



## Chapter 6

**T**HE room held silent for a moment, stilled, expectant. . . .

"She wasn't a mark."

I said it with force, looking at Erick. The fist-sized solidness of stone began to form in my chest, right beneath my breastbone. Familiar stone. Hatred and anger made real. I tasted it, thick and fluid and acidic.

I straightened at the doorway, stepped into the room.

"She *wasn't a mark*," I repeated, louder, and knelt down at her side, placed a hand on her shoulder. But I kept my eyes on Erick. "She didn't deserve this!"

"What do you mean she wasn't a mark?" Bloodmark spat. His breath came in ragged gasps, deep and forceful.

"I mean that she didn't deserve this! That there was a mistake!"

Bloodmark snorted, turned to Erick. "That's the woman you sent us after, isn't it?"

## THE SKEWED THRONE

137

Erick pulled his gaze away from mine, glanced down at the woman. He stared at her a long time, then said, "Yes."

"Then she deserved it," Bloodmark said. His breath had calmed, was no longer intense, no longer . . . excited. He shifted, wiped the blood from his blade. "Besides," he added, "she's the one that killed the man. She beat me to it, the bitch."

I shot a glance at Bloodmark.

"Shut up," I said, voice hard, vicious.

He glared at me, shifted his stance again. His eyes bled hatred.

"What? Don't you believe me?" He laughed, without humor. His eyes were dark.

I shifted uncomfortably.

"Oh, yes, she killed him," he said, voice softening. "I watched her do it. She moved from the fire and stood over him while he slept. If I'd known what she was going to do, maybe I would have stopped her, saved the mark for myself." He smiled, a slow smile, like Garrell's smile as he stared down at the girl playing with the green cloth. "She stood over him for a long time. A long, long time. She had the knife in her hand, turned it as she clutched it at her side. Then she knelt down and stabbed him in the throat."

"Shut up," I said again, but this time it didn't have as much force. I saw Mari in that last moment before I'd left, saw her squatting before the fire, staring at the knife.

Her voice had changed after Rec had used the knife to cut her cheek. It had hardened. Her eyes as well.

"I saw it," Bloodmark said, and his smile deepened. "I watched her do it."

"Shut up," Erick said flatly.

Bloodmark flinched, cast a glare in his direction.

Erick had moved while we spoke, so quietly I hadn't noticed. He now squatted, facing Bloodmark, his eyes intent.

"You watched," he said quietly, his voice deadly. It wasn't a question. "Why?"

Bloodmark's brow creased. "What do you mean?"

"Why *didn't* you stop her? Why *didn't* you act?"

"Because I didn't know she was going to stab the bastard. Besides, he was a mark. He deserved it."

"How do you know?"

Bloodmark grinned. "Because you sent us after him."

A stricken expression crossed Erick's face, a grimace of regret, as if he'd tasted something sour. But it cleared, there and then gone in a breath.

"No," he said, and shook his head. "I think you watched because you enjoyed it. I think you enjoy it far too much."

I straightened where I knelt at Mari's side. Hope flared up inside me, like fire.

Erick's gaze narrowed as he watched Bloodmark. I could see him thinking, could see it in his eyes, in the muscle that twitched at the back of his jaw as he clenched his teeth.

Then he shook his head once. "No. It's over. It's gone on long enough."

I almost barked a laugh, caught myself, held it tight.

Bloodmark stilled, and when he spoke, his voice was as low and dangerous as Erick's. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," Erick said slowly and with purpose, "that I'll give you no more marks."

## THE SKEWED THRONE

139

Bloodmark's eyes narrowed. "You can't do that."

"Go back to the Dredge," Erick growled. "I should have sent you back long ago. Should never have brought you in on this in the first place, should have listened to Varis. You're too dangerous."

"They were marks! They deserved—"

Erick took one step, but Bloodmark was expecting it. He launched himself away so fast he seemed a blur. But he halted at the door, shot Erick a dark glare, me one filled with hatred and venom. And something more, something I didn't understand.

"Bitch," he spat.

And then he was gone.

Erick remained motionless, stared at me in mute apology. The flare of hope that had suffused me a moment earlier died, the stone of hatred and anger still burning beneath my breastbone.

I knelt over Mari, trembling, hand on her shoulder, looked into his eyes.

"You shouldn't have let him go," I said. "After what you saw him do. . . ."

