

Chapter 2

Repercussions

By Michelle Pichette

Bonte Torrence stood before his son's funeral byre one hand resting on the House Standard draped over the casket. The black raven sitting in the middle of the blue cloth had always stood for Torrence eyes being everywhere, watching everyone and everything like ravens do. As Bonte's fingers ran across the fabric bird, it was just another carrion feeder, just another reminder that his son was dead. He hadn't been able to look at his son's face, not since he'd been found on the dock, somewhere he should have never been, doing something that he should have never done.

"What were you thinking, Lerin? How could you have betrayed us all this way?" he murmured, closing his hand into a fist and pounding it lightly on the casket. Bonte

lowered his head and closed his eyes, wondering if he could have stopped this somehow, if he'd listened more closely, if he'd made a point of being a larger part of Lerin's life, if he'd been a better father. In the end, Bonte found himself to blame for what had happened. He had cost his son his life and now he stood ready to pay the price for what Lerin had done.

"Torrence," came a deep voice from behind him. He did not look at the speaker. He knew the owner of that voice was not alone and he knew what they were here for.

"Out of respect for my family, I ask that we not do this here," Bonte said quietly.

"Your son has brought us to the brink of catastrophe, Torrence, and I, for one, will not bandy words about it."

Bonte turned and glared at Morsin Dorlan, who had just spoken. Dorlan's House, that of the Bear, had never been on friendly terms with the House of the Raven. "Dorlan, we agreed..." Leha Nish started in a quiet but scolding tone.

"No, *we* did not agree. You and your cronies decided what you wanted to do about this potential catastrophe and tried to force your will on the rest of us," Aarrick Denkire snapped. Another House heard from, Bonte thought bitterly, wondering if they were going to get back to him any time soon or just keep arguing amongst themselves.

That was when the Eagle House's head, Mir Toth, stepped forward, making a calm motion with both hands. "Please, this bickering is getting us no where and we have enough problems as it is." She bowed her head briefly to Bonte and offered him a apologetic grimace. "Bon, this can't wait. You know that this can't wait," she said far more softly as she looked directly into his eyes. Bonte nodded, lowering his head and wondering again if this might not have happened if he'd been a better father. Mir laid a hand on his upper arm and squeezed it gently, letting him know that he had one friend left in the world at least.

"No, it can't and we're wasting precious time," Dorlan snarled. "We have to decide how

the Houses are going to respond when the people find out about the theft of the Medallion..."

"They will not find out," came a firm declaration from the sacristy door. The interruption was unexpected, for all eyes turned to the back of the chapel. The Celestine monk that stood there had total silence for his next statement. "The Houses will not, in any way, interfere in this matter, or they will face the wrath not of the people, but of the Church."

For a few moments, there was silence, then several of the House heads began to sputter angry protests. Bonte watched the monk, who didn't seem at all impressed with the display going on before him. In fact, the man was so calm, Bonte wondered if he knew something that the rest of them didn't.

Bonte was painfully aware of many of the facts. His son had stolen the Medallion of Saint Celeste from the basilica two nights ago. The Abbot had awoken him after midnight to inform him of the theft. Bonte had been furious upon hearing the news, not understanding what had possessed the boy and ready to impress his displeasure on him. He had been searching for Lerin along with the rest of his staff when he had been found murdered on the docks early the next morning. Since then, Bonte had been numb, so many unanswered questions about what had happened running circles through his mind that he couldn't concentrate. Maybe the monk had some of the answers he sought. Maybe Mother Church had more information that she had yet imparted to him.

The monk let the people around him fuss and fume for a few minutes, then held up a hand for silence. It came, a little to Bonte's surprise, and the monk said, "The Church will not indulge in discussion on the matter. The Medallion will be back on display for vespers tomorrow. That is all any of you or anyone else needs to know. Return to your homes and speak no more of this. There was no theft. The Medallion has never left the confines of the tabernacle," he declared calmly. There were a few more protests and accusing fingers were pointed at Bonte, but the monk would hear none of it, growing visibly irritated as they persisted. "You should all be ashamed. Do you have no respect for the dead?" the monk demanded, nodding to the bier on which Lerin's coffin lay. "Leave and pray to the Saints that he doesn't give you as little peace as you have given him and his innocent father. Go!" He lifted a hand to point their way out of the chapel, his face threatening heaven's wrath if they argued further.

Bonte's visitors shuffled away, some having the good grace to look shamed at the monk's words. "I will return to offer my condolences to your wife at a more respectable hour. Be well, Bonte," Mir whispered, then kissed him softly on the cheek before she turned and trailed the others out the door. He watched her go, tired and somewhat numb now that the assault was over.

"Baron Torrence, may I speak with you?" the monk's voice came again from behind him. Bonte turned back to face him, worried what the man would say, though his tone had not been hostile when he had just spoken. "I want you to know, the Church holds no ill will toward your House, Baron. Still, I must ask, have you any idea how the other Houses came to know of what happened?"

Bonte raised an eyebrow at him. "I assumed that your Order or the Abbot informed

them.”

