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Chapter One*Shan*

It should have been more difficult to assassinate her father. Not in the actual execution of it: that Shan had prepared for. Her father was a powerful Blood Worker and had once been considered the brightest of his generation. That had been many years ago, though, and Lord Antonin LeClaire had fallen quite far indeed. But still, he had guards, magical wards and a lifetime of training at his disposal. And she had accounted for all these things.

No, there should have been something—anything—in her heart that railed against this. Despite everything he had done over the two decades of her life, patricide was still the most despicable of all crimes; it ought to twist her stomach and fill her with guilt. She shouldn't relish this kill, shouldn't feel this boundless relief.

But she did.

She was a shattered, broken thing, and this only proved it.

Her father lifted the glass to his mouth, the amber whisky sloshing in the finely cut glass, and took another deep drink as he shifted through the papers in front of him. Shan watched as he licked his lips, taking in more of the poison that would give her power over him.

It was a potent poison, frightfully expensive, but she had learned long ago that secrets were worth far more than coin. It had taken

her years to find, and a couple bits of hard-won information to pay for it. Yet watching her father drink it—in a glass handed over to him by his own daughter—Shan knew that she would have paid any price for this moment.

So she sipped idly at her wine as she waited, fiddling through the books that had been laid out across her father's grand wooden desk. Books of their financial records, filled with tables of transactions written in the cramped hand of her father's secretary. They detailed how much had been spent by their estate over the past years—or what remained of the LeClaire estate. Drained and destitute from generations of mismanagement, made worse by her father.

But by morning the books would be hers and that was what mattered.

Her father coughed suddenly, a deep, racking thing that shook his whole body.

Shan cocked her head to the side, eyes wide in the perfect mimicry of a doting daughter. "Are you all right, Father?"

Lord LeClaire looked up, his grey eyes narrowed in that paranoid way of his. He opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted by another round of coughs, blood splattering on the desk before him.

Shan stood quickly, knocking the books aside. Her glass crashed to the floor, shattering, the wine pooling at her feet. Deep. Dark, like drying blood.

She smiled at the fear in her father's eyes.

Another cough. Another spurt of blood. Shan leaned forward, dipping her fingers in the warm liquid. She swirled them around and brought them to her lips, unminding of the poison. The antidote already flowed through her veins.

"Well," Lord LeClaire managed. "About time."

Shan sucked her fingers into her mouth and felt the power explode through her. The blood acted as a catalyst, a source of power that connected them, forming a bridge that she could use to reach out and—ah!

She bent the very blood in his veins to her will, flinging him

against the wall and slamming him into the hard mantle, the sounds of his bones snapping the sweetest music to her ears. Circling around the desk to where her father had fallen, she felt his blood calling to her. Fighting her control with every last bit of his strength. He was strong-willed. He was stubborn.

But she was indomitable.

With a flick of her fingers she had him sprawled out on the floor, his arms pinned to his sides by the force of her magic. He struggled to move, thrashing against the bonds of her will, but for now his blood was hers to command.

Shan produced a dagger from the sheath up her sleeve, feeling its comforting weight in her hands. Her father eyed it, recognition shining in his gaze. Out of all the weapons she could have chosen—the knives he had gifted her for her most recent birthday, the steel-tipped claws she earned from the Academy—she chose this.

Her mother's dagger in her bare hands.

Shan sank to her knees, not caring that her fine, silken dress was stained in the process. "Goodbye, Father." Placing the knife against his throat, she only hesitated when she saw him smile.

"You were always my favorite," he rasped out. "Do me proud."

Grimacing, Shan dragged her knife through his skin, feeling it split under the strength of her hand. She cut deep, down to the bone, embedding the steel in his flesh. The blood welled and spilled, but she dared not remove it, not until it was done.

She couldn't have him healing himself. She doubted the punishment would be as light as it was last time. Then she had been but a child of eight, lashing out in a fit of anger and despair. When he had driven her mother from their home in one of his fits of paranoid violence, and she had taken up her dagger and turned it against him.

She had failed then. She wouldn't fail now.