"They were marks—"

"No!" I spat. "Don't tell me that! Don't—"

"They were marks!" And now his voice was hard, unforgiving. "No matter what you think, the Mistress said they were marks!"

I drew in a deep breath. "Mari was gray," I said. I ignored the look of confusion that crossed Erick's face, confusion that after a moment transformed into sudden understanding, as if he'd seen something for the first time, something that had been dangling in front of his face, that should have been obvious. I thought of what Bloodmark had said instead, that Mari had killed

Rec. I knew what he'd said was true. I'd seen the intent before I left, in Mari's eyes, in her stance. But I hadn't recognized it, had refused to recognize it. "She was *gray*," I repeated. "She wasn't a mark."

"She killed him," Erick said, his voice grudging. "You heard Bloodmark. That makes her a mark."

"Does it?" I spat. "If that's all it takes, then I'm a mark as well."

Erick frowned. "What do you mean?"

"She killed Rec to save herself," I said harshly. "He's the one who sliced her up. He cut her while I was here, before I came to get you. He cut her because he enjoyed it." I shook my head. "Mari killed him to save herself, just as I killed the ex-guardsmen to save myself, and the man with the garrote. Just as I killed the fat man to save you."

Erick drew in a sharp breath. Fear flashed across his eyes, and doubt.

But again he pushed the doubt back, forced down the fear. He shook his head, said in a tight voice, "It was Bloodmark's decision, just as previous marks have been your decision. He killed her, just as you killed Garrell."

I flinched, felt the dagger slide into Garrell's chest, felt myself step away. "No," I said, hardening my voice. "No. It's not the same. I *killed* Garrell. Bloodmark *murdered* Mari."

Erick glanced down at Mari's body, but said nothing. The fear shimmered in the back of his eyes, pushed back but not gone.

He knew what I said was true. But if he admitted it . . .

If he admitted it, then the Mistress was wrong, the

## THE SKEWED THRONE

141

Skewed Throne was wrong. And then everything that he'd believed in and trusted would be in doubt. No matter that the city had been slowly dying since the Fire, that the Mistress seemed incapable of doing anything to save it. No matter that what the Mistress *did* do only seemed to make matters worse. I knew the Dredge was dying. I saw it every day. I lived it. I saw what it had done to people like Mari, saw what it was still doing to people like her, and to me.

"You shouldn't have let Bloodmark go," I repeated, and then I turned to Mari, shut Erick out. It didn't matter now. It was done. Mari was already dead.

Erick held still a long moment, began to shift closer, but stopped himself.

In a strained voice, he said, "We need to mark her."

I felt the stone of hatred harden further. "No. Mark him, but not her."

Erick hesitated, then shifted away, toward Rec's body. He lifted the man's head, made three clean strokes, and then set Rec's head back down in the pool of blood that was already tacky, already darkening to rust.

I sat next to Mari as he worked. I heard her screaming, saw her in my mind, her body lax against Rec's body, shuddering as he drew the blade down her cheek. I saw her eyes—a light brown, lighter than I'd ever seen on the Dredge, with streaks of yellow—saw them flinch shut as Rec began to cut her. I heard her breath hiss between clenched teeth.

She had been gray.

I should have run faster.

I never should have left to find Erick in the first place.

Erick had finished, had come to stand beside me. He reached for my shoulder, but hesitated, not quite touching me. As if he were afraid to touch me.

His hand dropped.

And then the ice-rimmed hand slammed into my chest, so frigid I gasped. Its ice burned across my shoulders, burned up into my arms. It slammed into my chest with so much force I jerked backward in shock, stumbled where I knelt—

In the next breath, I choked on the smell of yeast, of dough and flour, the scent so strong it overpowered everything, overpowered the stench of fresh blood, of sickening sweat, of oily smoke.

“OH GODS,” I choked, and tasted vomit. “Oh gods, oh gods, oh gods.”

I suddenly understood the look on Bloodmark’s face as he’d left. Hatred and anger, but mixed with self-satisfied content.

He knew how to hurt me.

“What is it?” Erick barked, stepping forward. His eyes were wide with fear. But he was moving too slow.

I turned from him, lurched up into a crouch and launched toward the door, stumbling with the weight of the smell of yeast, with the weight of the ice-rimmed hand burning through my chest. I gasped as I hit the edge of the doorway with my shoulder, then caught myself and ran.

