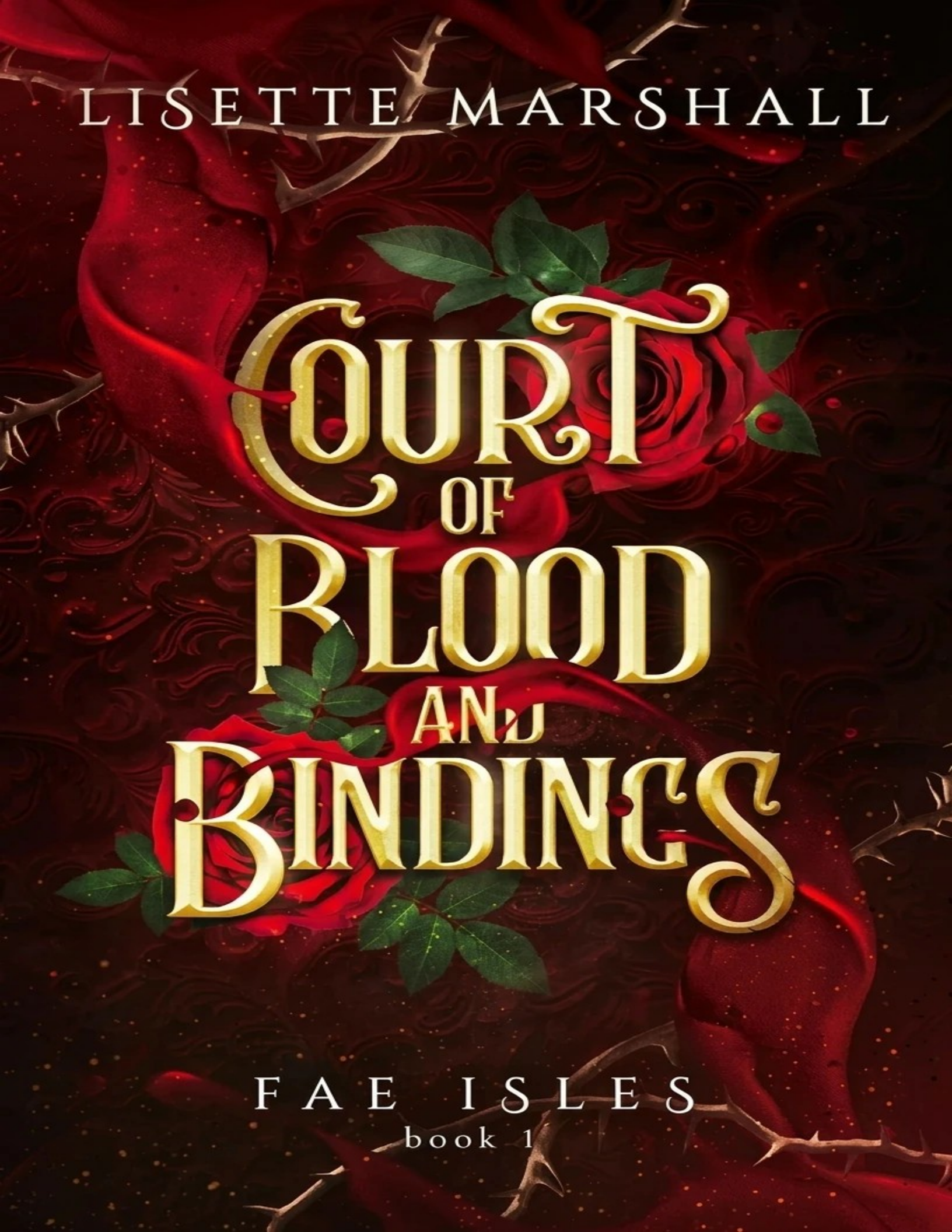




LISETTE MARSHALL

COURT
OF
BLOOD
AND
BINDINGS

FAE ISLES
book 1

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