

One

Prudence Merriweather loathed perfume. It always made the space behind her right eye ache, regardless of the circumstance. Add a ballroom brimming with pudgy earls, pinched-faced countesses, and arrogant lords cloaked in peony and lavender, and her head became a swollen beehive. The sickly-sweet cloud was thick enough to cast golden halos around the gas lamps lining the wine-red walls.

Shoulders back. Chin up. Look like a lady now. She couldn't falter, not tonight. It was her second Provincial Ball and her first as the Duchess of Talonsbury, Leora's crown jewel of a city. She *had* to be perfect.

Pressing back into the too-hard mahogany chair, she flinched as her braided twist collided with the headrest. The diamond pins keeping her chestnut hair coiled around the back of her head jabbed into her scalp, murdering what was left of her patience.

In the time between dinner and dancing, she and her husband Frederick, Duke of Talonsbury and master of Leora's southernmost province, were expected to listen as the leaders of the city's inner districts and surrounding villages aired their grievances.

Yet in the last half hour or so, Prudence hadn't heard anything close to an *actual* grievance. No starving war widows clutching their children tight, begging for heels of bread or root

vegetables hardened by months in manor home cellars. No Holy Sisters from the workhouse in Whitefire Square complaining of little girls coughing up their lungs.

Then again, she wasn't sure why she'd expected anything else. A person didn't become a leader of a Leoran district or village unless they had wealth. Problems like crop failures or starving babies weren't welcome in a place as fine as Talonsbury Estate. No, the people privileged enough to ask their province master for help—Silks, as the commonfolk or Groundlings called them—often requested lower import prices or assistance settling a long-held feud over a strip of disputed land. War widows and sick children couldn't afford gem-studded gowns wide as doorways or tailored velvet suits, and so their problems didn't matter.

That was the hard, simple fact of life in Leora.

"You all right, my dear?" Frederick's enunciation was crisp and practiced, a mark of his formal education. Prudence had picked up the same formalities—in Talonsbury warehouses and brothels an ocean away.

Not that he knew that, of course.

Fine, darling. It should have been an easy, immediate answer. She was wearing the gown of her dreams, emerald brocade detailed in black roses. Throughout her childhood scrounging for scraps on Talonsbury's sludge-filled streets, she'd dreamed of being a woman people marveled at whenever she walked into a room. This life she'd won for herself—six months as a *duchess*, Lightbringer's loins—was a wish come true.

So when, she wondered, would the Silk lifestyle stop feeling so hollow?

And so fucking dull?

"Prudence." Frederick stomped his cane on the marble floor.

The sound called her back. A prickle of frustration scurried up her spine. "What, dearest? Not smiling enough for you?"

His eyes, dark topaz pools, narrowed, and he smirked in a way that betrayed an underlying . . . *hunger*. "Is my Hell Witch getting riled up by all these ridiculous requests?" He leaned in closer. The musk of his cologne thickened in her throat, and the pain behind her eye throbbed. She didn't like how he'd said *my*

Hell Witch, like she was something to be owned. “Shall we retreat to the bedroom, let you spread those beautiful wings of yours?”

Her cheeks flushed. She glanced around, terrified someone had overheard him. Luckily, most of the guests were clustered around the banquet tables like pigs at their troughs, piling shaved pork and soft Visage cheeses onto provincial crackers as big as their hands.

Gluttons, she thought, and as the embarrassment and fear kindled her temper, the power quickened in her blood. The old hum began its tantalizing trill in her ears, vibrating into her bones, beckoning her: *Let go, let go, let go.*

Everyone in Leora knew about Hell Witches, women who, in a single, desperate moment, heard a mysterious melody that awakened a transformative magic in their blood. They knew the magic turned them into incredible creatures—banshees, lamias, selkies, and a thousand other beasts.

And with that certainty came another: that the Lightbringer’s Apostles, keepers of Leora’s True Faith, condemned all Hell Witches. A thousand years ago, Leora had been dominated by bands of Druids, wild women who worshipped a goddess called the Dark Mother and, according to the Apostles and their ilk, spent their time making blood sacrifices and stoking discontent amidst the citizens, going so far as to encourage cursed practices such as polygamy and abstaining from childbirth.