Ran through the outer room, through the room with the shattered clay tiles, out into the narrows, into the depths beyond the Dredge, the depths that had swallowed me as easily as they had swallowed Mari. I ran through the niches, through the abandoned courtyards, through the alcoves and doorways and gaping

## THE SKEWED THRONE

143

windows and half collapsed walls, so fast Erick could not possibly follow. I ran through my home, catching glimpses of the other animals of the Dredge. The startled face of a man, no more than skin laid over bones, huddled over a heap of rotten garbage. The rag woman, who cackled as I veered past, her heated laughter echoing down the alley. The boy, no more than seven, who held a broken spoon like a weapon, who clutched a pitted apple in one hand, one side already rotten, already brown and writhing with maggots. I ran, gasping in the frigid night air, muscles burning in my legs. I ran for the white-dusty man's door.

The ice-rimmed hand blazed deeper, tingling now in my hands. The stone of hatred grew harder beneath my breast, grew larger, until it choked me, lodged at the base of my throat. The scent of yeast, of dough, of heat and flour, burned in my nostrils, burned on my tongue, tasting of bread, of rolls, of cheese—

And then the scent flared, so strong I gasped at the intensity, so real saliva filled my mouth, coated my tongue—

And then it died.

I staggered to a halt, cried out to the sky. A raw, unintelligible wail that drew from deep inside. A wail of pure anguish, that sucked everything from me, that sucked the strength from my legs, from my arms, from my chest.

I gasped, collapsed into the nearest wall, hit it hard with my shoulder, scraped down its mud-brick side until I lay huddled in a ball at its base, arms wrapped around my legs, face drawn tight to my knees. I cried—harsh racking sobs that tore in my chest, that

filled my mouth with the taste of phlegm, that sent my blood pounding through my forehead, pulsing in my ears. I choked, not able to draw in enough breath, not *wanting* to draw in another breath. I felt a gaping hollowness fill me, a horrible emptiness that claimed everything inside me, everything in my chest, in my arms, in my legs. A hollowness that left me fragile, vulnerable, and utterly alone, that left me abandoned.

A hollowness that crushed me.

And I suddenly understood the look on the woman's face when I had handed her the dead girl. I suddenly understood that pain.

The thought brought my head up, stilled the sobs.

I'd killed Garrell. A sharp thrust to his chest, near the heart.

My eyes narrowed. The stone of hatred beneath my breastbone pulsed, its hardness seeping outward, stilling the tremors of weakness, stilling the liquid sensation in my lungs from the tears, filling the hollowness.

But it didn't touch the frigid burn of the hand pressing against my chest.

I stood, uncoiled from the tight crouch. My dagger was already drawn, already held loosely in one hand.

I had a new mark.

I slid forward, moving swiftly, but no longer at a dead run. Every muscle was tense, every sense alert. I bled from shadow to shadow, everything I'd learned of stealth and silence on the Dredge, everything I'd learned from Dove and his street gang of thugs, everything I'd learned from Erick coming forth.

Ten minutes later I slipped into a crouch opposite the white-dusty man's door. It was cracked open, oil light seeping out.

## THE SKEWED THRONE

145

The ice-rimmed hand still burned on my chest, still tingled in my arms. But it had faded, the edge of intensity dulled.

I glanced down the Dredge in both directions, saw no one.

I moved across the street, slow and quiet, and settled next to the white-dusty man's door. Reaching out, I pushed it open farther. It creaked as it slowed to a halt.

A wash of heat pushed outward, with a scent of yeast, of dough, and of blood.

Something clawed at my throat, acidic and vicious, but I pushed it down, crushed it with the stone in my chest.

Through the door, I could see the opening of an oven, the flames licking upward inside. An oil lamp hung from the ceiling, over a long table, a few chairs. On the table I could see lumps of rising dough, a pitcher of milk, a bag of flour. Another bag of flour lay split on the floor, a white fan against the fieldstone. Tracks marred the whiteness. Farther into the room, beyond the table, the long paddle I'd seen the black-haired woman holding when I'd been here last lay on the stone as well, the loaf of freshly baked bread it had once held lying on its side nearby.

And at the edge of the door, just within sight, I could see a hand, palm up, fingers slightly curled. A woman's hand.

