

THE BALLAD OF PHOENIX AND MONSTERS



M. N. Robbins

The Ballad of Phoenix and Monsters

Self-published by M.N. Robbins
First Edition

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First Edition

ISBN: 979-8266280014

Cover design by M.N. Robbins

Published by M.N. Robbins

Printed in the United States of America

Note

This book contains mature themes, including graphic violence, sexual content, death, trauma, and strong language that may not be suitable for all readers.

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“The Iskrants rule Zailand not only with magic and their exclusive right to craft wands, but with beauty as deadly as any blade. Their gorgeous kings and queens wield charm like weapons, each smile calculated, each glance a trap. They ensnare allies and enemies alike with effortless allure, and by the time you see the blade, it’s already too late.”

— Court Scholar Elantrus Marun,

The Legacy of Power: A Political History of Zailand
(Restricted Edition)



CHAPTER ONE

“The Crown Prince is cunning and ruthless—and so far has killed every assassin The Dark Prince has sent after him,” Delector grumbles as he thrusts a black satin bag into my hands. Inside is the gown I’m to wear for The Crown Prince’s birthday feast tonight.

We stand in our usual training ground, a clearing deep within the silent forest, ringed by ancient yew trees whose shadows still cling stubbornly to the earth in the fragile light of dawn. The air is sharp with the scent of damp soil and resin, hushed as though the forest itself holds its breath.

The first fiery orange and blood-red threads of sunrise bleed through the branches, slashing across Delector’s weathered face and carving his harsh features even harsher. I stifle a shiver as his glare cuts into me, the cold in his eyes icier than the chill seeping through my black fighting leathers. Perhaps he already assumes I’ll fail—just another assassin bound for the grave.

I keep my face blank. I’ve learned never to show fear or weakness around him—it never ends well.

“His Dark Highness is growing restless,” he goes on, the glare sharpening into a glower. “With the king ill and soon to die, he worries about his cousin taking the throne as heir.”

He leans forward, eyes boring into mine. “You. Cannot. Fail.”

“I’m not going to fail,” I say, forcing my voice to stay steady. Failure isn’t an option for me. He knows that very well. Failure means the Dark Prince won’t give me the cure for the curse that has plagued my mother’s body for the past five years—rotting her from the inside out, killing her limbs one by one. Her days are numbered, and if I don’t secure the treatment, she will die.

My throat tightens at the thought. She's the only person I have left. I can't lose her.

She's also the only reason I've endured Delector's brutal training, his cruelty, his blows, his endless tests. All because he serves The Dark Prince.

Delector's callused hand slips into the pocket of his dark leathers and draws out a slim dagger. He holds it out to me. "One more deadly weapon for your mission. Straight from His Dark Highness's collection. In case you fail to use your wand."

A sharp breath escapes me as I take in the blade, the gleam of the silver hilt that's carved with the royal crest—the fiery phoenix in flight.

But when I reach for it, he jerks it back out of my grasp.

"Along with the wand, I'm giving you the deadliest blade in the realm. And that gown—" his chin jerks toward the satin bag clutched in my hand "—cost me a fortune. Silk from Aismirign, studded with real diamonds."

His words settle into my bones, but one name pierces deeper than any blade. Aismirign. The land of love and lust. Theon used to whisper of taking me there, between kisses, as though it were a promise.

His death still hits me like a blow from nowhere, even after two years. When the guardians had dragged him into the Scathmore Tournament, where no Neophyte ever returns. We'd only had six months together, but in that short time his presence, his lips, had brought light into my dark and miserable life.

At the time I was eighteen and he was twenty, the last age a Neophyte could be chosen for the Games. But then...

I snatch the dagger from Delector's hand.

"And lastly..." he drawls, holding out a parchment envelope, the back etched with gleaming silver letters. "The invitation to tonight's feast."

The moment my fingers brush it, a hiss escapes my lips. I jerk my hand back as though from open flames. Blisters rise fast, angry and raw across my skin.

"It's imbued with an anti-treason rune," he sneers. "Burns anyone with ill intent. But without it, you can't enter the party."