This was carefully planned vengeance, and she watched until the light faded from his eyes, his blood seeping into her dress and staining her hands. Still she remained, waiting for the body to grow cold, for the skin to pale, for all signs of life to vanish.

The door creaked open, and Bart whispered, "Is it done?"

When her father's guards didn't rush in after him, she knew that he had played his part as well. Shan dragged her fingers through her father's blood one last time. This blood lacked vibrancy, cloying and congealing. There was power still there, but it was dulled.

It was the blood of a dead man.

"Yes," Shan said, relieved, empty and tired all at once.

Bart dropped the tray in his hands, the poison-laced cups clattering to the floor as he rushed across the room. For a moment he just rested his hand on her shoulder, but Shan continued to tremble. He pulled her close, letting her tuck her head against his shoulder. In a brief moment of weakness, Shan buried her face against her friend. "You're free," he whispered. "You're both free."

"We're *all* free," Shan said, clutching her skirt. "But we're not done yet."

"I know," Bart said. "But it's okay to feel."

Shan pulled away, slipping out of the embrace with ease. Bart didn't chase her—he knew better than that. Taking a deep breath, she forced herself to her feet, to put some steel in her spine. "There will be time for feeling later. Now we have bodies to dispose of."

Bart inclined his head. "As you say."

Shan ripped her knife from her father's neck, ignoring the loud, squelching noise that accompanied it. Drawing a handkerchief from her sleeve, she carefully wiped all traces of blood away, scrubbing until the metal shone. She dropped the soiled handkerchief into a small linen bag—the proof of death collected—then slipped it into her corset, tucked safely away.

"The incinerator?"

"Already lit," Bart replied. He was pulling long sheets of linen, sheets with which to wrap the dead, from where he had hidden them in the closet. Shan took one end in her hands, draping it over her father. With ruthless efficiency, she tucked the ends in around him, rolling him into the cloth. It was a clunky, undignified end for a Blood Worker, but Shan didn't care.

He had lost the mercy of a clean, dignified death long ago.

Together they cleaned up every bit of blood, soaking it into the excess cloth they had brought for this precise reason. She was especially meticulous in this regard—aside from what they needed to prove his death to the Council, they couldn't let one drop of blood get away. Lord Antonin LeClaire might be dead, but there was still a lot a Blood Worker could do with his blood.

So, like her father, into the incinerator it would go.

With Bart grabbing the shoulders and Shan scooping up the legs, they made their way past the corpses of her father's personal guards and down into the bowels of the LeClaire townhouse. It was a tricky journey, moving the body round tight corners and down narrow staircases, but it had to be done.

Shan was sweating by the time they made it to the incinerator room, and her arms ached from the awkward burden they were carrying. Bart was breathing heavily, less accustomed to such physical work, and unable to draw on Blood Working to supplement his strength. But he carried on without complaint, and Shan was grateful for that. For all that he was willing to do for her sake—for her brother's sake.

It was more than she had ever expected, even from him.

But the incinerator was there, and they tossed the body in with hardly a care for how it landed. This wasn't a formal cremation. Shan didn't dress her father in his finest, didn't cross his arms over his chest, or make sure his features were peaceful.

What did it matter? Soon he'd be nothing but ashes.

"The others," Shan said, and Bart groaned. She understood his pain, but they needed to get rid of them, too. Leaving her father's corpse where it lay, they returned upstairs to grab his first guard, and then, tired and aching, repeated the trek for the second.

"There," Bart wheezed. "We're done."

"Our clothes," Shan corrected, and Bart sighed. He stepped up behind her, quickly unlacing her dress. Shan let it fall to the ground, landing on dust and soot. Bart stripped her petticoats

as well, leaving her in naught but her underthings. "Any blood get through?"

Bart leaned back, studying her. "No, there's none."

Shan nodded. "Now you." Bart wrinkled his nose, but peeled off his shirt, revealing his dark skin. "Don't worry, I'll get you a whole wardrobe of fine outfits to replace this," Shan promised. "Though if Anton had his way you'd never need to wear them."

