

I



My mother was screaming at the Comte. Again.

I slammed the front doors behind me and walked down the carriageway, under the dappled shade of the poplars that lined it. A hundred paces away, I still heard her, though at least I could no longer hear the Comte's frantic endearments and low, rapid pleading. He should know by now that wasn't the way. Perhaps I should tell him. Adrien was the first of my mother's patrons I had ever liked, and I did not want to leave Normandy just as spring was breaking. Just as we were beginning to make progress.

Though perhaps we were not. Mother would not be screaming at the Comte if the work were going well. She would not take the time. Alchemy was a demanding science, even if some scoffed and called it charlatanry or magic. It required total concentration. If the work were going well, the Comte would scarcely exist to her, nor

would I, now that she would not let me be of use. The composition must have broken again. This was about when it had, last round. I could not be certain, since she had taken away my key to the laboratory. She could hardly have devised a worse insult than that if she had tried, and lately she did seem to be trying. The laboratory was mine as much as it was hers. If she did succeed in producing the White Elixir—which turned all metals into silver—then it was only because of my help. She had found Jābir’s text languishing in a Spanish monastery, but it had been I who translated it when her Arabic wasn’t nearly up to the job. I had labored for months over the calcinary furnace to make the philosophic mercury the text took as its starting point. I had the scars on my hands and arms to prove it. And now that success might be close, she wished to shut me out and deny my part, and claim it for herself alone.

But if she was acting ill and cross, it meant she had failed. A low, smug hum of satisfaction warmed me. I didn’t want the work to fail, but I didn’t want her to succeed without me, either.

A distant smashing sound rang out from the chateau. My mother shattering something against the wall, no doubt.

I sighed and shifted my letter box to the crook of my other arm.

I knew what this meant. Another move. Another man. The Comte had lasted longer than the rest. Over two years, long enough that I had begun to hope I would not have to do it all again. I hated the uncertainty of those first weeks, before I knew what was expected of me, whether Mother’s new patron had a temper and what might set it off, whether he liked children to speak or be silent. Though I was no

longer a child, and that might bring its own problems. A chill passed over me, despite the warm afternoon sunshine. God only knew what the next one would be like. My mother had already run through so many of them. And with the recent changes in France, there were fewer rich men than ever looking to give patronage to an expensive alchemist, even one as beautiful and famous as Marguerite Hope.

I veered off the carriageway, into the soft spring grass, dotted here and there with the first of the lavender anemones. I sat by the stream, under the plum tree.

There was no screaming here, no pleading, no signs that my life was about to change for the worse. I inhaled the soft, sweet scent of plum blossoms and opened my letter box. If this was to be my last spring in Normandy, I wanted to remember it like this. Springtime in Normandy was soft and sweet, sun shining brightly and so many things blossoming that the very air was perfumed with promise. Everything was coming extravagantly to life, bursting out of the dead ground and bare trees with so much energy other impossible things seemed likely, too. I had always been hopeful in Normandy when it was spring. Especially last spring, when Will was still here. When we sat under this very tree, drank both bottles of champagne he had stolen from the cellars, and spun tales of everything we could achieve.

I took out his last letter, dated two months ago.

*Dear Bee,*

*This is my address now—as you see I’ve left Prussia. It turns out that everything they say about the Prussians is quite true. I’ve never met a more unbending man than my patron*

*there. One day past the appointed date and he tried to throw me in prison for breach of contract! He thinks alchemy can be held to the same strict schedule as his serfs.*

Laws against false alchemists were very harsh in Germany, as Will knew full well when he sought patronage there. I had begged him to go somewhere else, though he had few enough choices. He was my mother's apprentice, with no achievements of his own to make his reputation. His training had been cut abruptly short when Mother found us together under this plum tree, watching the sunrise with clasped hands and two empty bottles of champagne. She'd seen to it that Will was gone by noon. It was no use telling her that all we'd done was talk through the night, or that the one kiss we'd shared had been our first, and had gone no further. He had behaved with perfect respect for me, but she wouldn't believe it. My mother had imagined a whole path laid before my feet in that moment, and scorched it from the earth with Greek fire.

I turned to the next page.

*I blame myself, of course, Bee, for not heeding your advice. I can picture your face now, wondering what I expected. It would almost be worth all the trouble I've caused myself if I could come to you and see your expression. You must be the only woman in the world who is never lovelier than when you've been proven right.*

The keen thrill of pleasure those words had brought me when I first read them had faded now, and left me feeling uncertain. Should I write back knowingly, teasing him for his recklessness? I had tried this, and was sure I sounded like a scold no matter what he said about my loveliness when proven right. I took out my latest draft, which struck a more sincere tone. I read the lines over, saying how I worried for him, how I missed him. I crumpled it in my hand halfway through. Too much emotion. It didn't do to show such dependence on a man. My mother had shown me that. I didn't wish to emulate her in everything, but I would be a fool to deny her skill at winning masculine devotion. I tried again.

*Dear Will,*

*I am sitting under the plum tree where we had our last picnic. I know how you feel about nostalgia, but I hope you will forgive me this one instance. I fear this will be our last spring in Normandy—perhaps even in France. Many of my mother's friends have left already, and though you may well condemn them as reactionaries, the fact remains that there are very few good Republicans with the ready cash to pay for our pursuits.*

I sighed again and crumpled the page. Somehow I could never seem to write to him about the Revolution without a touch of irony creeping in. I didn't want that. Will had put his hopes for a better world in the new order, and even though I was less hopeful than he, I loved him for it. At least he wanted a better world. Most alchemists simply wanted better metals.

