

## Chapter 4

She was a girl again, sixteen again, a runaway alone in the world: tired, hungry, angry. She knew the orchard was private land, owned property, off limits to a stray like her. She also knew it was wrong to steal. Even to think of stealing, that too was a sin. Her empty stomach was a nagging instigator that could not be denied. It abolished all notions of right and wrong, good and evil, law and order. One apple- just one. A small one. No one would notice such a trifle! One apple for a starving girl. Surely such a transgression could be overlooked. And then she would be on her way, forever indebted to an unknown landowner. Who would miss one apple? One... maybe two... little apples?

Grasshoppers fluttered up in waves as she left the dusty road. Tall blades of razorgrass scratched her bare legs. The hot summer sun was a pale yellow eye. It watched impassively as hidden pitfalls tripped her up now and again. Onward she stumbled, a small bundle clutched to her heaving chest. It was an old skirt used to wrap her worldly possessions- meager, pitiful items that held no worth to anyone else.

Reaching the edge of the orchard at last, she cast a guilty look back. The road snaked away in both directions, as empty and desolate as a dried river bed. Like a thieving badger, she slipped under the low logs that formed the fence. Trees closest to the road were sickly twisted creatures with green, wormy fruit. She was young, but bright. No time was wasted on these specimens, these stunted growths purposefully left untended to fool passers-by. Somehow she knew this wise orchard master was keeping his most succulent fruits screened behind this facade, safely hidden from speculative eyes and mischievous spirits.

She moved like a hunchback, doubled over to hide from the wrong of her criminal deed. Nervous fingers toyed with the frayed edges of her bundle, unconsciously anxious and filled with guilt. The rumble of her stomach drove her, drove her relentlessly. Deeper and deeper into the rank and file of trees she glided like a phantom.

The rows passed like silent, deformed statues. And then she was upon the orchard's hidden treasures. Though these trees grew much the same as the ones by the road- gray, squat, twisted- their skeletal branches drooped low to the ground with plump, golden prizes. The smell of fruit was heavy in the still summer air. Hands trembling, mouth watering with anticipation, she reached for the nearest specimen. Her humble knot of possessions fell to the ground, forgotten from her mind. Nothing existed except that golden orb of sweet, delicious pulp. The ache of her tired limbs, the blisters upon her feet, the sweat upon her brow, the buzz and sting of insects- everything was dismissed as irrelevant, insubstantial. Her entire universe sat perched upon the end of that leafy bough.

The apple came free with the slightest twist. It sat heavy in her hand, cool in the blistering sun. Her stomach back flipped, a wild creature gnawing at her insides. Slowly she brought the fruit to her mouth. At the last instant, mouth agape, she paused, lingering at that brink where anticipation becomes fulfillment.

For the briefest of moments her mind overcame the ravenous hunger in her belly. A moral stream of consciousness caught hold and cried out inside her head. This was wrong! Stealing was wrong! Had her parents taught her nothing? The gods do *not* tolerate evil, wretched children. Who was she to cast aside the laws of the gods, the beliefs of her people? What would the townsfolk think? What would her parents say?

Could they bear the shame of their daughter- their only child- mocking the world with such irreverent behavior? A thief- a thief in the family!

She tore up the thought. A mocking, scornful bark of a laugh escaped her lips. Her parents! Who were *they* to say? They had driven her out of their home with such talk, unrelenting, uncompromising, piously preaching right and wrong, good and bad, heavens and hells! What did they know? What insights could simple vineyard owners possess on subject matter so far above their station? How could they possibly fathom the thoughts of gods? They were petty, dull-witted people. They were stupid- stupid people for their religious delusions. She knew that now. Time on the road changed all views of the world. A fortnight on her own, alone with no one to turn to, had more than proven that the gods cared not one wit for cruel parents, runaway daughters- or stupid apples!

Her teeth broke the crisp skin with a snap. Sweet, succulent juice swelled in her mouth. Two days without food elevated the simple apple to nourishment fit for kings. She groaned in ecstasy, sugary juice dribbling down her chin.

At the second bite her world shattered in an explosion of light and sound and abject fear:

*Hear me, mortal.*

The words rent the air like a thunderclap. The earth shook from their reverberations. Her knees buckled and she fell. A blinding light stabbed from every direction. Shutting her eyes tight and burying her face in the crook of an arm did nothing to block the glare, the pain, the terror. A moment before she had been so cocksure, so resolute on the concerns of gods. Now she abased herself before this omnipresent voice in soiled underskirts. She begged, shrieked, pleaded for forgiveness. Her sides hurt from

the bellowing of her lungs. Yet her own voice came to her ears as a dim, feeble wail compared to the bodiless voice:

*Hear me, mortal.*

Tears burst from her blinded eyes. Her mouth worked on empty air. She was caught in the grip of an apoplectic fit. She gagged on her own breath, sobbing uncontrollably. Remnants of the apple drooled from her mouth while dirt and grass entered. Convulsive spasms racked her body from head to toe. She writhed in the dirt like a tormented soul. Her blasted brain could reason only one thing: she was going to die.

