

THE
SCARECROW
QUEEN

♦ *A Sin Eater's Daughter Novel* ♦

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Chapter 1



Somewhere to the left of the alcove I'm still crammed inside, water drips steadily to the floor. Other than those rhythmic taps, the bone temple is silent. I've counted over three thousand drops, when I hear something out in the passageway. I tense, my already stiff muscles aching as I strain to catch any other sound: muffled footfalls, soft sighs, the whispering of fabric. Moments pass like lifetimes, the dripping continues, and I hold my breath until my lungs burn.

I hear a thud, then another, and then a sort of rustling, and I exhale with a dizzying rush. I know those sounds: just more debris falling from the ceiling. Really, that alone should be enough to make me move, the realization the roof could cave in and bury me. The echoes of boots have long since faded, and the lanterns on the walls are burning low. I need to go.

I start counting again.

When I get to four thousand, I pause, shifting my weight. My foot immediately cramps and I flex it, squeezing my eyes shut at the pain. When I open them, the room seems darker, and I peer out through a sliver of a gap in the screen that conceals me, trying to determine if any of the torches have blown out. Through that small gap I watched Errin scream at the Sleeping Prince, saw her look him in the eye and lie to his face. I watched him stroke her, bend his head to her hair and *smell* her, threaten to murder her, and still she held her nerve. Even when she knelt to him, she did it with the air of someone granting a favor, not someone obeying a command. I have to wonder if Errin would have hidden from him at all if our situations had been reversed. I can't imagine she would have stayed wedged in a crevice, her fist stuffed in her mouth, the taste of her own blood on her tongue.

No, I decide. She's not the hiding type. Even if she had at first agreed to hide, she would have emerged and tried to fight. She could never have stayed concealed. Or if she had managed it, it would have been because she was thinking of the bigger picture, and she'd have left the moment they did. Stalked them through the passageways, eavesdropping to learn what she could, forming a plan. Either way, she wouldn't still be here, counting water droplets.

I thought I'd left my cowardice in Lormere.

Along with all my feelings for Lief. All I can see is the cold look in his eyes when he told me to hide. The grudging way he offered me safety, as though to repay a debt. Calling what we had a *friendship* . . .

I push it away, clenching my jaw, my hands curling into fists. I know exactly what kind of man he is; I know what he did to me,

to Merek, to Lormere. To his own sister, while I watched. And yet the first thing I felt when I saw him there was joy. I forgot everything, all the death, all the pain; instead, I remembered the way he smelled when I pressed my face into his neck, the feel of muscle beneath his skin as my fingers clutched his back. His hair falling into my face. The taste of his mouth. As though moons hadn't passed, as though nothing had changed.

All it took was my name on his lips to bring me to my knees again. Gods, I want so much to hate him. No—not even that. I want to think of him and feel nothing. I want him to be a stranger to me.

Enough, Twylla, I tell myself, wishing I could score him from my heart. *Go, now*.

Then one of the torches flickers and dies, adding a new patch of shadow to the room, and I realize it won't be long until the others do the same. And it's that—the thought of being alone here, deep underground, in the dark, surrounded by the dead—that finally makes me unlock my muscles, my legs trembling when I move. Even then I wait, staring into the darkness for any sign of life.

The first step I take is a roll of thunder splitting apart the stillness. The crunching of bone and wood beneath my foot ricochets around the temple, echoing around me. In the shadows something falls, and all of the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. And when another torch splutters and dies, I pick up my skirts and run, stumbling over femurs and ribs and broken struts, terrified of being trapped here in the dark.

As I push through the curtain into the passage, I trip over something large and soft, and fly forward, raising my hands to

break my fall. My hands sting as they strike the stone floor and I swear loudly, rolling immediately to stand.

I see a figure, facedown, white hair bloodied on one side. I can't tell if it's male or female until I crouch beside it—*her*—to press my fingers to her neck. I know immediately, from the coldness, from the way the skin feels unyielding, that she's dead. When I gently roll her over, the only injury I can see is a wound to her left temple; it looks small, as though it ought not to have been enough to kill. But it did; her golden eyes are dull and staring, mouth open, all life well and truly fled. I close both eyes and mouth, and cross her arms over her chest.

I've seen plenty of dead people in my life, and I know, deep in my soul, or my gut, that before this night is out I'm going to see a lot more.

The next two hours of my life are the closest to hell that I've ever come. The corridors of the Conclave are a warren and there are no markings or signs to tell me where I am, or where to go. At first I'm cautious, still loosely gripped by the fear that kept me in the bone temple for so long, but with each dead end, each wrong turn, the panic rises, the terror I'll never find my way out, that I'll die down here in the dark, and eventually I'm running, dodging obstacles and vaulting over smashed furniture.