I glare up at him, cradling my scorched fingers against my chest, biting back a wince. “Then how can you hold it without being scorched?” I snap. He is not simply evil—he is the cruelest man I have ever known. Nobles may hate us Neophytes, the second-class magicians of Zailand, but Delector revels in that hatred, savoring every chance to hurt me.

“I’m using a powerful rune,” he answers coldly. “Advanced magic. The kind spies wield when slipping into enemy territory unnoticed. And no, I don’t have the time to teach it to you. I’ll place it on you myself. It will last until midnight—which gives you plenty of time to kill your target and leave. But if you’re still in the palace after that...” His lips curl into a cruel line. “You’ll burn from the inside out.”

His voice drops, sharp as frost. “Remember. You. Cannot. Fail.” His dark eyes bore into mine. “Or it won’t just be you who pays the price.”

The words punch the air from my chest. The ground feels like it’s slipping from beneath me.

“You... you promised no harm would come to my mother if I failed.”

“Yes. And you promised to spend every second training. Did you think I wouldn’t notice you sneaking into the woods, wasting time hunting and feeding the other Neophyte rats?”

My eyes flare, and I stumble back a step. He’s been watching me. Following me. Even when I thought I was careful. I did train, harder than anyone—until my muscles screamed, until breath tore from my lungs. But afterward...

I couldn’t just abandon those families. Without my help they wouldn’t have made it.

In the Neophyte district, this filthy and destitute corner of the city, starvation is a common cause of death. Some families manage to scrape by, but not all. Like the five orphans whose parents were executed for the crime of carrying a wand. Or Theon’s parents, too old and too broken to survive on their own. I promised to take care of them when the guardians took him.

“I am powerful enough. You know that,” I tell him, my voice tight with fury.

“Oh, it’s not me you should worry about.” His arms fold across his chest, his glare like a blade pressed to my throat. “As I told you, His Dark Highness is impatient. He wants his cousin eliminated at any cost.” His eyes glint, sharp and lethal. “You succeed—you get the cure for your mother. But if you fail...” He leans closer, his words like poison dripping in my ear. “I’ve been ordered to hunt you down. Not just to kill you, but to wipe out your entire bloodline.”

By the time I reach home, a sagging two-story at the edge of the street lined with others just as shabby, the sun hangs high in the sky, too blue for a day like this.

The streets are deserted. Most Neophytes stay inside today, clinging to their children, praying they won’t be taken when the tournament summons come tomorrow.

Despite my attempt to open it quietly, the rusty hinges creak as I slip through the door.

Golden light spills through the cracked window, making the space look almost warm.

I head straight to the counter and drop the rabbit—what’s left of it. The rest I divided and left at the door of two houses, Theon’s parents and the five orphans who live three houses down.

It wasn’t much, but with my nerves so frayed, the rabbit was all I could manage to catch today.

Let Delector rage. He knows I’m as skilled as he is. He just needs someone to punish.

I reach for the dented cauldron, fill it with water and set it over the hearth, and strike the flint. Flames crackle to life beneath it, licking at its battered sides.

I rinse the herbs and mushrooms I gathered in the woods, then slice the remaining meat and drop everything into the pot. Soup is all my mother can swallow now, since the curse has rendered everything below her neck useless.

While the soup simmers, I examine the gown. My jaw drops. The fabric is soft and sheer, black as midnight, with diamonds scattered across it like stars.

Elegant, shoulder-less, designed to leave my arms bare and unencumbered—perfect for reaching weapons fast.

By the time the soup is ready, the kitchen is warm with the rich scent of herbs and meat.

I ladle some into a chipped bowl and head upstairs, to the single bedroom in the house.

At the threshold, I stop, my chest tightening like it always does.

My mother lies curled on the cot, her body hollowed by the curse.

Her skin is sickly gray, her skeletal limbs jutting out from under the ragged blanket like twigs.

I swallow the lump in my throat and step inside, kneeling on the worn wood floor so I'm level with her face. Her eyes flutter open.

"Hi Camille," I say, forcing a smile. "Look what I made for you."

She told me to call her Camille when I turned ten, after she admitted she wasn't my real mother. She said she'd found me in a box, abandoned in a dark alley when I was just days old.

But I never thought of her as anything less. She was the only mother I knew—kind, tireless, working herself to bone to raise me.

