

THE
MERCIFUL
CROW

Margaret Owen

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*To everyone whose mercy is demanded, and who dreams instead of teeth.
And to my parents: No, you're not in this one. The cat had first dibs.*

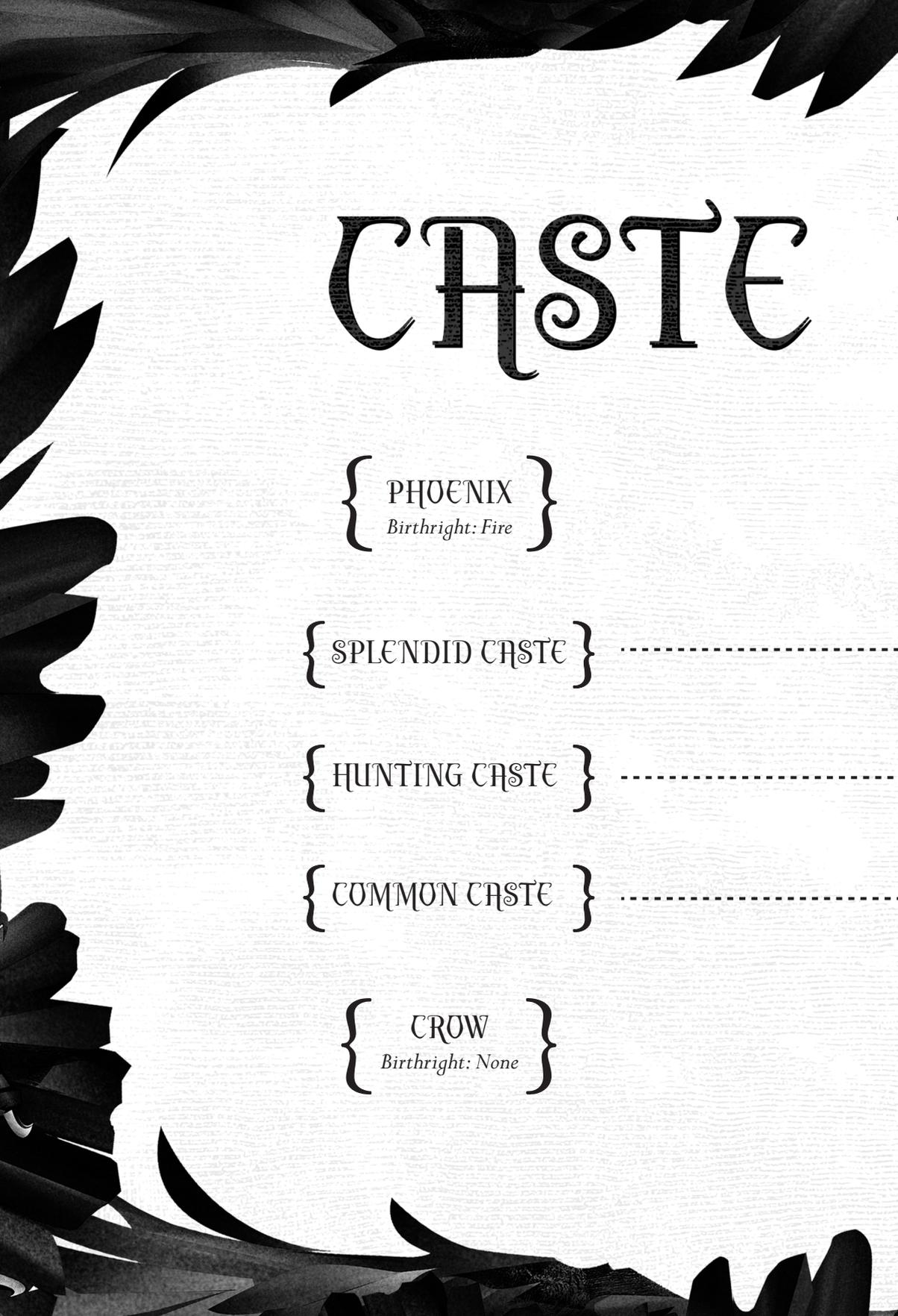


One way or another, we feed the Crows.

—Saborian proverb

On nights you burn sinners, sleep with your sandals on.

—advice for a young Crow chief



CASTE

{ PHOENIX }
Birthright: Fire

{ SPLENDID CASTE }

{ HUNTING CASTE }

{ COMMON CASTE }

{ CROW }
Birthright: None

LEGEND

PEACOCK

Birthright: Glamour

SWAN

Birthright: Desire

DOVE

Birthright: Artistry

HAWK

Birthright: Blood

CRANE

Birthright: Truth

OWL

Birthright: Memory

VULTURE

Birthright: Hunting

GULL

Birthright: Wind

PIGEON

Birthright: Luck

SPARROW

Birthright: Refuge





PART ONE

SINNERS

— AND —

QUEENS

CHAPTER ONE



THE EMPTY THRONE

PA WAS TAKING TOO LONG TO CUT THE BOYS' THROATS.

Near ten minutes had run dry since he'd vanished into the quarantine hut, and Fie had spent the last seven of them glaring at its gilded door and trying not to worry a stray thread on her ragged black robe. Taking one minute meant the Sinner's Plague had already finished off the boys inside. Taking three meant Pa had a merciful end to deliver.

Taking ten was taking too long. Ten meant something was fouled up. And from the whispers sweeping the pristine tiles of the courtyard, their throngs of onlookers were catching on.

Fie gritted her teeth until the queasy pinch in her gut retreated. Pa knew what he was doing. Twelve hells, just yesterday morning he'd led their band of Crows to answer a plague beacon, collected corpse and coin, and had them all back on the roads before noon.

That town had no shortage of gawkers either: a man slipping looks through his loom threads, a woman steering her goat herd past the sinner's hut to steal a better view. Children had twisted from their parents' grasp to stare at the Crows and ask if monsters hid under the beaked masks and black robes.

Fie reckoned the answer changed depending on whether a Crow was in earshot.

But Fie had seen gagglers and worse near every day she could recall. As the only caste untouched by the plague, the Merciful Crows were duty-bound to answer every summons.

And as Pa's chief-in-training, she hadn't the luxury of a faint heart. Not even here. Not even now.

The boys they'd been called to take tonight were no different from the hundreds of bodies she'd helped burn in her sixteen years. No matter that few had been this high-caste. No matter that Crows hadn't been summoned to the royal palace of Sabor for nigh five hundred years.

But the needle-sharp stares of warriors and aristocrats told Fie the plague mattered to the high castes tonight.

Pa knew what he was doing, she told herself again.

And Pa was taking too long.

Fie yanked her gaze from the door and searched for trouble in the crowds packing the walls of the royal quarantine court. She'd kept the habit since the first time an angry next-of-kin had trailed them out. From the looks of it, the latticed galleries were all Peacock courtiers, fluttering in mourning paints and ornamental woe as they gawped from a safe distance.

