

Chapter 1

"He fears me. Fears me now, fears what I might become, what he thinks I became. Fill my glass."

She took his glass and spun it lazily around. It caught the flickering firelight, which rippled up through the dainty stem and into the empty bowl where it settled, shimmering faintly. "He fears you," she replied, holding out his drink.

"Good." A log settled, releasing a fountain of sparks that glittered against the dullness of his eyes. "He should. In me he sees only a pariah, a label he has so graciously smeared over our years of shared suffering." The fire sizzled where he spat. "He sits in a grand castle, reveling in his position and fortune, smiling at the adoring crowds who flock to see him." The man sneered and spat again into the flames. "And such crowds! One to sell the produce, three with nothing to their names but a spare coin and a good arm! He retires, smiling, smelling of the fruits of a kingdom, to his borrowed room, lavishly decorated by the hard labor of generation after generation of moth."

Another glob of wine splashed angrily against the hearth. The man took a sip from his glass, and came up with air. His face hardened, the strong angles of his past momentarily struggling to the surface from beneath the sagging creases of far, far too much time. "Where is my wine? Fill my glass. I will not ask again."

"Of course," she said, taking his glass once more. She filled it again by the light of the fire, swirling in a touch of dried spittle and ash in a sudden moment of inspired pique, and returned it to him. "And what of you?"

His face softened, and the years rushed back in, leaving no trace of the handsome youth that had been consumed by wrinkles and spots. He broke into a sickly grin. "I live on my own lands, surrounded by my own fortune, I am greeted by crowds. My people. They cheer for me, they bring the fruit directly to my hands and refuse my coin. A duke does not sit on a throne, but I hear them whispering that my chair has grown very, very tall."

Gleefully, she watched as he finished the glass and fell into a fit of coughing. The skin on his neck wobbled, flickering shadows lending depth to the folds. "Why do you cough?"

The Duke recovered, and paused trying to regain composure against heaving breaths. Uncertainty flitted momentarily to the surface of his dark brown eyes, a tinge of concern and fear. "I am not a pariah. The people love me. I have not become... I do not hear..."

"You only hear me. Your loyal servant." She took the glass from him and held it to the light contemplatively. "Your servant."

Walking towards the door to the halls, he paused momentarily and placed a hand on the great silver chair that dominated the room. Cushions spilled over the sides, more than enough for a frail old man yet never enough to protect him from the cold metal below. The chair was ornamented with carvings of interlocking spiked wheels that seemed almost to turn in the firelight. He fingered one of the very real spikes that protruded from the large wooden wheel that served as his backrest. He idly pried off a scab of the dried mud that caked its edges. It wafted gently to the floor and lay there, color alternating dark brown and deep red in the firelight.

"Do you remember these?" he asked, papery skin caressing another of the wheel's dulled spikes. "They carried us forward across the forests and gorges. Tirelessly forward, first through the ice and snow, then the muck and rot left by winter's passing. They tore through it all, through the roots and decaying stumps of once vibrant pines, through the mud churned by marching boots, and then when that wasn't enough for us we laid the paving stones of flesh and sinew so that these wheels would not feel unneeded, so that glory could continue squelching forwards. He was there too. Do you remember?"

"I remember all wars. I remember you ripping through your enemies. I remember him ripping through more... though you were always the more brilliant."

Turning from the chair the Duke walked out of the room. "I was brilliant," he whispered to the bleak stone halls that made up his home. So empty now, his son gone, his son's mother long forgotten. He did not bother to bring with him a flame to light the cobweb covered candles that lined the walls. He did not need one, let the spiders keep their homes for a while longer, let the housemaids shirk their duty one night more. He had walked these halls since their conception. Longer still the path he would be taking.

His feet took him deeper into the depths of the castle, far past where chiseled block met richly carpeted floor, and into tunnels of rock smoothed by eons of wind and running water. He found the passageways of his youth familiar and calming, enjoying the way they fumbled through the surrounding rock, twisting and turning like the body of a dying snake seeking its own severed head. With only his hand on the wall to guide him he traveled deeper and deeper until he stopped abruptly, finally feeling the familiar unnatural coolness of the strong, iron shod, door.

He opened and closed his eyes, testing them against the impenetrable darkness, and reached for the metal plate that he knew covered a small barred window at eye level within the door. The metal shrieked in protest as his questing hands pulled it open, demanding oil to sate it's hunger. Next time he would bring oil, let it feast until it could no longer voice it's complaint. Behind the door he could see nothing but more darkness, and the two darknesses rushed to meet each other, the still air of the tunnel mingling with the stale air of the cell, tainted with human deprivation.