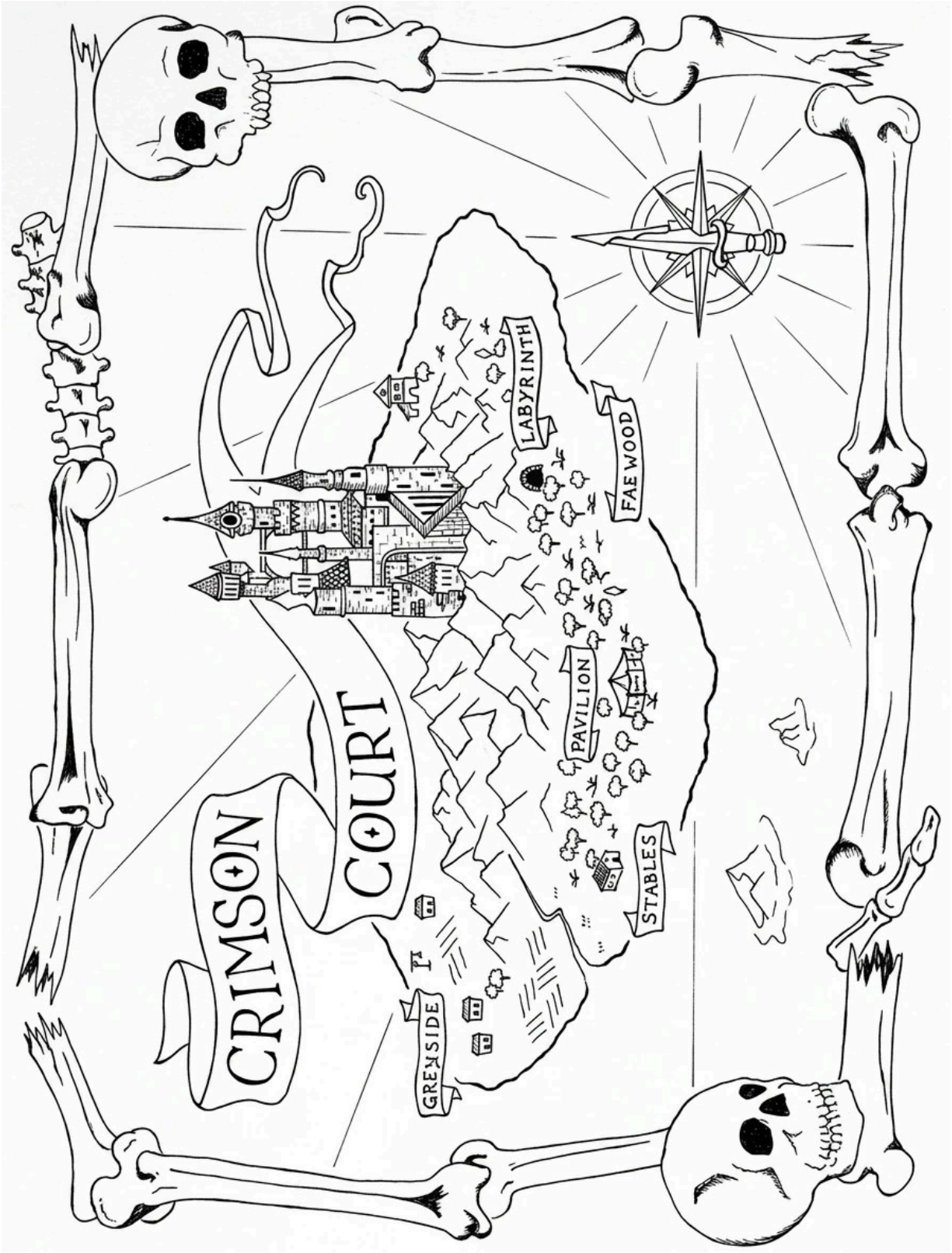
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To my 14-year-old self,
who was kept afloat by this story



