



ACT ONE

UNDER THE FIRST
COLD GLEAM
OF DAY

~

ONE



UNTIL DEATH RELEASE me.

Echoes of my swift and brutal coronation still troubled the hall: whispers thickening in the shadowed corners, memories seeping into the walls and floor. Hard-won, the stone of Turas sat heavy on my brow, the bronze circlet thrust through my braids by Sidonius's hand. It pinched at the hair over my left ear, but I did not lift my hand to resettle it. I had grown adept at living with pain of late.

No less than a dozen soldiers waited on me, two by the door and two at the foot of the dais, four down the length of each wall. Their honey-pale

complexions marked them as foreigners; their white livery and the short stabbing swords belted to their hips marked them as Ilthean. To a man they still wore the open sandals of their homeland, more cord than shoe, as if the colder clime here couldn't touch them. Perhaps it didn't – the soldiers' bared toes were too hard and hoary to show any hint of numb flesh.

They waited without protest, watching me, watching the entrances. They were all that stood between me and a swift death at the sharp edge of a blade. They were the reason death would stalk my every step in the coming days.

One other remained in the hall with me: Achim. As patient as the soldiers, he sat cross-legged at the foot of the dais, hands folded in his lap, dark eyes fixed on me.

The words of the vow had been mine, but it was Achim's strength with the shadows which had forced me to speak them, forced me to bind myself.

Until death release me.

I curled my fingers around the silken wood of the throne's arms, trembling as I contemplated the memory of my traitorous tongue. The movement brought a twinge from my tight-bound broken ribs.

What had possessed me to add the words to the end of my oath? I had sought a loophole, a phrase

which would give me leeway enough to dislodge the Iltheans before their hold tightened. I had failed.

Now my panel on the arras of Turasi history would show a woman kneeling, handing her nation and people into servitude.

The thought left a bitter taste in my mouth.

You used to be clever under pressure, my dead grandmother's voice niggled in the back of my mind. Marriage has dulled your wits.

I winced at the unwelcome reminder of my husband. I had knelt in the blood of my own court and wed the man who spilt it. Then, to cast him from my throne, I had sold my nation to the white serpents of the south. But that was not a permanent solution – for while he lived, he would fight to regain the throne. And it still left me with an Ilthean infestation.

Staring at the scarred wooden floor, I took a deep breath. My broken ribs throbbed in response. I was trapped, like the blood ground into the gouges of the floor, as were the Turasi. Death might release me, but not them.

Not when my cousin, next in line for the throne, was Ilthean to his petulant core.

If he still lived. I doubted Dieter, my husband, had been fool enough to kill the boy, but Renatas was headstrong, to say the least, and in battle even genuine accidents happened.

I rose, careful of my pain. Achim stood too, and the Ilthean soldiers shifted in readiness. I concentrated on breathing, the cold air scraping against my lungs, every breath chilling me through, shrinking my flesh to my bones, making my fingertips brittle.

The four broad steps of the dais jagged and danced before my eyes, and blinking did nothing to steady them.

With a sick yawning in my centre, the walls swooped one way and the floor another. My knees folded, pitching me headfirst down the steps. The wood of walls and floor flashed and tumbled end over end until strong arms jerked me to a halt.

The wooden floorboards teetered above me. For a long moment I made no attempt to move, content simply to stare at the misplaced floor.

Whoever had caught me shifted his grip, twisting me upright until the floor was back where it belonged. It took a moment more before my feet and head caught up with the transition, and I found myself in the shadow-worker's hold.

'I think I need to rest,' I said.

'Lady,' Achim agreed equably.

I stepped back, out of his steadying arms, and turned to the closest Ilthean soldier. I didn't recognise him, but that was no surprise: Sidonius's men numbered in the high hundreds.

‘Send for Roshi and Sepp to attend me, if you would.’

I didn’t need to see the flicker of his eyelids, or hear Grandmother’s disapproving *tsk*, to know my tone was too weak. With a little more starch I added, ‘Given the battle’s won, I’m sure the general no longer fears for his own hide. They’ve served their purpose as hostages.’

Being Dieter’s captive wife had given me ample practice in ordering other people’s troops around.

With Achim beside me and a covey of Ilthean soldiers behind me, I slowly made my way from the hall and into a courtyard as quiet and calm as if nothing untoward had occurred this day, though bodies still crowded the yard like clotted shadows. An occasional glint from vacant eyes or bloodied teeth broke the settling gloom. Only night’s oncoming coolness kept the scent of blood from rising in thick, choking vapours.

There were more Turasi dead than Ilthean. *My doing*, guilt whispered.

Moving among the bodies were Ilthean soldiers and press-ganged Turasi thralls, searching out the living and stripping the dead of valuables. In their wake the ravens and crows settled, squabbling over their own prizes: eyeballs and lips, the soft flesh of cheeks and gums.