Then, a young farm boy named Galahad was visited by a vision from the true God, the Lightbringer, who brandished His flaming silver sword and demanded Galahad rise up against the evils of the Dark Mother and reclaim the land for the people, lest the country—and then the whole of Canto, their Sphere of existence—tilted into Hell.

For nearly two decades, Galahad had waged a holy war, the Non-Believers’ War, against the Dark Mother’s followers, including her “Daughters,” who he and his disciples proclaimed as Hell Witches. Victorious, Galahad declared himself Crown Apostle and head of the one True Faith of Leora—and of Canto as well.

From that point forward, the Apostles had strapped suspected Hell Witches to the pyre to burn alive. The citizens of Leora had watched in awe as the flames stretched toward the

heavens, reminding them of their God, the Lightbringer, and His absolute power.

Of course Frederick, a war hero who'd always been more hedonistic than most nobles, knew Prudence was a Hell Witch. It was the primary reason he'd married her, a fact he made abundantly clear each night in the bedroom. But they'd agreed never to talk about it openly, especially not in a den of gossip-obsessed vipers eager to confirm that yes, their mysterious, dark-haired duchess had indeed enchanted her way into the bed of the most powerful man in all of Leora.

The last thing she needed was Countess Fortuna Braithwaite and her ilk gaining *useful* ammunition. Their barbs and jabs were horrific enough.

"Are you trying to get me killed?" Prudence's nail beds ached as her talons begged for release.

Frederick chuckled at Prudence's fear, his cheeks pinking up like starpeaches above his full, black beard. "Dearest, do you think I would let anyone harm you?"

"Do *you* think that crushed hip of yours could stop them?" She tilted her chin up the way her sister Emmaline had taught her so many years ago and pressed her eyes into a glare. "You want to purr about my power while we're in bed, fine, but mention it here again and I'll tear your throat out."

She didn't mean it, of course, but she took pleasure in watching his eye twitch. Clearing his throat, he angled his face back toward the door and his duty.

Good. You can still scare him shitless if need be.

"Walter"—Frederick's voice cracked, and Prudence bit her lip to hold back her grin—"send in the next."

The manservant opened the door, and Father Sewell, Senior Apostle at Talonsbury Abbey, shuffled into the room, doing his best imitation of a reanimated corpse. His acolyte, a young boy who couldn't be more than fourteen, did most of the work, propping him up when his steps faltered. The voices skittering along the walls softened as everyone in the hall turned, bowing their heads in respect. When a holy man spoke, everyone in Leora was expected to listen.

Impatient at his approach, Prudence stole a glance around the room.

In the far corner, Fortuna Braithwaite stood with her gaggle of friends, eyeing Prudence with a mixture of disgust and jealousy. She and her wart of a husband had already had their audience, some nonsense about how Madame DuFresne, a talented seamstress with a shop on the border between Talonsbury's Silk and Sweetbreads Districts, had increased the price of her fine fabrics. Evidently, she was upcharging her Silk customers for their ball gowns and day dresses to account for increased export prices in Belacanto and Visage, courtesy of tariffs imposed by the House of Lords, of which Earl Braithwaite was a member.

"But she hasn't raised the price of factory smocks for women working in the Stacks," Fortuna had said, her haughty tone bristling Prudence's nerves. "It's reverse classism is what it is."

"Or perhaps," Prudence had said, cocking a brow, "it's that wool doesn't cost nearly as much as silk or taffeta. Could that be it?"

Now, almost an hour later, Prudence locked eyes with Countess Cockpuss. Fortuna's lips pursed into a sour pucker. In response, Prudence tucked her hand under her chin and wiggled her fingers in what she intended to be the world's pettiest wave. She made sure to use the hand marked with her love knot tattoo, the one all Leoran women had to receive within a fortnight of their wedding. Ridiculously, men weren't required to get one at all. Many believed male love knot tattoos were a weakness, an outward demonstration of a willingness to be possessed and controlled by a woman. Yet the House of Lords and the Apostles had no reservations whatsoever against forcing women to receive one.