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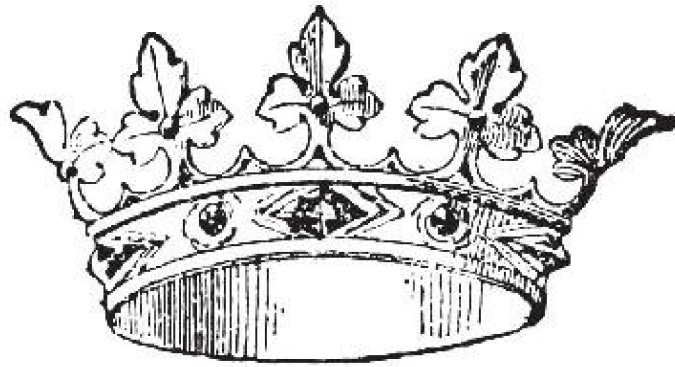
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CHAPTER 1



Wine, mathematics, and distant shouting were a terrible combination.

I groaned, rubbed my eyes, and made another attempt to add up the numbers crawling over the parchment before me. Finishing our administration for the month was the last of my tasks this morning. Just three more pages of paint and canvas purchases to go, and then I'd be free to leave this office – free to finally finish the dress I'd sewn for today's victory celebration and make my way to the village square, where the long tables would already be filling up with roast lamb and grilled goat cheese and Nettie's famous honey figs.

Just a few last sums – but doing sums would have been a whole lot easier if not for the one glass too many I'd had during the festival preparations the previous night. Or for the sound of my parents' voices in their bedroom, loud enough to signal they were having one of their more vehement fights.

So much for the festive atmosphere.

I muttered a curse, grabbed another piece of scrap parchment, and scrabbled down some preliminary totals. No, that couldn't be correct – there was no way my prudent, occasionally penny-pinching father had spent twice his monthly income on varnish. I'd probably misplaced a comma somewhere ...

Vibrating through the walls and ceiling, the unmistakable sound of my mother's sobbing reached me.

'Oh, for fuck's sake,' I muttered out loud, shoving away from my desk. It was one thing to still be working for my parents at an age when I'd hoped to be long gone from this island. To continue attempting to work while they insisted on interrupting me with their dramatics of the day ... I had better things to do.

I'd finish the embroidery on my new dress first. With a bit of luck, they'd calm down and leave the house soon; then I could quickly finish my accounting tasks before following them outside.

I slipped out of the office and crossed the wide-open space of Father's workshop. Above my head – intelligible now with one less wall separating us – my mother was yelling about the neighbours and expectations and ...

Recognisable even through the walls, my name.

I froze mid-step, holding my breath to better hear them. Gods be damned, what had I done this time? Had someone been gossiping about my six months on Ildhelm again? Or was it about men and marriage, as these fights were more and more often lately?

Ulda is pregnant with her second already, Mother had told me yesterday, her lips tight with annoyance, *and she's younger than you are* ...

Nobody had asked for my hand, had they?

Heart jumping into my throat, I trotted to the workshop door and opened it a chink. Their voices came much clearer now, unaware of my listening ear.

'I'm telling you we can't risk it!' my father shouted, his voice accompanied by the sound of his heavy footsteps. I knew those footsteps. They rarely

promised anything joyful. ‘That Othmar fellow has been studying magic for decades! If Em has even the tiniest slip—’

‘She hasn’t slipped for months! For *years*!’

‘*You* weren’t the one who had to explain to Matilda why her apprentice suddenly started burning dresses!’

My heart clenched at that. Two years and still the familiar sting of shame, loss, and guilt didn’t come any gentler than the day after that catastrophe. If they were afraid of me slipping again, for the festival’s high-born visitors to see, no less ...

What were they planning to do? Lock me inside the house?

