



## Chapter 3

I WOKE in my niche, the blanket wrapped tight around me, late day sunlight angling through the entrance. The first thing I thought of was the fat man, the grate of blade against bone.

I closed my eyes tight against the sensation, pulled the blanket close. But it wasn't enough. With a shudder, I felt tears streaking down my face. I fought them. Because they were useless. Because he'd been about to stab Erick and so wasn't worth crying over.

I eventually cried myself back to sleep, my chest aching.

†

When I woke again, I was instantly hungry and thought of the white-dusty man. But someone had placed a sack just inside the entrance to my niche.

I froze, then fumbled beneath the greasy blanket for my dagger. Fear sliced through my chest that somehow I'd lost the blade, left it behind near the fat man,

50

JOSHUA PALMATIER

or that Erick had taken it. But then my fingers closed over its hilt.

I pushed the blanket aside and crawled to the sack. It contained bread and cheese. And oranges.

I only thought of the fat man twice as I crammed the bread in my mouth, then the cheese. I saved the oranges. By then it was dusk, and I thought of the white-dusty man again. I was still hungry. I was always hungry.

I slid from my niche and found the guardsman waiting. He sat on his heels on the far side of the narrow, back against the mud-brick wall. His scars stood out in the half-light. He squinted through the grayness, jaw clenched, thinking.

I sat back against the edge of the entrance to my niche and suddenly wondered how he'd gotten me inside. The opening was too narrow for him to fit. Looking into his eyes, I realized he'd been waiting all day, that he'd heard me wake, heard me sobbing.

New fear lashed through me, close to panic.

He was trying to decide whether I was useful.

He stood. "I think," he said with a careful frown, then paused and seemed to change his mind. "I think, if I'm going to have you hunting for me, I'll need to show you how to use that dagger."

He turned and began to walk away. But he halted just before turning into the nearest alley.

Without looking back, he said, "I'll meet you here at dawn for the first lesson." There was an edge to his voice—regret mixed with something deeper. As if he were about to do something he'd never be proud of, something he'd never forget.

Then he was gone.

I waited, feeling strangely hollow inside, holding my

## THE SKEWED THRONE

51

dagger in one hand. It felt . . . heavier. And for a moment—with something close to the panic I'd felt a moment before, icy and trembling—I no longer wanted to touch it.



Erick took me to a courtyard the following dawn. A different one than the one near where I'd killed the fat man, this one wider, more open. He'd brought me clothes, still matted with dirt, still used, but better than the rags I'd been wearing. They still felt scratchy when we stepped through the open space where a gate had once stood into the enclosed courtyard. It was only twenty paces across at most, but I still pulled back, drew tight against the wall.

Erick set down a sack just inside the gateway, walked to the center of the courtyard, then turned. He straightened, instantly wary, eyes searching. It took him a moment to pick me out of the shadows beneath the courtyard's crumbling stone wall.

He grunted and relaxed. "You're never going to learn anything hiding beside that wall. Come here."

I bit my lower lip, forced myself to step out of the darkness into the strengthening sunlight, until I stood two paces away from him. I glared up into his eyes.

He held the gaze, then smiled tightly. "I don't normally train. That's for others in the guard. I'm not exactly certain how to do this," he said. Then he shrugged.

There was no warning. One moment, Erick stood, relaxed, face crimped in perplexed thought, the next his dagger flashed in the sunlight and he lunged.

I reacted instantly, all the years of survival on the

Dredge surging forth. I ducked, twisted, and ran. I'd reached the open gateway before Erick's outcry registered.

"Varis! Stop! It was just a feint!"

I slid to a halt in a low crouch, hand against the crumbling stone of the gate's wall, and glanced back. Erick stood where I'd left him, dagger in hand but at his side. He was grinning.

"Gods, you're fast," he said. "Now come back here again. We'll try something simple . . . like holding the dagger."

"I don't want to," I said. My heart was thudding hard in my chest and my arms tingled with fear.

Erick's grin vanished and the hard, dangerous look I'd seen at the fountain rushed forward. Face expressionless, he said, "Do you see that sack?"

I glanced toward the sack he'd placed inside the entrance to the courtyard.

"You get nothing from that sack if you quit now. And you'll get nothing from me again after today unless you stay."

