, at the base of my throat, spreading like frost. I tasted the air from the night of the Fire three years before, felt the Fire itself burning cold deep inside me. I sucked in a hard, painful breath of air in shock.

And then my breath was cut off.

I threw myself forward, felt the cord dig deeper, felt a trickle of blood flow as the cord sawed into my skin. The man's gasps ground in my ear and I jerked to the side, felt the cord cut deeper still. And then the grayness of the world focused even more, focused down and down until the only thing I could feel was the cord, the hot fire of not being able to breathe beginning to burn in my chest—

The cold metal of the dagger pressed tight against my neck. I still held its handle in my right hand, held it in a death grip.

As the fire in my chest seethed outward, sending tingling sensations of warmth into my arms, down deep into my gut, I twisted the dagger. Its edge bit into my skin, drew a vertical slice from the back of my jaw downward to my collarbone that stung like a sharp needle prick. I twisted, pushing the dagger outward as the man grunted in my ear, his breath a hissing stench, spit flying from his clamped teeth onto my neck. My focus on the world began to slip, the grayness seeping forward, narrowing to a hollow circle, to a point. Tingling hot fire filled my gut, seeped downward into my legs, into my thighs. A thousand needle pricks coursed toward my knees, through my shoulders and into my arms. The cord cinched tighter. My chest heaved, spasmed—

And then the dagger sliced through the cord.

The man grunted with surprise as his hands jerked wide. The knee pressed into my spine thrust me forward, sent me sprawling onto the dead woman. The man fell backward into the rank alley wall.

My gasp for air was like a warm, shuddering scream.

I lurched over the woman, stepped on her arm, felt it roll beneath me, but the motions felt soft and drawn out. As I fell to my side, I twisted, turned so that I landed facing the man.

He'd already thrust himself away from the wall, was already looming over me, descending, his face a grimace of hatred. His hands reached for me, the cord still twined around his fingers, its cut ends dangling as he reached for my neck.

I brought the dagger up from my side without

## THE SKEWED THRONE

13

thinking. The world was still too gray, too narrow for thought.

The dagger caught him in the chest. I felt it punch through skin, felt it grind against bone as it sank deeper, deeper, until it was brought up short by the handle. Then the man's weight drove the handle into my chest.

I had a moment to see a startled look flash through the man's eyes, a moment to feel his hands encircling my throat loosely, and then the pain of the dagger's handle drove the breath from my lungs. I lurched forward, threw the man to the side, and rolled to my hands and knees, coughing like a diseased cat. Pain radiated from the center of my chest. Not the fiery pain of no air, nor the cold pain of the warning Fire, but the dull pain of being punched too hard, too fast.

I coughed a moment more, then vomited.

I was still hunched over, on hands and knees, bile like a sickness in my torn throat, when someone said, "Impressive."

I jerked away from the voice, a tendril of spit and bile that dangled from my mouth plastering itself to my chin as I moved. I came up short against the alley wall with a thud, body tucked in so I was as small a target as possible. A bright flare of pain radiated from my bruised ribs. My hand went reflexively for my dagger, but it was still embedded in the man's chest.

My heart lurched and I cowered lower, head bowed, arms wrapped around my knees. I was trembling too much to do anything more, too weak from the struggle with the man to run. So I cowered, eyes closed, hoping the voice would go away.

After a moment I realized I hadn't heard retreating footsteps. I hadn't heard anything at all.

I opened my eyes, aware of the wetness of tears on my face, and tilted my head, staring out into the alley through the matted tangles of my hair.

A guardsman leaned against the alley wall twenty paces away, the bodies of the man and the woman between us. It was the same guardsman I'd seen on the street before. His arms were crossed over his chest, his posture casual. He wore the standard uniform—breeches, leather boots, brown shirt, leather armor underneath—but no sword belted at his waist. A dagger lay tucked in his belt instead. The Skewed Throne symbol was stitched in red thread on the left side of the shirt.

Red. A Seeker. A guardsman sent to mete out the Mistress' punishments, to pass judgment. Not one of the regular guardsmen; the stitching would have been gold instead.

A new fear crawled into my stomach.

He'd seen me kill a man, had witnessed it.

He watched me with a strange look in his eyes. A confused look that pinched the skin between his brows and tightened the corners of his mouth.

After a moment, his gaze shifted from me to the body of the man.

"Very impressive," he said again, then pushed himself away from the wall.

I flinched back, my shoulders scraping against the moldy dampness of the alley's mud-brick, my breath hitching in my throat. I tasted bile again, felt fresh tears squeeze through pain-clenched eyes.

I heard the guardsman halt.

## THE SKEWED THRONE

15

"I didn't come for you," he said, his voice brusque but soothing. Reassuring.