I tried to imagine he was here. It wouldn't be difficult then. He was so good at setting me at ease. His admiration was as intoxicating as wine, but unlike wine it sharpened my wits instead of dulling them. I was never cleverer than when Will was there to laugh with me.

My chest constricted at the memory of Will's laugh. I didn't know anyone who laughed like him. The Parisian aristocrats I had known all had so much consciousness of the sound they made when they did it. The Comte wasn't like them, but he was a serious man and laughed rarely. My mother didn't laugh at all.

But Will. He laughed like it came from the loud, bursting core of him. Like he couldn't have kept it in if he wanted to, and why would he want to? And when he was done laughing, he would look at me like no one else ever had. Like he saw only me, not as an accessory to my mother, but as myself. And not as an odd girl whose sharp edges would need to be softened. Will liked the edges. The sharper they cut, the more they delighted him.

"Thea!"

I threw my letters into the letter box and snapped it shut. I looked around for somewhere to hide the box, and noticed too late that one of my crumpled drafts had blown toward the stream. My mother appeared on the hill above me, the late afternoon sun lighting up her golden hair like an unearned halo. She walked down the hill with measured steps and stopped a few yards above me, I assumed because she wished to enjoy the experience of being taller than me again for a few moments. Her eye moved to the crumpled paper. I ran to it and stuffed it into my pocket before she could take it, though

my haste in hiding the failed letter told her all I didn't wish her to know.

"Oh dear," said my mother. "I do hope you haven't been wasting your afternoon trying to find the right words to say to that boy."

My mother was tolerant of my letter writing these days, perhaps because she was confident I would never see Will again. She had smiled when she heard of Will's contract in Prussia. *He won't find it so easy to charm his way past the Prussian alchemy laws. In Germany, one must deliver results, not pretty smiles, or end in prison.*

"I wouldn't have an afternoon to waste if you would let me into the laboratory," I said.

"Don't be pitiful, Thea," said my mother. "Surely you can think of something worthwhile to do when I don't happen to need your assistance."

I clenched my teeth so tight that my jaw ached. Shutting me out of the laboratory, *our* laboratory, was the greatest injustice she had ever committed against me. Worse than all the moving about, worse than sending Will away, worse than any insult she could think to level at me. Before she had done that, I believed we were together in alchemy at least, even if nothing else. That she had raised and trained me not simply to be of use to her, but to be her partner. Her equal, one day. Throwing me out of the laboratory just when we might achieve what we had worked for told me that Will was right. She would never let me claim credit for my part of the work. She would never accept me as an alchemist in my own right.

And yet she described it as though she had simply let me off my chores. As if I were no more necessary than a

servant. There was no point in arguing with her, but even so I could not let it stand.

"I am not your assistant," I said.

"Oh?" she asked. "Do you have news, then? Have you found a patron on your own merits? Do you intend to strike out on your own?"

"Perhaps I will," I said, my face growing hot. "Perhaps I will stay here when you are finally finished tormenting the poor Comte."

My mother had a perfect, deceptively sweet beauty: golden blond and blue-eyed with a round, doll-like face. It made the venom that sometimes twisted her expression hard to quite believe in. Many men simply didn't. They preferred to ignore the evidence of their minds for the evidence of their senses. I, of course, knew her better than they did. I tensed, preparing.

But instead of lashing out, my mother turned aside, a hand to her chest. A tremor passed over her; she bowed her head against it.

Mother had been strangely unwell for weeks. At first I responded to her illness as she had taught me to, with distaste and disapproval, as though falling sick were an ill-considered pastime of those with insufficient moral fortitude. But if she noticed how unpleasant it was to receive so little sympathy when unwell, she did not show it. She had locked herself away in the laboratory every day until late at night, ignoring my silence as much as she ignored the Comte's pleas that she rest. I had not thought much of it until this moment. Any pain great enough to turn her from chastising me for thinking I could do alchemy without her must be serious indeed.

“Mother?” I asked.

“You will go where I tell you.” Her voice was low and breathless, almost a gasp. “For now, that is to dinner. Wear the green taffeta.”

“The robe à la française?” I asked, perplexed. I hadn’t worn that dress since before the Estates General met. Its style was the hallmark of the ancien régime: wide panniered hips, structured bodice, and elaborate flounces. “But it’s out of fashion.”

“So is our guest,” said my mother.

She went up the hill again, then turned back to me at the top.

“Thea,” she said, all the sharpness gone from her voice. “I know you do not believe it any longer, but everything I do is for you.”

It was the sort of thing she always said. Before this year, I had always believed it, more or less. At least, everything she did was for the both of us. She had considered me an extension of herself, so that doing things for me was no different than doing them for herself. Why else take so much care to train me, to see to it that I had the tutors I needed to learn every language necessary—more even than she knew? To take me with her in all her travels to seek out manuscripts? She was an impatient teacher at times, but a good one. A thorough one. And in turn I was a good student. The best.

Until we were close to our goal. Then, suddenly, I was a rival. And my mother did not tolerate rivals.

“You are right, Mother,” I said. “I don’t believe that any longer.”