



PROLOGUE



The matriarch of House Kore was running late for a dinner. In the normal course of things, she did not care for punctuality. Punctuality, with its unseemly whiff of eagerness, was for peasants. And she was neither a peasant nor eager to endure a meal with the mongrel heir of House Nyx.

“What is taking my carriage so long?” she yelled down the hall.

If she arrived too late, she would invite rumors. Which were a great deal more pesky and unseemly than punctuality.

She flicked at an invisible speck of dust on her new dress. Her silk gown had been designed by the couturiers of Raudnitz & Cie in the 1st arrondissement’s Place Vendôme. Taffeta lilies bobbed in the blue silk stream of her hemline. Across the gown’s low bustle and long tulle train, miniature fields of buttercups and ivy unfurled in the candlelight. The Forging work had been seamless. As well it should be, given the steep price.

Her driver poked his head through the entryway. “Deepest apologies, Madame. We are very nearly ready.”

The matriarch flicked her wrist in dismissal. Her Babel Ring—a twist of dark thorns shot through with blue light—gleamed. The ring had been welded to her index finger the day she became matriarch of House Kore, successfully beating out other members of her family and intra-House scrambles for power. She knew her descendants and even members of her House were counting down the days until she died and passed on the ring, but she wasn't ready yet. And until then, only she and the House Nyx patriarch would know the ring's secrets.

When she touched the wallpaper, a symbol flashed briefly on the gilded patterns: a twist of thorns. She smiled. Like every Forged object in her home, the wallpaper had been House-marked.

She'd never forget the first time she'd left her House mark on an artifact. The ring's power made her feel like a goddess cinched to human shape. Though that was not always the case. Yesterday, she'd stripped the mark of Kore off an object. She hadn't wanted to, but it was for last week's Order auction, and some traditions could not be denied . . .

Including dinners with the head of a House.

The matriarch marched toward the open door and stood on the granite threshold. The cold night air caused the silken blooms on her dress to close their petals.

"Surely the horses are ready?" she called into the night.

Her driver did not answer. She pulled her shawl tighter and took another step outside. She saw the carriage, the waiting horses . . . but no driver.

"Has *everyone* in my employ been struck by a plague of incompetence?" she muttered as she walked toward the horses.

Even her courier—who was merely to show up at the Order auction, donate an object and leave—had failed. To his lists of clear-cut

errands, he'd undoubtedly added: Get fabulously drunk at L'Eden, that gaudy sinkhole of a hotel.

Closer to the carriage, she found her driver sprawled facedown in the gravel. The matriarch stumbled backward. Around her, the sounds of the horses stamping their hooves cut off abruptly. Silence fell like a heavy blade through the air.

Who is there? she meant to say, but the words collapsed noiselessly.

She stepped back. Her heels made no sound on the gravel. She might have been underwater. She ran for the door, flinging it open. Chandelier light washed over her and for a moment, she thought she'd escaped. Her heel caught on her dress, tripping her. The ground did not rush up to meet her.

But a knife did.

She never saw the blade, only felt the consequence of it—a sharp pressure digging into her knuckles, the snap of finger bones unclasping, hot wetness sliding down her palm and wrist and staining her expensive bell sleeves. Someone prying her ring from her fingers. The matriarch of House Kore did not have time to gasp.

Her eyes opened wide. In front of her, Forged moth lights with emerald panes for wings glided across the ceiling. A handful of them roosted there, like dozing stars.

And then, from the corner of her vision, a heavy rod swung toward her head.