I shot him a defiant glare from where I crouched. The sack was only a few paces away. I could snag it and be gone before he'd barely moved.

But then I'd be back to relying on the Dredge, on the white-dusty man.

My glare hardened, but I stood and moved again to stand before Erick in the center of the courtyard. The dangerous look in his eyes receded.

"Now," he said, calm and relaxed, "let's see how you wield that guardsman's dagger of yours."

He showed me how to hold the dagger—different grips for different thrusts and slashes and jabs—and

## THE SKEWED THRONE

53

where to strike. Not just to kill. Sometimes just to maim. Sometimes just to leave a mark, a scar . . . a reminder. And he showed me stances, for balance, for distraction, so the target wouldn't know you held a dagger until it was too late.

Just after midday, Erick called a halt and pulled bread, cheese, and thick chunks of roasted pork out of the sack. My stomach growled at the scent of the meat, my eyes going wide. Meat was rare on the Dredge. Unless you included rat. This was a feast, the meat juicy and tender.

An hour later Erick packed away the remains of the food, glancing toward the sunlight before turning back to me.

"Now let's see if you've learned anything."

We faced each other again, as we had that morning, only this time Erick set his dagger aside. I kept my dagger out, held as he'd told me to hold it, even though it felt strange.

"Attack me," Erick said, his eyes glinting in challenge.

I watched him, saw the muscles already tensed, ready to react. I frowned, gripped the handle of the dagger tightly, then let myself slip beneath the river.

The world grayed, sounds receded, until the only thing in focus was Erick, the only sound his breathing. I felt my own muscles relax, saw Erick register the change with a start of surprise, and then I struck.

Erick blocked the first stab, shunted it aside, and tried to grab my wrist. I slid free, tried to step in close, to use one of the moves we'd practiced that morning. But Erick expected it. I saw his counter on the river a moment too late to react.

His hand latched onto my shoulder as he stepped back. With a quick jerk, he spun me around. I barked a snarl as his other arm snaked around my stomach and drew me in against his body, pinning my dagger arm to my side. I struggled, pushed off with my feet, snarled again as his grip tightened—

Everything he'd taught me fled my mind and instinct came rushing back. I stomped down hard on his foot, and at the same time snapped my head around and bit the hand holding onto my shoulder.

"You little shit!" he spat. He shoved me away as he collapsed to the ground.

I darted to the side, bringing the dagger back up, but halted when I realized he was laughing.

He lay on his back on the ground, hand cradled near his chest, tears streaming down his face, the laughter sharp and loud.

"Oh, gods," he gasped after a long moment, chuckling. "That's enough for today." He rolled to his side, then heaved himself to his feet, favoring one foot. He moved to retrieve his dagger and the sack, shaking his head when he glanced at me.

I followed him slowly. He paused, as if catching his breath, his back to me, then knelt by the sack.

"What about my mark?"

His shoulders stilled for a moment. Then he gathered up the sack and turned. All of the humor had faded from his eyes.

"No marks for now. Not after the last one."

He handed over the sack. I stared down at it, twisted it back and forth, then asked softly, "Who are they?"

Erick hesitated. "They're people the Mistress wants dead."

## THE SKEWED THRONE

55

"Why?"

Erick's brow crinkled, as if he'd never been asked, had never thought about the answer before. "I don't know. Because they've done something wrong, killed someone, hurt someone. Like the man who strangled that woman, the man you killed when I first found you."

"What about the hawk-faced man? What did he do?"

Erick shifted uncomfortably. "I don't know."

Then he pushed the confusion aside, buried it. I saw it in his eyes, in the way he straightened his shoulders. "I'm a Seeker in the guard, Varis. An assassin. I hunt for those that have run to the Dredge. I don't need a reason to hunt them other than that the Mistress wants them dead. I don't need another reason. That's all that matters to me."

"But how do you know they deserve it?"

"Because the Mistress tells me they deserve it. If the Mistress says they deserve it, if the Throne says they deserve it, then they deserve it."

"But what if the Mistress is wrong?"

He stood, reaching down to ruffle my hair. That something deep inside leaped at the touch, yearned for more, but his hand dropped away.

"The Mistress is never wrong," he said, but his voice was flat, as if he were reciting something he'd been taught.

"We'll continue with the training tomorrow," he said, and then he walked away.