"Father Sewell, always a pleasure," Frederick said once the Senior Apostle finally reached them. The old man kept his arms crossed over his chest, his gnarled hands tucked inside his billowing white robe.

Prudence recognized him from her time at the Whitefire workhouse. When she was eight, half the girls' dormitory came down with Scarpetta. He'd led a prayer vigil, where he'd laid a pale, shriveled hand on her older sister Emmaline's sweat-beaded

forehead and promised that with prayer, the Lightbringer would revive her.

Prudence had prayed, prayed, and prayed some more for a miracle.

Emmaline had died that night, choking on her own blood. And as Prudence cradled her body, willing her to come back to life, the Hell Witch's song had thrummed in her ears. A whisper followed in its wake, saying *Make a wish, Pru. Anything you want.*

That was when the magic had ignited in her veins.

"Your Excellency." Father Sewell and the acolyte, all bones and sharp angles, bowed in respect. The Father's jowls quivered as he picked his head up again. "May His Light be with you."

"And also with you," Frederick responded.

Prudence forgot the customary reply. It was only when her husband, the Apostle, and the acolyte all gawked at her that she managed a panicked "And-also-with-you."

"Forgive her, Father, she . . . isn't well." Frederick gave Prudence a scolding look before turning back to Sewell. She dug her nails into the mahogany arms of her chair and tried to smooth the worry out of her face.

It was *warranted* worry, though. It had been fifty years since the Apostles last burned a Hell Witch in Whitefire Square, but the pyre still stood outside the abbey, a warning to those who maintained belief in the power of the Druidic Dark Mother. The Apostles' message was clear: The Lightbringer was the only God. Defy Him and face the flame.

But ever since Leora's embarrassing defeat at the hands of the Spindle Isles, there had been rumblings about corruption within the nobility. Not only that, but common women such as barmaids, schoolmarms, and war widows now outnumbered the Leoran male population two to one—and had started demanding the right to vote for their own representatives.

With the onset of this unbalanced population, fanatics had begun preaching about the downfall of the Lightbringer's society and the need for a new Righteous Order. That idea had started to take root in the minds of Leora's noblemen and wealthy

merchants. After all, women were the weaker sex—and they couldn't be allowed to forget that.

“What can we lowly nobles do for the Lightbringer's most devoted servant?” Frederick asked.

Disgustingly, Father Sewell smacked his lips together, wetting the parched skin with his tongue. “I'll get straight to it, Your Grace. The Lord in his wisdom appreciates brevity.”

A chuckle escaped Prudence, causing the men to glower at her again. “Apologies, Father.”

“I'm here today, Duke Talonsbury, to speak of the danger of—”

“Father, you will be silent!” a familiar voice boomed through the room.

Prudence's stomach dropped. Instinctively, she reached for the ruby pendant around her neck. She'd had it for so long, she was surprised it hadn't melded with her skin.

But the last time she'd seen Paris, Frederick's younger brother, he'd nearly ripped it away from her. It was just after the wedding. She and Frederick had engaged in a quick tryst in the library between the ceremony and the reception. Stupidly, in the heat of passion, she'd caved to Frederick's request to unleash her wings—and then, as she'd climaxed, she'd heard the library door slam shut.

Before dinner that night, Paris had cornered her, shoving her up against a shadowed corner of the foyer. He'd accused her then and there of being a Hell Witch, said that she'd bewitched his brother into marrying her, but with no proof and a reputation for zealotry, it was his word against his war hero brother's.

“I'll prove it, though,” he'd said, the pendant clutched tight in his hand as though he meant to break the chain. “And you'll burn for it, you she-devil's whore.”

Now, as her brother-in-law approached them, Prudence could all but feel the pendant's chain digging into the back of her neck. He still had that same murderous look etched across his face. He was dressed in the uniform that most followers of General Maximus Hale, a skilled military man and half-crazed zealot, wore out in public to distinguish themselves: white

tailed trousers that came up past his waist, a loose-fitting black tunic, and a long black cloak pinned with a glittering white sapphire brooch. His bare feet were pale as marble, his spider-leg fingers clasped in front of him. His hair, as dark as Frederick's, was parted down the middle and cut in a perfect bowl around his head.

