



The Shattered Court: A Novel of the Four Arts

By M.J. Scott

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First in a new fantasy series from the author of the Novels of the Half-Light City.

Entangled in a court ruled by tradition and intrigue, a young witch must come to terms with newfound power and desire—and a choice between loyalty and survival....

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Then Sophia's powers manifest stronger than she ever imagined they would, and Cameron and she are inextricably linked in the process. As a witch unbound by marriage rites, Sophia is not only a threat to the established order of her country, but is also a weapon for those who seek to destroy it. Faced with old secrets and new truths, she must decide if she will fight for her country or succumb to the delicious temptation of power....

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Editorial Review

Review

"Romance fans will enjoy the growing relationship between Cameron and Sophie, but the story's real strength lies in the web of intrigue Scott creates around her characters." ---Publishers Weekly

About the Author

M. J. Scott is the author of the Half-Light City series and the Wild Side series. She also has written several contemporary romance novels as Melanie Scott, including *The Devil in Denim* and *Angel in Armani*. She lives in Melbourne, Australia. Visit her at mjscott.net.

Flora MacDonald was born in Scotland and trained as a classical actress in London. She has appeared on and off Broadway with the Royal National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company and on television. Her unusually wide range of voices can be heard in cartoons, movies, and in radio broadcasts all over the world.

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PRAISE FOR THE NOVELS OF THE HALF-LIGHT CITY

ALSO BY M. J. SCOTT

ROC

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Deep the earth

Its harvest life

Bright the blood

Sharpest in strife

Swift the air

To hide and fool

False the water

The deadly pool

CHAPTER ONE

“Milady, please pay attention.”

It was precisely the last thing she wanted to do. For a second, Sophie Kendall rebelled, lingering where she was, hands pressed into the pale gray skirts of her dress, no doubt wrinkling the silk. She had a sudden wild urge to bolt through the half-open glass doors and flee. But then her good sense, or at least her sense of resignation, returned, and she forced herself to turn away and smile apologetically at her tutor.

“But they’re playing so well.” She looked back over her shoulder at the two teams of young men playing roundball on the Indigo Lawn outside the doors, envy biting. Oh, to be so free. Here in the palace she wouldn’t be able to join in the game. Proper young ladies, let alone ladies-in-waiting, didn’t play roundball at court. But she could, at least, sit and watch. Or she could if she ever had the luxury of nothing to do.

Just an hour or two to herself in the sunshine. Was that too much to ask for?

She couldn’t remember the last time she’d had a spare hour or two alone. And right now she couldn’t imagine when she might next do so.

Captain Turner’s bushy white eyebrows drew together, but his expression was kind. “Milady, your twenty-first birthday is in two days. There will be plenty of time for frivolity then. But now you need to learn this.” He gestured to the large leather book on the table in front of him. “Your Ais-Seann is not a trivial matter. Do I need to remind you that you’re—”

“Thirty-second in line to the throne, about to come into my birthright if I have one,” Sophie said. “I know the speech, Captain. It’s just . . .” *I want to be more than Lady Sophia Kendall, valuable broodmare.* But proper young ladies didn’t say such things out loud. At times, being a proper young lady was enough to make her want to scream.

“It’s such a nice day,” she continued, trying not to sound too impatient. Sunlight streamed through the windows, making the lesson room seem dull in comparison. The breeze coming through the outer doors was just strong enough to carry the scent of grass and the early-blooming blossoms and possibility into the room. It made her skin itch. It made her want to tell the royal family and the court and everyone else weighing her down with expectation to go to hell. Made her want to run far, far away.

But the captain’s face showed no sympathy for the restlessness she’d been feeling all day, and she doubted he’d show any actual sympathy if she tried a grander rebellion like leaving the room. Most likely he’d just send a squad of the guard after her to carry her back.

The king, the crown princess, and several hundred years of Anglese tradition wanted her prepared for her Ais-Seann, so she would be prepared for her Ais-Seann. Her Age of Beginning. Beginning of adulthood. Beginning, possibly, of magic. Beginning of many things she wasn’t entirely sure she wanted to begin.

If indeed she proved to have any magic, her power would be dedicated to the goddess with all the proper rites and her person married off promptly to whichever nobleman the king thought best. A royal witch was a prize for the men of the court, and the stronger she was, the higher ranked and more influential the noble to whom she would be wed would be. Not that any of the available high lords of the court struck her as men she was longing to spend her life with. Most of them were fifteen or twenty years older than her, for a start.

If she turned out *not* to have any power, she’d be married off less promptly to some more obscure lordling and might at least get to leave Kingswell and the relentless mores and rules of the court.

The lesser of two evils, just. Maybe. She wasn't entirely sure. Her hands began twining in her skirts again, and she forced them to relax.

There was nothing to be done to protest her fate or escape from it. She didn't have any control over whether she was going to manifest magic, and she'd been schooled from birth to take her place in the court and the society of Anglion. She just wasn't entirely sure why, when she'd known since she was old enough to understand what would happen when she turned twenty-one, it was becoming harder and harder to meekly accept with each passing hour. Perhaps it was just nerves.

Perhaps everything would be perfectly fine if she just kept putting one foot in front of the other and did as she was asked to do. So, like a proper young lady, she smoothed her skirts where her hands had gripped them and sat back down next to the captain.

"I know this seems tedious, child," he said. "But you need to know how to control your magic if it comes in. Royal witches are strong, and we can't predict how your gift will behave when it manifests."