*Hear me, mortal! It shall come to pass that the oceans of the west shall spawn a foe of unstoppable momentum- a conquering host so vast, so insidious it shall sweep across thine world as a living plague! They shall rise in such multitude as to blacken the sky unto darkness with their numbers. They shall swarm into the city and the town and the hamlet, insatiable in their desire for death, ravenous for the bloodlust of the kill. The roads shall run red with the blood of the dead. The maggots of the earth and the vultures of the sky shall grow fat upon the carrion left in their wake.*

*Hear me, mortal! Thou hast been chosen. There shall come unto thee a savior of thine world- a unique soul of the like thou shall never see again. Do not overlook the anointed one! Thou hast been chosen to receive this champion of thine world. A time shall come when thou shall be entrusted with the savior's life in a moment of dire need. Do not fail, lest thine peoples be wiped entirely from the face of the world. Do not fail to succor the Chosen One when all others have turned away!*

*Hear me, mortal!*

\* \* \*

Marion knew the dream. It came to her in fits with no apparent trigger. It was an affliction that knew no cure and struck without the slightest precursor. Sometimes months would pass and she would sleep in peace. Other times the images of blood and carnage would pummel her mind's eye without respite. On such nights, where the terror of the coming destruction unnerved her, she could do nothing but lay awake, shivering like a drowned kitten. And slowly dawn would overtake her and she would face another day robbed of proper rest.

This night, when she awoke in her usual cold sweat, the pounding of her heart slowed faster than usual. The wait was over. The appointed one had arrived. He who she had never seen the likes of before- and would never see again. Nok, the elf, was the savior of her world. Years of waiting, of extending a healing hand to any and all in need, years of expectation were now finally at a close. As foretold, he had been delivered unto her with the shadowy wings of Death upon him, in dire need of help. She dared not smile in the face of the gods, but she did allow a soothing calm to run throughout her trembling body. Her wait was over. Over at last.

It was late, well past the Witching Hour. Late, but still a long time until dawn. While her children slumbered, the matron of the temple was up for the night. She knew it was useless to try and seek further rest in her bed. Her only hope in forgetting the chilling nightmare lay in keeping herself busy. Even as she pulled on her skirt and groped for her tunic top, thoughts of doom and destruction lingered like trolls in the dark. Focus. She had to focus.

With years of waiting over, the Reverend Mother wondered for the first time: Now what? I have succored his wounds, this mysterious elf. But beyond healing him, what is my role? Is there more to do? Have I fulfilled my duties to their extent? Is the

rest in his hands, in those strange, pale green hands? If not, will the gods visit me again with further instruction?

She hoped not.

Marion decided she would go to the kitchens, as she invariably did on such nights. There was always work to be done in the kitchens. It was far enough removed from the rest of the temple so her movements would go unheard. Pausing in the darkness to wash her face in the basin by her bed, she settled her tunic primly upon her shoulders and slipped from her room barefoot. The cool stones underfoot helped combat the humid night air.

To her surprise Marion heard voices. The low, sonorous voice of a male was mixed with the lighter notes of one of her girls. Picking up her pace, she moved to investigate.

Coming around the corner of the main antechamber, the Reverend Mother recognized the hawkish profile of Captain Lant. He was no stranger to the Mother Temple. A late call from him was not unusual, for the master of the city watch kept irregular hours. Marion trusted him more than most men, though she still found fault with some of his opinions- most of them in fact. Stepping from the shadows, she met him with an easy air as if expecting his arrival for hours. Her voice startled the girl who stood between them. The poor child almost dropped the small lamp she carried.

“Captain Lant.”

“Reverend Mother,” the soldier nodded. He showed some surprise at the purpled weal upon her cheek. Holding his tongue, he drew off his gloves and tucked them slowly into his swordbelt.

Marion had forgotten the buccaneer's gift. The frights of her dreams had been enough to push recent events from her mind. Now, reminded of the mark, it throbbed heavily upon her cheek. She refused to acknowledge it, to even test the swelling with her fingertips. Timion was her business. Lant need not know what did not concern him directly.