"Hello dear," he said. Something whimpered inside. "I have brought you food and drink." He reached to his side and found nothing, no bag of bread nor jug of wine. He shook his empty arms, bemused. "Give her food for me." A tray clattered within the cell. Something within whimpered again and shuffled towards the noise.

"Water..." pleaded a hoarse voice.

"Oh, give her water." A splash sounded in the cell alongside a gasping sputtering. "Give her water in a *cup*." The ringing sound of a metal goblet slowly settling into place echoed within. The occupant stopped pawing desperately at the rapidly drying ground and fumbled towards the source of the noise. He heard hands fumbling at the cup and then a gulp followed by a fit raspy coughing, then choking and then silence.

"Are we alive dear?" More silence. He ground his teeth and called out again. "I'd need to tell the king if otherwise and I'm sure it would worry him greatly so I will ask again, are you alive dear?"

A shaky feminine voice spoke up at last. "Alive," he could hear the sound of teeth tearing against bread now, "still alive."

"That is what I wanted to hear, dear," he reached up to close the plate, but the shaky voice spoke up again, this time laced with venom.

"You damned pariah. Your kind should not be shunned. That would be far too gentle. My father told me you were a man. He told me that my exchange would help garner unity within the kingdom, heal a growing divide. He can be so naive."

"Watch your mouth," he hissed back through clenched teeth. "I am no pariah."

Ignoring him, she continued, her shaking voice strengthening with each word. "I wonder what will become of your son, pariah, once I do not return, once the fool realizes any letters sent are forged? I have some thoughts I would love to share, if you'd let me. They have been spinning around my head, bouncing against the dark walls that surround me, pressing in closer and closer each day. I have nothing but thoughts, oh great Duke, please allow me to share. You will not close that window." He opened his mouth to respond, but she continued before he could shut her down. His fingers tightened on the sliding door, but refused to budge.

"First your son is to be gently warmed by the fire. An exchange of pleasantries, if you will, between his skin and the flames. Toasty and warm. Then he shall be brought closer. Bit by bit. The fire will begin to tingle, then burn. His beautiful skin will smolder, cooked just to the point where the succulent fats begin to bubble up most deliciously. He will be turned, slowly, so as to make sure that we don't do him injustice by leaving any part of him raw. Next he will be removed from the flames, alive, for of course no son of yours deserves such an easy death. He shall be taken to a great banquet hall, table laden as if for a great feast. There he will be locked to his chair, chained so tightly that his perfectly rendered skin knows nothing but pain. Can you imagine his delight? The

food will be plentiful and, to be sure, your son will be fed too, for my hospitality must exceed your own, oh great Duke. A dull knife against his skin will send him into fits of agony, drooling from the smell of the bountiful spread and his own tender flesh, as he is fed piece by piece starting with his delightfully prepared little toesies. Do you think this too cruel? Worry not, for I will take pity on him. I would be a poor host if I served him such an under spiced fare! I will make sure to thoroughly salt each and every span of his blistering skin before his feast has properly begun."

She paused to take a breath and then continued. His hand remained fixed to the handle of the sliding door, gripping it tightly with mounting rage. "I have not yet come up with what should be done to you. Would you be too foul to serve, even to one as wretched as yourself? My father told me you were still a man, but tell me, what of the voices you hear? Do you listen with rapt attention or do you, perhaps, pretend to be deaf, even to yourself? Do you still think yourself a man? Still, pariah, it would be untoward of me to not at least attempt to offer you hospitality befitting your station. Surely the Duke deserves a better reception than his own well done heir? I *have* always wondered if demons burn."

The Duke grit his teeth, anger threatening to bubble up past the confines of his lips. The cell's key thudded into the wood between the plates of reinforcing iron. One trembling arm held away from the lock by the other, finally wrenched free from the sliding panel.

Silence threatened to fill the darkness, punctuated only by the Duke's own ragged breaths. "I have afforded you the respect due to the daughter of a king. I caught you searching in the dark recesses of my home for things that were not there. In

exchange for looking where you should not, for *spying* on me no doubt by the king, no... *his* orders I have taken your sight. Look now to the darkness and see only justice."

She laughed hoarsely. "Spying? You truly think I was spying? And for him? That man is just as much a demon as you. How my father can tolerate his presence let alone his existence I do not know. I did not leave the room you gave me. I searched no further than..."

"I have taken your sight," he cut in, "next time you will hold your tongue. It is not so easy to take one's voice without resorting to more drastic measures. Finish filling your mouth with food before it betrays itself and the taste is cut short for good." He reached up and wrenched the flap closed before she could speak, grimacing at its agonized shriek. He would need to bring oil next time. He could ask for oil?

"I am not a demon?" The air remained still. He shook his head. "Give me oil."

She passed him a small brush coated with grease. "Of course."