"You can't predict that it will manifest at all," Sophie said, trying not to let irritation shade her words.

"Given your bloodlines, there is a high probability that you will have power, Lady Sophia."

"Much good that will do me," Sophie muttered. One hand strayed to the silver-gray pearl hanging from the slender chain at her throat. *Salt protect me. Lady give me light.*

Her thumb rubbed the surface of the pearl again, the smoothness a comfort, though she still missed the uneven texture of the strand of five natural pearls she'd worn for as long as she could remember. But they were a creamy white, and as long as the princess was in half mourning, her ladies couldn't wear white.

The gray had been a gift from the princess herself. Its color alone made it expensive, more than Sophie's family could afford. It was not as darkly beautiful as the rope of black pearls Princess Eloisa herself wore. But then again, Eloisa's pearls could have bought Sophie's family estates many times over.

A true symbol of her family's wealth. And Eloisa's power. Both mundane and magical.

The princess was the strongest royal witch yet living. Magic hadn't ruined her life.

But Sophie was not the crown princess. Magic would bring a woman of her rank only unwelcome attention and an even more narrowly prescribed life: Performing the seasonal rituals. Keeping the water sources blessed. Tending to her husband's lands or the court's as demanded. Earth witchery was hardly exciting. Useful, in a prosaic sort of way, being able to coax crops and animals into fruitfulness and supposedly anchor the prosperity of the court and the country. But hardly exciting.

Once, royal witches had been able to do more, to call the weather and do other things only hinted at in the history books. But it had been long years since any royal witch of Anglion had been able to do such things. Eloisa was the strongest living royal witch, and she was gifted with wards and healing and, so it was said, foretelling, but she couldn't, as far as Sophie knew, move so much as a puff of air.

She'd asked her mother once, long ago, why royal witches no longer did such things. Her mother, possessed of only a little power herself, had said that no one knew. Her father, overhearing, had muttered something about inbreeding but then laughed when her mother had told him not to be an idiot.

Privately, since coming to court, Sophie had decided that maybe they just never got the chance to try to do anything exciting. Royal witches were carefully hemmed in with rules and protocol so that their powers

served the Crown as the Crown wished to be served. And after that, they served the goddess and her church. It didn't leave much time for trying to tame lightning. And with the pampered court life, there was really no need to try for more.

She tried to imagine the look on Captain Turner's face if she asked him what she would need to do to call lightning. He would probably have apoplexy. And then possibly march her straight to the temple for a lecture on the proper uses of earth magic. She sighed, finger and thumb rubbing the pearl again. It was disappointing to think that actually doing earth magic, or the variety she would be allowed—if she was even able—would be even less exciting than learning the theory.

The captain cleared his throat, drawing her attention back to him. "Maybe magic will be of more use to you than you realize."

"It's not as though I'll be allowed to do anything useful with it. Witches don't fight battles or anything."

He lifted the book they had been studying. "You've been talking to the crown princess again. Earth magic keeps Anglion prosperous. Feeds our people. Fighting battles isn't everything, milady."

"I believe your fellow soldiers in the Red Guard would disagree with you, Captain. And it's difficult to avoid talking to Princess Eloisa when I'm one of her ladies." The princess, widowed just over a year, had certain views about marriage and the role that women should play in the court. Views that were not exactly conventional. She had, so far, avoided being wed again. Sophie wondered just how long past her mourning time Eloisa would continue to get away with that. Her father doted on her, but he also wasn't a man to waste a prize in his possession. Not one that could be traded for strength and loyalty. Or he hadn't been before his recent illness. He was recovering from the sickness that had gripped him most of the winter and spring, but there were whispers in the court that he was weakened for life.

Captain Turner laughed beside her, a friendly deep, rumbly laugh, at odds with his stern weather-carved face. "Maybe so. Still, you won't need to fight battles, milady. No one crosses a royal witch. No one sensible, at least."

That made her smile, unwilling as she was. She picked up her notebook and tried to remember the last thing the captain had said about grounding to a ley line. She knew the theory off by heart. After all, she had been schooled in the history and tenets of earth magic and the lore of the goddess since she was fifteen. Captain Turner was charged with ensuring that those lessons were retained. She thought it strange that a Red Guard battle mage was the chosen instructor for potential royal witches, but that was what the temple had decreed. She also had regular sessions with temple priors, but they always stuck to the lore of the goddess and wouldn't discuss earth magic. She'd even had one nerve-racking session with the icily formidable Domina Skey, who was in charge of the Kingswell temple and therefore also in charge of all of Anglion when it came to matters of the goddess. But Sophie hadn't learned anything new from her. Anything she hadn't learned by now, well, it seemed that it was just about too late.

Of course, amongst that learning was a large hole about the actual rites undertaken by a royal witch—that information being deemed unsuitable for those without power to know of—which seemed entirely unfair. But that was another improper thought for young ladies. Until her power manifested, all she was allowed to know was the foundational theories of magic developed by the temple. The ones that underpinned all three branches of power. And there was nothing she could do about that, either. "All right, Captain. We have another hour. The princess asked me to attend her at midday."

Just after eleven in the morning, Lieutenant Cameron Mackenzie reported for duty.

“You’re late, Lieutenant,” the duty captain grumbled. “The princess rang for you five minutes ago.”

Cameron shrugged. “Sorry,” he said, not meaning it. Wallace—the captain—was an officious toady. One who’d avoided any sort of real danger in his time in the guard. A silk soldier. Cameron might be guilty of many things, but not that. “Business with my father.”