Bile rose from my gullet, sour and scouring.

‘Get rid of those birds.’

The captain of my guard broke stride in surprise. The soldiers following us drew to an uncertain halt.

‘Detailing men to deal with the vermin will only make the searching slower, my lady,’ the captain said.

‘Then I suggest you summon more men.’ I fixed him with my best imitation of Grandmother’s stern stare. ‘Have the stable thralls or the field hands stand around with lanterns. Summon your countrymen from their warm berths and their precious cups of wine swill to swing staves, if you have to. Just keep the courtyard free of vermin. And kindly remember it is never your place to question me.’

His spine stiffened and he gazed into the distance, the soldier’s version of subservience. ‘Yes, my lady.’

A flick of his hand sent one of his men hurrying away to fetch more workers; a terse command saw another five soldiers leave my escort to aid with the scavenging.

I continued on my way, the chastened captain and now only half his men following in my wake.

With a knowing smile Achim remarked, ‘I hope you don’t conceive of too many more chores between here and your suite, my lady,’ he said. ‘Else you may grow perilously short of guards.’

A swooping, giddy urge to laugh near overpowered me. *Here we go again*, I wanted to retort, for all that Achim would not wholly understand. *Try your best*,

but I will defeat and humiliate your general just as I did my husband.

‘I have a chore for you, too,’ I said to the shadow-worker. I had to take a deep breath to quell a flutter of anxiety before I continued, ‘Teach me.’

A handful of crows clambered aloft in a confusion of wings as we passed, the dusty whiff from their feathers tickling my throat. The closest raven cocked its head and croaked an admonishment.

No calamity befell me, but still I shivered at what I had dared. The shadows were the province of the mara, and once given to that branch of the church, a person never left their service.

The mara have claim on all who can walk the shadows, Grandmother had reminded me, time and time again throughout my childhood. If they see you, they will claim you, and House Svanaten will die. I’ll not see that come to pass, not now, not when your talent is slight and uncontrollable.

Achim’s smile dissolved at my command, but I gave him no chance to protest. Apart from his skill with the shadows, and what he could teach me of it, the shadow-worker had the luxury of refusing to obey Sidonius’s commands, and that was something I might turn to my advantage.

‘We will begin tomorrow,’ I ordered. ‘Be ready.’

TWO



QUICKENING MY PACE, I hurried through the courtyard and its macabre crowd until we were climbing the stairs towards cleaner air, the birds of the shadows settling once again to their feast.

At the top of the stairs, I slowed. Weariness had lodged a sharp knot somewhere behind my ribs and it was stealing my breath.

Inside the palace, order was already settling over the halls. By the time the Ilthean soldiers teemed through here, the battle had been won. Only random strikes on the walls, and the muck dragged in on hundreds of feet, showed any hint of the recent chaos.

Dieter's men had had cleaner feet when they stormed the palace.

Pain makes you soft in the head, child, Grandmother chided.

Heads down and hands busy, thralls were occupied by routines that even a coup could not disturb. There were men on their knees, scrubbing the floor as we passed; there were women tending the lanterns. Warm yellow light and the familiar crisping stink of oil flashing alight followed me down the corridors.

When I hesitated at the first turning, Achim glanced my way. 'Simple fatigue, my lady, or are you unwell? Do you need a leech?'

I swallowed my indecision and shook my head – the last thing I needed was someone hovering over me, or pushing me to take a draught that would take days to wear off. 'No. I'm fine.'

With nowhere else to go, I led the way to the royal suite. The rooms had been my grandmother's, while she ruled, and Dieter's after his coup. Although as his wife I had officially shared them, in reality I had continued to reside in my own rooms, desperate to retain some privacy and separation from my husband.

Now that I must occupy Grandmother's rooms alone, my memory painted them as cold and foreign.

A pair of Ilthean soldiers stood watch over the door. At sight of them, my stomach tightened: their presence too clearly said *Here sleeps the puppet queen*.

At the same time, a shameful rush of relief weakened my knees. The stone and throne of Turas belonged to whoever could take and hold power – but it had been Ilthean hands that placed the crown on my brow, and Ilthean swords which prodded the people to bend knee and neck. There probably wasn't a Turasi in the palace who wouldn't gladly drive a knife through my ribs this night.

Achim took his leave at the door. With a reminder to be ready first thing tomorrow, I let him go, eager for rest myself.

One of the guards opened the door to my suite for me, releasing a bright glow and a wave of warm air. Thank the ravens for whoever had thought to kindle my hearth fire! I stepped through the door's welcoming arch, wanting only to stretch out on a soft mattress and sleep.