Bart laughed, the serious expression dropping away, reminding her of his youth. Their youth. They were both so young. "The things I do for love." With a few quick movements, his clothes joined hers on the floor.

Shan didn't pause. She scooped them up, uncaring of the streaks of soot that stained her arms, and threw them into the incinerator with the bodies. "There."

Bart stepped around her to slide the door shut, locking away all the evidence. "It's done."

Shaking her head, Shan grabbed her friend by the hand, leading him away from the incinerator. Together, they left the room, shutting the heavy metal door behind them. Grabbing the lever, Shan pulled down hard and released the fire.

"*Now* it's done," she said, as the flames roared.

Bart grabbed the cloaks that he had stowed away. Stepping around Shan, he placed one across her shoulders, soft and gentle, tucking her away from prying eyes.

It almost made her laugh. She had just murdered her own father and his guards, burned their bodies and stripped down in front of her brother's lover. And still Bart was concerned with propriety, though it was far too late for that. She was a murderess and a monster. But she didn't fight it—the gesture was well meant, and she didn't want any of her father's servants catching her at anything less than her best.

No.

Her servants now.

"Time for the next step, then?" Bart asked.

Shan nodded. "Yes, let's make it official. Before Anton gets home." She saw the look of worry in Bart's eyes, the fear that perhaps they had gone too far. But she forced herself to ignore it. She could handle her twin, and he'd understand soon enough.

All of this was for him.



It was already past midnight when Shan arrived at the Parliament House, solemn in its grandeur, a high ceiling raised over the marble floors as the sounds of Shan's heels echoed in the vast, empty space. Perhaps it was designed to make her feel small, but as she strode through the atrium, she only felt the calm sense of belonging.

She had made it, at last.

Despite the hour, she was freshly bathed and dressed in one of her finest gowns, one that she had picked for its modestly designed square neckline and pure black color. A perfectly proper choice for a young woman mourning the sudden death of her father. With false tears in her eyes, she told the poor aide who worked the night shift that her father had passed, and he had shuffled her off to a waiting room while the Royal Council was called, left alone with her conscience and an ever-cooling pot of tea.

By the time the Council had been roused and had arrived, the night had slipped away into the early morning, and Shan was summoned to their hearing chamber. It was smaller than she had expected it to be, just large enough for a curved table that they sat around, an impressive piece of dark mahogany with five large, upholstered chairs, nearly grand enough to be thrones, each covered in deep green velvet. There were no windows, perhaps for privacy, and the walls were filled with paintings, a history of Dameral painted from portrait to portrait as it grew from the small seaport of antiquity to the grand capital it had become.

The air was heavy with history and solemnity, and Shan couldn't help but wonder what mark she would leave.

She stood with her back as straight as a rod as the Royal Council entered, her hands folded in front of her, the silver of her claws glittering under the soft, red shine of the witch light.

Lady Belrose, the Councillor of Foreign Affairs, entered first and took the middle chair, the four other Councillors flanking her. The Council—officially all equal with each other—rotated leadership with every year. This year fell to Lady Belrose, and thus she took the seat of honor at the head of the table.

It was part of the way they worked—never did one of the Council rise above another, as they all served as equals, placed above the House of Lords. They each held domain of their own branch of the government, and they were the absolute masters of it, bending only to the wisdom of the Eternal King himself.

Not that the Eternal King had bothered to intervene much in recent centuries, only coming down to pick his new Councillors and allowing them to run his country in his stead. Oh, he performed his duties with care and diligence, but everyone knew that his true home was in his palace, with his studies, far away from the cares of those he supposedly ruled.

So for the moment Shan contented herself with studying the faces of the most powerful people in Aeravin without breaking before them.

Even now, summoned in the middle of the night, Lady Belrose looked incredibly fine. She was a woman of middle years, and she had held this position for over a decade. Like Shan, she had given much care to her appearance, from her neatly pressed dress to the way her hair hung in carefully styled ringlets down her back, making Shan wonder if she had even had the chance to be to bed yet.