“Your father should not keep you from the Princess Royal,” Wallace said with a flick of his hand toward the roster on the desk before him. But he sounded slightly mollified. Or, rather, reluctant to anger the Erl of Inglewood. Cameron wondered what the captain would think if he knew the duke had been, as usual, berating his son about why he hadn’t managed to make the princess fall in love with him.

“I’m sure he didn’t mean to inconvenience Her Highness,” Cameron said, knowing full well that was exactly what His Grace had wanted.

In his father’s convoluted mind, Eloisa would pine for Cameron if deprived of his company. Cameron himself was clear on the fact that Eloisa didn’t pine for anyone—except poor dead Iain, perhaps. But the erl was convinced he could become father-in-law to the first in line to the throne if only Cameron would properly apply himself.

It didn’t matter how many times Cameron pointed out that Eloisa was still in half mourning, and at any rate, was exceedingly unlikely to be given permission to marry someone as lowly as a third son who held only a minor courtesy title and a few acres of northern Scarp land buried far in the high reaches of Carnarvan. Let alone bring up that it was more than improper for a bodyguard to be involved with his charge. His father was ambitious. In fact, Lord Inglewood practically defined the word.

“Just be punctual next time,” Wallace said. “Now, you should go.” He made a note—probably recording Cameron’s lateness—in the ledger, the black letters curving with perfect precision, and waved Cameron away.

Cameron saluted and headed down the corridor. The door guards let him into the suite, and he found Eloisa in her morning room. Alone. He stopped short at that. She was usually surrounded by a gaggle of ladies-in-waiting. He hadn’t been alone with her for close to three weeks.

He bowed, the obeisance instinctive despite their solitude. “Good morning, Your Highness.” He straightened and scanned the room quickly.

Definitely alone.

The room seemed larger without the usual crowd. Eloisa wore a deep green dress—not strictly a half-mourning color, but who would quibble with the Princess Royal? With her witch-red hair caught casually behind her head rather than piled up in the elaborate curls currently favored at court, she dominated the room like a flame against the pale yellow of the walls and furnishings. Cameron told himself not to jump to conclusions about what the absence of her ladies might mean and stayed where he was.

Eloisa tapped her fingernails against the arm of her daintily curved chair and arched an eyebrow at him. “Good morning? It’s practically midday,” she said in a mock-annoyed voice.

Cameron hid a smile. So she was in a mood, was she? Obviously his duties today would include charming a royal witch into a better temper. He pulled his watch from its pocket on the inside of his uniform jacket. “Merely a little after eleven, Highness. Midday is still a ways off. Where are your attendants? You shouldn’t be left alone.”

“Why not?” she asked, with another tap of one long nail against the light-colored wood. “I have such a big, strong bodyguard to protect me.”

“I only just arrived,” he pointed out. He crossed his arms, mock stern as he looked at her. So close, the scent of her, smoke and spice and night-heavy roses, bloomed around him like an invitation. A dangerous invitation. He’d never quite worked out if Eloisa’s scent was perfume or magic or one of the incenses earth witches used, but regardless of its source, it was delicious. Designed to make men fall at her feet or howl at the moon.

“There are guards outside,” she countered in a bored tone.

“There should’ve been your night man,” Cameron said, suddenly truly serious. “Why isn’t he here?”

“I let him go early,” she said, flicking at the black lace edging the neckline of her dress. The movement drew attention to her cleavage, which he was sure was intentional. The witch was toying with him.

“It was that Smythe-Stuart idiot,” she said with another flick. It was clear that Smythe-Stuart had been lucky to escape being hexed.

“Lieutenant Smythe-Stuart is very capable,” Cameron felt compelled to say. It was the truth. No man made it into the ranks of the Red Guard, let alone the royal bodyguards, without being an elite soldier. Pity they didn’t also test for personality.

“He’s a bore,” Eloisa retorted. “And I don’t want to talk about him.” She curled a lock of her hair around her finger. The deep red of it against her pale skin was a pointed reminder he was dealing with a royal witch. One who was, perhaps, feeling a little fey today. He could feel his own magic—minor as it was—curling within him. Eloisa always could rouse him.

“Where, might I inquire, are your ladies?” Cameron asked, hoping to steer the conversation back to safer waters.

“Off planning the celebrations,” Eloisa said with a smile.

“Ah, Lady Sophia. The one you all have such high hopes for.” Sophia Kendall was the last royal female—though in her case the royal claim was quite removed—of her birth year to turn twenty-one. And after her, there was a five-year gap until the next oldest girl with royal blood. Her upcoming Ais-Seann was the subject of much court speculation and anticipation.

Neither of the two other girls who had come into their majority this year had manifested the gift, and both of them had been unceremoniously married off to minor lordlings and had yet to reappear at court. Cameron wouldn’t like to be in Lady Sophia’s shoes at all. Her fate was to be a pawn either way. All that was to be determined was just how big a prize she would gain for her family. Or the king, really. Cameron had met Lady Kendall’s father, Barron Leeheld, and he had struck Cam as a decent man who had little interest in court intrigues. He had spoken somewhat wistfully of his estate and the upcoming grape harvest, not of whom best to marry his only daughter to.

“Yes,” Eloisa said. “I think she at least deserves some fun before you men usurp her life.”

“If she manifests, she’ll have some more training before she’s handed over to whoever the lucky man is, won’t she?”

“And if she doesn’t, she’ll be married before the turn of the year,” Eloisa snapped. “And I’ll get some new

country bumpkin who doesn't know a hairpin from a hatpin to attend me."