‘Fine, then let me explain the situation to your bloody Othmar!’ my mother snapped upstairs. Ah. That was the source of the dispute – she did *not* want to lock me inside the house.

‘There’s no explaining this!’ A door slammed, vibrating through every wall. More footsteps and a joyless laugh loud enough to make it through two closed doors. ‘He’s been hinting he might commission portraits for the academy gallery! The *academy gallery*! If he finds out my daughter is ... is ...’

I stiffened, waiting for the rest of that sentence. It didn’t come.

A disappointing little mess, carrying a shred of that erratic magic that should have died out of my mother’s family generations ago. Father had never spoken the words to my face, but then again, they weren’t hard to read in his eyes.

‘She could cost us an *astounding* amount of money,’ he continued, not as loud now, and almost pleading with her to see sense. ‘It’s not just Othmar, remember? That White City senator has mentioned he’s looking for someone to paint his family portrait, and you know how they feel about magic in *that* place ...’

‘But you can’t just ban her from the festival, Valter! It’s going to be the celebration of the decade!’

I swallowed, anxiety churning in my gut. Of the century, more likely. A hundred and thirty years of forced tribute payments and finally Cathra had found a way to fight back against our rulers. The scientists and senators – they weren't coming here to visit a little backwater island and have some roast lamb. They were here to see the iron ward around the beaches with their own eyes and determine whether they might use the same method to keep the fae off their own shores.

And to order portraits from Valter of Cathra. That too. If his embarrassment of a daughter didn't spoil the prospects, at least.

'Well,' my father snapped. 'It won't be much of a party for her either if she accidentally obliterates the buffet tables, will it?'

I closed my eyes and leaned back against the plastered white wall, willing my mother to say something sensible. Come on. It would be so easy shut him up. *Don't talk about our daughter as if she's a toddler prone to tantrums. She's a grown adult, for the gods' sake; you can hardly tell her what to do unless you threaten to cut her pay. She's been preparing for the festivities for weeks like every single person in town, and wouldn't it be a little unfair to ban her from the amusement just when she's finished her dress for the occasion?*

She cried, 'But think of what the *neighbours* will say if she's not there, Valter!'

The neighbours.

Right.

Ten years ago I might have stormed up the stairs and shouted at them to be reasonable. Five years ago I might have pled and argued. But after twenty years in this household, I knew shouting would only result in stricter measures, that pleading would only win me some additional glares and not an inch of goodwill.

I clenched my fists and swallowed down another fit of nausea, my attempts at accounting forgotten once and for all.

‘I don’t care about the bloody neighbours!’ my father burst out upstairs. ‘Are the neighbours’ commissions going to feed us for the next year?’

‘You don’t have to listen to their nagging for the next six months while—’

‘Nagging? You think *nagging* is the worst that could come out of this?’

My mother uttered a shrill laugh. ‘You forget there’s *guaranteed* to be nagging, while the chances of Em slipping are—’

‘I don’t care how small they are!’ He was shouting loud enough for the neighbours to hear now. I wondered if he realised. ‘They are there! That’s all I need to know!’

A breathless silence; I could picture them pacing around the bedroom, my father flustered and ruffled, my mother cold and severe. Their voices came softer now, the words harder to catch.

I tiptoed through the door and into the kitchen, all festive anticipation gone. With my cheek pressed against the kitchen window, I could just see the decorated pine trees on the town square, garlands and lanterns and the occasional banner. A dark, heavy dread settled over me, a weight that even the bright sunlight couldn’t wash away.

I had been naïve, of course, not to expect it. Had been naïve to think they would finally have let it go, that disaster of two years ago.

Not for the first time, I found myself wondering if I should have returned to Cathra at all. If I shouldn’t just have left them all behind, home and Miss Matilda and everyone I knew ... but where should I have gone at the time, eighteen years old and penniless?

‘Emelin?’

Father, using my full name. That, too, never promised anything joyful.

I swallowed a catch of bitter regret and yelled back, ‘Yes?’