Fie grimaced behind her mask as she caught whispers all too familiar: ". . . *such disgrace . . .*", ". . . *his father?*", and the pestilent ". . . *bone thieves.*" An old, tired kind of trouble. The scandal-thirsty Peacocks

were transfixed by the spectacle of thirteen Crows below, awaiting a show.

Hawk trouble was wholly a different beast. King Surimir fancied the war-witches as his palace guards, warriors who healed wounds just as easily as they tore their foes apart from within. Double as dangerous and, since the Hawks knew it, thrice as easy to vex.

These war-witches' hands had anchored on their sword hilts the moment the Crows dragged their cart through the gate. They hadn't budged since.

Fie found no grief in their stony stares. The Hawks weren't waiting on a show. They were waiting for the Crows to foul up.

She caught herself rolling another thread betwixt two thin brown fingers. The queasy pinch slunk back; she nailed her gaze to the door. It stayed damnably shut.

There was a slip of a movement to her left. Hangdog, Pa's other trainee, had shifted by the cart. Torch-flame charred his silhouette, edging it in vivid orange where the light caught tattered robes and the long curve of his beaked mask. From the tilt of his head, he was eyeing the patchouli burners squatting about the hut.

Fie wrinkled her nose. She'd stuffed a fistful of wild mint into her own mask's beak to ward off plague-stink. She couldn't fault this fine palace for trying to daub it over as well. She could, however, fault them for their terrible taste in patchouli.

Hangdog's sandal idly inched toward the burner.

Anywhere else and she'd have *accidentally* punted the patchouli herself. Hangdog was likely itching under so much high-caste attention, and the sneering arcades of gentry above were begging for some nasty surprise.

But not here, not now. Fie tugged at the hood of her robes, a sign only the other Crows would ken. *Don't make trouble.*

Hangdog's foot slid another toe-length toward the burner. Fie could all but smell his grin behind the mask.

They'd both been born witches, and for Crows, that meant they were born to be chiefs, too. Fie's gut gave a hard little twist every time she thought on it . . . but she doubted Hangdog thought on being a chief at all. Pa called him "two-second clever": too bent on making fools of others to catch his own purse getting cut.

Fie looked at the soldiers, then at Hangdog, and resolved to scalp him if the Hawks didn't do it for her first.

There was a squawk from the hut's rare-used hinges as Pa finally stepped outside.

Fie let the loose thread go, head and heart steadying. Damp red streaked down the front of Pa's robes. He'd dealt a mercy killing, then.

Wretched slow mercy, Fie reckoned.

Her relief lasted half a heartbeat before metal rasped, dreadful, from the wall behind them.

Any Crow knew the song of quality steel being drawn. But Pa only turned toward the sound, torchlight flashing off his mask's glassblack eyes. And then he waited.

A hush iced over the courtyard as even the Peacocks froze.

In the city streets, in sorghum fields, anywhere from Sabor's western merchant bays to its cruel mountains of the east, a higher caste could cut down Crows for any invented slight. Brothers, aunts, lovers, friends—every Crow walked with the scars of loss. Fie's own ma had vanished down a dark road years ago.

But for now, the Hawks kept to their walls. The Sinner's Plague spread swift once its victim died. One body could rot a town to stone before year's end. Here in the quarantine court, with two dead boys guaranteed to bring the palace down in less than a half moon . . . here was where the Crows could not be touched.

There was another rattle as the blade returned to its scabbard. Fie didn't dare look back. Instead she fixed on the rumble of Pa's rough voice: "Pack 'em up."

"I'll handle the dead moppets," Hangdog said, starting forward.

"Not on your own." Pa shook his head and motioned for Fie. "They're bigger than you."

Fie blinked. The steward had called the sinners "boys" when he led the Crows in. She'd expected tots, not lordlings near grown.

Pa caught her shoulder just as she reached for the door. She cocked her head at him. "Aye, Pa?"

The mask hid his face, but she still caught a hitch in his breath, the way the beak tipped less than a fingerbreadth to point clearer to the Hawks.

"Just . . . bring them out," said Pa.

Fie stiffened. Something was fouled up, she'd swear it on a dead god's grave. But Pa was the chief, and he'd gotten them out of worse.

Most of them, at least.

She nodded. "Aye, Pa."

The second the door swung shut, Fie cuffed Hangdog upside the head.

"What in twelve hells were you thinking?" she hissed. "The Hawks near gutted Pa for walking out a *door*, and you're aiming to try their patience?"

"Aiming to make you mad." This time she heard Hangdog's grin in the hut's thick darkness. "Those scummers won't gut the chief. Or they'll all rot with us if they do."

"You're the only one keen to test that," she snapped, then stopped cold.

Her eyes had adjusted to the little torchlight filtering through the hut's canvas window screens. The lordlings were already tightly cocooned

in linen shrouds on their red-stained pallets, a blot of blood seeping through the fabric at each throat.

Bundling up the dead was their job, not Pa's.

"Maybe chief didn't trust us to get it right." Hangdog didn't sound like he was grinning anymore.

That was nonsense. The two of them had handled shrouding for five years now, ever since Hangdog had come to her band for chief training.

"If Pa's got reasons, he'll tell us," she lied. "Sooner these scummers are on the cart, sooner we clear the damn patchouli."

There was a short, muffled laugh as Hangdog picked up one body by the shoulders. Fie took the feet and backed through the door, feeling every gaze in the courtyard alight on her—and then dart to the bloody shroud.

Quiet shrieks ruffled through the Peacock courtiers as Fie swung the body up onto the cart. Hangdog gave it an extra heave. It toppled onto heaps of firewood with an unceremonious thud, knocking over a pile of kindling. A collective gasp swept the galleries.

Fie wanted to kick Hangdog.

Pa cleared his throat, muttering pointedly, "Mercy. *Merciful Crows.*"

"We'll be nice," Hangdog said as they headed back inside. He'd just picked up the remaining body by the feet when he added, "Wager someone faints if we drop this one."

Fie shook her head. "Pa can sell *your* hide to a skinwitch, not mine."

The second body was met with another round of sobs as they loaded it. Yet once the Crows began to haul their cart toward the courtyard's gateway, the Peacock courtiers miraculously overcame their sorrow enough to jostle at the lattices for a better look.

The spectators' enraptured angst grated like a broken axle. The dead boys must have been favorites of the royal Phoenix caste if this many Peacocks battled to out-grieve one another.

Fie's skin crawled. Of all the bodies she had ever dragged off to burn, she decided she hated these two most.

To reach the quarantine court, they'd been all but smuggled down cramped, plain servant passageways; now a stone-faced Hawk hustled them straight through the belly of the palace. The longer the bodies lingered, the greater the odds the plague would pick a new victim.