The girl with the lamp curtsied to her mistress and explained in a tiny voice, "The watch captain wished me rouse you, Mother."

Marion regarded Lant quietly. She knew well his mannerisms. His tight-lipped stance signaled a need for privacy. His motivation behind this midnight call was unfit news to the ears of a novice. With a nod, the Reverend Mother dismissed the girl, signaling the child to leave the lamp for their benefit. They watched her slip into the shadows of the hall like a ghost. Marion allowed a few moments to pass before she broke the silence, inquiring, "Have you another wounded soul for the Mother Temple, Captain?"

He pursed his lips a moment before answering. "No."

When he offered no further explanation, Marion ventured, "Surely you haven't come on a social call? Or to arrest one of my girls? An infraction of some sort?"

He was in no mood for wit. Grimly he said, "A favor."

"Favor?"

"A request..."

Marion folded her arms and fixed him a suspicious glance. "Lant, I have never known you to hedge a question or avoid a topic of discussion, no matter how unpleasant. Yet tonight you are at a loss. I do not know if I like you in this role."

He nodded. “Nor do I. Better you see for yourself. Wait here.” He turned on his heel, left the temple for a few moments, and reentered with a prisoner in chains.

Marion was at once struck by the girl’s fiery red hair. Never before had she seen such a hue- such fire! For some reason the sight made her heart sink: red, blood, death. Imagery from her dream sprang anew. A premonition of dread assailed her.

“Why is she gagged?” the Reverend Mother demanded quickly. “And those manacles? Have you brought a criminal to my temple? I do not run a prison.”

The prisoner tried to shake off the grip Lant had upon her elbow. Lant in turn shook the girl to be still, the violence of his action rattling both prisoner and chains alike. Grudgingly she calmed, a grumbling curse clogged by the gag in her throat.

Marion bristled. “Is this how you treat women of late, Captain? Chained and gagged? I ask you, is she a criminal or no? If not, then release her this instant! I will not stand for such treatment in my temple. Release her, Lant. Do not manhandle her in my presence- or ever!”

Spurred by this unexpected support, the girl renewed her struggles.

Reviled on the one hand, criticized on the other, Lant reached his breaking point. He cast off his prisoner with an exhale of impatience. “Gods spare me the-! *Acth!* Nay! Nay, she’s no criminal, just a foolish child. Ignorant. One who pulls the whiskers of a jungle cat and expects to live.”

Free, the red-headed prisoner moved to the opposite side of the antechamber. Wearing a sullen cast, she brought her fettered hands up to work loose the gag in her mouth. It was an old, foul smelling rag. She spat to the floor several times to clear the taint, wiping the spittle from the corners of her mouth with the back of her chained wrists.

“Insolent as the day is long,” Lant breathed harshly.

Marion chose to overlook the defilement of her temple. There was a story to be told here. She would hear that drama first. That done, she would set the girl to scrubbing her floors. Proper behavior in a house of worship was expected at all times. “What is the meaning of this Lant? Never before have you brought someone through my doors in chains. I insist upon an explanation.”

“She is yours,” said he, pulling on his gloves to go. “I have had enough of her! She drives my men crazy with her caterwauling. We cannot control her. Perhaps you can mold her into something... human.”

“What is this about? Why have you brought the girl here? What right do you have leaving her in my charge? What have her parents to say upon the matter? I doubt they have sent her to apprentice as a novice? Not in chains. I will not keep her here as a prisoner. You should know that.”

“A novice!” The good captain’s voice cracked. “Perish the thought! A she-devil in the guise of a child!”

“I have done nothing!” the girl insisted, rattling her chains. “Take these off me! Do it or I shall wake the entire town! Do it-!” She let out a banshee screech, the sound of a cat flayed alive.

“Hush!” Marion hissed. “I will not stand for such insolence- hush I say!” Two quick strides and she crossed the antechamber. Her slim hand lashed out and struck the girl smartly across the cheek. “Behave yourself in my temple,” she warned. “Act in a respectable manner! Continue this foolishness and I shall strike you again. Behave in a civil manner and you shall be treated in a civil fashion. Continue to wail like a slaughtered pig and I’ll house you in the stable with the other animals.”

The girl bit her lip, already calculating her next move. She had underestimated the old woman's mettle.

Lant made a low, positive noise in his throat. "The first progress I've seen. I'd hoped you would have some way with the girl. I see I shall not be disappointed." Knowing further comment could undermine the Reverend Mother's influence, he quickly changed the topic. "I came across her at *The Portentous Seer*, causing a raucous. She's lately come to Glammenport-"

"I'm here to meet an esteemed scholar!"