Ah, so that was what was bothering her witchness. She didn't want to lose a friend. "You think she won't?"

Eloisa shrugged. "I don't know."

"You're sure about that?" Eloisa's gift ran strongly to psychic abilities, but she tended to keep her premonitions close to her chest when she thought it best to do so. It drove her father, the king, wild.

"Yes. I haven't seen anything about Sophie."

Well, that was good. Then he replayed the sentence in his head. Perhaps not. "Does that mean you've seen something else?"

She shook her head but didn't look at him, instead toying with the midnight-colored pearls circling her wrist. "Nothing important."

"Highness . . ."

Silk rustled as she came out of her chair and crossed to him. The wild smoky rose scent filled his nose, making his pulse speed a little.

"All I see," she said with a wicked smile, "is a man who is wasting a perfectly good opportunity." She tilted her head back and looked up at him. "What's the matter, Cameron? Out whoring last night, were you?"

She pressed her hand against his chest, and he struggled to keep his train of thought. "You know I don't . . ."

Her hand trailed lower. "Saving yourself for me? That's sweet." Fingers slid beneath the waistband of his breeches, and his cock rose to meet her. "Why don't you show me?"

"Witch." He picked her up and carried her into her bedroom. The princess might not want to marry a minor lord, he thought as she started unbuttoning his jacket, but she surely didn't mind fucking one.

As always, it was hot and fast and wild between them. He'd never figured out what it was about Eloisa that drove him so crazy—whether she used her magic on him or whether his power just craved hers—but he felt her trigger the barrier around the room so they wouldn't be heard or interrupted, and the second her magic flowed across his skin, he was engulfed.

Green silk tore beneath his hands as he ripped at her dress, desperate to touch her. Her eager response only egged him on. His own jacket and shirt vanished somehow, and her mouth rose to meet his with a hunger that matched his own.

Spice and smoke and roses engulfed him, fogged him, caught him as his hands closed over her breasts. She moved beneath him, and the buttons on his breeches opened of their own accord as she pulled him closer. There were benefits to bedding a witch, he thought hazily as her fingers closed around his cock again, guiding him to her. Then, as he slid home and she closed around him, he didn't think anything more for a long time.

When he finally opened his eyes afterward, Eloisa lay beside him, one hand idly tracing patterns on his bare chest.

"You have to get dressed," she said. "Sophia will be here at twelve."

The clock beside her bed said it was ten minutes to midday. And the princess trained her ladies to be prompt. Still, he couldn't quite force himself to rise just yet. "So eager to get rid of me?" He tugged lazily at a curl that had found its way onto his pillow.

She closed her eyes.

"Elly?" he said. "Is something wrong?"

The deep red of her hair caught the sunlight as she shook her head. "No, nothing."

Something inside him twisted. His own magic didn't run much to forewarning or truth seeking, but he didn't believe what she was saying. "Promise me you're telling the truth."

Her lids drifted upward, and her blue eyes were clear. "I am," she said firmly. "Nothing's wrong. Everything is just as it should be." She kissed him quickly. "Now get dressed. I want you to escort Lady Sophia to Portholme."

"Send one of the guards," he said, rolling out of bed. "I'm your bodyguard, not hers."

Eloisa walked naked to her dressing table and started brushing her hair, pulling it back into the same loose style she'd worn when he arrived. "Father wants to see me. I'll be perfectly safe in his chambers. You can even escort me there yourself before you go. Besides, I want some herbs, and Chloe has the best at her shop."

"Lady Sophia shouldn't be going anywhere near Portholme. Or Madame de Montesse. Even with a royal bodyguard," Cameron said, pulling on his shirt.

He could see Eloisa frowning at him in the mirror. "If she manifests, she needs to know where to get the best when she needs it," she said coolly. "I do not intend for her to be fobbed off with inferior tools. Besides, I've ordered some things for her birthday. You can collect those and pretend they're for me."

"She'll be showered with more gifts than she can possibly use for her Ais-Seann."

"Most of which will be near useless." Eloisa sniffed as she shoved a last hairpin in place, then rose and crossed to her armoire. "You know most of the court witches are weak. I'm the strongest by far, and I can't do half what my grandmother could. Most of them couldn't tell blindroot from dandelion. Sophia deserves better. And I trust you to see she gets it." She pulled a silk shift over her head, then reached for the dress they'd left lying on the floor and started working her way into it, easing the sleeves and bodice and the complex folds of the skirt into place.

He walked over to help. "I don't like leaving you whilst I'm on duty. You're my charge, not Lady Sophia."

She twisted around and kissed him again, a hard, fast press of her lips that still made his blood sing. "You don't have to like it. What's that oath you men swear? Protect and *serve*?"

He stepped back and bowed, falling back on obedience because he had run out of protests. "I am, of course, at your command."

As he straightened, she smiled at him. "Thank you. I'm lucky to have you, Cameron. My dearest friend."

Friend. A two-edged sword, that word. He'd spoken truth to his father. Eloisa wasn't going to let herself fall in love with a minor noble. Thankfully, he had avoided that trap himself. He didn't think he loved her. But

sometimes he wished things could be different. And he knew if she ever—by some twist of the goddess—decided to flout her father’s will and marry as she chose, not to mention got over losing her husband, that it would be very easy to fall for her.

“Always, milady.”

She smiled again, all sweetness again now that he had given in. “Good. Now, how do I look?”

“Beautiful. You know you do.”

“Not like I’ve just been . . . ?”