Fie's spite grew with every marvel they passed. Their cart clattered over ceramic inlays in mesmerizing whorls, past gardens of amber-pod wafting its perfume through the damp late-spring night, and into arching corridors of alabaster and bronze. Every pillar, every alcove, every tile paid some tribute to the Phoenix royals: a sun, a gold feather, a curl of flame.

The Hawk threw open a set of enormous ebony doors and pointed her spear inside. "You'll know your way from here."

Pa motioned them on, and the cart creaked into what could only be the fabled Hall of the Dawn. They'd emerged at the head of the hall, which was crowned with a dais; the way out waited far, far down a grand walkway bracketed in more galleries. Great black iron pillars held up an arched ceiling, each cut like a lantern into the likeness of a dead Phoenix monarch. Fires burned within every column, hot enough to cling to Fie's arms even from the door.

Most of the hall was lacquered in deep purples, scarlets, and indigos, but frothy gilt laced the railings of each gallery, and at the dais, a grand disc of mirror-polished gold sat on the far wall above a pool of fire. Gem-studded rays of gold fanned all the way to the roof. Every facet hoarded up firelight until the dais hurt to look at straight on. The whole mess made a sun that rose behind the Phoenix thrones.

The *empty* Phoenix thrones.

Fie sucked in a breath. No king, no queen, and neither the older prince nor the new one here to mourn the dead lordlings, yet the

gentry wailed as if their fortunes depended on it. It didn't make sense. But whatever this was, whatever had fouled up, Pa would get them out as he had every time before.

They rolled onto the walkway and began to march.

She hated the way the hall's slick marble tiles whined against the nails spiking her sandal soles, dulling them with every step. She hated the perfume oils besmirching the stagnant air. And most of all, she hated the galleries of Peacock gentry, who shuddered daintily in their satins as if the Crows were no more than a parade of rats.

But behind the Hawk guards stood a silent legion in the brown tunics of Sparrow-caste palace servants, near outnumbering the courtiers above. Harrowed expressions said their grief was more than decorative.

The pinch in Fie's gut returned with a vengeance. Nobody liked Peacocks *that* much.

This was bad business, treating with castes too high to fear the plague. At this rate Pa would be throttling their viatik fee out at the gate. At this rate, maybe they wouldn't get paid at all.

Then, halfway to the door and ten paces ahead of the cart, Pa stopped.

At first Fie didn't understand. Then her eyes skipped to the colossal palace gate, the final landmark betwixt them and the capital city of Dumosa. It had been built large enough for parades of dignitaries and mammoth riders alike; it would swallow the thirteen Crows and their cart easy enough.

And sure enough, a lone sentry stood at the gate, waiting to pay viatik for the dead.

The woman was a glittering specter, from her unbound cascades of silvery hair to the silk white gown that barely rippled in the sluggish breeze. Even from so far off, the telltale shatter of moonlight and torch-flame on her finery promised enough gems to feed Fie's whole band of

Crows—twelve hells, maybe the entire Crow caste—for her lifetime. But one thing carried more weight than the sum of her jewels: the collar around her neck.

Two hands of gold, cradling a sun that dawned below her collarbones. It was the royal crest. Fie had seen those hands stamped into every Saborian coin and woven into every flag, and now she could say she'd seen them wrapped around the neck of a queen.

Marriage had made the woman a Phoenix, but she'd been called the Swan Queen even before she left the courtesan caste's pavilions. One of those empty thrones Fie'd passed belonged to her.

And in that moment, Fie kenned what part of tonight had fouled up.

It had been five hundred years, or somewhere near it, since the Sinner's Plague had touched the royal palace. Five hundred years since Phoenixes had lit that plague beacon. Five hundred years since they'd called for Crows.

But if Queen Rhusana was here to pay viatik for these sinner boys, Fie knew sore plain who was under one of their shrouds.

The Crows were hauling the crown prince of Sabor to his funeral pyre.

CHAPTER TWO



THE MONEY DANCE

A DEAD PRINCE LAY IN THEIR CART LIKE ANY OTHER SINNER, NOT an arm's length away. Fie could scarce believe it. A prince. A *Phoenix*.

Some morbid part of her wondered if Phoenix boys burned like any other sinner. Maybe slower. At least they had the poor bastard beside him to compare.

But Pa didn't move, still fixed to the spot even as the rest of the band pulled the cart nearer. And then Fie saw why.

The queen at the gate meant to pay them, to be sure; the steward at her side held the viatik in plain view. A viatik's worth fit the family's means, that was the rule. A Sparrow farmer might pay them in a sack of salt or dried panbread; a Crane magistrate might offer panes of glass-black. Viatik for royalty, though . . . Fie didn't even know what would be proper.

She did know, however, that it wouldn't be the dirty tabby squirming in the steward's arms.

The night blistered with sudden, furious tears. A stray cat. Fair pay for a beggar at most. Not for two gold-sucking palace boys they'd marched seven leagues to burn.

Every frayed wisp of Fie's patience twisted into a taut, angry wire.

The palace had leered at them, drawn steel on them, all but spat on them, and now they'd made a mockery of payment. Queen Rhusana didn't care about sending her family into the next life with the barest scrap of dignity. All she cared for was flaunting the brutal truth: as queen, she could give Crows naught but contempt, and every time, Crows would have to take it.

No chief would abide this, not even one in training. Not even one facing a queen. Something had to be done.

The Crows were merciful, but they weren't cheap.

The cart had near caught up to Pa. Fie leaned forward, blinking sweat and tears from her eyes. "Pa," she whispered. The beak of his mask dipped. "Money Dance?"

For a long moment, he didn't move. Then the beak dipped again.

For the first time that night, Fie grinned.

She jammed her nail-studded sole into the ground and stuffed every grain of spite into a long, satisfying scratch, the marble screaming for mercy. And then she screamed back.

Around her, the dozen Crows wailed in answer to the call, jolting to a halt. Thirteen torches clattered to the ground.

For the second time that night, the galleries above went silent.

The Crows shrieked again, Fie loudest of all, her pitch climbing at the end. The others took her signal and waited, stock-still. She counted out the quiet in her head: *Four. Three. Two. One.*

Another bloodcurdling cry tore through the hall from thirteen

throats, its unmistakable anger echoing off distant archways. Another silence crashed in its wake.

On the third round of screams, the noble sneers were gone. All eyes hung on the motionless cart.

On the fifth round, half the gallery looked ready to cry.

Most fine lords and ladies had never been this close to Crows or plague-dead. To them, the plague was a poor man's problem.

They didn't understand that there were rules. That the plague cared naught for silks or jewels. That it left when the Crows said it could.

But by the thousand dead gods of Sabor, Fie wagered they were starting to catch on now.

She decided they'd stewed enough, and trilled the marching order.

Stamp. The thirteen Crows stepped forward as one, but the cart stayed in its place, its drag-ropes coiling on the marble like asps. *Stamp.* Hunting Castes, Splendid Castes, Common Castes—it didn't matter. The Crows would teach every Saborian in this hall to remember. *Stamp.* Before, their threadbare black rags and long-beaked masks had made them look a superstitious joke. *Stamp.* Now she saw nightmares in the eyes trailing the corpse-cart. *This* was the fear they'd learned at their father's knee.