On and on I go, stumbling past body after body, my whimpers reflected by the walls, haunting me with every step. In the back of my mind I know this means I'm truly alone down here. I'm making more than enough noise to give myself away, but I can't stop. I sob and gasp; every single person I come across is a corpse, battered, broken, and splayed. Clothing is askew where they've

fallen, exposing breasts and groins, the owners oblivious. Limbs are bent backward, or sometimes not there at all. There has been no mercy here.

I'm in a mass grave, I think, and laugh, immediately clapping my hands over my mouth at the sound. But it's still there, the urge to giggle, bubbling up even as I tell myself this isn't funny. *I'm hysterical*, I realize, but it doesn't mean anything. I keep going, around and around.

After a while I stop running, walking through the tunnels and rooms in a dreamlike state. I drift through chambers carpeted with the charred pages of books; I pick my way through smashed glass and ceramics, cross caverns where the air reeks of herbs and sulfur and myriad other things that litter the ground, crushed beneath the heels of boots. Mattresses have been shredded, bookcases overturned. Like Tremayne above, the Conclave has been explored, stripped, and destroyed.

I pass ever more bodies: alchemists with their luminous hair, normal men, women, even children, and now I stop beside each one, checking first to make sure they are truly dead before I close their eyes and mouths if they're open, neaten their limbs if they're sprawled without dignity.

This is new to me, this kind of death. The corpses I've seen before have been neatly laid out, their hair brushed, wearing their smartest clothes; sometimes even powders and pastes have been added to mask death. They lie in neat repose, waiting to be absolved. Not so down here.

I rearrange clothing. I smooth hair back from foreheads. I find no survivors.

I feel like a wraith, a Valkyrie, wandering a battlefield and

counting the dead. Most of them have been stabbed, or had their throats cut, and my thoughts keep fighting their way back to Lief, in his suit of silver armor, his sword hanging at his side, and I keep wondering if any of these lives are on his conscience.

Horribly, it's the bodies that eventually begin to guide me. After a while I can tell where I've been, and where is new, based on how they lie. If I can see they've been tended, I turn back and walk the other way; if not, I see to them, then walk on. The dead become my map.

And that is how they lead me to my mother, as they always have; wherever the dead are, there she will eventually be.

The Sin Eater of Lormere lies in the middle of the great hall, with three other corpses nearby. Feeling oddly numb, I ignore her for the time being, tending to the others. Sister Hope isn't here, and neither is Nia or Sister Courage, which allows me a flicker of hope that they at least escaped. But one of the Sisters has fallen, Sister Peace, a sword useless beside her. I tidy her body and those of the other two, all dead so that Errin and I could run. I arrange them as best I can, wiping the blood from their faces, tidying their clothes.

Then, and only then, do I approach my mother.

At Eatings, I heard people say things about how the dead seem smaller than they did in life, how they look as though they're sleeping. But I can see neither of those things when I look at my mother. I grew in that body; I came from it. It gave me life. And now it's empty. Visibly and unmistakably empty.

She's on her front, and I turn her over, feeling sick at the dull thud of flesh as she rolls back. Mercifully, her eyes are shut, and as with the first body I found, she has only the smallest wound to

the side of her head. Her dark hair is oily, and I stroke it gently. I've never been able to see my face in my mother's and I still can't now, can't find who I am in her strong nose, her rosebud mouth. Her skin is clear of my freckles, her eyelids hooded. I could see a little of her in my sister, Maryl, the same bow lips, the same small hands. But not me. I might as well have been a changeling. I wonder for a moment where my brothers are, whether they live, whether they care about the Sleeping Prince's reign. Whether they'd care that our mother is dead. But then, she neglected them even more than she'd neglected me. I at least had a use. A purpose, as it now seems.

Less than a day has passed since I stood in this room and vowed to fight the Sleeping Prince. How sure of myself I was then, with Errin and Silas beside me; how righteous my anger was. It seemed so possible then, so simple. Silas would train the alchemists and their kin to fight and we'd all march on Lormere and defeat the Sleeping Prince. I thought we'd be like an avenging army in a story. I imagined people rallying to our cry, and that the fact we were on the side of good would assure our victory.

And then Aurek came, with my lover at his side, and proved that I am not only still a coward but still a naive, stupid fool, too. And I'm supposed to save us from the Sleeping Prince.

I loosen my mother's hair from its binding and arrange it around her shoulders. I fold her arms over her chest and straighten her robes. But I can feel something missing, something I've forgotten to do. An itch to be scratched. A debt to be paid.

Then I see the table, see the bread and the flagon of ale that have somehow, miraculously, survived the fighting, as if for this very moment. And I know what I need to do.