I lift a spoonful to her lips and watch as she swallows with difficulty.

"Have... you... eaten?" she asks, her voice a brittle rasp.

"I have," I lie, praying my empty stomach won't betray me with a growl. The truth is, with my nerves wound so tightly, I'm afraid anything I eat will come back up.

She gives her head a feeble shake. "You've... never... been a... good liar."

I don't answer, just bring another spoonful to her lips.

"Camille... I have something to do tonight. I'll be back late."

My gaze flicks to the cot at the opposite wall, where the faded strap of a worn rucksack peeks out from underneath. I packed it last week, everything

we own crammed into that bag. Tonight, when I return from the feast with the countercurse, we'll leave. I don't know where. Maybe Aismirign.

But we won't be safe here after I kill The Crown Prince.

"Where... are you... going?" she asks, her eyes heavy with illness.

"I'm..." I pause. She doesn't know the truth. That I've been training with Delector for five years to kill a man in exchange for her life. "It doesn't matter. I'll be back with... the countercurse." "The... countercurse?" she blinks slowly, her voice thin.

"You found... it?"

I nod, unable to hold the burning in my eyes.

"I... want to... tell... you something... this curse..." she begins, but her body convulses in a fit of coughing.

I curse under my breath and take the glass of water to her lips. But she doesn't drink. Her coughs rattle the cot, scrape against the walls, and tear through my chest.

When they finally subside, she speaks again. "I... did... things, Deneb," she whispers, each word scraping raw. "Terrible things... this curse... it's my punishment."

More coughs wrack her fragile body.

I tip the glass to her lips and she takes a sip, water trembling against her mouth.

But my mind is spinning. What is she talking about? Terrible things? Punishment?

She tries to talk again, but only rasping gasps escape.

I set the glass aside and clutch her hand, her skin papery and cold under my grip.

"Camille, you're the kindest person I've ever known. Don't strain yourself. We'll have time to talk when I return."

Her eyes glisten with unshed tears as she nods.

I rise and turn before her gaze can break me, descending the creaking stairs.

The scent of soup clings to the air as I gather my things—each motion a final step toward tonight’s mission.



CHAPTER TWO

The grand hall of the White Palace thrums with festivity, thick with laughter and the clink of crystal goblets. Nobles strut in gem-crusted finery. Velvet gowns gleam majestically, dark silks dominate the crowd—deep indigos, blood garnet, shadowy blacks—meant to project power and restraint.

I could easily blend in with them, my elegant dark gown, diamonds winking like fallen stars, masking me as one of their own. Yet I choose the shadows, where I can watch, unseen.

On a marble clearing to my left, dancers sweep in elegant arcs to the strains of harp and lute. Crystal goblets glitter in their hands, wine swirling like captured fire. Above, flame-shaped bulbs blaze from a sprawling chandelier molded into the royal crest—a phoenix in flight. Its light spills over golden roses entwined with crimson silk drapes, casting a warmth that softens even the marble's cold gleam. Servants in ivory uniforms thread silently between the gentry, balancing trays of pastries and spiced meats. Perfumed air disguises the sweat and sour tang of wine.

My gaze lifts to the dais at the far end, where the king slumps on a throne of lapis lazuli, the weight of his crown bowing his head. Delector was right—the man looks as if life itself has bled out of him. Waxen skin, hollow cheeks, eyes dulled to ash. A ghost swaddled in royal robes.

Beside him stands the smaller throne, empty. The Crown Prince's seat. Two hours into the celebration and still no sign of him, even though this is his birthday party.

I scowl at the grand doors, fingers curling around the wand hidden in my pocket. An hour—that's all I have before the invitation jinx fades and unmasks me. The bastard had better appear soon... or I'll scour the palace myself to find him.

A rustle to my left snags my attention. A noblewoman in violet silk is yelling at a servant girl before she shoves her. The girl stumbles and trips over her foot, tumbling to the ground. Her tray of crystal goblets hits the floor, the sound of glass shattering cutting through the music.

My breath catches as two guardians step forward. They are going to arrest her for just catching a noble's temper. There's no mercy for Neophytes. I take a step forward, but another servant—a young man—steps to her side and the guardians halt. Grabbing her shoulders, he helps her to her feet.

