WITCHES STEEPED IN GOLD

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In loving memory of Megan Smart
and Sandra Lawson
And for you, mum, whose championing
melody never wavered



PART I

PLAY FOOL TO CATCH THE WISE



1

JAZMYNE

Though the night is flush with stars, the sky still seems like a lid of earth closing atop a grave.

It's a fate that could be mine, should anyone see me sneaking from my home at this hour—a fate reserved for criminals and traitors, rebels and liars. Not me, the doyenne's emissary.

Even if I am most of those things.

Ever watchful, the palace's hulking shadow looms across the Parade Court, dogging my nervous tread to the sweet-scented fruit grove where, as promised in the missive that drew me out of bed, my sand-prowler is tethered. In pursuit of blood eaters, Joshial bows a tree trunk with his weight as he flicks his whip of a tongue out.

At the sight of me, he jumps back to the grass on four thick scaled legs. Straining against his leash, he's more of a hound than a monster-size lizard. Cooing, I scratch the underside of his chin before mounting. There's no time to retrieve a saddle.

Who knows which eyes watch from the windows.

Adjusting my hood, I bend low against Joshial's wide neck. "Run fast for me tonight," I whisper. Always the loyal companion, he half sprints, half leaps, taking us away from the palace via the unguarded temple drive, and into a tangle of bush that conceals our descent into the sleeping parish streets at the base of the estate's mount.

We enter Ol' Town at a breathless gallop. In the day, it's a bustling street market. This late, no magi congregate to gossip, their musical patwah mingling with peppery jerk spice and opiate smoke. The slowing click of Joshial's claws on stone is the sole sound as we bear down upon the destination dictated in the missive. Wedged between vacant neighbors, and down a side street I'd never enter in the day, the building's windows are either shattered or boarded up; dark puddles, too murky to reflect light from fading witchlight lamps, seep before it, and trampled detritus litters its doorway—where a buguyaga slumps, blanketed in filthy rags. I guide Joshial right up to the snoring witch; his giant pink tongue unfurls and gives the side of her face a good lick.

"Cha!" Abandoning all pretense of sleep, Anya scrubs a filthy sleeve across her cheek. "When will you teach that beast some manners, mon?" Beneath her mucky camouflage, the toasted almond color of her skin is flushed with annoyance; it contrasts against wisps of straight silver hair peeking out from beneath her hood. "And why are you so late?"

"Wahan to you too. Whoever left the missive didn't wake me."

Straightening, she swaps her disaffection for the better-

fitting militance of her Stealth métier. “I’ll have a word with whichever fool was assigned. Some of the newer recruits could do with having more respect for our discipline.” And who better to teach them than her, the best magically trained shadow I know.

“Can you keep Joshial with you?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “I’m on duty with the first battalion tonight, not the resistance.”

Of course. At nightfall the magicless second battalion is replaced by those with magic.

“I’m undercover, obviously, but others in uniform are also making rounds. You’d better take your familiar inside before he licks the wrong face.”

I look at the building’s entrance, and nerves twist in my belly. Away from the palace I can no longer hide behind my mask of political envoy, a professional fence-sitter. In the meeting that waits inside, I’m part of a resistance working against the very structure I serve, and they have a question for me tonight. My answer won’t please us both.

“You’ll be fine as long as you remember to duck when the time calls for it,” Anya says, knowing my expressions almost as well as she knows her own.

We two are bottom and bench. But while she might not fear the aim of Light Giver, the moniker bestowed to the grizzled resistance founder, my cheek smarts at the memory of the last time one of her slippers caught me in the face.

“Now go. I’ll come find you later.”

Joshial takes the entrance sideways, climbing onto the wall with whatever adhesive his clawed feet provide. I leave him

in an empty room just off the doorway with plenty of dead insects to devour before venturing on. The building is a trap of endless corridors dimly lit by the soft glow of overhead witchlight orbs. It isn't a safe house I've been in before, which isn't unusual. The resistance changes location often to avoid detection. They all have the same feel to them, though: damp neglect undercut by a fetid heat—one that licks at my neck, my brow, and only encourages the creeping sense of unease working its way through my limbs.

I am not a liar by nature, but tonight I must sell the sky to magi who know it's free.

The resistance has tired of our leader, our doyenne. In the beginning, along with the rest of our order, they admired her decisions. Praised their bloom in the garden of her rule. But as time has passed, certain choices she's made have rankled, caused them to question how well they suit the spiritualism of our order. Enough that the resistance is prepared to prune the garden she's cultivated until it is barren, and she is no more.

I need to persuade them that she can change, that such extreme action is unnecessary, even as they hone their tools and discuss attack.

Soon snatches of patwah sound from behind a vast sliding metal door, but it's too quick for me to catch. I linger long enough to straighten my shoulders and fix a look of cool professionalism to my face before drawing the handle back. The door creaks awkwardly upon opening; behind, a small party of fourteen or so Alumbrar, now silent, turn to see who's entering. *Be measured. Be steady*, I will myself. Light Keeper

is seated on a stool at the head of their gathering, straight-backed and formidable as any elder. Her eyes narrow.