Lightbringer's loins, he's surrendered to all of Hale's teachings, then.

"Lord Paris, with all due respect, no man interrupts a servant of the Lord," Father Sewell said. Paris ignored him as he stepped up beside him, locking eyes with his brother. "Your Grace, as you can see, Maximus Hale's influence is spreading throughout the country, infecting—"

"Whatever this man has come to say, it is lies, brother." Paris spoke loud enough for his voice to carry through the ballroom. Whispers and snickering rippled toward them, but Prudence couldn't pick out any specific words. She was too lost in the thunder of her own heartbeat. "I am here not only to repudiate this pretender's words against General Hale but to *urge* you to see reason. To see truth." Slowly, his eyes drifted in her direction. "And to throw off the evil that seeks to destroy you."

A sudden hush fell over the ballroom. Fortuna Braithwaite and her goslings perked their heads up, eager to watch Prudence squirm. She refused to give them the satisfaction—but ice-cold sweat trickled down her spine.

"If there is evil here, it is Hale's doing," Father Sewell barked back. "Maximus Hale may be a war hero, but he spreads lies, not only about the Apostles and our commitment to the Lightbringer's Word but about the women of Leora, about their ability to—"

"Do not *insult* the ladies in this room, Father Sewell." Paris's lips twitched into a smile. "Countess Braithwaite, Baroness Tillery—these are good, God-fearing women more than welcome in General Hale's bright world. They are obedient. They are content." He turned toward the crowd to find them. Prudence saw them blush and place their hands on their hearts, as if they were proud to be called docile lambs by an obvious wolf. *Twits*. "It is those who exist outside of the Lightbringer's commands,

those who seek to bring back the wicked ways of the Dark Mother, that General Hale seeks to defeat. Women like *her*.”

Paris’s hand was steady as he pointed at Prudence.

She wanted to shrink herself in front of all these people. But that little girl from all those years ago, the one who had picked through rubbish bins for food, who had fought off stray dogs to survive, stirred beneath her skin.

She stared her enemy square in the face. “What exactly is that supposed to mean, Paris?”

Immediately, she wanted to take it back. Frederick’s fat-fingered hand shifted to her knee and squeezed: a warning come too late.

Oh you stupid, stupid girl.

“What if I told you, Father Sewell, that your duchess was far worse than a strongly opinionated wife?” Paris’s voice rose two octaves, surprisingly powerful for such a waifish-looking man. His beady black eyes stayed fixed on her. “What if I told you she was one of *them*? One of the Dark Mother’s despicable Daughters, a Hell Witch hiding in plain sight? What would you do then?”

As Father Sewell gawked, every eye in the room settled on Prudence. The glances crawled over her flesh, pricking her nerves. She wasn’t sure if it was her survival instincts kicking in or mere shock that forced the laugh out, but she ran with it.

“Paris, I know you and I haven’t seen eye to eye on most things, but this?” *Make it sound ridiculous. Save yourself.* “How jealous can one man be? Do you honestly want your brother’s title so badly you’d slander the woman he loves? In front of our *friends*?”

Beside her, Frederick didn’t move. His grip tightened on the golden wolf’s head atop his cane.

“I have seen her for what she is!” Paris shouted, and this time he played to the crowd, lifting his hands in the air like an Apostle standing on the abbey pulpit. “A winged beast with talons meant for tearing out your children’s hearts! She and her kind gather strength as we lick our wounds from a defeat that should *never* have happened, that *would* never have happened if we had heeded the Lightbringer. We were decimated *because* we turned

our backs on Him. We let the wicked *thrive* rather than rooting them out, and for that, we have been *punished!*”

Fear pooled in Prudence’s gut. Frederick would protect her, but would he be able to survive this kind of public embarrassment? What if he was forced to turn her out, to annul their marriage and choose another bride? He’d endure a few ugly rumors, some hard months perhaps, but then he’d go right back to being the wealthiest man in the southwest province. Meanwhile, she would be forever barred from Silk society. Labeled a Hell Witch and forced into hiding, and that was *if* the City Watch didn’t arrest her.