Two other servants rush in to clear the shattered glass, using wands.

My eyes widen. Neophytes aren't allowed to carry wands. But here, they clearly do.

The young man straightens and turns, and I forget how to breathe. He's tall, with broad shoulders. The chandelier's golden light streaks copper into his dark hair.

His jaw is strong, set hard, his gold-flecked amber eyes glaring at the back of the noblewoman, who has stepped away and is laughing with a paunchy man. He is nothing like the subdued servants with slumped shoulders and bowed heads. In fact, this one has difficulty keeping his chin low.

Then his gaze snaps to mine. I want to look away. But I can't. His eyes hold me, fierce and unflinching, and the air between us seems to still. My pulse trips, racing faster with every heartbeat, heat pricking across my skin.

Only then, forcing myself, I tear my gaze away. Turning instead to the open balcony doors, where lace curtains flutter in the cool breeze drifting in.

When I dare to look back, he's gone. Swallowed by the crowd. My eyes search hungrily for a glimpse of him before I remember my purpose here and scold myself. I take a few steps toward the balcony.

"May I offer you a bite of delicacy?"

An ornate silver tray of exquisitely crafted, bite-sized delicacies I've never seen in my life is suddenly shoved under my nose. I look up to find the young servant with gold-flecked amber eyes. Once again, I'm struck by how

beautiful he is—the eyes, the dark hair, the muscles that shift beneath his tight-fitted servant uniform. His eyes dance with amusement as he leans in closer.

“Perhaps a spellseed canapé or honey-glazed fig bite? Though I doubt any will taste better than you.”

I scowl. Is he flirting with me? Clearly the idiot isn’t afraid to get in trouble with nobles. But my rage falters, replaced by pity. I recognize what he must be. The nobles have used my people in so many harsh ways. This one must be a courtesan. Too beautiful just to be a servant. A Neophyte that entertains them in abhorrent ways. A pet for the lords, to play with and then break as they please.

Yes, that must be it. I look into his eyes and sadness overwhelms me. What has he gone through at the hands of these people? I’d know. I, who had to endure five years of harsh training with one of the royal guardians, with no weeks passing without him breaking a bone or wounding me.

And yet—I hate myself for noticing his beauty at all. For letting even a flicker of distraction loosen my focus, when I came here to kill.

“Well, well... what do we have here?” An oily voice says before a short, paunchy man in a velvet tunic and leather breeches steps in front of me. He shoves the servant who stumbles back, barely keeping the food on his tray from tumbling to the floor.

The paunchy man’s beady eyes crawl over my body and linger on the curves the gown is too tight to conceal. Goosebumps rise on my arms. “A fresh-faced maiden. All alone and ripe for picking.”

He licks his lower lip as he seizes my hand in his thick grip, each finger heavy with opal rings.

He looks vaguely familiar. Then recognition strikes—Ser Hull. The head of House Hull, one of the Tenfold Dominion who rule over Thrymsgard province. My stomach curdles. The man is notorious for taking brides on their wedding nights by force and returning them to their husbands a week later, broken. He’s also one of the sponsors of Scathmore Tournament.

His breath reeks of sour wine as he leans closer, and bile stings my throat.

“What do you say we sneak off to one of those empty rooms on the first floor and I give you a full body massage?” His lips curl in a leer. “And afterward, we could make a few babies together, hmmm?”

I tug at my hand, but his grip is iron. My muscles coil, my instincts scream to end him—one twist of my wrist, one curse rune and his leer would vanish forever. But I can’t. Not here. Not now. I force myself still, the leash on my assassin’s training cutting raw against my control.

Five feet away, the young servant stands rigid, tray balanced in his hands, eyes blazing. He glares at Ser Hull, who doesn’t even notice him.

“Let go,” I hiss.

Ser Hull’s eyes harden. “Be a good girl and come willingly, and I’ll promise to be gentle. Resist...” His leer sharpens. “And I’ll ruin that pretty little face.”

“That’s enough, you lecherous man,” the servant growls, stepping forward.

My heart stutters. No. He’ll be executed for daring to speak to a noble like that. Neophytes are killed for far less crimes. I shake my head, silently telling him that I can handle this man.