"You're late, Emissary." Her tobacco-rough croak is full of reproach.

"The missive was late," I correct. Lowering my hood frees my silver afro of curls. Here it is a currency, a marker that I'm one of them. "Please, continue."

She watches me a moment longer, weighing up the trajectory of her aim and my distance, I'm sure, before her eyes, as dark as coal and just as incendiary, dart back to the standing speaker. "You heard her."

Nodding in acknowledgment at the attendees, I make my way to the back of the gathering while the witch I interrupted launches back into her report about numbers. This meeting is smaller than others I've attended, and yet not a single face is familiar to me. I'm again reminded of the size of this resistance and the power of its anonymity—the Nameless, as they titled themselves long before I joined, aren't as concerned with flaunting their membership as they are with the protection of our order from a leader sure to destroy us.

One they mean to kill.

My fists curl around the cotton fabric of my cape, scrunching up the delicate kaftan beneath. Remaining on the fence will make the upcoming conversation difficult, but not impossible. I have to believe that as the witch ends her spiel and Light Keeper turns her attention to me.

"What news do you have about the Yielding?" Our Aiycan accent is a song, like the music from cicada and cricket, but

from her lips it's flat. Hard. "Last I heard, the Witches Council is still foolish enough to plan for it to go ahead."

"That's correct."

Murmurs of displeasure, annoyance, ripple across the room. I am not ignorant to their vexation. The Yielding, a sacrificial rite, sees seven pickney all about my age, on the cusp of inheriting their magic, compete for the honor of being offered to the Supreme Being in ritual sacrifice. It's necessary to provide the guzzu of protection wrapped around the island, an enchantment that keeps us safe from once-allied islands who have always craved the power imbibed in the mountains and rivers here, the earth and bush. But it's also the biggest blight in our order's history. The nature of Alumbrar isn't to kill. At least, it wasn't before the rite.

"But," I continue, raising my voice slightly, "there has been more discussion than ever before about the Yielding's merit now we've displayed our strengths to those who thought us weak, as well as facing so little threat from Obeah insurgents."

Light Keeper frowns. "Unfortunately, that's not a cancellation. I know how you feel about the decision to assassinate Doyenne Cariot, Emissary, but a *discussion* is not good enough after we've imparted our request through protests, missives, and she remains unmoved. Her lack of malleability isn't something we can afford to ignore any longer. Not this close to another Yielding announcement."

"If we wait until then, I'm sure she'll make the right decision."

Though I project confidence—I've been practicing in the mirrors in my rooms—resistance members exchange glances,

and sweat builds anew between my shoulder blades. Some of my order shake their heads in pity at me, the fool they believe can't see her master is a monster. They truly think I'm turning a blind eye to a witch who has killed countless pickney throughout the years to ensure our order remains in power. But how could I be when they know that number includes my only sister?

Death isn't the answer, it's the problem here.

"If we assassinate her," I ask, challenging them now, "how are we any better? How will this island be less bloody *after* her than it was *before* her, when she earned her seat killing the last ruler too?"

The wrinkled skin around Light Keeper's mouth draws tight.

"The Ascension Festival is just six nights away," I push. "A mere moon phase—and when it comes, the moon will be New. A purifying blessing from the Supreme Being for our entire order, a chance to reflect and grow. It's the perfect time for the doyenne to announce a resurgence. One without the Yielding." My voice softens. "We should have faith."

Alumbrar are Healers, scholars, cerebrals, Artisans. We are not killers. The doyenne can remember that, if she's given the time. The resistance *should* remember that.

"Your faith is commendable, Emissary," Light Keeper says, her words chewed out slowly. "And you're right to exercise caution, to protect Alumbrar virtue. It's what will make you a better leader than the one we currently have. But know this." Her eyes narrow into a look as foreboding as the sky I left outside. "If the doyenne doesn't renounce the Yielding during the

festival, indefinitely, she will be put down. And you need to be prepared to say goodbye when the time comes."

I swallow. Her message doesn't go unmissed.

The resistance will make their peace with ridding the island of a tyrannical leader with ease, but my relationship with the doyenne has always been more involved. She's not just the leader I work for—she's the witch who gave birth to me.

"Emissary?" Light Keeper pushes. "Do you understand?"

Should the doyenne be stopped? Yes. Replaced? Definitely.

Killed?

Regardless of what she's done, she gifted me with life. I've struggled to endorse her assassination; though it's not sentiment alone that stays my hand. Ours isn't a relationship where she combs my afro at night, or I turn to her with my problems. She is my tutor. If she dies, I ascend. And I'm . . . not ready. A secret I can't tell the Nameless, not when they're looking to me as they are now, with pity, doubt, questions. Not when I *want* to lead, in time.

Sitting on the fence cannot cost me the respect of my people.

"Emissary Cariot, your answer?"

I inhale. "I'll be ready."

It's a harmless lie. This island, Aiyca, has been ruled by my family for a decade, and will be for at least a decade more. Nothing will bring about the Yielding this year, I guarantee it.