

## Chapter 1

### Le Début de l'Histoire

It is a time of famine, a time of hungering want that threatens to eat you from the inside out, leaving you good only to wait for the coming of death. And Death the Endless always comes.

It is before dawn, dark and silent. The corpses of the starving have been laid out on the cobblestones overnight, waiting for the carts to bear them away. The dead are wide-eyed, unhearing, uncaring, unafraid. They remind me of my sister, Azelma.

Azelma, who never cries, cried for two whole days. She wouldn't eat or sleep. I tried everything, even saying that Father was coming with two bottles of whisky in his belly and rage in his eyes. But she didn't move, unhearing, uncaring, unafraid.

She's finally stopped crying. For the last few hours she's been lying on her bed, staring into the distance. She won't answer me, won't even look at me. I think I prefer the crying.

Azelma used to wake me with a murmur of "*Viens, ma petite chatonne,*" and I'd lean into her warmth while she brushed my hair and helped me draw on my clothes.

Now I slip from the bed without her and change in the cold, putting on a dress that's getting too short. Giving my hair a few tugs with a hairbrush and teasing it into a lopsided braid. I splash my face with icy water poured from a heavy porcelain jug and sneak a look back at her. She's on her side, eyes open but seeing nothing.

The inn is quiet at this hour. I hesitate a moment longer, but she doesn't move, so I go downstairs and grab a pail, take a faded scarf from a peg by the door. The scarf is Azelma's and is too big for me, but the well is many streets away from the inn and the walk will be cold. I hate making the trip alone, in the darkness, but I must.

Outside, the freezing air burns my throat. I hasten to the well, trying not to look at the bodies I pass on the street. At the well I lower the pail and heave it back, full, my numb fingers straining with the weight of it.

The road back is treacherous, and with every cautious step my breath rises in clouds. With every breath I think of my sister, and the fear eats at my insides.

When I reach the inn, my shaking arms are relieved to put the bucket down. I pour some of the water into a pan and set it to boil, then look around. The floor needs mopping, even though that never keeps out the smell of spilled wine, and in the dim light, the main hall is a disarray of plates, empty tankards, and jugs; all need scrubbing.

I have dried hundreds of plates while Azelma flicked soapy bubbles at me. I duck and complain. She wrinkles her nose and tells me, "Kittens hate water."

I sigh and decide to start on the floor. The mop is heavy, and it makes my tired arms ache dreadfully, but I push it back and forth with vigor. Maybe if I can scrub away the stains, I can also scrub away the sickening feeling growing in the pit of my stomach.

*My sister, my sister.*

Last night Father said nothing when Azelma didn't emerge from her room for the third night in a row. It was as if he'd forgotten she existed. He hummed, drumming his fingers on the table cheerily. He even threw me a hunk of warm brioche, which was so unlike him that I couldn't bring myself to eat it. There's barely flour in the city for bread, let alone for brioche, so I don't know where he got it. My father is a thief; he's stolen many a shinier jewel or weightier gold purse than this scrap of dough. But what use are jewels or gold in a time of famine?

My stomach growled low and heavy at the scent of the pastry. But fear was gnawing at my bones worse than hunger, so I brought the bread to Azelma, and now it sits growing stale on a chipped plate beside her bed.

My hands are red and raw with cleaning, and there's a sheen of sweat on my brow, but still I shiver. If Azelma doesn't eat, she'll soon be lying with the corpses outside in the cold, waiting for the carter to pick her up. But she's not feverish, I checked; there's something else wrong with her, something dreadful. What's worse, I can't do anything to heal it. I feel like the kitten Azelma likens me to—tiny, fragile, batting my paws against the wind.

There's a sound at the top of the stair, and when I turn, Azelma is there: clothed, hair plaited, looking straight at me. I should be relieved, but her expression is unnerving.

"I'll finish up here," she says in a flat voice. "You need to find Femi."

I should be happy to drop the cleaning, but my fingers tighten around the mop handle, and I frown. Why should I get Femi Vano, the one they call the Messenger? He comes and goes as he pleases, whispering things in my father's ear. He speaks to Azelma in murmurs and makes her laugh. But it's not even dawn and the inn stands empty; Father is snoring in his bed. Why must I get Femi now? Can we not clean as we always do, side by side?

Azelma comes down the stairs and takes the mop from me. My sister has a way with words; her voice is soothing, like honey, and the customers like her for that, and because she's pretty, soft. But now, even hushed, her voice is dagger-sharp.

"Bring him around to the back, and tell no one. Do you hear me?"

I nod, reluctantly heading for the door.