I swallowed, felt tears burning the edges of my eyes. I moved through the door in one quick step, crouched low. I ignored the two bodies—forced myself to ignore them—scanned the room, found it empty. I slid to the only doorway, moved into the darknesses beyond, checked the inner rooms.

Bloodmark wasn't here.

I returned to the outer room and knelt down beside the white-dusty man. I brushed at the hair on his forehead, hair lightly dusted with gray, with flour. I let my fingers trail down his cheek, stopped at his jaw. I looked into his eyes, saw them soften there on the Dredge, saw them soften here in the alcove of his door, heard him say, *You've grown*.

I cupped his face with my hands, leaned forward over him, till my forehead touched his.

Then I sat back.

Bloodmark had stabbed him in the chest, had stabbed the black-haired woman as well. But on the white-dusty man's chest he had carved a parody of the Skewed Throne—three long, deep slashes.

I stared at the bloody gashes, felt myself harden further.

I stood, moved into the back rooms, returned with two blankets. I covered the black-haired woman first, then the white-dusty man.

Then I slid back out into the night, closing the door behind me. Standing in the alcove of the white-dusty man's doorway, I looked up into the sky, gazed at the stars and moon a long moment, saw them as I'd seen them the night of the White Fire—clear and vibrant and pure. And I felt the Fire inside me, burning with its cold flame beneath the frigid imprint of the hand on my chest. I felt it seeping through me, not fiery and seething, but slow and gentle.

It filled me with a preternatural calm, as it had that night so many years before.

I glanced back down to the darkness of the Dredge. I straightened, narrowed my eyes at the depths.

## THE SKEWED THRONE

147

And then I slid beneath the river. Deep. Deeper. Until I could feel the pull of the ice-rimmed hand, until I could scent it—like hoarfrost, burning in my nostrils, metallic against my tongue.

I drew away from the white-dusty man's door, slid into an alley—

And submerged myself in the depths.

I followed the scent, the river smooth around me. It flowed from alley to alley, from courtyard to courtyard, through twisted iron gates, past crumbling statues. I moved through abandoned buildings, their insides gutted, their walls collapsed. I saw the gray shadows of people huddled in corners, so many more people now than before the Fire. As I crossed one narrow, I heard a low growl, glanced down its short length and saw a dog, its teeth bared, lips peeled back, saliva dripping from its mouth. Its eyes were feral beneath the river, black and haunted. Drool coated its muzzle, and blood bled from its eyes. Its hindquarters had collapsed, gone numb with disease, and it lay in its own shit and piss, unable to move.

I paused, stared into the low, ominous rumble of its growl.

Then I moved on.

The scent grew, and with it the frost of the hand against my chest. And as I closed in, moving slowly, cautiously, I realized where I'd find Bloodmark. The realization came with a hard twist in my stomach. But at the same time I think I'd known. Part of me had hoped, had thought there would be a refuge, a safe place, a home—

But he'd taken everything else.

A tension fell away from me, a tightness in my

shoulders. I moved forward purposefully now, without seeing the depths of the Dredge.

Until I came to my niche.

I paused outside the entrance, knelt down a few paces away to stare into the narrow darkness.

The scent of hoarfrost was strong, overpowering. It rolled from the entrance to the niche like the heat had rolled from the white-dusty man's door, but cold instead. The ice-rimmed hand against my chest burned so harshly it felt as if my skin would freeze, would peel away in chunks.

The sensations were so intense, I never felt Bloodmark approach.

I sensed the kick a moment before it struck, tensed for the blow as I'd done a thousand times on the Dredge, ready to absorb it and flee to a safer darkness.

But this time I wouldn't run.

Bloodmark's foot dug in just beneath my ribs, forced itself up into my stomach with enough strength that it lifted me, flung me to the side, twisted me onto my back. The air was thrust from my lungs, but before I could suck in another breath, Bloodmark stomped onto my chest, his heel landing squarely on the ice-rimmed hand.

I doubled over, curled up tight over the sudden, vicious pain, rolled onto my side, coughed against the burning in my lungs.

I lost my hold on the river.

The instant the darkness of true night closed around me, I felt the backlash of nausea begin in the pit of my stomach, felt the tremors of weakness begin to course down the muscles of my arms.

My eyes flew wide in fear.

## THE SKEWED THRONE

149

"Bitch," Bloodmark said.

