

Chapter One

What Happens in Darkness

THE Palace clocks were striking midnight and distant thunder growled from an early summer storm. Tansy hurried to the laundries. She had come this way hundreds of times since she'd first arrived at Arvestel a year ago, but everything looked different at night. There were no lamps to light her path, and the three moons were covered by cloud; if she hadn't known the way so well, she might have lost herself in the warren of stairs and corridors and store-cupboards that made up the servants' territory beneath the Palace.

She was afraid she'd be late. It was bad enough being empty-handed. She didn't have what Lorison had asked for, and she knew that this request was more important than the others. This time Lorison hadn't asked for a mere cake of scented soap, or a tin of boot-blackening. Everyone helped themselves to that kind of thing. But this – this was different, and the fact that Lorison had told Tansy to meet her at night, in the deserted laundries, was proof.

Tansy picked her way across the washing room, feeling for the damp stone of the troughs on either side. During the day, the laundries rang with noise: the grumbling of the women, the heavy slap of wet cloth, the bangs and rattles of paddles and washboards, the gush of emptied buckets. But now Tansy could hear smaller sounds: the steady drip... drip of the troughs, the gurgle of pipes.

The ironing room was beyond, with its circle of hearths in their metal cages, and the felt-covered ironing boards. By day it was stiflingly hot in both rooms; often Tansy would leave her work dripping with sweat and steam, her face red, her shirt and pinafore damp from top to toe. But now the great fire in the centre of the ironing room was out, and the night air rushed down the chimney.

'Good girl. No candle, just like I told you.' Lorison's nasal whine came from the doorway. 'I've always said you were a good girl, always stuck up for you. The others say you think you're better than the rest of us, but I say no. She's clever, is all. Doesn't belong in service, I say. Deserves more from life than washing other people's underpants, don't you, Tansy?'

Tansy didn't answer. She wasn't sure if Lorison was making fun of her. She knew she was no cleverer than most people. She didn't want to be in service, that was true. Even in well-paid service – and there was none better paid than service at the Palace of Arvestel, the seat of the Royal House, the heart of the Kingdom of Baltimar – you still had to take orders. You didn't own yourself; you weren't free.

'You got yourself one step nearer to that horse farm of yours tonight, my girl.' Lorison chuckled. 'Well, let's see it.'

Tansy swallowed. 'I – I ain't –'

Lorison's voice sharpened. 'You telling me you ain't got it?'

'I looked out every day –'

Lorison seized her arm and shook it. 'You didn't look hard enough. There must've been something come through the laundries. Ten days I gave you, there must've been *something!*'

There was an edge of panic in the older woman's voice. Tansy tried to shake herself free. 'Let go! It ain't my fault.'

'You think *she'll* care whose fault it is?' Lorison's grip tightened as thunder rumbled around them. 'She won't. It'll be my fault, and your fault, and we'll pay –'

'Who? Who's *she*?' Tansy tried to prise Lorison's fingers from her arm.

'Don't tell me you don't know. Bright girl like you, and you ain't guessed? You think I wanted all that stuff for myself? Who do you think we're working for, girl?' Lorison squeezed Tansy's arm. 'This is all for Madam, for the Witch-Woman.' She lowered her voice and glanced around at the looming shadows. 'For Lady Wanion.'

Tansy tried to back away. 'I don't believe you.'

'You better believe me, girl.' Suddenly Lorison was brisk and ruthless. She dragged Tansy toward the doorway. 'Come on. You can tell her yourself. I got no interest in your excuses. You can give your excuses to her.'

'What, *now*?'

'Madam does her business in the dark. She sleeps in the day, like a spider. She's busy now, doing what she does. Ready for visitors.'

'Let me go!'

'You going to scream?' sneered Lorison. 'No guard's going to come running for you, girl, not this time of night. Respectable girls oughta be in bed.'

'What about you, then?' Tansy had to half-run to keep up with Lorison.

'I got no need to worry. Madam protects me.'

Lorison tugged her round corners, up stairs and into a tangle of dim corridors crammed with objects. Tallboys leaned drunkenly against the walls; giant vases nestled beside mirrored sideboards laden with porcelain. From high brackets, carved lamps threw eerie shadows. Tapestries and curtains whispered in the draught, and behind the faint grumble of the thunderstorm came the chime of ancient clocks as they marked off the quarters of the night.

'You're hurting me!' said Tansy.

'Run faster then.'