“No one would guess.” Least of all him. Satisfaction still flowed through his body, making him wish they had more time; the scent and sight of her were still temptation. But Elly looked every inch the cool, regal princess, even though he knew she’d enjoyed herself as much as he had.

“Excellent.” She waved a hand, and the shield she’d woven around the room dissolved. “Then we should go back out. Because, if I’m not mistaken, I can hear Sophia in the hall.”

CHAPTER TWO

When Sophie arrived at Princess Eloisa’s apartments, she was somewhat surprised to find the princess in her parlor, feet tucked up under her skirts as she sat reading a book on one of the silk-clad sofas. Alone. Well, alone apart from the silent presence of today’s bodyguard standing just inside the door.

He barely glanced at her as she entered. None of the Red Guard were talkative, but this one, Lieutenant Mackenzie, had elevated silence to an art form. Sophie couldn’t remember ever having heard him speak unless Eloisa or one of the other soldiers or ladies-in-waiting spoke to him directly.

“How was your lesson?” Eloisa put down her book with a smile. “I was beginning to think Captain Turner had refused to let you leave.”

“My lesson was fine, Your Highness.” Sophie willed herself not to blush. She had taken the long way back to Eloisa’s apartments, pausing for a minute or two longer than she should have by one of the doors that led out to the Indigo Lawn to watch the roundball game before the first chimes of the hour bell had pulled her attention back to where she was supposed to be.

“By which you mean it was deathly dull,” Eloisa said with another smile.

“Captain Turner isn’t dull,” Sophie protested.

“No, but learning magical theory when you can’t use it is,” Eloisa said. “I remember that feeling.” She swung her feet down and patted the sofa beside her. “Come; sit down.”

Sophie would have preferred to stand after spending so long seated already that day, but she moved to the sofa obediently. “Where is everybody?” she asked as she smoothed her skirts and sat.

“Here and there,” Eloisa said.

By which Sophie understood that all the other ladies-in-waiting were doing something connected with her

Ais-Seann celebration and that she wouldn't find out anything more from the princess. And that she was probably going to be kept by Eloisa's side all afternoon, so that she was out of the way of whatever was happening.

Across the room, she was aware of Lieutenant Mackenzie watching them. Some of Eloisa's other bodyguards managed to fade into the background when they were on duty so that you didn't notice them. But Lieutenant Mackenzie didn't fade. He loomed rather.

He was tall, dark, and, quite frankly, intimidating. Serious deep blue eyes and a slight red light to his dark hair were the only hints that he had Carnarvan heritage. Otherwise he looked like the very model of a good Anglion noble and soldier. All stoic silent muscle and devotion to the Crown.

Though today she rather thought the expression in his dark blue eyes was disapproving instead of just serious. But his mood was hardly her concern. No, her concern was whatever the princess desired it to be. "Was there something you needed me to do, Your Highness?" she asked hopefully.

"Actually, there is," Eloisa said. "I have an errand for you. Lieutenant Mackenzie is going to escort you to Portholme to fetch some supplies."

Sophie stopped her jaw from falling open with an effort of will. Portholme? All the way to the harbor? Eloisa had never requested such a thing before. "But who will stay with you, milady?" She looked from Eloisa to the lieutenant, who was definitely looking disapproving now. He didn't protest, though, so presumably Eloisa had already informed him of the plan and overruled any objections he had.

Eloisa waved her hand. "The door guards will serve me well. I have to see my father, but after that I have an urge to be completely lazy and just sit here and read for the afternoon. And it's far too pretty a day for you to be cooped up here with me just because I'm a sluggard. So no arguments. Fetch your cloak, and the two of you can be on your way."

"Stay close, milady," Lieutenant Mackenzie said as he handed Sophie down from the carriage.

"I know the rules, Lieutenant," she said with more bravado than she felt. It wasn't like she went to Portholme terribly often. And never alone, with just one guard for escort. The few times she'd been here, she'd been arriving or departing the port, her family accompanied by a squad of guardsmen to and from the palace. Once Eloisa and her ladies had ridden this way, but they'd barely reached the borders of the port before the Red Guards escorting them had turned them back to safer paths.

But she wasn't going to give the lieutenant the satisfaction of seeing that she was even the slightest bit nervous. He'd been silent, his displeasure with the situation perfectly clear, for most of the carriage ride to Portholme after an initial barrage of instructions on how she was to behave whilst they were dockside.

Definitely intimidating.

Sophie knew Cameron Mackenzie was Elly's favorite guard, but perhaps Her Highness got to see a side of him that wasn't on display currently.

Though right now, even if he did view her as an inconvenience, his looming presence was somewhat comforting. With him beside her, so unyieldingly proper and professional—not to mention so damned large—she doubted anyone would be unwise enough to bother them.

She looked down at the cloak draped over her arm. Rule one of traversing Portholme. Don't look too rich.

The cloak and her plain gray dress should help with that. But it was hot despite the port-fragranced breeze coming off the water, and she didn't really fancy even the lightest layer of wool against her skin. She was stifling enough in the three layers of petticoats under her dress.

Besides, what good did it do for her to wear a cloak when the lieutenant's deep red uniform jacket made it clear what he was? The Red Guard were named for the battle magic they wielded and the blood they shed, not the color of their uniforms, but they weren't above reinforcing the former with the latter. "I know the rules," she repeated when he didn't answer her.

"Good," he said, scanning the crowded street before them. "Make sure you follow them."