The monk shook his head. “No. The Abbot was wrong to have been brusque with you about the matter and he has been spoken to by the head of my Order. I wonder, Baron, do you know the story of the Medallion of Saint Celeste? The whole story? No, of course not. It’s something I doubt has been recounted much outside the Celestine Order. After all, we don’t want the people to get the wrong idea about us.” The monk smiled softly and Bonte became rather confused.

“I know that shortly before her death, the revered Saint gave her medallion to the founder of your Order so that he could carry on her healing work.”

“That is... mostly true. The fact of the matter is, our Founder stole the medallion from her and after she had healed him of the plague. He didn’t get far before his conscience made him return to Celeste and confess his crime. She must have known her time was near, because she told him to keep it and carry on her work. He did. He founded our Order and we do our best to care for the sick to this day. I’m sure you understand why our Order is, perhaps, a bit more forgiving of theft than most people,” the monk explained to Bonte.

“But, if you have the Medallion back already, you must know who murdered Lerin,” Bonte said quickly.

The monk shook his head, looked a bit embarrassed, saying, “Baron, I would much like to ease the burden your heart carries at the moment, but my Order guards many secrets. Too many, perhaps. This is another of those secrets. The Medallion is where it belongs. The Abbot is furious because he knows no more than you. He believes we traded the Medallion for our silence as to who the ultimate recipient was. He enjoys court intrigue and scandal far too much, so being denied the identity of this individual is good penance for him.”

Bonte took in what the monk was saying and it spun through his exhausted mind leaving him with one conclusion. His son was murdered for nothing and he still didn’t know who had killed him or why. Had the murderer seen even then that the theft would come to naught? Had he simply thought to be rid of the boy now that he had what he wanted? Had the two of them argued over something once the deed was done? The Torrence House had some of the best spies and information mongers in the world, so how was it that Bonte did not know the things that he most needed to know now. He doubted he would ever know the truth. Bonte lowered his eyes and shook his head. “I just don’t understand how this came to happen. I don’t understand why my son did this. Why he would...”

A hand came to rest on his shoulder and he looked up from the floor into the monk’s kind eyes. “We all hear the voice of temptation, Baron. Lerin was young and, from what I’m told, not a sort of person that would have taken the Medallion for its material worth. Someone told him something, got him to believe that the Medallion would serve some higher purpose in their hands or I’m sure he never would have done what he did. The person or persons who lured your son down this path will meet with justice, if not in this life, in the next and they will gain no benefit from what they now have. Your son’s soul is at peace, for neither my Order nor the Saint

herself hold any ill will against him. I know that is little comfort to you, but it is the truth.”

Bonte nodded to the man’s words and gently clasped his arm. “Thank you, Father. My family has put you to considerable trouble. You owed me no explanation and no reassurances.”

“I have taken an oath to ease suffering where I can and you your family have been more than kind with donations to my Order and our work, Baron,” the Monk replied. “If you would like to talk further on this or anything else that troubles you, please feel free to seek me out at the Monastery. My name taken name is Brother Grai.”

“I can see our great Lady working through you, Brother Grai. You are welcomed in my House at any time,” Bonte told the monk sincerely, squeezing his arm again before releasing his grip.

Grai offered Bonte a sheepish smile. “Yes, well, I should go. I have many things to attend to yet this night.” He turned and started to go, then paused at the Sacristy door, glancing back. “Baron, please don’t think me overly inquisitive, but how did the other Houses come to know of the theft of the Medallion?”

Bonte hadn’t had a moment to give that point any thought. “The Abbot, I suppose.”

“No. The Abbot would not have done that. He did not want a panic. You know about the outbreak of the withering disease in the north. Many feel that the Medallion has protected our lands from it,” Grai said, his face growing grave. “Be careful, Baron. Perhaps there are spies not in your employ in your House.” With that, the monk stepped through the door and vanished into the dark beyond it.

Bonte felt suddenly cold. How had the other Houses come to know of the theft and his son’s involvement? He had thought he could trust his household staff implicitly, but doubts began to assail him. Many of the other Houses would have been well pleased to see his brought low over this matter. Was that what had been behind this all along? Lerin would never have contributed willingly to such a scheme, would he? No, Bonte dismissed the notion. Lerin was guileless to the point of being naive, another thing Bonte should have taken steps to correct. But he hadn’t, bringing him back to his previous thoughts of culpability.

How had the other Houses known, then, he thought as he closed his tired eyes for a moment. So many questions with no ready answers, Bonte thought with growing apprehension as he looked back at his son’s body. He wondered if his son’s murderer had been in this very room tonight. “Oh, Lerin. What were you caught up in? You probably never fully knew,” Bonte murmured as he touched his son’s cold hand finally, the forgiveness he had been unable to muster earlier flowing from him as he did.

Bonte let his hand drop, then turned to go. He had much to discuss with his wife and remaining children, much to puzzle out. This was only the beginning, he thought with a shiver. How much more would he lose to this intrigue before it ended, Bonte thought with a deep sigh as he closed the Chapel door behind him.