Fie trilled again.

The footfalls picked up pace, ending in a sweep that carved hellish curls into the tiles. Another stamp. Another guttural scream. Another two paces away from the cart. The gallery recoiled.

Stamp-scrape-scream. Fie huffed under her mask. That was for their ugly palace.

Stamp-scrape-stamp. That was for drawing steel on them.

She trilled again, and the Crows stopped just shy of the threshold. A sick tension clung to the gallery, knuckles whitening on gemstones and silk.

The Crows snapped about and spun into a weaving, vicious pattern

back to the cart. Nervous relief wound through the galleries, then wavered when the Crows didn't immediately take up their ropes and torches again. Fie took her place at the cart's front-right corner and waited until the nearest Peacock looked likely to piss himself.

Fie let out a murderous whistle. The Crows snatched up torch and rope, exploding down the hall and into the last courtyard like a hurricane, howling with the gods' own wrath.

Courtiers scattered, tripping over satin trains and painted leather slippers. From the corner of her eye, Fie saw Hangdog had got his wish: at least three Peacocks had fainted.

That, she thought, is for trying to pay us with a damn cat.

Pa liked to call it the Money Dance. Fie just liked that it worked.

Their cart slowed near the gate, yet the dance carried on. The queen had not fled like the others of her court, her steward still quaking by her side. From ten paces off, Fie could see all too clear who they intended to shake down.

Queen Rhusana bristled beneath the arch, pale eyes glittering like two hard moons. Under the intricate whorls of white mourning paint, her face was a few shades lighter than Fie's own terra-cotta, her brown complexion nearer to polished bronze. Everywhere Fie looked she saw wasted coin: a diamond-studded headdress wrought like a phoenix of white gold; ropes of pearls and diamonds dripping from her arms to drag on the ground; a white tiger pelt draped over her shoulders. The black-striped tail coiled about her arm, one hind paw fastened to clutch at her hip, and its stuffed head lolled on the tiles, eyes blank with more white gold. To Fie's disgust, even the dead thing's claws were crusted over with diamonds.

The silent demand of tradition had brought Rhusana to pay for her husband's dead son. But it was clear as day that the queen had her own unspoken demand: every eye would stay nailed to her glory alone.

It had never been about the coin. But by every dead god, Fie hoped Pa would make it about coin now.

Then Pa gestured to Fie, jerking his head at the gate.

He wanted *her* to deal with Rhusana. To name the viatik price.

Fie froze. Sweat rolled down her backbone. Calling the Money Dance was one thing. Making demands of a queen was another. She wasn't a chief, not yet—it wasn't proper—what if she fouled it up and cost them all—

She didn't even know *what* to ask for.

Torchlight glinted off steel as Hawks shifted at the wall, a sign their indulgence ran thin. A paper threat with plague bodies heaped in the cart, but a threat all the same. Enough to make a few Crows flinch. Enough to strike lightning through Fie's gut.

Only a paper threat, yet they made it because they could. Because they liked seeing Crows jump.

Fie's anger was a curious thing, sometimes tempered and unwavering as cut steel, sometimes raw and unstoppable as a cut vein. Now an old, sharp kind of rage climbed up her spine, forged of every blade pointed at her for a jest.

And it was that old, sharp rage that told Fie her price.

The screams and footfalls of the Money Dance rose in fury as she stepped forth.

Rhusana had deliberately daubed her face over with boredom, clicking her own diamond-cluttered claws a breath faster than the beats of the dance. Fie knew the signs of impatience: the queen still didn't think she'd answer for this insult. The steward, however, had gone near as gray as the tabby in his arms.

The cat was offered tremulously. Fie didn't take it. She had a chief's price in mind.

She wanted to look the Splendid Castes in the eye without fear. She

wanted to make the Hunting Castes think twice before flashing their steel for laughs. She wanted her ma back.

But since the queen couldn't give her any of that, she'd take the next best thing.

"I'll have the teeth," Fie said.

Rhusana glared at the steward. He looked ready to vomit, eyes locked on the bloody shrouds in the cart. "Chief, I cannot—it is not your place to ask—"

"The teeth," Fie repeated, stone-cold. She squashed down the odd little jolt in her chest at being called "chief." *Not yet.*

Behind her, the Crows wheeled and roared. Both she and Rhusana knew they could keep terrorizing the court for hours while the dead sinners steeped the palace in plague. The Swan Queen might wear the royal crest, but here and now, Fie ruled the courtyard.

Rhusana did not answer.

Nor did Fie budge. The longer this went, the worse the queen looked for letting Crows drag her about.

Sweat beaded the steward's face. A pity that Fie needed the queen to crack, not him.

"You have a count of a hundred," said Fie, turning her beaked mask square on Rhusana and mustering every scrap of old fury. "Then we leave the boys at your gate and come to your city nevermore."

"But—" the steward sputtered, "the king—"

"One," said Fie.

Please—

"Two," said Fie.

"Enough," Rhusana snapped.

Fie waited. A passing breeze plucked at her robe, then settled.

"Fifty naka." Rhusana's lip curled, her diamond talons clicking faster. "And we will overlook your insolence."

The steward wheezed a sigh of deliverance. “Thank you for your immeasurable generosity, Your Ma—”

“Three,” said Fie.

Rhusana’s claws went still, digging into her silk-clad thigh.

At the count of ten, the queen’s servant was sent running. By the count of seventy, he was back, thrusting a heavy brocade bag into Fie’s hands.

If the heft didn’t give the contents away, the quiet, echoing hum of magic in her bones did. Every family in Sabor saved their teeth for the day they might call on Crows empty-handed. Each tooth was near good as gold, if only for the Crows who heard their whispers. Some were worth more, a scrap of Pigeon luck or Sparrow refuge when a Crow called for it.

No royal had paid a viatik in centuries. But tonight, Fie had come to collect.

A rare harvest of teeth clicked and rattled inside that brocade bag, entire Phoenix dynasties of teeth, thousands of milk teeth and even teeth pulled from the dead.

And now her band of Crows owned each and every last, priceless one.

A smile sharper than steel cut beneath Fie’s mask. There was a reason they called it the Money Dance.

Razor-thin lines had appeared at the corners of Rhusana’s perfect, thin-pressed mouth, and Fie took that as a personal victory. She gave a mummer’s grand sweep of a bow, stepped back, and handed the bag to Pa.

He raised his fist. The dance stopped; the courtyard rang with aching silence. Ropes were collected, feet reshuffled into a march, and a sigh swept through the crowd as the cart at last began to roll toward the gate.

Fie paused, then doubled back.

The queen whirled, eyes flashing.

“What *more* do you want?” Rhusana flicked her hand at the guards. Every Hawk snapped to attention, spears at the ready.