‘Come here for a moment, will you?’

Like an accused about to receive the judge’s verdict, I steeled myself and trudged up the stairs, not sure if I should pretend to have missed their shouting match entirely. They should know better than to think I had been

that engrossed in my sums. Then again, the fact that they should didn't always mean they would.

Mother stood leaning against the wardrobe, in the floral dress I'd made her last year. The hard lines around her lips spoiled every last illusion of festivity. Father was pacing between the bed and the balcony door, his cheeks too red, his lips too pale.

'Em, your mother and I have been thinking about the celebration.'

Thinking, I wanted to say. *Funny thing*, *I'm usually a little quieter when thinking*. But snide retorts would only squander their last bit of goodwill and potentially half of this month's pay.

I needed that money, little as it was, if I ever wanted to get out of this place.

So all I said was, 'What is it?'

The explanation came out in a tangle of lies and half-truths, with the occasional honest confession thrown in – worried about my reputation if anything were to happen, surely I didn't want to ruin the festivities either, and the honoured guests from the White City could cause me a lot of trouble – but of course they couldn't keep me at home against my will, and either way, questions might be asked if I were to stay away from the festival ...

'So what do you want, Em?'

What did I want? That most treacherous of questions. What I wanted, at this point, was to get thoroughly plastered at that damned celebration. What I wanted was to wear the dress I'd made and eat the food I'd prepared and hear the mothers of the town compliment the garlands I'd sewn.

But that wasn't the right answer.

Twenty years in this household had taught me that lesson, too, that the enquiry after my wishes was never an open question but rather a test, an assessment of my daughterly adequacy. Usually the honest answer meant failing that test. And failure resulted in days of cold silence and one-syllable

answers to everything I said – or, if I was unlucky, yet another pay cut for my work as my father's assistant.

The problem was that the right answer wasn't clear today. Rather, there were too many of them.

Father's right answer was that, indeed, I didn't want to spoil the festivities and would gladly stay at home. Mother's right answer was that I didn't want to miss the celebration for a thousand gold coins but would be very careful not to draw even a fleck of colour or give any of the honoured guests reason to think me more than a boring, unremarkable young woman. Whatever I said, I was bound to displease someone, and the wronged party would take care to let me know.

I could take the risk, of course. Could join the victory celebrations and just make sure not to get near any colour I might accidentally lose control of. But I'd spend the full evening with my father's eyes on my neck, and *if* I made even the smallest of mistakes ...

I didn't want to think about that possibility. I'd seen him after my return from Ildhelm. This would be a hundred times worse.

Mother would inform us of every gossiping housewife for weeks if I didn't go, though. Would report every underhand remark to us, every sideways glance, and be an insufferable martyr about it.

By now I no longer cared about the entire damn celebration. I just wanted a way out of this corner.

'Why don't you tell them I couldn't come because I didn't finish my chores yet?' I heard myself say, voice flat. 'I'll make myself useful here and do some work in advance. I'd enjoy having a free day tomorrow, after all the excitement.'

The neighbours would still gossip, of course, but not about my mother and her failure to keep the family in line. Just about me. And they'd done that since my hasty return from Ildhelm anyway.

My mother brightened. 'Well, if you don't mind a little white lie, Em ...'

I lied, told them I didn't mind, and they chose to believe me. Ten minutes later, they were on their way, into the loud buzz of voices three streets away.

I stayed behind in the silent house, cursing myself and my stupid unwanted powers for all I was worth.



I folded the laundry. I cleaned the kitchen. I reordered Father's paintbrushes and gathered his aprons, cleaned out the sketches and studies he'd thrown away, and sorted his inks and paints.

By the time I was done, it was barely noon. On the square outside, music was playing, glasses were clinking, people were cheering. Most voices I recognised even from a distance; I could probably identify every one of the island's less than two hundred inhabitants by their whispering.