“Miss LeClaire,” Lady Belrose began, the formal words slipping from her tongue with the ease of a thousand uses, “you have summoned the Council.”

“Thank you for coming, especially given the hour,” Shan said, taking care to put an extra tremble in her voice. Not too much; overdoing it was just as false as underdoing it, and she had to walk

an incredibly fine line. “Earlier this evening, my father passed away quite suddenly of a heart attack.”

Lord Dunn, Councillor of Law, leaned forward in his seat, his dark eyes beady and suspicious. He was a thin man of sharp angles and harsh edges, pale and sallow. “Strange to hear in a man of your father’s age.”

“I’m sorry to say that my father had not been well of late.” Shan cast her eyes down, ignoring the twist in her stomach as the lies fell from her lips. “He had been deteriorating for many years, ever since my mother left.”

She hated to use her mother in this fashion, but after seeing the collective flinch around the table, she knew that she had made the right choice. It had been such a scandal, and as much as they had reveled in the gossip all those years ago, their foolish propriety wouldn’t let them discuss it openly with her.

“Well,” Belrose said, pulling the Council back on topic, “do you have the proof?”

Stepping forward, Shan pulled the linen bag from her side and placed it on the table. She had treated it with the antidote and tested it herself—it would show nothing but the death of her father. But she still held her breath as Belrose opened it carefully, letting the bloodstained handkerchief spill out, and the whole Council leaned in as one. Picking it up with the tip of her claws, Belrose spread it out in front of her before lifting the entire thing to her lips. Her tongue flashed out—quick and pale—and pressed against the cloth.

For a moment the whole Council watched her, eyes closed as she did her work, until she breathed out, “Lord Antonin LeClaire is dead.” Clenching her fist around the handkerchief, she lowered her gaze upon Shan. “Long live Lady LeClaire.”

Muttering broke out amongst the Council, but Shan ignored it, focusing on the weight that lifted from her shoulders. It truly was done.

Stepping forward, Shan held out her hand and Belrose reluctantly dropped the handkerchief onto it. “Take care, Lady LeClaire.” Shan

tilted her head to the side, and Belrose sighed. “You are young to take your father’s place.”

“I am three and twenty,” Shan replied, with more bite than she intended, but Belrose only smiled.

“As I said.” She stood. “Though there are records to update now, you are officially recognized as the new head of the LeClaire line, with all the privileges and responsibilities that come with it.”

“I trust we will see you at the opening of this year’s session of the House of Lords,” Dunn added. “How fortuitous for you that this happened while we were in recess.”

“Hush,” Lady Holland, the Councillor of Industry, reproached. She had been the quietest of all this night. She was the youngest of the Council, hardly into her third decade, with mousy brown hair and plain features. Shan only knew her by reputation—that she was more interested in numbers and policy than in playing politics, unusual for a Councillor. Typically, such a position required a fair amount of political acumen, but in the case of Lady Holland one could easily believe she had risen on merit alone.

“It *is* auspicious timing for the new Lady,” Dunn continued, only for Lady Morse, the Councillor of the Military, to take him by the arm. She was a stern woman of advanced years, but she did not let age soften her. Lady Morse was all lean muscle, her grey hair cropped short in military style.

“Many people’s Ascensions seem fortuitous, Kevan,” Morse said, “including yours.”

“She has you there,” added Lord Rayne, the Councillor of the Treasury. He was the eldest of the Council by far, a stooped old man with white hair and prominent veins in his hands. “Let the girl be, she’s had a long day.”

“And she’ll have many long days ahead of her,” Belrose added. “You should go rest, my lady. Tomorrow, it begins.”

“As you say, Lady Belrose.” Shan curtsied to them all, taking care to remain demure and polite, even though she railed at the way they talked about her—as if she wasn’t even there. As if she meant

nothing. Perhaps she didn't. The LeClaire line had fallen from grace, and her father had ensured that nothing was left but dust and ashes.

But she would force them to see her, to accept her, and she'd reclaim the power that should have been hers, even if it took her years. But for now she'd have to play the game, smiling and simpering—until they had no choice but to bow before her.

And this was just her opening move.