"I'm not a child," she muttered. She was sick of being ordered and bossed and curtailed. Maybe turning twenty-one wouldn't be so bad after all. Perhaps magic would give her some tiny bit of control over her life. Or marriage. Married ladies were not as tightly policed as virgins. If her husband—whoever that might turn out to be—were reasonable, she would be able to decide some small things for herself.

She straightened her shoulders, hoping the low cut of her gown—and she would be very glad when the current court craze for reviving the gowns of two centuries ago was over—would emphasize the fact that she was quite grown up, thank you very much. Not that the lieutenant would notice her that way. Everyone knew he was basically a monk.

A well-armed monk, she thought as he clasped one hand around his largely ceremonial sword and straightened his pistol in its holster. But still, not one of the ladies who'd tried throwing themselves at him—after all, he was handsome if you ignored the stony soldier facade—had succeeded, to her knowledge. And there were no rumors of his tastes running in a less conventional direction. No counterweight love amongst his brother soldiers. Which would, given he was a third son, be acceptable if his own brothers had already spawned heirs. She tried to remember what she knew of Lord Inglewood's family, but other than the fact that Cameron had two older brothers, it escaped her for the moment.

Much like the knowledge that she was female seemed to have escaped the lieutenant. His gaze remained firmly on the crowds of people swelling around them, not so much as a glance at her cleavage.

"Shall we, Lieutenant?" she said, putting a snap in her voice. The man could at least look. Yes, as a royal virgin, she was off-limits, but how was she supposed to learn how to deal with men as a woman if they all insisted on treating her like a cloistered prior of the goddess? Watching Eloisa gave her a good idea of the principles of flirtation, but being an untouchable, unwed lady-in-waiting offered little chance to practice them. Men danced with her at court because they had to. Until she was of age and of power, she was no use to a courtier, and the repercussions for a dalliance with a potential royal witch were severe enough to keep them from trying anything below board.

"Stay close," Cameron said again as he offered his arm and stepped forward.

Sophie moved with him, drinking in the novelty of being in such a place. Portholme felt like an entirely different country from the court and the parts of Kingswell that surrounded it. The smells were different—salt and fish and the sweat of too many bodies rather than the perfumes, lamp oil, and incense that cloyed the court. The salty stink wasn't exactly pleasant, yet it was refreshing somehow.

Even more refreshing was the way no one kept their voices to polite court tones. Sailors yelled at one another across the street, carters cursed their horses, and women screeched at the stallholders and the children who ran screaming as they played almost underfoot of the passing traffic.

And beneath it all were the not-so-distant lapping waves breaking against the docks and the cries of the sun gulls as they squabbled over fish scraps.

It was hard to know where to look. The cobbled streets were crowded. The buildings huddled together as well. Made of wood and brick and solid gray stone rather than the green-veined granite of the palace, they were oddly foreign. Suddenly the large presence of the lieutenant seemed comforting rather than annoying, his arm reassuringly solid beneath hers and the leather and wool smell of his uniform a touch of familiarity as he moved them smoothly through the crowd and across the street to their destination.

Madame de Montesse's store was larger than Sophie had expected, clean and airy as far as an elderly narrow Portholme building could be. As she took in the rows of jars, bottles, and pouches that lined the shelves, she realized she didn't recognize what half of them held despite all her years of lessons. Which meant they were used for things other than the earth magic she was being taught. Which could be entirely illegal.

Battle magic didn't require any supplies and the Arts of Air only a few. Of course, in Illvya, they also practiced the fourth art. Water magic. Magic strictly forbidden here in Anglion, involving as it did, demons and darker things declared forbidden by the goddess. She moved closer to the nearest shelf, intrigued. Was Madame de Montesse truly brave enough to sell such things? Or was it just that Sophie was looking at supplies used for other purposes? Medicines and such. Supplies for seed witches and midwives and the healers without magic. Or earth magic that hadn't been included in her lessons.

"Lieutenant Mackenzie, what a surprise."

"Madame de Montesse, your health."

Sophie turned quickly, just in time to see the lieutenant bow, a gesture as precisely polite as his greeting. The woman he bowed to smiled broadly, her bright green gown, cut even lower than Sophie's, rustling as she bobbed an answering curtsy.

Sophie didn't follow the lieutenant's example. No one was entirely sure of the truth of Chloe de Montesse's background. She claimed to be a widow, though Sophie had heard rumors that that was merely a fabrication, designed to sway some sympathy in Madame de Montesse's direction when she had first come to Anglion as a refugee. That seemed more like court gossip and spite than anything else to Sophie. But she was sure of one thing. As a member of the court, she outranked the woman. She wasn't bowing first.

Madame de Montesse laughed. "So formal, Lieutenant? Such a pity." Her voice was airy and amused, her English underscored ever so faintly with the accent of her former country. "And who have you brought to my humble establishment?" Her dark eyes flicked briefly to Sophie and then returned to the lieutenant.

"May I present Lady Sophia Kendall?" He made another shallow bow. Sophie moved closer to them out of politeness and, she had to admit, a certain degree of curiosity.

"Ah," Madame de Montesse said, smiling again as she bobbed another curtsy. "The one we hear so much speculation about." She laughed and loosed a stream of questions in the liquid syllables of her native Illvyan at the lieutenant.

Sophie returned the curtsy with a version of her own that was even shallower, more interested in following the conversation. But the speed of the exchange was too much for her—far quicker than her Illvyan tutor had ever spoken to her, though the lieutenant seemed to have no difficulty. She made out only a few words. "Flower" and "the game." The lieutenant's reply was short, causing Madame to break into another peal of laughter as she spoke again. The word for "prize" was about all Sophie could decipher this time.