I struggled to rise, heard Bloodmark's footsteps as he moved around behind me. The tremors shuddered through my shoulders now, through my legs.

I focused on Bloodmark, on the sounds of his movements, on the pain in my gut, in my chest. I focused on breathing, each intake painful.

"You ruined everything!" Bloodmark spat, punctuating it with another kick, this time to my lower back.

Fresh pain sheeted up my side and I jerked out of the protective curl, rolled onto my back again, then over onto the other side with a barked cry, my arms tucked close to my chest.

But the pain pushed the tremors back.

Bloodmark moved in close, squatted down beside me.

"Did you find them?" he asked quietly, then laughed. "I left them for you. And for Erick." His voice turned bitter. "He was my ticket into the Guard."

"They would never have taken you," I gasped, the words broken, breathless.

"Why not?"

I shifted, enough so I could look up into Bloodmark's eyes, so dark and vicious, enough to free the arm tucked closest to the ground.

"Because," I muttered, so softly Bloodmark leaned down closer to hear, leaned close enough I could see the black smear of the birthmark next to his eye. I smiled—a slow, satisfied smile. "Because you're gutter-scum. Just like me."

I shoved my dagger up along his neck, drawing a thin line beneath his chin before the blade punched up under his jawbone. Blood splashed my hand, hot and slick, and then Bloodmark jerked back, a strange, gur-

gling croak coming from his open mouth. The dagger slid free, followed by another wash of blood, and Bloodmark's hand clamped to his throat, to his jaw. He staggered backward, struck the mud-brick of the collapsing wall beside my niche, and skidded down it until he sat against the heels of his feet.

My hand, the one that held the dagger, slumped to the ground. Tremors were rippling through me now and I could no longer hold it up. I let my head rest against the dirt-smearred cobblestones of the narrow, let the tension in my shoulders release, but I didn't take my eyes off Bloodmark.

He stared at me with horrified, hate-filled eyes. His jaw worked as he tried to speak, but nothing came out except a sickening wheeze of air and a speckle of blood. Blood coated the hand clutched to his throat as well.

I thought of the first man I'd killed, of his hand clutching the cut across his own throat. I thought of the White Fire.

Bloodmark's eyes widened and his body began to slip. The hand at his throat fell away. As it did he lost his balance.

He slumped to one side, falling across the opening to my niche, his body landing with a low, rustling thud.

His blood-soaked hand flopped out toward me, as if he were reaching for me.

I stared into his dead eyes and then the tremors took me.

The world faded, and I closed my eyes. I felt the spasms shudder through my body, felt the pain from Bloodmark's kicks pierce through my chest, but it was

## THE SKEWED THRONE 151

all distant, removed. I drew myself away, too exhausted for anything to matter, too beaten down to care. I thought of nothing, simply stared into the darkness behind my eyes and waited.

It took longer than I expected. I'd stayed beneath the river far longer than I ever had before, had pushed myself harder than I ever had before.

When the worst of the spasms finally passed, I rolled onto my stomach and pushed myself up onto my hands and knees, thinking of Mari, of Erick. *You heard Bloodmark. She killed him. That makes her a mark.* Nausea rippled through me and I vomited onto the cobbles. Hanging my head, I waited for this to pass as well, then climbed weakly to my feet.

It was still night, still dark. But dawn had begun to touch the eastern sky.

I stood over Bloodmark, wavering slightly, still weak.

He'd stolen everything from me.

Erick.

The white-dusty man.

My niche.

He'd taken it all.

And I'd killed him for it. Murdered him.

I turned and stared up into the night sky, thought of the Mistress, of the Skewed Throne . . . of Erick.

A searing pain slid through me, as thin as a dagger's slice, but deeper. Tears stung the corners of my eyes and I pressed my lips together hard, felt them tremble.

I could never go back to Erick now, could never look him in the eye, could never face his disappointment. Not after Bloodmark. I hadn't killed him to save myself, or Erick, or anyone else. I'd killed him because I'd

wanted to. Because he'd deserved it, whether the Mistress knew that or not.

Erick would never understand that. Not if he thought Mari was a mark. Not if he couldn't see that she wasn't, even after she'd killed Rec.

There was nothing left for me here. Nothing at all.

So I turned and left the Dredge, moved toward the only other place I knew.

To the bridge leading across the River.

To Amenkor.

The real Amenkor.