But he pays me no attention. The servant sets the tray on a nearby table and steps forward, towering over Ser Hull.

“Take your hand off her,” he growls.

“Don’t. I’ve got this,” I snap, but Ser Hull’s eyes are already narrowing, sweeping over the servant with contempt. He releases my wrist only to snarl. “How dare you speak to a noble, rat? You’re lucky I’m busy, or I’d spill your filthy Neophyte blood right here.”

The servant doesn’t flinch. His voice cuts low and steady, sharp as steel. “I’d like to see you try.”

Ser Hull’s fat hand jerks toward his pocket—for his wand.

Before he can draw it, I’m there; my wand out, tip leveled at his bulging crotch. My voice drops to a deadly whisper. “Now, now. Be a good old man

and walk away. Unless you'd like me to test the exploding rune I just learned... on your balls."

Behind me, the servant snorts. I bite back the urge to kick him for being an idiot, keeping my eyes locked on Ser Hull. Rage flickers across his face, his hand trembling as fear worms through it.

"You know who I am?" he spits. "I don't care what house you belong to, you'll pay for this insolence. And you—" his glare slams into the servant, burning hot. "I'll eradicate your entire bloodline for daring to speak to me like that."

He spins on his heel and storms across the hall, his bulk swaying as he makes for the captain of the guardians. Judging by the golden phoenix brooch on his chest and the two guardians flanking him, this must be their leader.

"You didn't have to step in. I could've handled him," I mutter through clenched teeth, my eyes following Ser Hull as his voice rises, shouting at the guardians and pointing toward us.

"Oh, oh," the servant drawls behind me, voice dripping with sarcasm, a grin tugging at his lips.

My stomach drops. We'll be arrested, no doubt. They'll demand to know which noble house I belong to, and if I can't answer, suspicion will fall on me. I can't afford that. I have to finish the mission I came here for. But first, I have to deal with this fool standing beside me, arms crossed over his chest, eyes narrowed on the guardians. I might be able to slip away unnoticed, but if he stays here, they'll kill him for sure.

I glance around, and my eyes catch on the open balcony doors. Outside, thick gray clouds smother the moon. Shadows ripple over the marble floor, cloaking a possible escape. I start shoving him toward it, but he plants his feet like a boulder.

"Move, you idiot," I snap.

"What are you doing?" he asks, startled.

"You have to leave. Or they'll arrest you," I hiss, shoving harder. Over my shoulder, I see the captain and his guardians breaking off and striding

toward us.

“Oh, I’m not escaping,” he says, watching them with something close to amusement.

Panic claws through me. I tug at his arm, urgency sharpening my voice. “You must. You have insulted a noble. I won’t haul your corpse from the dungeons,” I bite out, furious at his stubbornness.

He just stares at me. I drag in a breath, forcing calm. “See? You can get out through the balcony.” I jab a finger toward the open doors.

His brows rise. “It’s too high. What if I fall and snap my pretty neck?”

“You won’t,” I spit, tugging him inch by inch toward the archway where a cool night breeze flutters the hem of my skirt. The fabric shifts, revealing the slit—and the dagger strapped tight to my thigh. His eyes fall to it.

“The fall from the balcony is thirteen and a half feet. Just bend your knees, keep your feet slightly apart, and land lightly—like a cat. Then stick to the shadows, head left, and slip out the southern gate. Only two guardians stand there.”

He blinks at me, perplexed, until I finally yank him over the threshold and into the balcony. The night air is cool against my flushed skin, carrying the faint tang of torches and the muffled hum of music from the hall. Shadows ripple across the marble as clouds smother the moon.

“You know this palace well,” he mutters, half to himself. Then his gaze snags mine, and the corner of his lips twitch. Heat prickles up my neck as he leans in. “Like a cat? Do you suggest I look like a cat?”

I snap before I can stop myself. “Of course not. I wouldn’t insult a cat’s intelligence.”

He studies me, as though considering the taunt, then lets out a soft chuckle. It should be disarming—almost comical—but the sound twists in my chest instead, making me more anxious. The guardians are edging closer.

His amber-flecked eyes sweep toward them. “Maybe they’re coming for you,” he smirks.

I glare, dragging him toward the railing. “I’m not a criminal.”