Sophie bristled. "I am not a prize, Madame." She didn't know exactly how old the Illvyan woman was—her skin was smooth, but she was definitely older than Sophie. Older than the princess, too, perhaps. Near thirty. Maybe more. One also heard rumors of Illvyan women being able to stay young beyond their years.

"You speak Illvyan?" Madame de Montesse asked, looking completely unperturbed that Sophie had understood her.

"Some," Sophie replied, trying for the same air of unconcern. All Anglion nobles learned Illvyan to some degree. The official reason given was the maintenance of the tightly controlled trade agreements. Privately Sophie thought that it was more a case of knowing one's enemy.

Illvya's use of the fourth art meant that they now controlled most of their continent. But the demons the Illvyan wizards summoned couldn't cross salt water. So Anglion, protected by the ocean that surrounded it, was still free. But no one believed the Illvyans wouldn't try again to add Anglion to their empire.

"Court ladies. So . . . accomplished." The nose beneath those amused dark eyes wrinkled despite the seeming compliment, and Sophie felt an unwilling admiration for the woman.

Chloe de Montesse was no Anglion. Though, as an Illvyan refugee, she seemed to follow the rules of her adopted country. The pearls dangling from gold wires threaded through her earlobes testified to that.

But she couldn't hide the fact that she hadn't always followed Anglion ways. No, she was a free witch. Unhampered by custom. Her hair wasn't the rich red of the royal witches, deepened by their contact with the earth. It was a color closer to flame, licked here and there with threads that were near black. Sophie wondered exactly what powers she had dallied with before coming to Anglion to achieve that color and whether she thought Sophie herself should aspire to a similar shade rather than submit tamely to the fate decreed for her by tradition.

Though to do that, she would have to leave Anglion. The keepers of the goddess's temple did not truck with anyone practicing those arts that had been forbidden on Anglese soil. And they expressed their displeasure forcibly. Having hair like Madame de Montesse's was a sure path to trouble unless, like Madame de Montesse, one could claim to have given up the habits of her homeland. If she was being less than truthful about that, then no one had ever proven it.

"Do Illvyan ladies not learn Anglion?" Sophie countered.

Madame de Montesse nodded, the gesture almost approving. "Some do. Those who have . . . need."

Need? Those who did magic, perhaps? Those who would end up with hair like Madame's?

Sophie tried to shake off the thread of speculation. There was no certainty that her hair would ever be any different from how it was now. If her power didn't manifest at her Ais-Seann, then it would remain nondescript brown. And if she did, there was no way it would end up any shade near Madame de Montesse's. It would be the same as all the other earth witches. Earth red. Deeper if she was stronger. Just a hint—like her mother had—if she were not. She had tried and failed to imagine herself with hair the color of Eloisa's—a red so rich it drew the eye like rubies. It suited the princess's milky complexion, but skin like Eloisa's was a rarity in the court. It cropped up now and again in the royal family, a reminder that they had both ties to the north and, though it was scarcely admitted to these days, links to the paler-skinned Illvyans as well.

But Sophie's skin was the usual golden shade of most Anglions. She couldn't help feeling that red hair might

just make her look like an unstruck matchstick.

The lieutenant produced a piece of paper from his jacket pocket and started reading out a list of herbs and other supplies that were at least familiar to Sophie from her studies. His words drew Madame de Montesse's attention back to him, her smile and fluttering eyelashes firmly directed at him as she started to fetch things from the shelves.

Sophie turned back to her study of the cabinets and shelves, carefully clasping her hands behind her back so she wouldn't break anything delicate or touch anything dangerous. Illvyans didn't limit themselves to the three arts of Anglion magic. And even in Anglion, some of the ingredients used in magical workings were dangerous. Safer to look and not touch.

Just as Sophie had nearly decided that the tiny skeleton in a jar just out of reach on one of the higher shelves must definitely be a conar lizard, the lieutenant called her name, making her jump and bump the shelf. Jars rattled, but luckily nothing came crashing down around her ears. She put a hand out to settle the last of them back into place, willing the blush that had sprung into her cheeks to leave before she turned. "Sir?"

"Come and see this. The princess would want your opinion before I spend her money."

On the opposite side of the counter to him, Madame de Montesse didn't look overly pleased at the insinuation she'd sell anything that wasn't worth the high prices she charged.

Sophie hid a smile—it was nice to know that the lieutenant could annoy others as well as her—and joined him. Laid out on the counter was a supple leather roll, currently unfurled. The length of rich brown hide gleamed dully under the light coming through the window. On it lay a variety of smaller leather pouches, two slender silver knives, and a length of gold chain, held in place with thongs sewn into the roll. She'd never seen anything like it before, though it was clear that it was intended for a witch.

"What do you think?" he asked.

Sophie reached out and stroked the leather, her finger slipping across the softness easily. Yet it had the sheen of waterproofing. "It's lovely."

"High quality?"

She looked up at him, trying to see whether he was joking. "You're the mage here. You tell me."

He shrugged. "This is witch magic. Warriors don't use this stuff. I barely know mandrake from marjoram."

"I'm sure you understate things. The Red Guard trains its mages well."

"Yes, the ones who have strong talent. I'm average at best. Basic defense spells. Nothing requiring herbs or silver."

Madame de Montesse arched a dark brow at this but stayed quiet.

"You're a royal bodyguard," Sophie protested.