Then my heart gave a slow thud. Perched on the edge of a couch before the hearth was Sidonius.

'Lady Matilde.' The Ilthean general didn't rise. 'I was beginning to wonder if you had found other employment.'

A moment's pause steadied my legs enough to step into the room.

‘I hope I’ve not kept you waiting.’ I spoke with all the strength and insincerity I could muster. A throne was a state of mind, not just a chair in a hall, as Grandmother had drilled into me night daily. The woman who sat athrone did not apologise – particularly to the general of an invading army.

Sidonius waved a hand, dismissing the matter.

‘You’re in time to help me receive an interesting visitor, at least,’ he said.

He didn’t explain further, and propriety kept me from asking. In truth, a regal façade was a handicap more often than not.

Fortunately, I didn’t have long to wait. Before the sensation of blood drying the silk of my slippers to my skin could drive me to outright distraction, the doors rattled open to reveal a girl with hair and eyes as pale as foxfire, and a sneer prouder than a cock’s crow. She was wearing a wrap of red silk that had come from my own wardrobe. Flanked by two Iltheans, she held herself as if the soldiers were but an emblem of her rank.

Amalia of House Raban stepped into my suite.

She ignored me at first, taking inventory of the room. I recognised that look; I’d been on the receiving end too often to mistake it. She was angry. My husband’s sister was often angry.

When her gaze lit on Sidonius, her chin tipped upwards. ‘You’re in charge of this rabble, I take it.’

Then uncertainty clouded her expression as his features registered.

Ravens above, I thought, stealing a glance at Sidonius. Was it possible Dieter had never told Amalia about their brother?

She swept across the room, anger in the snap of her skirts and her narrowed eyes. 'Who are you?' she demanded.

Taken aback, Sidonius examined her features in turn. If his conclusion bothered him, he hid it better.

'My name is Sidonius,' he said.

'That's it?' She whipped the wrap off her shoulders and let it dangle from her hand, as if the red silk were but a scrap of common worsted. 'No House, or whatever passes for clan among the serpents?'

'Slaves have no clan or family alliances,' he said.

Amalia glared at him. 'Slave? Not even Iltheans would be fool enough to put a thrall in charge of an army.'

A knuckle to my top lip hid my smile at Amalia's lack of tact.

Judging by the severe light in his pale eyes, Sidonius did not share my humour. 'Jurgas Avita Angeron, may the gods grant him eternal life, gave me manumission by his own hand,' he said coldly. 'From your appearance, and the way you demanded entrance, I'm guessing you are Amalia.'

He looked my way, as if seeking my confirmation, though I suspected his intention was to show Amalia where my duty lay. When it came to manipulating, he was almost as adept as Dieter.

Noting the exchange, Amalia turned on me. 'You told him!'

I raised my hands, unsure whether I meant to placate her or to put a barrier between us. 'I think he reasoned it for himself, Mali.'

She huffed in acknowledgement of this point. 'And who's he, then?'

I hesitated, dreading her reaction. 'Isn't it obvious?'

She curled her lip and said, 'My father never whelped a serpent – he never so much as set foot inside the empire's borders, so no, it isn't obvious. Tell me why this . . . this *southerner* resembles my father!' She crossed her arms, the wadded silk wrap dangling from her fist a bright splash against the dark blue of her gown. My gown, more correctly, for it was also from my wardrobe.

'I only know what Dieter told me, Mali, and that was precious little,' I said, aware that Sidonius was watching us with a keen interest which belied the calm of his closed expression.

'More than he told me, apparently,' she said.

'He said that he had an illegitimate brother.'

Mali closed her eyes and in a flat voice said, 'That's all?'

'Another time, he said his mother wasn't a woman to be trifled with, although his father had tried. When I asked what had happened, he said, "Ask my brother sometime."'

At that, Sidonius stood. 'Now we have our family tree established to your satisfaction,' he said, 'perhaps we might return to the point at hand.'

Amalia opened her eyes, but maintained a contemptuous silence.

'You wanted to see me,' Sidonius prompted.

Amalia set her gaze on the hearth fire and did not reply.

'Now why would Dieter leave his sister behind?' Sidonius pressed with an ugly inflection.

When Amalia still said nothing, he turned his glower on me.

I would have liked to stare him down, to answer only with silence as Amalia did, but my need to know her purpose was as great as his.

'He didn't,' I said.

Amalia shot me a sideways glance and tightened her hold on the wrap. 'No,' she admitted. 'He didn't.'

I swallowed. Need or not, helping Sidonius to draw her out felt like a betrayal.

'Answers at last,' said Sidonius. 'Let me ask a better question. If Dieter did not leave you, why

did you choose to remain behind, among your brother's enemies?'

Amalia's lips tightened as she stared once more into the fire. 'I stayed to punish him.'