†

And we did. Every morning I'd leave my niche hoping Erick would be there. Sometimes he was, sometimes not. If not, I'd return to the Dredge. Not always for

momentarily forgotten bundles, or the stray potato. No. Erick kept me fed and clothed now, although I still scavenged the Dredge when Erick's food ran low and I hadn't seen him, still went to the white-dusty man if I was desperate. No. After a few weeks of training, Erick started giving me new marks and so I went to the Dredge for the people, to search for the men and women who'd run, who were trying to hide from the Skewed Throne, from the Mistress . . . from Erick.

I trained, but for a long time I didn't have to kill anyone. Erick took care of that. All I did was find them, then lead Erick to wherever they'd hidden in the slums beyond the Dredge.

It worked well.

Until Erick had me find Garrell Cart.



Garrell Cart: about my height, a little older, dirt-blond hair, muddy eyes, and a wide, light-brown birthmark near the base of his jaw that looked as if someone had spilled ale and it had pooled on his neck.

Garrell.

Squatting on the Dredge, back against a sun-baked wall, its warmth seeping through the worn shirt Erick had given me, I searched the passing crowd. I didn't expect to see him. I'd been watching for over twenty days now. I was waiting for Erick to give up and give me someone else to find.

I glanced down the Dredge, not really seeing the people, only the movements of the crowd, and caught sight of Bloodmark.

I frowned, heard again his whispering voice, *Don't mess with me, bitch.*

## THE SKEWED THRONE

57

A brief stab of anger shot through my chest and I stood as I lost sight of him. I found him again, thirty paces down. He'd stopped, was looking at something I couldn't see across the street.

His eyes narrowed, darkened like they'd darkened the day he'd taken the sack from me, then flicked up and down the Dredge. Then they returned to whatever had caught his attention.

His head dipped slightly forward and he bit his upper lip. One hand reached for something beneath his shirt.

I stepped away from the wall and into the crowd, moving across the street. Halfway across I saw his target.

Without thought, I let the world slip into gray and wind, keeping Bloodmark and his target in focus. The crowd became shifting eddies in the gray, eddies I could move through as I continued to cross the street. I settled against the flatter gray of another wall and leaned back to watch.

The man Bloodmark had targeted stood near another man's wagon, hand resting on the back of the seat as he talked to the wagon's owner. Both men were laughing, shaking their heads. Bloodmark's target shifted his weight. As he did so, the small pouch tied to his belt swung into view.

I frowned and glanced toward Bloodmark. He'd moved closer, but not close enough for the strike. He seemed to be waiting.

My frown deepened. I couldn't see what would happen, couldn't *feel* what would happen. Not like before. I thought about the woman with the shawl, about that sensation of slipping deeper into the gray. Everything had been clearer then, crisper, easier to see.

Straightening, I drew in a short breath . . . then hesitated. Because of the nausea, the weakness and convulsions that had followed. I hesitated . . . but only a moment.

I tried to push myself deeper into the river.

Nothing happened except a faint tremor in my chest. I strained against the sensation, jaw tightening.

Then something slipped. With a fluid smoothness, the eddies in the grayness washed away, the wind of the crowd died down to the faintest murmur. Bloodmark and the two men near the wagon grew focused, the sunlight around them brighter. Their movements slowed subtly.

And farther down the Dredge, a new eddy emerged from the blackness. A group of five men, heading toward me and the wagon, at least three of the men drunk. They were slapping each other on the back, laughter sharp and biting, like spikes in the heightened sounds of the river.

I relaxed, the tension in my jaw loosening, and settled back against the wall again. The focus remained unchanged. I'd been trying too hard, trying to force it.

When the group of drunken men were almost to the wagon, Bloodmark moved.

He timed it perfectly, motions so subtle, so casual, I almost missed them. As the drunken men drew alongside the wagon, Bloodmark fell into place behind them, close, a look of annoyance set on his face, as if he wanted to get around them but there wasn't enough room. When one of the drunks slewed toward the man with the pouch, Bloodmark's hand reached out to push him that extra distance, to make the drunk stagger into the target.

## THE SKEWED THRONE

59

Bloodmark needn't have bothered. One of the other drunks slapped the man on the back instead.

The drunk staggered, a curse spat into the grayness and wind as he reached out and grabbed the man with the pouch to catch his balance.