She wouldn’t go back to her life as a thief, and she certainly wouldn’t return to the brothel.

She’d rather die first.

All around her, she could hear the voices knitting into a net meant to snare her. Her flesh burned white hot, and she wanted to peel her skin away. Inside, her magic woke once more, ready to defend her if necessary, to carry her through the skies, away from this place.

“Cast her out, Frederick.” Paris turned back to his brother, who sat like stone in the seat beside her. *Do something*, she pleaded with her eyes. *Anything*. “Deliver her to me, and I shall bring her to General Hale for punishment and purification. We, the Order of the Zeraphel, seek not only to restore Leora to her former glory but to purge her of the filth that has laid her so low.”

Zeraphel. Every citizen in Leora knew that word. In history and in the Apostle’s holy book, the Epistle of Light, they were the Lightbringer’s winged warriors, masculine angels who sent the Dark Mother and her black magic spinning into the pits of a Hell built on the porous bones of non-believers. Galahad had summoned them during the Non-Believers’ War, and the Zeraphel had descended upon the Hell Witches, smiting the wicked with swords dressed in purifying white flames.

Prudence stiffened, imagining different flames, the flames that had claimed the lives of so many Hell Witches before her. She envisioned them licking up her legs, her flesh charring as she screamed.

“Join us. Join him. Give us your wealth and I swear to you, you will be welcomed back into the Light.” He stretched out his hand as if to grasp Frederick’s, make a deal with him in front of all these people. “We can be brothers again.”

Prudence willed her husband to rise from his chair. *Say something. Do something.*

“Can I ask,” came yet another familiar voice from just beyond the crowd, and this time Prudence was certain her heart was going to give out, “do you find this kind of pitch actually *works* on folks? Or are you as big a nutter as that general of yours?”

Some of the ladies gasped and the gentlemen huffed as a man with a mop of auburn waves, a jaw sharp as a blade’s edge, and a slightly crooked nose split through them like a ship splitting the sea.

Seeing him there in her ballroom, hearing his voice echo inside the estate walls, was like stepping into a winter’s night naked as a newborn. Gooseflesh erupted along her spine. Safely tucked within the confines of her shoulder blades, the shock ruffled the feathers adorning her wings, reminding her once again that she could run if she wanted.

I just want to fly away. Far, far away from here. That was her wish the night her sister died, the wish that had remade her.

That same wish struck the backs of her ribs as she beheld the man and his entourage circling Paris in a horseshoe formation. She knew that maneuver. She’d learned it years ago as a clever way to trap a mark in an alleyway.

“Sorry to interrupt you there, mate,” the man said to Paris as he approached him, wearing a grin that kindled a flame she’d sworn she’d snuffed out long ago. “But we the people have got some real problems to discuss with the duke here. So you, the old man, and the kid”—he gestured to Father Sewell and his acolyte—“best piss off, yeah?”

“How *dare* you speak to a nobleman this way,” Paris growled at him, all but lunging at him. “Depraved thief.”

The man met his lunge with that same confident smile. He went so far as to press a hand to Paris’s shoulder, earning him an audible gasp from the whole of the ballroom. “Depraved as

I might be, I don't like it when people get so close to my face. Now, if you don't mind . . .”

It was hard to tell exactly what happened, since Paris had his back to Prudence. But one moment her brother-in-law's cloak was clasped securely around his shoulders, and the next it was on the floor, collapsed around Paris's feet like a beheaded snake.

Her laugh—and the laughter of everyone in the ballroom—caught her by surprise. Paris's shoulders tensed, pulling toward his ears in obvious embarrassment.

Meanwhile, the man strutted past him, letting the sapphire brooch clatter to the marble floor as he approached Prudence and Frederick. He bowed his head in their direction. “This thief's got business with the *actual* Duke of Talonsbury.”

It had been two years since Prudence had last seen Puck Reed, and twelve years since a single word had passed between them.

So why in the Lightbringer's loins is it so hard to breathe?