"Princess Eloisa is stronger than I'll ever be. I serve her best with my sword, not my magic." He looked uncomfortable, perhaps because he was discussing such a subject in front of someone not of the court.

"I see." Sophie untied the thongs wrapped around one of the knives and picked it up, trying to see if it

evoked any response. It was more a dagger than a knife, really. The hilt was chased with runes and fit her hand well. It had the heavy sheen of good silver, but otherwise she sensed nothing. Likewise the chain. The pouches were a little easier. She could at least recognize the contents by sight and smell—a wide array of herbs and other ingredients for spells—but she didn't know how to judge their magical strength. She wouldn't be able to tell that until her own powers showed up. If they did.

“Milady?” The lieutenant interrupted her thoughts.

She sighed and slipped the knife back into the loop designed for it. “It looks perfectly fine to me.”

“Good. If you please, Madame.” He nodded at the roll, and Madame de Montesse busied herself repacking the roll, adding it to the pile of packages on the counter in front of the lieutenant. Eloisa must have sent him with quite the list.

Cameron reached for his pouch for the coins Eloisa had given him. Thank the goddess that this errand running was nearly over and that he could get Lady Sophia back to the palace. Then his unplanned babysitting stint would be over, and he could get back to his duties instead. The girl was pleasant enough, but her wide-eyed air of curiosity about the port and Madame de Montesse's dubious store was proof that she didn't belong in Portholme. But as he lifted the pouch, a growling rumble boomed through the air. A second later, the building shook violently. Jars crashed off the shelves, the sound of shattering glass echoed by an outcry of cries and screams from the street.

“What was that?” Sophia said, twisting.

“Stay here, milady.” He strode to the door and wrenched it open, drawing his sword. The crowd was beginning to move, screams and cries filling the street as stallholders tried to stow away their goods or run away. If he were any judge, they were minutes away from full-blown panic. He grabbed the nearest man. “What's happening?”

The man only shook his head and pointed.

Cameron followed the direction of his arm and went cold. Smoke billowed from one of the palace's wide round towers—the east tower, which sat at the intersection of the northern front wall and the east wall. As he watched, another roaring rumble was followed by a flash of fire, and a hole appeared in one of the walls of the west tower. An explosion that large was no fire or accident. They were being attacked. Instinctively, he started toward the palace but checked himself after half a step. *Lady Sophia*.

He couldn't leave her unprotected. Who knew what was happening? She was part of the royal family—however distant a part—and if they were under attack, then his duty was also to her.

Another rumble, and stones spewed into the air. Goddess. *Elly*. What was happening to her? But fear for his lover didn't change his duty to the girl in the store.

“What is that?” Sophia appeared beside him, looking terrified.

“Get back inside,” he snarled. He didn't wait for her to protest or argue, just bundled her back into the shop, bolted the door, and drew the shades.

Chloe was standing by the window. “The palace?”

“Under attack,” he said shortly.

“Attack?” Sophia echoed.

He spared her one glance. She had turned a sickly sort of yellow shade, fear dulling the sheen of her skin, but so far wasn't having hysterics. “As far as I can tell, milady.” He turned back to Madame de Montesse. “Where's the nearest portal?” The safest thing would be to get Sophia out of the city altogether and hide her somewhere until he could get some idea of the situation.

“I have one here,” Chloe admitted.

Now, that was unexpected. Portals cost money. A lot of money. Both to establish and maintain. But where Chloe de Montesse got that sort of cash was a question for another day. Now all that mattered was she had one. “Show me,” he said, and took Sophia by the arm, leading her after Chloe.

They ducked into a back room, and then Chloe threw back a rug to reveal a trapdoor. It led down into a cellar and to another door. When he approached, he felt the familiar pull of a portal stone. As Chloe unlocked the door, he turned to Sophia. “Have you used a portal before?”

She nodded. “O-once.”

“Did it make you ill?” Portals were uncomfortable for most. If she was going to faint or throw up, better to know now.

“A little,” she said, straightening her shoulders as if to say “don't worry about me.” “Where are we going?”

“Away from here. Never mind.” He shot a look at Chloe. “My apologies, Madame, but if you do not know, you can't tell.”

She nodded and pulled the door open. “I understand. Do you need a focus?”

“No. I have one.” Stepping through the door, he lit the candle Chloe had handed him and raised it so he could read the symbols around the portal stone. Portals were linked to other portals. The more destinations, the more expensive and power-consuming to maintain. This one showed ten, and thankfully, he recognized two of them as being in the general direction he required. He took Sophie's hand. “Stay close.” She obediently stepped nearer.

“You would be wise to run yourself, Madame. The city will not be safe. Not if . . .” He didn't want to speak the possibilities and scare Sophia. Or give them reality.

Chloe shrugged, a peculiarly Illvyan quality to her gesture. “I will wait and see how things lie. It is only a few moments' work to leave if needs be. Salt protect you.”

She stepped back and closed the door, leaving them in darkness broken only by the ring of flickering light provided by the candle. “Ready?” he asked Sophia, drawing her against his chest.

She nodded, a movement he felt rather than saw. He pulled the dagger he carried in his boot free and slashed his thumb, using the blood to open the key to magic. He thought fast as his thumb throbbed and the power built; then he focused on the symbol of his chosen destination, blew out the candle, keyed the portal stone, and moved through the portal with three rapid strides, never loosening his grip on Sophia.

CHAPTER THREE

Sophie stumbled as the lieutenant practically dragged her through the portal.

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