My absence, if it had even been noted, didn't seem to bother anyone in the slightest.

As had been the intention, of course. As my mother needed. But I found myself sulking into the kitchen like a petulant toddler, senselessly frustrated that no one had even bothered to walk by and offer me a piece of the honey cake I'd baked myself. Even if I was busy with a day of work, they could realise I would take a break or two, couldn't they?

The thought of cake made me hungry. A quick search through the baskets and crates yielded a handful of fresh figs, some olives, and the remainders of yesterday's bread. Not much, but it could have been worse. I had lived on less for months last year, when the harvest had been miserable and the yearly tribute rates higher than usual.

I sat down in the back garden, in the golden sunlight but out of view of passers-by, and tried to shut out the celebratory shouts a few hundred feet

away as I chewed my bread. An odd thought, that we'd never pay tributes again. That we would never have a winged assembly land on our town square again, demanding money and food in the name of the Mother of all fae who ruled us. That we could harvest and *keep* the fruits and grains from now on, that we could eat what we had without having to put half of it aside, waiting in our sheds and cellars for the fae to come and get it.

Odd enough for it to seem unreal.

It might have seemed more real if I'd been there on the square right now, drinking and dancing with the rest of the town. Instead I found myself here, holed up like the village idiot, surviving on lukewarm water and dry bread.

I muttered a curse. I should just have told them what I wanted, icy glares and pay cuts be damned.

But showing up now and declaring my work done – that would only make matters far, far worse. Father liked unpleasant surprises even less than snide retorts. I'd have to keep myself busy and hope they would at least return with some of the roast lamb leftovers from the feast.

So how was I going to make myself useful for another few hours?

Sewing? But the thought of my nearly finished dress upstairs turned even the simple pleasure of needlework pale and useless. I'd finish it later, when the bitterness had softened. Today I was better off taking care of the more unpleasant chores; there was nothing left to ruin about the day, anyway.

The paints, then. We were running out of red; Father would appreciate a new supply.

I gathered my materials in unthinking routine, apron and gloves, cinnabar and egg, glass muller and palette knife. At least grinding minerals to powder didn't require me to think. At least I could just focus on the work below my hands for a few minutes, grinding the soul out of every last grain of cinnabar until I had a bright red spoonful of vermilion powder so fine that even Father wouldn't be able to find fault in it. I split the egg, added some of the white to

the powder, and mixed it to a thick paste. Just a few drops of water, then, and a few more ...

I was done far too quickly. The party still wasn't over by the time I scraped the blood red paint into its jar, and it didn't sound like it would be over soon.

I checked the other paints, but we still had plenty of most. No sense in making too much too long in advance. Time would only degrade the quality.

Perhaps I could clean something else upstairs. Otherwise I might as well sneak away and take a dive in the bright blue sea instead of continuing this useless loitering. As long as I made sure the neighbours didn't see me apparently avoiding my chores ...

I took off my gloves, then my apron, and froze.

Oh, fuck.

Somehow a bright red smudge of paint had escaped the sturdy linen of my apron and ended up on the front of my tunic, smeared over the white cloth like a handful of blood. As if I'd just committed a violent murder. Staring at that stain, on the tunic my mother had bought for me during their last trip to Rhudak, I damn well felt like killing something.

She wasn't going to be happy if she came home to find the tunic ruined. Not happy at all. There would be lectures about not wearing expensive clothes around the workshop, and she would not even be wrong. Any credit I had earned by solving the impasse of my festival attendance would be wasted before I could even apologise for this blunder.

Fuck.

I closed my eyes and tried to stay calm. Tried to be reasonable and mature about this newest complication. I was no longer the little girl she'd send to bed without dinner. She couldn't set on me with the dust beater anymore. There was no reason to be *scared*. I was an adult woman. I was here because I was working as Father's employee – and fine, because I had nowhere else to go – and the worst she could do—

Well, the worst she could do was make me pay for the damn thing.