One of the queen’s bangles caught Fie’s eye as it flashed in the torchlight: a clever work of silver and pearl, crafted to look like a string of white oleander blossoms.

For a moment, Fie felt like those diamond claws had wrapped around her throat.

She sucked a breath down and let the mint settle her bones. Anyone could wear oleanders. It didn’t have to mean aught, not on a queen. And if it did . . . well, the Crows were already on their way out of the palace. Fie’d just make sure they left faster.

She plucked the cat from the steward’s arms. “I’ll have this, too.”

The cat didn’t fight as Fie scurried back to the cart, only burrowed its face into the crook of her elbow with a grumble. By the time they cleared the gates, it had begun to purr.

Fie decided she liked the cat. Anything happy to leave the royal palace had good taste.



It was a long, hushed walk out of the capital city of Dumosa, lit only by their torches and the occasional Dovecraft lantern in a mansion window. Fie wagered the rest of the Crows felt the same tight-throated impatience to make it past the city walls before Hunting Castes rode them down. Every single Crow knew what carrying a bag of Phoenix teeth meant. Every one of them wondered if they’d truly be allowed to carry it out of Dumosa.

Fie felt eyes spying from behind lattice screens or through knot-holes every step of the way, past the fine pavilions of the Swan-caste

courtesans, through the granite-pillared Magistrate's Row, even in the Pigeon commons, where dirty faces cowered behind cracks in shanty walls and spat in the Crows' wake to ward off ill fortune.

She kept a sharp eye on the shadows, and more than once she caught Pa tapping his sternum slow, just below the string of teeth about his neck. If the dead gods were kind tonight, he'd have no call to use them.

But if Fie had learned aught over the years, it was that the dead gods skewed miserly with kindness when it came to Crows.



It was nigh midnight before they set foot on the League-High Bridge over the Hem. The great river thundered only a few hundred paces below, but for murder's purpose, it worked near good as a league. Fie minded her step during the ten minutes it took to cross.

The moment her nail-studded soles touched gravel instead of cobblestone, Fie held her breath. If the royals meant to claw back their teeth, this was where the Hunting Castes would strike.

All of them strained to catch any hint of company. The long, terrible silence stretched thin and treacherous as young ice while Fie scoured every flicker of leaves for an ambush.

None came.

Maybe—just maybe—they'd done it.

Someone inhaled sharp. Then a deafening cry broke out:

"OH, I ONCE KNEW A LAD FROM ACROSS THE SEA, WITH A MOST PARTICULAR SPECIALTY—"

Madcap's voice split the night like an axe, swinging into the bawdiest walking song Pa'd let them sing in Fie's presence. The rest of the band broke into wheezing laughter, near weeping with relief.

"Twelve *hells*, Fie!" Wretch clung to the cart for dear life, slapping

a knee. She had near as many years as Pa and twice as quick a temper, one of the few who'd known Pa when he was still called Cur, not yet Chief. She took the cat from Fie and scratched its brow. "I thought you'd ask the queen to throw in a crown for all that trouble!"

"What good's a crown?" Swain drawled from behind Wretch. A flash of mirth leavened his perpetually dour voice. "She could have just asked to slap the king. Probably would've gone over better with Her Majesty."

Madcap, a Crow allergic to dignity, snatched up Fie's hands and wheeled her about the road in a giddy whirl, belting yet another lewd and anatomically improbable verse of "The Lad from Across the Sea." Fie couldn't help but throw back her head and laugh. Aye, they still had leagues to walk and bodies to burn, but—but she'd done it.

For once, she'd made the palace pay.

"Stop, stop," Madcap wheezed, laughing as they clutched their stomachs. "I'm like to barf!"

The two of them slowed to a drunken tilt near Pa. By all rights, he ought to be reeling with glee like the rest of the band.

He hadn't even taken off his mask, staring straight back at Dumosa.

"Come *on*, chief—" Madcap started, but Pa cut them off.

"It's not done yet. Save your dance for when the bodies burn." Pa fired off the whistle-order to march.

Wretch passed the cat back to Fie, shaking her head at Pa's back. An unease draped over the Crows once more. Madcap still hummed under their breath, and Swain muttered along after a few steps, but otherwise silence clung to the cart as they dragged it on.

The scattering of huts and god-grave shrines by the road eventually yielded to the twist-trunked, lichen-shawled forest. "The Lad from Across the Sea" wound down, another song rising in its wake, louder and steadier. Soon the only marks of Dumosa were glimpses of a gilded crust over dark hills, sometimes sparking through the trees.

“Here.”

Pa’s voice cut through the night, snipping off the walking song’s last verse. He thrust his torch into the soft dirt by the roadside. The cart creaked to a halt as Pa shucked his mask and nodded at Fie and the tabby. “No strays we can’t eat, girl.”

“Not a stray, she’s mine,” Fie returned. “My share of the viatik.”

Pa huffed a short chuckle. “Covenant’s crap she is, Fie, but we’ll talk your share later. What’s her name, then?”

She thought of the steward’s queasy face and Madcap’s dance and grinned. “Barf.”

“That’s proper.” Pa ran a hand over his bald crown. All his hair had migrated south to his short salt-and-pepper beard long years past. “Now let’s see about these boys, eh?”

Fie leaned on the edge of the cart and studied the two shrouds lying among splits of kindling. “Big,” she said. The prince had been near a year her elder, and clearly both boys had been better fed. “Dunno if we have enough firewood for both.”

“Will if we douse ’em in flashburn,” Hangdog suggested, lounging over the cart’s other side.

Fie’s beak was only in the way now. She set Barf down in the cart and pushed back her hood to loosen the mask’s straps, letting it hang about her neck as she ran a hand through her chin-cropped tangle of black hair. It was a blessing to breathe clean night air and not the palace’s incense or her mask’s stale mint.

She had naught to fear of contagion. It was said that every Crow had fouled up something grand in their past lives, bad enough for the Covenant to strike them down with plague and boot them directly to a life of atonement in containing the disease. That Crows were born already in debt to the Covenant’s measures of sin. That it would not take them to their next life before that debt was paid.

So it was said, at least. Fie didn't know how much of that rang true to her ear. But it was truth hard as iron that the Sinner's Plague left only Crows untouched.

Death-stink hadn't settled on the boys yet, but she still flinched at the crimson stains on their shrouds. Of all a chief's duties, cutting throats was the one she dreaded most.

She reached into the cart, prodding what seemed like the nobler of the bloody heaps. "They really royals, Pa?"

"Just the one. Other was his body double."

Fie tugged back the linen until torchlight landed on a boy's rust-flecked face, looking for all the world like he was sleeping. Maybe a little afraid. Maybe he'd been awake when Pa's blade touched his throat.

She pursed her lips. "So that's what a sinner prince looks like."

The dead boy sat up.

"Well, no," he said, "but I've been told I'm fairly close."