There was no one about. At this time of night, feasts and concerts had ended; only rust parties gathered here and there in secret corners of the Palace. A group of addicts with their telltale twitches and red-stained nostrils would be seated around the paraphernalia of their drug: the tray, the knife, the sniff-pipe and the lamp. But the rust parties were quiet affairs. If they made any noise, Tansy didn't hear it.

Without warning, Lorison stopped in the shadow of a carved cabinet. 'Here's something not many in this place has ever seen,' she said, and she reached behind the cabinet to press on one of the wall panels. It swung open to reveal a set of stone steps that led down into the darkness.

'This is one of Madam's secret ways,' said Lorison with a hint of pride. 'They run all over the Palace, and out of it, if you know where to look.' She grabbed Tansy's hand and pressed it to the panel, and Tansy recoiled as her fingers traced the shape of a slender-legged spider carved into the wood.

'I'll get it tomorrow, I swear I will!' she whispered to Lorison. 'Don't take me to *her*.'

'Too late now.' Lorison pushed Tansy down the steps, and pulled the panel closed. Darkness engulfed them, and Tansy clutched at Lorison's arm.

'Are we going to the Pit? Lorison? We ain't going to the Pit?'

Lorison laughed, and tugged her forward. With relief Tansy realised that there were torches in these passages, but small, and far apart, with long stretches of suffocating dark between. Tansy was frightened of Lady Wanion, but she was even more frightened of being shut up alone in the dark, and she clung to Lorison's arm as they stumbled from one murky splash of light to the next, round corners, up and down stairs. Sometimes Lorison whispered, 'That way goes to the kitchens – that way leads right out to the picnic pavilion in the woods. Those steps go to the picture gallery. Madam's got her secret ways to everywhere in Arvestel.'

At last they halted before a low door studded with iron bolts. 'We're here,' whispered Lorison, and Tansy smelled the sour whiff of her fear. Lorison raised her knuckles and knocked, two quick raps and two slow.

'Enter,' came a voice from inside, and Lorison lifted the latch and shoved Tansy into the room.

Tansy had to stifle a cough in her sleeve. The enormous, dimly lit room was full of sweet, sickly smoke, and crowded with objects: cabinets with glass doors, boxes and crates of all sizes, tables piled with jars and vials. Just in front of Tansy and Lorison stood an immense bowl, waist-high. Its contents shimmered in the candlelight: water, or oil, or some kind of liquid. Surely it couldn't be – could it be *blood*?

Tansy recoiled, but Lorison pushed her forward. Now she could make out the figure of a woman, seated on a high, throne-like chair. There were candles behind the woman's head, so it was difficult to see her face. Tansy had an impression of a massive, squatting presence, like a toad. The woman's face was broad and flat, and her wide, thin-lipped mouth turned down. Her head was wound around with a silk turban, her eyes half-closed. The hands clutching at the arms of the chair were no more than withered claws, incongruously attached to the bulky body. The woman wore an embroidered robe of rich brocade, and huge jewelled earrings dragged the lobes of her ears almost to her shoulders.

'This is the girl I told you about, Madam. Tansy, the laundrymaid.' Lorison's voice squeaked with fear. She gave Tansy a vicious nudge, and whispered, 'Bow down to Madam!'

Tansy bowed so low she almost lost her balance. Everyone in Baltimar had heard tales about Lady Wanion. Tansy knew she was a witch; that she wove powerful, secret magic and prisoners were sent to her if they refused to co-operate: not just Renganis and Cragonlanders captured in the war, Baltimaran criminals too. Lady Wanion, they said, was very persuasive. One old soldier had told Tansy that Wanion *persuaded this one Gani's eyeballs clean out of his skull*. Tansy's stomach had lurched.

'I see it is the laundry-maid. Why have you brought her here?' To Tansy's surprise, the voice that issued from the toadlike mouth was deep and rich and full of music.

'She didn't do what she was told, Madam.'

'I see.' There was a pause; Tansy was too frightened to look up. She stared at the ground. Shadows slithered and scuttled at the edges of her vision.

'This is the girl who likes to ride horses, yes?'

'That's right, Madam,' said Lorison promptly. 'Every morning, since the start of spring, down to the stables she goes, rain or shine. She loves it, don't you, Tansy? Speak up, girl. Answer Madam when she talks to you.'

Tansy whispered, 'Yes, Madam.'