Azelma always asks me if I have a scarf or reminds me I need a coat. She tells me to be careful and not to dawdle. But now she turns away, saying nothing. I don't know this hard girl. She's not my sister. She's something else, a hollow thing wearing my sister's face.

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I call Femi by whistling the way he taught me, and suddenly he appears, swooping down from nowhere.

"Kitten," he says with a low bow, but I've no time for his gallantries and drag him by the arm to the inn. Azelma looks at us dead-eyed and tells me to scrape the wax from the tables into the pot so we can melt it down for new candles. When she slips out the back door to speak to Femi, I tiptoe to the kitchen and climb onto the tall red stool I sit on to wash the dishes. I can just make out the tops of their heads through the window. They're standing pressed against the wall.

"He is coming for you" I hear Femi say.

A long silence follows. When Azelma speaks, her tone is bitter. "Father will bargain. He always does. While they are occupied, you must take her. They will not notice that she is gone."

"We can run." Femi's voice rises in desperation. "We can hide."

"Who has ever escaped him? How far do you think we'd get before he found us? Even if by some miracle we could escape now, we'd damn her if we brought her, for he will surely find us. And if we leave her behind, then who do you think will taste my father's rage? Have you thought who he might throw at Kaplan to appease him? Or to punish me?"

Azelma shakes her head, then turns to the window, as if she senses me watching. I duck so she won't see me.

"Whispers and sweet stories you have given me, Femi Vano," she says, and I lift my head in time to see her gently touch his cheek. "But words will fade where I am going. If I am lucky, I will not remember anything. Give me your oath in bone and iron that you will find a protector for her."

Femi raises his hand, and with a single gleaming movement of his knife, his opposite palm is marked by a long dark line as drops of blood begin to bead like black diamonds.

"My word, my blood," he says. "I give you my promise in bone and iron."

She rests her head on his chest, and her voice softens.

"Do you care for me?"

"You know that I do."

"Then do not cry for me," she says. "I am already dead."

"No, not dead. The dead, at least, are free. . . ."

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When Azelma comes back inside, her face is a mask. Femi trails behind her. Like his Maghrebi ancestors, who hailed from Northern Africa, he wears his thick hair in coiled braids. No matter the weather, he is always swathed in a heavy brown cloak streaked with rain marks and frayed at the edges, giving him the impression of having large folded wings. His dark skin is like burnished copper, his nose is slightly hooked, and his eyes burn fierce and golden—and right now, they are rimmed in red.

Azelma beckons to me. I take her hand; mine is small and hers is cold as she leads me back up the stairs to our room.

There are some old clothes laid out on the bed: boys' things, oversized and fifteenth-hand.

Her eyes travel over my thin frame unforgivingly. They pause at my face, studying me, as if looking for something. "*Dieu soit loué*, at least you're not pretty." Her voice catches.

She's right. Where Azelma is softness and curves, I'm bones and angles. The only thing we have in common is our olive skin, the legacy of the Algerian pied-noir woman who birthed us. When I was small and winter winds rattled the panes like vengeful spirits trying to get in, Azelma would put her soft arms around me and tell me stories. "What do you want to hear, little cat?" she would ask.

"Tell me about our mother."

Father says she was nothing but a rat for leaving us with him.

“The woman who birthed us is not our true mother,” Azelma would say. “Our mother is the City.”

But even I knew it was not the City that had gifted us our olive skin and raven hair.

Now Azelma’s gaze falls to the thick braid that I struggle to plait by myself. She reaches out and I go to her. She unties the braid with deft, gentle fingers and begins to brush.

“Our mother the City is not a merciful mother,” she says as she gathers my hair in one hand. “To be a girl in this city is to be weak. It is to call evil things down upon you. And the City is not kind to weak things. She sends Death the Endless to winnow the frail from the strong. You know this.”

I hear the sound before I realize what is happening: a sharp, shearing scrape. Then I feel a sudden lightness at the back of my neck. My eyes widen, but before I can say a word, a tail of dark hair lands softly at my feet. Azelma takes the shears to the rest of my hair, cropping it close to my scalp.

“Keep it short,” she says, and when she is done: “Take off that dress.”

I wonderingly obey, my hands trembling to undo the buttons she sewed on. She used to force me to stand like a statue, arms outstretched, while she fit one of her old dresses to my frame, her mouth full of bent, rusted pins. I always squeezed my eyes shut, afraid she would draw blood. She would laugh at me through pinched lips. “I’ve not pricked you yet, little kitten.”

I peel off the dress and hand it to her. I stand before her in a much-patched linen shift.

“That too.”

Fear and cold prick my skin.