CHAPTER THREE



— A COVENANT OATH —

FIE DIDN'T INTEND TO PUNCH THE BOY, BUT SHE DID ALL THE SAME. Fie didn't intend to scream, either, but that happened, too, and with enthusiasm. As did tripping over her feet as she bolted back, landing on her rear in the damp grass. Hangdog's curses and Pa's roaring laughter only muddled her panic.

The dead boy yanked his left hand loose from the bindings, wincing as he felt his jaw. Gore on his plain long-sleeved tunic made it impossible to tell if any of the blood was new. Fie scabbled about to arm herself with a rock as the other shroud also began to stir.

"Here, here," Pa said, wiping tears from his eyes as he reached into the cart to help free them. "You've gone and spooked my girl."

"There's an understatement," the boy said, dry. He glanced down at the wiggling shroud beside him. "Jas, as your personal guard, I feel obligated to warn you"—he pointed at Fie—"that one is easily startled."

Fie's mind was a fly in her hollow skull, buzzing in fruitless circles. The dead boys were moving. The dead boys were *talking*.

The dead boys weren't dead.

"Yech." The bodyguard slid out of the cart, wincing at the crackle of his blood-stiff shirt. "Is pig blood always this vile? Next time I fake my death, I'm picking something more glamorous. I hear poisoning's in vogue."

"Pa." Her voice came out strangled. "Did we just kidnap royals?"

Pa grinned ear to ear. He loved a good jest, but Fie wasn't sure the Phoenix caste would find abducting the heir all that amusing. "Told you, Fie, just the one. And only on account of them asking kind."

A prince and a guard. A Phoenix and his Hawk, then. Fie didn't know if she wanted to scream or laugh. Perhaps this was all one garish nightmare. If they were lucky—

"You're *certain* we weren't followed?"

The quiet voice belonged to the boy the bodyguard had called "Jas."

Jasimir. Everyone knew the crown prince's name. As the prince untangled himself, neither he nor his guard seemed to note how every mutter had died like birdsong before a storm. The Crows eyed the lordlings as if twin serpents had slipped from the shrouds. By torchlight the two blood-soaked boys were nigh identical in their wide, sharp-jawed faces, sleek black topknots, and loose linen shirts and trousers. Where his Hawk guard was all good-natured ease, though, the prince was as grim as if he were truly at his own funeral.

But it took more than a crown and a frown to faze Pa. "Oh aye, we were followed." He pried a tooth from his string and tossed it aside. Fie couldn't believe he'd burned a whole Sparrow tooth without her catching on. "Pair of the queen's trackers. They tailed us to the bridge and no farther."

"Cur."

The prince, the Hawk, and Pa all looked up. Wretch's mask was off as well. Fie knew when she called Pa "Cur," they were in for a spectacle.

"I see you're busy ministering to the needs of the royal louts here," she cooed, voice rising, "but I don't suppose if, perchance, when it suits your fancy, you might share with your kin what nonsense, suicidal, *scum-brained* scheme you've just dragged us into?"

The Hawk bodyguard moved first, striding toward Wretch. "Of course, I apologize. We've been quite inconsiderate." He tapped his right fist to his lips and held it out in greeting. Wretch, taken aback, did the same, and they clasped hands briefly. "My name is Tavin. I'm sure you've figured out who my friend is."

"We've a notion," Hangdog drawled, leaning on the cart. There was a nasty edge in his voice, the kind he got when he hungered for a fight. "Got bored of your palace, *cousins*?"

The prince's face darkened at the slantways insult. Before he could bite back, his Hawk guard flicked his hand, dismissive. "I don't typically commit wide-scale blasphemy out of boredom. Repeat assassination attempts tend to motivate a man, though."

Wretch scowled. "If someone doesn't start talking sense, I'm getting as far clear of here as possible."

"Then I'll rephrase," the Hawk said. "Rhusana wants us dead."

"She wants *me* dead," Prince Jasimir corrected. "She's wanted it since she used Father to marry up into the Phoenixes, and she wants it even more now that she's birthed a prince of her own. First it was just a hunting accident, then a viper in the bathhouse, then ground glass in the wine . . . and it won't stop until she's gone. Or I am."

Wretch flung her arm at the road. "Well done, then! You've given her square what she wants. So now that we've dragged you to freedom, we'll be taking our leave, aye?"

The Hawk—Tavin, he'd said he was Tavin—didn't answer, instead holding out a hand to Fie. "I'm sorry for scaring you, by the way."

She let him pull her back to her feet before yanking free. “Well, I’m not sorry for punching you.”

“That’s probably not the last time you’ll say that.” His teeth flashed in a grin. “Jas and I need to tag along with you for a few days.”

Pa stiffened, crossing his arms. “That wasn’t our deal.”

Tavin and the prince traded looks. Tavin’s mouth twisted. “It’s complicated,” he began.

“It’s not. I kept my word. Our business is done.” Pa’s tone had turned a chill sort of civil. Fie snorted. Typical high castes, thinking they could twist the terms of a deal as they pleased. They’d picked the wrong Crow chief for that.

“You don’t understand.” Prince Jasimir’s voice rose. “We’re—”

“Out of Dumosa,” Pa answered, even and immovable. “And we have our viatik. That was the deal. No more, no less.”

The Hawk guard scowled. “You *have* to hear us out.”

Fie contemplated punching him again.

“This isn’t your palace, lads.” Pa bent to pick up a drag-rope. “We don’t *have* to do aught.”

“They’re going to try to kill you,” Prince Jasimir said, abrupt.

A moment’s hush dropped, then ruptured in laughter. Madcap wheezed so hard, they had to lean on the cart. Both the prince and the Hawk looked taken aback.

“Oh, they’ll try to kill us?” Wretch cackled. “That’s new. That’s bold. Oh, I like that.”

Prince Jasimir’s brow furrowed. “How could you possibly find that amusing?”

“They’ve *been* trying to kill us. There’s always some ‘they.’ Reckon *they’ve* been at it a few centuries now.” Fie swept him the same mocking bow she’d given Queen Rhusana. “My deepest of sorrows, Your Highness, but if you mean to frighten us into helping you, you’ll have to think bigger.”

“Are the Oleander Gentry big enough?”

Fie snapped up straight to stare at Tavin as the laughter died. The Oleander Gentry were more than a “they.” The Oleander Gentry were a fist to the windpipe of every Crow.

“It’s a funny story, you see,” the Hawk guard continued, the sudden razor edge in his words suggesting it was anything but a jest. “Turns out the queen’s been making lots of new and horrible friends. Right now I’d give it a month before she tries to take the throne for herself. And when she does, she’ll owe most of her success to her greatest allies: the Oleander Gentry.”

Part of Fie wanted to hit him again. Part of her wanted to run clear from Sabor.

Every Crow carried scars from the Gentry. They were the reason Crows didn’t stop near many a village after sundown. That was when the Gentry would ride, bearing white oleanders on their breasts, faces hidden in pale paints and undyed cloth so they couldn’t be traced to kin or caste.