In the subtle, slow world of the river, I saw Bloodmark shift, saw the blade flash in the sunlight as he neatly sliced the cords of the pouch, the blade and pouch gone in the space of a heartbeat.

Then, the look of annoyance deepening, Bloodmark sidestepped the two stumbling men, the target holding the drunk up automatically.

The others in the group burst out laughing, then rescued their companion from the target. Waving toward the man and the wagon owner, they continued on their way.

Bloodmark skirted across the street, pausing at the entrance to an alley. As the group of drunks passed me, he seemed to sense that he was being watched.

He glanced up and our eyes met.

I nodded, with a slightly turned grin of grudging respect.

He scowled.

I was about to respond with a rude gesture when the cold white warning Fire that had nestled in the pit of my stomach suddenly flared, so strongly a tingle of icy prickles raced down my arms. Simultaneously, a tremor rippled across the dark gray and muted wind and I was struck by the putrid scent of blood and sweat and rotten butter.

I staggered back from the stench, eyes widening, and felt the world of gray and wind begin to slip away under the force of the Fire. Before the grayness com-

pletely fled, I reached out and held it. The gray steadied. The rush of wind that had slipped briefly into the roar of a hundred people, a hundred voices, pulled down again to a muted murmur. I'd risen in the river slightly, not as deep as when Bloodmark had lifted the pouch, but I was still deeper than usual.

And I was beginning to feel nauseous.

I glanced quickly toward Bloodmark, still in focus on the far side of the Dredge. His scowl had turned into wary confusion, the pouch in his hand forgotten, probably wondering why I had staggered back. But Bloodmark didn't matter anymore. Only the cold Fire still seething in my gut mattered. And the stench.

I turned toward it, breathing in deeply. The gray shifted sickeningly as I moved, blurring at its edges, but it held.

When I'd spun almost completely around, the stench so thick I thought I'd gag, I saw the tremor rippling in the grayness again. It'd taken on a reddish tint.

I focused with effort and Garrell Cart slid out of the rippling red.

I straightened in mute surprise, hand immediately falling to my dagger. Then the gray and wind trembled and with a gasp I was forced to let it go.

The world rushed back with a roiling twist, the noise of the Dredge almost overwhelming. I drew short, sharp breaths, trying to calm the nausea that came with it, trying to keep Garrell in sight. For a moment I thought I'd lose the battle, felt the bile burning upward in my throat, but I swallowed hard, forced it back with a painful gasp—

And then I was moving. It had taken me this long to spot him, I wasn't going to lose him now.

## THE SKEWED THRONE

61

Instantly, the same trembling weakness that had struck me before coursed through my legs. *I didn't go as deep!* I thought to myself in anger and annoyance, and fought the weakness, pushed it back ferociously as I dodged through the crowd. Without the focus of the river I couldn't move as easily through the people, couldn't see the eddies, the currents. I swore as I stumbled over someone's foot, heard them curse in return, and then I realized that Garrell had stopped.

I halted in the middle of the Dredge, felt someone pull up short behind me, skirt around with a mutter.

Ahead, Garrell had paused near the entrance to an alley, stood leaning against the corner. A woman had spread a stained blanket out on the stone of the Dredge, broken pottery that she had repaired set out on the blanket. Her daughter sat on the corner of the blanket just before Garrell, staring down at a thin, faded green cloth in one hand. She was twisting it in boredom, her blonde hair half-fallen over her rounded face. Unusual blonde hair, the color of straw. She wore a dirty shirt that was too big for her, tied with twine at her waist like a dress. Her mother wore the same. Both were barefoot, feet dirty.

The woman stood in front of the blanket, her own long, straw-blonde hair tied back with a length of rawhide. Her features were more foreign than the girl's, her eyes desperate. A dab of blue had been painted onto her skin near the corner of her left eye, like a teardrop. She cupped a glazed bowl in both hands and held it out to the passing crowd in mute supplication.

I frowned. The two were obviously not from Amenkor. I'd heard of the blue paint mark. The Tear of

62

JOSHUA PALMATIER

Taniece, some religious sect from one of the northern cities along the coast.

I snorted. Amenkor didn't need a god; we had the Mistress.

Garrell was staring down at the girl. A slow smile crept across his face.