Wanion's taloned nail tapped softly on the arm of her chair. 'Perhaps Tansy does not understand that her mornings with the horses are my gift to her. Does she not wish to show her thankfulness?'

Tansy swallowed, unsure if she was supposed to reply, until Lorison dug her sharply in the ribs. 'Yes, Madam. Yes, I'm very grateful.' A lump rose in her throat. When Lorison had told her she could go to the stables before dawn and help with the horses, her miserable life at Arvestel had become worth living at last. Those precious times were the only happiness she'd known since she'd come here.

The low, musical voice filled Tansy's ears. 'I have given you a great gift, yes? A great gift. And in return, I asked this little thing only. One small task. Remind me what it was we asked of you. Perhaps you did not understand.'

Tansy's mouth was dry. 'You – Lorison asked me to, to steal something. A piece of clothes, from the laundries. Something grey.'

'Yes.' Wanion let out a long sigh. 'Yes. That is all. A small thing only. A stocking, a glove. Something worn next to the skin. Only this I asked of you, and the mornings with the horses would be yours for as long as you wished so long as you lived at Arvestel.' Wanion laughed, a warm, embracing laugh. Lorison gave a nervous snigger. 'And more than this I promised, yes? Gold, to buy whatever you wished, to buy horses of your own one day, and a farm to raise them?'

'Yes, Madam.' Tansy stared at the floor. She didn't care about the gold Lorison had promised as much as she cared about being near the horses.

Wanion gave another sigh, heavy with disappointment. 'You work in the laundries, yes? Washing and ironing, soaping and rinsing, starching and folding.'

'Yes, Madam.'

'Washing the dirty clothes of everyone in Arvestel, yes? The servants, the noble lords and ladies. Even the King's stockings are washed there, yes?'

'Not – not by me,' said Tansy, with a stab of confusion. Must she steal the King's clothes now?

'No, no, I do not ask you to interfere with the undergarments of the King.' Once again that rich, warm laugh filled the room. 'The token I asked for belongs to a boy. Not a Baltimaran noble boy, a foreigner. What is his name? Steer, Sneer? No – Skir, that is it. You have not heard of him, no?'

Tansy shook her head.

'No. You see how unimportant he is. But his clothes pass through the laundries, like everyone's, yes? You have seen them? All grey he wears, like a little mouse.'

Tansy opened her mouth, and closed it again. She *had* seen him, just once, last autumn, before her own rides began: he was the red-haired, skinny boy, about her own age. He'd been taking his first riding lesson, on a grey pony. He was hopeless – hands everywhere, no seat at all. Strange to think that she'd envied him then, envied him the fat docile pony. *Skir*. The name meant nothing to her. But yes, she had seen his clothes in the wash-troughs and on the drying-lines. No one else in Arvestel wore grey, grey, nothing but grey.

Wanion said, 'I see in your face that you do know him, that you know his clothes, yes? You must be careful, my dear. Your face is easy to read. So. You have seen this boy's clothes. Why is it you could not find even one grey sock or a glove or a vest?'

'I did look, Madam, truly I did. But there was nothing grey at all.'

‘Was it fear of the Pit that prevented you? Because you must know that the Pit belongs to me.’ Wanion laughed, and this time the laugh was not pleasant. ‘Those who do my bidding must have no fear of *that*, even for thieving.’

‘I – I’ll try again, Madam,’ said Tansy. ‘But you know how boys are. Likely he didn’t send nothing to the wash these last days. I got five brothers and they never –’

Lorison was pulling furious faces at her and she fell silent.

Wanion said heavily, ‘It is too late for that now.’

The room grew very still. Tansy heard the hiss of a lamp, and a faint whisper as the thick curtain behind Wanion shifted slightly in the draught. She wondered what lay behind that curtain. She felt sick from the perfumed smoke; she longed to run out of this too-hot, too-sweet room into the fresh night air.

‘I gave you a chance, yes, and you did not take it. Now I must ask another thing. Still a small thing, but not so easy. You must fetch for me something else. A lock of hair, a fingernail. You understand? Something that belongs to his *body*.’

Tansy gasped.

‘But Madam, how can I do that?’

‘You must find a way. You will find the token, and bring it to me. You have two days, no more. After that, I go back to the Fastness of Rarr, to my home. I must have the token before I leave. And, of course, no one must know about this, especially the boy himself. Do you understand? If you do this simple thing, then there are horses for you. To ride now; later, to own. But if you fail –’ Wanion sucked in her breath. ‘Do not fail,’ she said.