“Hear my words, for they are all I have left to give. Wrap them around your flesh like armor. You may forget my face and my voice, but never forget the things I am telling you.”

“I won’t,” I say, trying not to tremble.

“Eat only enough to stay alive. You must get used to hunger so that it won’t break you. Stay small so you will fit into tight spaces and they will always have need of you.”

I want to ask her who “they” are and why they might need me, but her tone is solemn and my tongue is stuck to the roof of my mouth.

“No dresses anymore. Do not let men look at you with desire.” She wraps a length of gauzy cloth around my chest, binding it tightly, I can barely breathe.

“Wind bandages around any parts of you that are soft.”

She hands me an oversized pair of trousers so faded that no particular color could be ascribed to them. I pull them on quickly, and follow them with a large shirt.

“Wear clothes like a mask so no one will see you, do you understand? Wear them to hide your true face. You are not Nina the kitten, you are the Black Cat. Show your teeth and claws at every opportunity so they remember that you’re dangerous. Only then will you have won a small portion of safety. One shut eye’s worth of sleep.”

I tie up a pair of thick boots that have seen several owners and don a large cap that engulfs my small head.

“Father might have given me his silver tongue, but he gave you his sharp brain. You’re clever, Nina, and that is a weapon. You’re small and you’re quick, and those, too, are weapons.”

She grips my wrists and peers into my face.

“Be useful, be smart, and stay one step ahead of everyone. Be brave even when you’re afraid. Remember that everyone is afraid.”

I’m afraid now, of her. Of the two days of awful crying and the blank stares and the fire that burns in her usually gentle eyes. What has happened to my sister?

“When you think the darkness is coming for you, when you are small and frail and fear that our mother the City is trying to destroy you, you *must* not let her. Do you hear me? You must survive.”

“I w-will, I swear it,” I say, my voice trembling.

We go downstairs to where Femi Vano waits in a shadow.

“You’re to go with Femi and you’ll do what he tells you,” Azelma instructs me.

My heart races with fresh panic. “B-but I want to stay with you!”

This carved-out shadow of my sister bends and looks me in the eye. Her voice is hollow.

“Sometimes we must pay a terrible price to protect the things we love.”

I don’t understand what she means. There are a hundred questions I want to ask her, but I can’t find the words; they choke my throat as tears roll down my face. She ignores them.

“You must look after yourself now.”

She glances at Femi, her eyes like chips of ice.

“Take her, then.”

There’s no goodbye, no hug, no proclamation of her love for me. Instead, she pushes me away as if she doesn’t want me anymore.

“Zelle?”

She begins moving through the tables, cleaning.

“Zelle—” I start toward her, but Femi holds me back.

“*Hush.*” Worry laces his voice. He’s scared, and I don’t know why.

Then I hear it. Over the drumming of my own heart, I hear the crunch of boots on gravel, voices outside.

“Go now!” Azelma hisses.

Femi picks me up, pressing me to him, and I feel the fear thrumming through his bones and into mine.

He drags me to the kitchen, away from Azelma, who for the barest second throws an anguished look at us over her shoulder. Then she turns away and straightens her spine. Her head is held high; her hands make fists at her sides.

I start to call her name, but Femi's hand clamps hard across my mouth.

"Thénardier!" A roar from the front of the inn splits the silence, a growling, penetrating command. Femi freezes. I hear clumping and thumping overhead; the shout seems to have stirred Father from his slumber. I marvel that whoever has come has been able to wake him from the stupor of a drunken sleep with one word.

Femi dares a glance out the window, his eyes darting back and forth as he checks the yard for anyone standing there.

I hear the front door open.

I hear the honeyed but unsteady tones of my very hungover father from the top of the stairs, the uncertainty in his voice. "Lord Kaplan?"

The visitor has entered, while in the shadow of the kitchen, Femi inches us silently toward the back door as quietly as possible.

"Forgive me," my father continues. "I did not think you would see to this trifling matter yourself."

"A trifling matter, Master of Beasts?" the voice growls back, seeming to rattle the very roof of the inn. "Do you forget who I am? Do you forget how I came to be? I wanted to see if you would actually do it—if even a man like you would truly sell his own kin."

*Sell his own kin?* Understanding strikes me like a fist, leaving me winded.

*Azelma . . . Father is going to sell Azelma?*

"I've twelve gold coins here, Thénardier."

"Twelve . . .," Father echoes, but his voice is considering, wheedling. A rage wells in me because I know that tone: he's doing what he always does. He's actually *bargaining*, this time for a better price for his own daughter.

I bite down on Femi's hand, but he doesn't loosen his grip, and with a last fumble at the door he drags me out into the night.