Something touched against the back of my neck, like a drop of water, then trickled down between my shoulders like sweat. I reached up to brush it away, but there was no sweat, only the sensation, the prickle of water against skin.

My frown deepened and I scanned the crowd behind me. Instinctively, I reached for the river and felt the nausea return, felt my legs weaken, and stopped with a grimace. I scanned the crowd again and saw nothing.

But there *was* something back there. I could feel it.

Then the Fire leaped upward again and I spun back toward Garrell.

He was gone.

So was the girl.

The green cloth lay at the edge of the blanket, twisted in on itself.

For a moment, I felt nothing but the Fire, heard nothing but the grunts of the first man I'd killed as he struggled with his clothing, his hand pressed down hard, so hard, into my chest. I smelled his musty shirt with the Skewed Throne stitching torn out as he crushed my face into his shoulder. I couldn't catch my breath, tasted the mold in the cloth as it pressed into my mouth.

Then the Fire blazed over me and I darted toward the alley where Garrell had been leaning, where the

## THE SKEWED THRONE

63

mother of the girl had just noticed that her daughter was missing. I halted at the entrance, leaned against one wall for support as a wave of weakness washed through me. But I didn't have time for the weakness.

I gasped in a few deep breaths, then plunged into the depths of the alley, into the depths beyond the Dredge.

I ran. Into the shadows. Into the familiar stench. The alley angled away after a short stretch and I slowed as my eyes adjusted. Too slow, too slow. There was no one ahead, only mud-brick slicked with mold, a trickle of sludge down the center cobbles, an alcove, a door farther down. I slipped down the alley, keeping close to one wall, my heart thudding in my chest. The Fire had died down, but still sent licks of white flame down my arms. I felt them in my pulse, in my blood, burning.

I reached out to the wall for support as I moved, fighting off another wave of nausea. I wanted to move faster, but didn't dare. Garrell could be anywhere.

The alcove was empty. The doorway had been bricked shut, the brick now beginning to crumble.

I moved on, hesitantly, toward the empty blackness of a window, another alcove.

When I reached the window, the darkness inside so complete I could see nothing, the Fire roiling inside my gut abruptly died down to a single coiled flame.

My stomach clenched and I swallowed against the sudden certainty that I was too late. I lurched toward the alcove, hesitated at its recessed wooden doorway.

Twisting the hilt of the dagger I didn't remember drawing, I pushed the door open with one hand and stepped inside with barely a sound, crouching low and

to one side just inside the darkness. I breathed in deep, scented the mildew of the rotting door and something deeper, something metallic. Something I recognized.

I waited, letting the darkness recede into vague forms. Crumbled walls, another window, a second door. A broken table and shattered chair. A body.

I shifted forward.

The girl lay on her back, her too-long shirt rucked up to her armpits, her arms pulled above her head, angled and loose in death, her legs splayed. Her skin was hauntingly pale, except for the black of the blood trailing down from the knife wound in her chest.

I stood over her, stared down at her eyes—mere shimmers against the paleness of her face. The wetness of tears still stained her cheeks.

I thought again of the first man I'd killed, of his hand pressing hard against my chest, and drew in a long, deep, shuddering breath. Tears threatened to blind me.

I'd taken too long, moved too slowly.

The Fire had died, and in its place I felt hot anger. Like the anger I'd felt when I'd knelt over the man's body and spat into his face, flushed and feverish.

I turned to the second door, moved toward it without thought. No thought was needed. I could feel the anger in my jaw, hard and locked and intent. Could feel it in the hand that gripped the dagger.

The door opened onto a wall, a narrow running to the left and right. I couldn't tell which direction Garrell had taken.

I *pushed* myself beneath the river, violently.

Bile instantly rose to my throat, burning, and I collapsed to my hands and knees, hunched over as I vom-

## THE SKEWED THRONE

65

ited. The world of gray and red and wind vanished almost instantly.

But not before I caught the stench of rotten butter and piss and blood. It came from the left narrow.

Spitting out the last of the vomit, I forced myself to my feet, wiped the sourness from my mouth as I stumbled to the left. My legs trembled. One calf cramped.

Twenty steps along the narrow, past a sharp turn, I saw Garrell. He was walking away, his back to me, but moving slowly.

I came up behind him without a sound, touched his shoulder.