I opened my eyes to narrow slits, just enough to see him, to watch.

He moved toward the dead man, knelt on his heels near the man's head.

For a long moment, he simply stared at the man's face, at the small trickle of blood that had leaked from the corner of the mouth. Then he spat to one side, his face twisted with contempt. "Vicious bastard. You deserved worse than this."

He jerked my dagger free from the man's chest and in a strangely fluid motion made three quick slashes across the man's forehead. He stared at his handiwork a moment more, then turned on the balls of his feet until he was facing me, elbows on his knees, my dagger dangling loosely from one hand.

I watched the dagger carefully, aware of his intent look. I hadn't realized how important the dagger had become to me over the last three years. I felt exposed without it, helpless.

I wanted my dagger back. Needed it.

The guardsman began swinging the blade back and forth, taunting me, and my gaze shifted back to his eyes. This close, I could see they were a muddy brown, like mine, like most of the people who lived in Amenkor, on the Dredge. There were scars on his face, lots of scars. Scars that ran up into his thinning, gray-brown hair. They made him seem hard, like worn mud-brick bleached by the sun.

"And you," he murmured, the confused look returning. "You don't seem dangerous at all. You're what? Ten?" He leaned slightly forward, eyes narrow-

ing, then shook his head. "Older than that, although you could fool almost anyone. Thirteen at least, maybe more. And you don't talk much."

He paused, waiting. The dagger stilled.

"Maybe you don't talk at all," he said finally, dagger back in motion, the action careless, as if he didn't care.

I narrowed my eyes. "I talk."

The words came out harsh and gravelly, like brick grating against brick, and they hurt—in my chest, in my throat. I wiped the thread of spit and bile from my chin and coughed against the burning sensation. Even the coughs hurt. Hurt worse than anything I'd ever felt before.

The guardsman hesitated, then nodded, the barest hint of a smile playing at the edges of his mouth.

"So I see. You just don't talk much, do you?"

I didn't answer, and his smile grew.

He turned his attention to my dagger, still swinging between the fingers of one hand. With a smooth gesture, he swung it upright in his grip, then stared at me over its tip. All traces of the smile were gone, his eyes flatly serious, expression hard.

"This is your dagger, isn't it?" All hints of the reassuring, casual voice had disappeared. This voice was hurtful, threatening.

I cringed back. "Yes."

He didn't react, eyes still hard, intent. "It's a guardsman's dagger."

My eyes flicked to the dagger tucked in his belt, then back. I felt my stomach clench and tensed, even though it hurt. In my head, I saw the first man I'd killed leaning against the second story of the rooftop, hand outstretched, grasping for me, saw the blood

## THE SKEWED THRONE

17

coating his neck, heard the wet rasp of his last short breaths. And I saw the ripped-out gold stitching of the Skewed Throne on the left breast of his shirt.

For the first time since the night of the Fire, the thought of the first man I'd killed didn't frighten me. Instead, defiant anger seethed just beneath the pain.

I glared at the Seeker. "Yes. But now it's mine."

He frowned. He wanted to ask how I'd gotten it, where it came from. I could see it in his eyes.

But he simply shrugged. "What's yours is yours."

He tossed the dagger low across the ground, metal clanging on stone as it struck the wet cobbles and slid to a halt just in front of me.

I reached out slowly and picked it up, unbelieving, the blood on the handle still tacky, my eyes on the guardsman the entire time. He didn't move, just watched. But something had changed. There was a new, considering look in his eyes, as if he were judging me, coming to a decision.

I pulled the dagger in close to my body, kept it ready.

After a long, drawn-out moment, he stood. "I bet you know the warren beyond the Dredge like I know the scars on my own skin," he murmured to himself. And then he tilted his head.

I shifted under his gaze, suddenly aware of the darkness of the alley, of the seclusion and the smooth fluidity of his movements.

"Go away," I said, pulling in tight, ready to flee.

He smiled, a slow, careful smile, as if my wary stance had convinced him of something.

Instead of turning to leave, he crossed his arms again and said, "I could use your help."

"Go away," I repeated with more force, even though the suggestion piqued interest deep inside me.

"You can leave if you want," he said, but he didn't move himself, simply stood, waiting. It was like the dagger again. He was dangling escape in front of me, letting it swing back and forth, taunting me.

I glanced toward the potatoes scattered across the cobbles, barely visible in the light. Hunger twisted in my gut.

The guardsman shifted and I tore my gaze back to where he stood. He hadn't moved forward, only shifted his weight, his eyes on me. "Everyone runs to the slums of the Dredge, you know. Almost everyone. Murderers, thieves, brawlers. Merchants who've lost their businesses, gamblers who've gambled away their lives. A few run to the sea, to the ships in the harbor and the cities they can take them to elsewhere on the coast, but not many. They come here. They think they can hide here. That among all this crowded filth, these warrens of alleys and houses and narrow courtyards, they can somehow disappear."