Most of Sabor believed Crows to be dead sinners reborn, sentenced to repent through a hard life of containing the plague. Oleanders believed the part they liked—that the Covenant meant to punish Crows for their misdeeds—and claimed the Crows spread the plague themselves. Then they took it upon themselves to dole out that punishment. The Covenant was one more mask for them, and Fie kenned too well the monsters that rode beneath it.

They were rich and poor, nameless and infamous, many and merciless. Their hunts were only called murder when they were caught. And since they only hunted Crows, the regional governors were in no great hurry to catch them.

When the Gentry took Crows, only the lucky few walked away.

Fie’s mother hadn’t been lucky.

Fie thought of a road in the dark, one that stretched over a dozen years behind her, when she'd scarce reached Pa's knee. Yet she still remembered the trail of fingers the Oleander Gentry had left to point the way.

She caught up her robe's loose thread again and twisted it hard.

"I won't demand your obedience in this." Torchlight danced over Prince Jasimir's bloody face. "But with Rhusana on the throne . . ."

". . . the Oleander Gentry will ride where they please, when they please," Fie finished. Hangdog was gripping the cart so tight, his knuckles looked near to burst through the skin. She could only guess what he saw in his own terrible memory.

Tavin nodded. "And they'll get an armed Hawk escort to help."

Fie didn't have to guess at her own memories: far away and long ago, a little girl picked up a crooked, fleshy caterpillar in the cold and dusty road, then found nine more in a red-tipped trail.

Ma had hooked that finger through Fie's small hands enough times for her to know every scrape, every callus, every bump of the scar down one joint. And when Fie had fumbled, and the broken stump of fingerbone scraped against her palm, she'd known the spark singing to her from that bone. She'd know Ma's song anywhere.

The road had caught Fie back then, in the peculiar way that only roads could. Chief—not Pa to her, not yet—had strode that bloody path, blade in a shaking fist, knowing he had mercy to deliver to one of his own. And Fie—not a chief-in-training, not yet—had stayed frozen in place, wanting to see her ma but knowing that every time that blade came out, Ma had covered Fie's eyes.

That cold road had trapped her there until Wretch bore her away, for even then, Fie had known her choices were to either walk down the chief's way, or to run from it.

And on this road now, in the torch-lit dark, Fie still could not say which way was worse.

But if the queen gave Oleanders command of her Hawks—if not even daylight gave Crows refuge—Fie knew sore how all their roads would end.

The lines in Wretch's face seemed to carve a little deeper than they had a moment before. "If you boys are fixing to have us Crows storm the palace and fight off Her Majesty, I got hard news for you about how that will turn out."

"The Oleanders only have sway." Prince Jasimir seemed steadier on political ground. "And the people still call Rhusana the *Swan Queen* for a reason. She can rule through her son's claim to the throne, but she still needs support from the regional governors to keep the kingdom united. My cousin Kuvimir is the lord-governor of the Fan region. He's sworn to take us in and rally the others behind me, which should force Rhusana to back down. If we move fast, we can reach his fortress in Cheparok before she deposes Father."

"So we smuggle you to your kin in Cheparok, they make a big, ugly show of liking you over the queen, and you remember us rosy on your throne someday." Fie nodded to the wagon's load of firewood. "Reckon you forgot how most of Sabor thinks you and your Hawk here are charcoal in a pyre right now."

The prince hesitated to answer; the Hawk pounced. Tavin's teeth flashed wolfish as a gambler who knew how his loaded shells would land. "That's my favorite part, actually. I'll have to lie low for a while, but Jas . . . Let's just say Queen Ambra set a precedent for Phoenixes miraculously returning from the dead."

Fie's jaw dropped. Of all the things she had heard this night, what Tavin proposed was the most rattle-brained of all.

In the entire history of Sabor, only one soul had ever burned bright enough to survive the Sinner's Plague: the invincible Ambra, matriarch of the Phoenix caste, Queen of Day and Night. Legend said she

rode tigers into battle, a spear in each hand; that she walked in wild-fire unscathed; that the sun came at her beck and call, so greatly did it love her. Legend said that her rebirth in the Phoenix caste would herald another era of prosperity and peace.

Legend hadn't much to say about shamming her reincarnation for political gain, but somehow Fie couldn't imagine it landed on the right side of the Covenant. Nor could she conjure a vision of the willowy prince before her riding aught more spirited than a poppy-addled pony.

Tavin must have read the doubt on her face, for his hand flapped once more. "We can't *really* sell Jas as the King of Day and Night. But bouncing back from the Sinner's Plague is a good argument that Ambra's bloodline is strong in him. That alone will win over half the country."

"The idiot half," Wretch muttered.

"If there were another way out, we'd take it." Prince Jasimir's gaze traveled from Crow to Crow. What he was searching for, Fie couldn't say. "But Rhusana will give every one of you over to the Oleanders if she reaches the throne. I'm asking for your help to stop her. Otherwise none of us has a chance."

"If you're speaking true . . ." Pa rolled a tooth strung at his neck. Fie would've gone for a Crane-caste tooth, one that could sift out lies from the lordlings. Instead Pa's hand dropped. He looked at the rest of the Crows. "We've only got one rule. Strikes me we'd best follow it."

Look after your own. Fie had heard that rule near every day. As a chief, she'd need to live it soon. But even if she could keep her own band of Crows safe, the whole caste was scattered across Sabor.

If the Oleanders could ride free, road after road would end like her ma's had.

Her jaw stiffened. It was a chafing thing: even filthy with pig blood, the lordlings still looked like they belonged in a palace.

There was no real bargain here, just make-believe benevolence of offering the Crows a choice. It was written in the imperious tilt of the prince's lips, in the jut of Tavin's chin, the way they both drummed their fingers as they waited for an answer they were sure they'd get.

Just like Rhusana, with her damned oleander bangle. Even if the lordlings were bluffing about her ambitions, the Oleander Gentry still had her favor. Of course the Crows had no choice.

Of all the bodies Fie had ever dragged off to burn, she most *surely* hated these two the most. For all their talk, the lordlings treated with the Crows as if they were back in that miserable gilded hall, forcing them to dance for fair pay—

An idea carved through her thoughts like her sandal-nail on marble, and left a trail like a bloody finger.

"No," Fie said. "I say no deal."

Surprise flashed over every face on the road. Hangdog's snort followed. Prince Jasimir's dark eyes narrowed. "We want to help—"

"Oh, *you want to help*," she mimicked. "Does His Highness have another servant to shovel up all the crap falling out of his mouth, or is that *his* job?" She jerked a thumb at Tavin. To his credit, the guard only raised his eyebrows, but that razor edge danced in his gaze again. "You faked your deaths. You tried to go back on your deal with Pa. And you just told us your whole plan is to lie to everyone in Sabor. Why would we trust you?"