He turned with a slight start, that slow grin still on his face. Only now it was deeper, more satisfied. Sated. And now I was close enough, I could see it touching his eyes.

He was still back with the girl. I could see it there, in his eyes. Dark brown eyes.

I slid my dagger up beneath his ribs. The motion felt slow, practiced, but it happened in a heartbeat. I slid it in deep, then pulled it free and stepped back out of range.

I'd missed his heart on purpose.

He staggered back, his eyes widening. He wasn't with the girl anymore. His hands grabbed for both sides of the narrow, but only one made contact. As he stumbled, he tried to gasp. Blood poured out of his mouth with a rough, choked cough. Hand still against the wall, he swung backward, back slamming against the mud-brick. His other hand made contact with a meaty slap.

Then his legs gave out and he crumpled to one side, back skidding down the brick.

I moved forward and knelt over him. He was still breathing, through blood and spit and snot. Blood now stained his shirt where I'd stabbed him. The stain was spreading.

He tried to raise one arm, tried to reach for me. There was anger in his eyes now, and his mouth twisted. His breath was coming in shortened gasps.

"Die, bastard," I muttered.

And he did, his last breath coming in a bubble of blood.

It held for a moment, then burst.

I stared into Garrell's muddy, death-glazed eyes and shivered in belated reaction. Not a shudder of weariness from using the river, nor of nausea. This shiver tickled along my skin and brought hot, sharp tears to my eyes.

I turned away from Garrell's body and looked up into the blue of the sky, into the sunlight that somehow never made it down into the depths of the narrows, into the rooms with the bodies of the dead, or the niches of the living. I looked up at the sky with tears stinging my eyes and thought of the first man I'd killed, the one who'd been a guardsman, the one whose dagger I carried.

After a moment, I let the tears come. Not sobbing, racking tears. Not tears for the ex-guardsman who'd tried to rape me. And not for Garrell. These tears were for the girl whose body rested inside the shattered room, her arms loose above her head. And for the girl I'd been.

I was still staring up at the sky when I heard a rustle behind me, in the narrow.

I turned where I knelt, dagger held before me. At

## THE SKEWED THRONE

67

first I saw nothing but the darkness, still blinded by the sky. But then a figure emerged, huddled close to a wall.

The figure was too far away for me to see a face, nothing more than a shape. Before I could move closer, whoever it was turned and faded into the darkness, the sounds of their fleeing footsteps receding into the silence of the narrow.

I thought suddenly of the girl and rose. Leaving Garrell behind, I fled back to the room. I didn't want to think about what I'd done, how easily I'd done it. I didn't want to think about Garrell at all.

So I concentrated on the girl.

I hid the dagger beneath my clothes, then knelt and gently pulled down the girl's makeshift dress, hiding the blood and spatter at the junction of her legs. The length of twine she'd used as a belt was gone, discarded. I scooped her body up in my arms, holding her beneath the neck and knees. Her head rolled back, unnaturally relaxed, and I subdued an urge to sob. I shifted her arms so that they lay against her body, then stood.

She felt weightless, like a bundle with nothing inside, all loose and empty and broken.

It was the most horrible sensation I'd ever felt.

I found the girl's mother where I'd left her. She'd collapsed to her knees in the center of the blanket, her face empty. But her eyes continued to dart toward the faces in the crowd, continued to search. She hadn't seen me. Her shoulders hunched as I approached from behind, hitched with awkwardly silent sobs, her hands covering her face. The green cloth was twisted through the fingers of one hand.

I knelt beside her.

Her hands dropped instantly and she jerked away, face terrified, arms raised defensively. She cried out something in a language I didn't understand. I didn't move.

Then she noticed what I held in my arms.

It only took a heartbeat. And then she screamed. A rough scream of pure anguish that pierced the noise of the Dredge, that caused those passing by to halt in shock, to draw back. But she didn't notice. Her hands returned to her face, trembling inches before her, as if she didn't dare touch herself. Then she reached forward, tentatively, and pulled her daughter to her. She clutched her daughter to her chest, one hand holding the back of the girl's head to her shoulder, the other at the base of her back, crushing the girl to her. She hunched over her as she sobbed, the blue mark of paint near her eye vivid in the sunlight, her face contorted with a pain I didn't understand.