He paused, still staring at me. Then he frowned, and his voice darkened. "And they're right. Five years ago, before the Fire, they wouldn't have had a chance. The Seekers would have found them, if we were sent after them by the Mistress. The Skewed Throne would have found them. But now. . . ."

His gaze dropped to the dead man in the middle of the alley, his eyes flickering with a black hatred, and I shrank back until my shoulders pressed against the collapsing wall.

"Now the Dredge is more crowded. All the merchants hit hard by the panic after the Fire are drifting

## THE SKEWED THRONE

19

here. All of their families. They're desperate. And they have nowhere else to go. You must have noticed how crowded the Dredge has become, little *varis*." He paused, glanced up, then nodded his head. "Yes. You've noticed. You live off of it, don't you?"

The question struck like a physical blow, harsh enough to make me wince. I narrowed my eyes at him, jaw set, and said, "Yes."

It came out bitter and hopeless.

He nodded again. "You know the Dredge and its underbelly. You live here. You can help me find these men that run."

He paused, still watching me, letting the offer sink in. After a moment he pushed away from the wall and walked toward me, knelt a few steps away, so close I could see his scars clearly, could see his eyes.

I cringed back from him, from the heated danger that bled from him, that set all the warning senses I'd honed on the Dredge on edge except for one, the one I trusted the most: the cold Fire in my chest. That Fire remained dormant, and because of that I stayed instead of fleeing to the street, or in the other direction, deeper into the warren of dark paths beyond the Dredge.

"Do you know where Cobbler's Fountain is?" he asked.

I nodded. I hadn't been to Cobbler's Fountain in years. It was too far up the Dredge, too close to the River and the city, to the real Amenkor. I'd be noticed there, my rags and dirty hair. It wasn't good hunting ground.

"Good," he said, sitting back slightly. "I can help you, and you can help me. Think about it. If you want

to help find these men for the Mistress, come to Cobler's Fountain tomorrow, at dusk. I'll be there."

Then he stood, turned, and strode from the alley, pausing at its edge to adjust to the sunlight before entering the crowd. He didn't look back.

I waited for ten heartbeats, wary, then rose from my crouch, wincing as I drew in a deep breath. I approached the two bodies slowly, every movement sending dull pain across my chest and into my arms, still watching the far entrance to the alley, still uncertain the guardsman had left. A stinging fire burned in a circle around my neck where the dead man's cord had cut into flesh, and a thinner line of fire ran from the back of my jaw down my throat from where I'd pressed my own dagger into my neck to cut the cord, but the pain in my chest . . .

I coughed again, hissed through clenched teeth as I knelt beside the man.

His face was strangely slack, his eyes open. Blood had filled his mouth, had leaked from one corner and matted in his beard. The guardsman had carved the Skewed Throne into his forehead, the cuts raw, with only a trace of blood. A single horizontal slash across the top, two slanted vertical slashes beneath, one shorter than the other. The man had been dead too long for them to bleed much.

I leaned over his face, breathed in his sour smell—piss and blood and sweat and something deeper, something rancid, like rotten butter. I stared into his vacant eyes, frowned as I brought one hand up to the scored line encircling my neck. There was no frigid flare of Fire in my chest now. No reaction at all. The danger had passed.

## THE SKEWED THRONE

21

But as I stared into his eyes I felt again the coarseness of his beard on my cheek, heard his ragged, desperate gasps. I smelled his breath.

Anger grew, deep in my chest, a hard lump beneath the dull pain. An anger I recognized. I'd felt it many times during my life on the Dredge—for the wagon master who'd kicked me, for the nameless gutterscum who'd slid into my niche and stolen my bread. A hatred that was there and then gone. Fleeting.

But this time the anger, the hatred, wasn't fleeting. It was solid. And the longer I looked at the dead man's face, the harder it became. It began to take form, shifting and slithering.

I leaned closer, breathed in the rancid musk of the dead man even deeper.

And then I spat into his face.

I leaned back, startled, my spittle running down the man's skin beneath one dead eye. I was strangely . . . thrilled, arms tingling as if with numbness, with cold. But I wasn't cold. A hot flush covered me instead, lay against my skin like sweat.

I turned to the woman, a pang of regret coursing beneath the heated, sickening exhilaration. Then I crawled to the spilled potatoes, the dropped basket, and collected it all together, as quickly as possible.

I fled toward the back of the alley, away from the Dredge, trying not to think about the dead man, the woman, or the guard.

I focused on the pain in my chest instead. And beneath that, the still lingering anger, coiled now, like a snake.