"Because your lives depend on it," Prince Jasimir snapped, panic sparking in his voice. "Do you truly think the Oleander Gentry will treat with you?"

Fie smothered a laugh. "Awful convenient how your heart only bleeds for Crows now that you need us. Spent your life weeping on the inside, did you?"

"That's not fair," Tavin started.

That same old rage whipped the words from her. “Fair? *Fair?* You want to tell me what’s fair, palace boy? You want us to choose betwixt letting the Oleanders run us down by day or making sure they still have to do it by dark so *your* castes can keep pretending you don’t see?” She spat at their feet. “Call that help if you want. Your Hawk’ll pick it up with the rest of your crap.”

If any Crow thought Fie had overstepped, she’d hear their grumbles. Instead, the roadside was wired in taut silence, all eyes on her.

They knew a Money Dance when they heard it.

Tavin moved first, rubbing his hands together. Somehow the gesture still looked deadly. “You’re not wrong,” he admitted with a shrug. “At least, not about your options. It’d take another ten years in service of the palace for me to make it all the way to royal dung collector. I’d recommend you take our word on the Oleanders, though.”

“What’s your word worth when you’re good as dead?” The rot in Hangdog’s voice said this was more than the Money Dance. “When we’re *all* good as dead?”

“Fine.” Prince Jasimir pinched the bridge of his nose. “Gold? Jewels? Lands? What’s your price?”

Fie mimicked Tavin’s dismissive hand flick. “Flash and trash. If the Oleanders don’t loot those from us, your other gentry will.”

“Then what *do* you want?” Prince Jasimir asked.

This time, Fie already had a chief’s price in mind.

Look after your own. She had one foot already down this road, and every eye was on her. She couldn’t go back; she couldn’t give her ma mercy or keep Hangdog from screaming in his sleep. But she could keep any Crow from having to walk that way again.

She took a deep breath and looked Prince Jasimir dead in the eye. “I never want to see the Oleander Gentry again. The Hawks that Rhusana promised the Gentry? They’ll guard us instead. I want your Covenant

oath that with you as king, every caste will know we Crows are worth protecting. *That's* my price."

The prince's face turned as gray as the steward's had.

Pa, on the other hand, had the tiny wrinkles under his eyes that only showed when he was beating down a smile. Fie took that as a good sign.

"Crows," Pa called out before either lordling could speak. "Do we favor those terms?"

Another twist of her dance. There was a chorus of ayes. Another twist of the knife. Tavin's glare could have cut through stone.

"You know what you're asking?" Prince Jasimir asked. "No caste has ever had special protection like this before."

Swain coughed. "Suppose your palace Hawks are just highly trained, well-armed houseguests, then?" One more whirl and stamp, one more scratch in the floor.

The prince opened his mouth, then closed it, thinking. "It's different," he said slowly. "Royalty are prime targets for coordinated attacks and internal violence—"

"Aye, and we actually die from those." Fie folded her arms. "*You* said you wanted to help. Rhusana seems to think she's got Hawks to spare. We've named the terms, prince. Cut your oath or leave us be."

Fie's favorite thing about the Money Dance was that it always, always worked.

Tavin ran a hand over his dark hair. "She's got a point, Jas. Several, in fact. Enough points that I'm starting to think she's mostly thorns."

"Some bone in there, too," Pa added, his grin little more than lacquer over an unspoken threat. "Y'know. For structure."

Prince Jasimir scowled, eyes darting from Fie to Tavin. After a long moment, his shoulders drooped. "Fine. You have my word."

Fie caught her breath. A ripple shifted through the Crows; it might as well have echoed down the road, all across Sabor.

The prince had just sworn to tell his country that Crows were worth protecting.

But they only had his word. Fie knew how flimsy a Phoenix's promise was. "I said a Covenant oath."

The prince shrank back. Hangdog laughed cruelly. "Oh, the wee princeling's afraid of cutting an oath, then?"

Pa shot Hangdog a dark look. "No harm in it, lad. I'm the chief. You'll bind it with me." When Jasimir didn't move, Pa slowly drew out a jagged stump of a sword from under his robes. Some long-past battle had sheared the blade in half, leaving a length of steel no longer than Pa's forearm, but its broken point still gleamed wickedly as Pa jabbed it into his palm.

He held up his hand, showing a small, bloody gash. "Naught to it, see?"

"Tav . . ." Jasimir's voice had withered like a raisin. Fie knew that fear, the trap of a road that only went two bad ways.

"Isn't his word good enough?" Tavin slid between Pa and the prince. A line in his brow said the casual façade was like to split a seam.

"No," Fie answered, cold. Tavin's diplomacy caved as he frowned at her. She scowled back. "What's the matter? Afraid your king-to-be might have to keep his deal this time?"

Prince Jasimir flinched and shook his head. "I . . . Fine. You're right."

"Jas—" Tavin put a hand on the prince's shoulder.

"A king doesn't get to make empty promises. This is just a formality." Jasimir shrugged him off, walked over to Pa, and grasped the sword's broken end. His fingers came away bloody.

He and Pa clasped hands. The air round them fried with a cold heat,

like the moments before a lightning strike. The ring of torches burned higher, washing the roadside in red light.

“In flesh and blood do I make this oath,” Pa said. “Me and mine will see you safe to your allies, prince. To the Covenant I swear, may my soul not rest until it be done.”

“In flesh and blood do I make this oath,” echoed Jasimir. “As king, I will ensure the Crow caste’s protection as payment for their service to me now. To the Covenant I swear it.”

A breeze stirred Fie’s hair, dragging the torch-flames sideways. The very ground seemed to hum beneath her toes.

Pa still held steady. “By the Covenant, we bind this oath. I swear to keep it in this life and, if I fail, the next.”

The wind only grew stronger.

“With the Covenant as witness, this oath shall be kept.” Jasimir’s voice was louder now. “In this life or the next.”

Firelight seemed to catch round their joined hands a moment, flaring brighter as it wove through knuckle and skin.

There was a brief, furious blaze of light, and then it was done.

The Covenant had heard them, Pa and the prince and even Fie.

The breeze died, the dim torchlight suddenly paltry in the wake of the oath. Fie swayed in place, trying to snatch whole thoughts from a whirlwind in her head.

She’d sworn the prince to a Covenant oath. No more Oleanders; no more riders in the night; no more fingers in the road. So long as they kept their end of the deal.

But if it went bad, Pa would pay the price.

The notion coiled about her throat like a collar on a queen.

If Pa or Jasimir failed in this life, they would still be sworn in the one after, and after, and after. Until their oath was kept, Pa would be bound to the prince.

And a royal Phoenix would be sworn to protect the Crows.

Hate the boys or no, Fie had to admit that extorting royalty had its sunny side.

“Pleasure doing business with Your Highness,” Pa said, cheery. He let the prince go. “Now I believe we’ve got some bodies to burn.”