And so I fled. Back into the depths beyond the Dredge, into the narrows and alleys and hidden rooms. I didn't care where I went. I simply moved—away from the dead girl, away from the torn, pleading expression on her mother's face, away from the sensation of weightlessness. I moved, blinded by tears occasionally, but the tears came harder now, hurt more in my chest. I was too exhausted for tears.

Eventually, I realized I was heading toward Cobbler's Fountain.

It was approaching dusk, and I'd found Garrell.

†

I waited in a recessed doorway in sight of the fountain. I didn't like to come here. Not because of my tattered

## THE SKEWED THRONE

69

clothing anymore; Erick had taken care of that. Because of the memories.

I glanced up at the broken fountain, a mere outline in the darkness, and felt sunlight and water against my face, heard laughter. My mother's laughter, soft and deep and throaty as she splashed me. I giggled, splashed back. I could taste the water in my mouth, cool as it ran into my eyes, down the curve of my neck.

Hands lifted me from the fountain. I heard my mother murmur, *Come on. You've had enough fun for today. Time to head home.*

I turned away, shoved the memory aside in anger. It didn't matter. It meant nothing. It was too vague, too bright with sunlight and reflected water, the voice too soft and fluid. I'd been too young.

"Have you found Garrell?"

Erick stood on the edge of the open, cobbled circle around the fountain. When I glanced up, his expectant face darkened and his stance shifted, became subtly more dangerous.

"What's wrong?"

His eyes shifted behind me, scanned the alley, the recesses, the doors, then back to me. He frowned.

The nausea returned when his gaze fell on me, and I turned away.

"I found him," I said.

I led him back to the narrow, through the night. I didn't look back, but I could feel him following, wary, his hand close to his dagger.

I halted ten paces away from the body and sank down into an uncomfortable crouch against the wall. Erick paused just behind me in the darkness, then edged past, his hand resting briefly on my head. The

touch was gentle, reassuring, and I felt my chest clench and harden, my eyes burn again.

I hunched over my knees, pulled them to my chest.

Erick knelt at Garrell's side a long moment, then stood.

"Did you do this?" he asked. His voice was emotionless and he did not turn.

Before I could answer, someone else spat, "She killed him. I saw her."

I jerked upright, hand groping for my dagger.

Erick barely reacted, merely turned toward the voice. "Come here," he said, hard and unforgiving.

Farther down the narrow, a shadow detached itself from the wall and hesitantly moved forward. The figure kept to the deeper darknesses, kept itself hidden, but as it moved closer, it seemed to gain confidence.

When he came close enough to be recognized, he stood straight, face wary but head high.

Erick shifted toward him. "Who are you?"

"Bloodmark," I said sharply, my voice laced with hate.

Both Erick and Bloodmark turned toward me, Erick with a frown, Bloodmark with a contemptuous sneer.

"Is that your name?" Erick asked.

Bloodmark's sneer faded. "It's as good a name as any."

Erick nodded, as if he'd expected the response.

Then he seemed to dismiss Bloodmark entirely and turned toward me.

"Come here," he said.

I hesitated, uncertain what Erick intended. But all of the brittleness had left his voice, and I was used to following his orders now because of the training. I trusted him.

I stepped forward until I stood beside Erick, over Garrell's body.

## THE SKEWED THRONE

71

Bloodmark sank into a crouch less than ten paces away, but I barely noticed him.

I looked into Garrell's face, as I'd done earlier. But now all the hatred and anger had faded. I felt nothing but a trembling, weak shame.

Erick leaned forward, close enough I could feel his breath tickling the back of my neck.

"Go ahead and mark him," he murmured.

I flinched, stepped back in horror, but Erick stopped me, his hand against my back. He pressed me forward.

"No," I breathed, shaking my head.

"Why not? You killed him, didn't you?" Still a murmur, but hardened now, insistent.

"I saw her kill him," Bloodmark interjected. "She touched his shoulder and when he turned she stabbed him!"

Erick jerked his head toward Bloodmark, cutting him off. "If you say one more word, I'll cut out your tongue, gutterscum."

The threat sent a shiver down my back, to where Erick's hand still held me in place. My skin prickled.

Then Erick's breath touched my neck again.

"You killed him, didn't you?"