"Yes child," Marion said. "You shall have your chance to speak in a moment. Patience. Lant, continue."

"Her reasons for being in the finer districts are irrelevant, as is the fact that no esteemed scholar was in evidence. She is a foreigner without a point of contact in our fair city."

"And you wish the Mother Temple to sponsor her?" A heavy tone of sarcasm lined Marion's words. "Is this your new civic policy, Lant? Don't you usually pawn off the destitute to that vixen Callishia?"

"I'm no whore!"

Marion nodded at the girl. "Good for you." She moved back to face Lant, but instead found distraction lurking in the distant shadows of her hall. She snapped her fingers at two figures just out of lamp light, saying, "Robin and Samantha- off with you now! There is nothing here for you to see. Back to bed. H-s-s-st! Scat!"

The shadows scampered away on pattering feet and stifled giggles.

Marion turned on Lant, her original thoughts still fresh in her mind. "I see the child recognizes Callishia's name and vocation. Am I to assume you have already tried

to enroll this poor creature into the ranks of the living damned? Mmmm, the guilt on your face answers my question. Lant! You continue to deprecate yourself before the gods.” She added in a lower tone of disgust, “You are the one who should go about in chains.”

“Your opinion of my methods is well known to me, Your Grace. Let us not waste further words on that issue. Maintaining civic order is irrelevant this evening. What remains under discussion is the girl’s safety and well-being. I fear she must be kept here in the Mother Temple for the night. Perhaps longer-”

“I will not be a prisoner!” the redhead insisted. “Not in your filthy dungeons! Nor some idiotic temple!”

Marion shook her head. Enough. She turned her back on the quarrelsome pair and started up the brief steps towards the inner temple. “Release the girl and let her go her way, Lant. I wash my hands of this matter. She is her own person, not a dog to be leashed because you fear her bite. I will not keep her here against her will. Douse the lamp when you leave and be sure the gate is secure.”

“You don’t understand,” the captain insisted, raising his voice. “Her very life is in your hands, Marion. Her life!”

The Reverend Mother froze on the topmost step.

Lant noted a tremble in the woman’s step. He mistook it for rage. The Reverend Mother did not care for her given name. Not from his lips.

Slowly, slowly, Marion retraced her steps back into the antechamber. “What did you say...?”

“Her life hinges upon your decision, Your Grace. Do not turn your back upon the child. She has nowhere else to turn.”

Dream images assaulted Marion's senses. A unique person would be delivered to her, someone whose life depended upon her actions. No- it could not be. She had her savior: the elf! He was unique beyond question! Someone she would never see the likes of again. Marion's eyes involuntarily lit upon the girl. That hair- fiery red. Those eyes- emerald green. Never had she seen such colorings! And never would she see them again. No, no! This could not be! She had her savior. Her wait was over. This was a mistake.

"It cannot be," she breathed. "What do you mean, Lant? Surely you err. The girl looks fine to me. Healthy as you or I- more so if anything."

"As you suspected, the girl did meet our Grand Madame. Face to face they were, as close as you and I. It was a foul situation that... that took a turn to the worse." He swallowed. "She stuck her."

Marion waved a hand. "That is no matter. Callishia is known to have a short temper. And the girl looks unharmed. I see not so much as a blemish upon her--"

"No, you misunderstand! She...," he pointed to the prisoner. "*She* struck Callishia."

"Mother of all gods!"

Marion bit her tongue at her own blaspheme. "And Callishia let her go? Just like that?" She looked the prisoner over from head to toe. "Not a mark? Not one? This does not sound like the Grand Madame I know."

The prisoner proclaimed with a smug grin: "That queen of harlots had little to say on the matter! She was carried off by her coachman like a bundle of laundry!"

"I thought I saw blood on her face," Lant added somberly. "I fear the Grand Madame may have a broken nose. Calli is a vain woman- insanely so. If her features

have been marred in the slightest, she will exact unspeakable vengeance. This is my belief. The girl is not safe within my prison walls. Every man has his price- even my own troops. The Grand Madame has treasures aplenty to bestow upon helpful men. I thought here in the Mother Temple Calli's influence might not be felt. You and your girls can be trusted. An oath of silence? Tell no one she is hiding here? She can be passed off as a new novice. No one will be the wiser. Hold her, protect her until I can book passage on the next ship out of Glammenport. Callishia's agents will never think to look here."

Marion shook her head. This was too much to bear. Years of waiting for the appointed one, the Chosen One, and now in the span of two days she had not one, but *two* candidates who qualified.

"Do you realize what this means?" she stammered. "Do you realize what this means...?"