I nodded, felt the dagger slice up through Garrell's shirt, snagging slightly, then slipping into flesh. With a torn voice, I breathed, "Yes."

"Then you deserve the mark."

His hand left my back and he stepped away. Not far, but enough so that the world seemed to narrow down to just me and Garrell, to his shadowed face and muddy eyes, the ale-stain of the birthmark on his neck a pool of black against his skin.

I knelt, my dagger already in my hand. The stench

of death, of blood and piss and shit, filtered through the stench of rot from the narrow.

I hesitated.

"But I killed the man who tried to strangle me. I killed the fat man. You marked them both. Not me."

From what felt like a great distance, Erick said, "You killed the man who tried to strangle you to save yourself. And you killed the fat man to save me. This one is different, Varis. You killed him because it was necessary. Because you wanted to."

I brought the dagger up to Garrell's forehead, placed the blade against his skin, then hesitated again.

I closed my eyes and thought about the man with the garrote, felt the cord as it bit into my neck. I still carried a faint scar, a circle of white, with a vertical line where I'd cut myself with my own dagger to get free. I thought about leaning over him, staring into his face, then spitting on him.

The hot anger of that moment returned with a flush and I opened my eyes, looked down into Garrell's face again. Only this time I didn't see the shadows against his skin, the muddiness of his eyes, the dark blood of the birthmark.

I saw him staring down at the girl with the straw-blonde hair as she toyed with the green cloth. I saw the slow smile as it spread across his face. That slow, casual grin.

The hot anger spread through my chest, down into my arms, and I straightened where I knelt. My jaw clenched, and with firm strokes I sliced the Skewed Throne into Garrell's forehead, then sat back.

There was no blood. And the mark didn't have the smooth lines of the mark Erick had made on the man

## THE SKEWED THRONE

73

who'd tried to strangle me. But it was clear it was the Skewed Throne.

Erick moved forward, rested his hand on my shoulder. "Good."

But I barely heard him. Instead I shuddered.

Erick squeezed my shoulder.

Bloodmark snorted. "That's it? She kills him, she marks him, and that's it? You're the fucking guard!"

Erick moved so fast I barely saw him. In three short steps he was at Bloodmark's side. His hand clamped onto the back of Bloodmark's neck where he crouched and with a sharp shove he crushed Bloodmark to the ground, face turned, Bloodmark's ear and cheek pressed into the sludge of the narrow.

"I told you," Erick said, "not another word." He drew his dagger, brought it down to Bloodmark's face.

Bloodmark cried out, began to flail, his eyes wide. But Erick pressed his knee into Bloodmark's back, pinned him hard, hand still on his neck. He leaned close to Bloodmark's ear and the struggles ceased. Bloodmark closed his eyes and whimpered, mouth drawn back in a clenched grin of pain.

"The Mistress wanted him dead," Erick said. "It doesn't matter who killed him. I asked Varis to find him, and she did. It was her mark, her choice. The only question is—" Erick shifted slightly closer, his dagger touching Bloodmark's exposed cheek. Bloodmark gasped. "—what am I going to do with you?"

The narrow grew silent except for Bloodmark's ragged breath, rushing through clenched teeth. I didn't move.

Then Bloodmark grunted, "Use me."

I straightened, panic slicing through me. And some-

thing else. Something like what I'd felt when the rag woman had demanded my apple.

The apple was mine. I didn't want to share it. I didn't want to lose it.

Erick paused, drew back, his knee releasing some of its pressure from Bloodmark's back. Bloodmark sucked in a deep breath, coughed hoarsely into the muck. But he didn't move. Erick still knelt over him, hand clutching his neck.

"Use you?"

I shifted forward, started to shake my head in disbelief, in panic, but halted.

Erick was considering it. I could hear it in his voice.

Bloodmark coughed again, then said in a choked voice, "Use me. Like you use her." He shot a glare of hatred toward me, one that Erick couldn't see. "Have me hunt for these marks. I can find them as easily as she can."

I drew breath to tell Erick, "No," to tell him about Bloodmark leaning close and breathing, *Don't mess with me, bitch*, to tell him that Bloodmark couldn't be trusted.

But Erick looked at me. He'd already decided. I could see it in his eyes.

"Two pairs of eyes would be better than one," he said.

I let the drawn breath out in a ragged sigh.

It was already too late.