

A Fate of Wrath & Flame by K.A. Tucker - Sample

A
FATE
OF
WRATH
&
FLAME

K.A.TUCKER

Prologue

1739

“It is time for me to die.” Sofie’s delicate hands slid up Elijah’s chest to slip behind his neck.

“And if you are wrong ...” Unable to finish the sentence, his voice trailed off.

“I am *not* wrong!” she snapped. The copper-haired spitfire was always quick to temper.

He pulled away and moved to stand at a nearby window, to gaze upon the bustling nightlife beyond the castle walls. Rarely did he envy the commoners. Tonight, though, as he watched horse-drawn carriages roll along cobblestone streets, shuttling passengers home from frivolous celebrations and too much ale so they could hump their partners with reckless abandon, his jaw tightened with resentment. Why couldn’t his problems be so trivial?

Briefly, Elijah allowed his attention to stray to the square where the pyres beneath the charred remains of three women still smoldered. It had been the largest culling in the region yet, the flames stoked by the bishop in his fervent quest to save humanity from witchcraft. This time, the church cited the plague of vole that ravaged the year’s harvest as evidence of these women’s guilt. Next time, they would find proof of Satan’s wicked hand in a contagion that stole children, or a flood that drowned crops.

There was more truth to it than the portly bishop realized. But Elijah knew the church was motivated not by rooting out the cause of evil as much as its bid to maintain power in a time when a new house of worship was rising.

And this lunacy was spreading.

As Count of Montegarde, Elijah's influence over the church was limited. Still, he could have stopped today's massacre. He could have slipped into the yawning shadows of the bishop's residence and snapped the neck of that sanctimonious prick leading the charge. But his untimely death would only stir inquiry and embolden the masses. Another would quickly ascend into his place, more women would perish atop a bed of flames, and soon attention would turn to these stone walls and the peculiar nobility who arrived overnight, staking claim.

From there, the whispers of heresy and evil would grow legs and teeth. It would be only a matter of time before a frenzied mob congregated outside the gates with pitchforks and swords, and Elijah and Sofie were forced to flee like rodents, to start anew elsewhere.

He knew this pattern well. He had lived it in one form or another many times over.

And so Elijah sat idly by within his comfortable castle and listened to the shrieks of the women as they burned.

Sofie glided over to his side and lifted a finger to push a stray lock of hair off his forehead. "I cannot exist like this anymore, hiding in the shadows and waiting for certain doom."

"Do not worry about those zealots, my love."

"Adele did not worry, and look what happened to her," she reminded him somberly of her dearest friend who relocated to London, whose charred corpse Sofie wept beside last spring. He needed no reminding, though. That night, alight with raw fury, Sofie had razed the abbey responsible for Adele's death, including its occupants, with nothing more than a flick of her wrist. In all his years on this earth, Elijah had never seen such power. It was both awe-inspiring and terrifying.

He had quickly ferried her sapped body away before too many witnesses could place her at the slaughter. Still, the last messages received from abroad were worrisome. The Casters'

Guild knew Sofie was behind the massacre and sought severe penance for her sedition.

Meanwhile, the humans hunted for a witch with hair the color of the devil's flame. Already, four victims matching her description had perished for her crime.

He could not fault Sofie for avenging Adele's death. The two shared a childhood of dashing along Paris's narrow passageways between lessons, and later, youthful nights dancing through the streets, enchanting suitors as much with their alluring beauty as their mettle. Sofie's heart was ardent and her loyalty eternal. Unfortunately, when wounded, her emotions engulfed her need for self-preservation.

Elijah sighed. "Adele was not careful. Besides, I would never allow any harm to come to you."

"And what of time? Will you stop that too?" Sofie knew where to aim her words to inflict the sharpest ache. "The madness calls to me even now, at this very moment. I do not know how much longer I can deny answering it."

He flinched, dropping his gaze to the majestic oak in the courtyard garden, dressed for autumn, a scant breeze rustling its golden leaves. Winter's bite hinted in the air. It would arrive within a fortnight, stripping the tree's beauty and imposing rest upon the earth. Sofie despised that long, dreary period, but Elijah found comfort in the visible passage of time.

Beneath that leafy canopy was to be Sofie's burial spot, if their fortunes did not change, though his preference was the crypt under the chapel where he could better guard her remains.

Would she even survive long enough to see the first snowfall?

It was unfathomable to him that this woman, not three decades old, with the glowing complexion of youth and childish wildness flowing through her veins, would soon slip from his grasp. But he knew this madness she spoke of was true. He had seen it take hold of another like

her, many years ago, leaving nothing but a mumbling shell of the impressive elemental she once was, her hair chalk-white and sparse, her eyes worthless, her powers impotent. She passed her days as a prisoner of the guild, reciting nonsensical musings that the scribes recorded as prophecy.

Though he didn't want to admit it, Elijah had begun to see worrisome signs in Sofie—listless stares, volatile mood swings, unintentional incantations that escaped her tongue. He could not bear to see Sofie become a husk of the vibrant woman he adored.

Of course, she had no plan to allow that to happen.

A man stumbled out of a tavern and fell to the ground in a drunken heap, directly in the path of two draft horses. Elijah's eyes widened, the idea of witnessing someone trampled to death lifting his spirits. At least that human's problem might rival his own tonight. He gripped the stone ledge in anticipation, watching the beasts' hooves plodding toward the man's limp body, seconds away from squashing his head as if it were a ripe melon. At the last moment, two men grabbed him by the heels and dragged him to safety. The horses cantered on into the night.

Damn those good Samaritans.

Elijah scanned the streets for another person in a predicament worse than his own, knowing the chances were slim. His attention landed on a young couple in the midst of a lovers' quarrel, one that quickly escalated from shouts and hand gestures to a swift knee to the man's groin. The growing crowd of spectators erupted in laughter as the young man crumpled, writhing in pain. Despite his bitter mood, Elijah chuckled.

Sofie was not to be deterred, though. "Malachi has answered me, and we *must* act in haste. You have delayed this long enough."

“When the guild finds out, they will kill us on principle,” he warned, as he had many times before. They had forbidden such perilous summons for good reason—an accord that had brought about peace after centuries of war between the casters and the immortals.

“What is done is done.” Her face was a mask of grim certainty. “*If* they find out, they may punish me. But if we don’t do this, I am dead either way.”

“And I shortly thereafter.” His eyes flickered to the ground beneath the oak tree once again. If she was wrong, the gravedigger would be burrowing two holes in that soil by the morn, for without Sofie, there was no point for Elijah to continue.

But he was not ready to say farewell yet. “One more sunset.” Surely, this madness that loomed behind those emerald eyes would allow for that?

Sofie didn’t respond immediately. When she did, it was with the sharpness of a well-honed blade. “Very well.” The silk layers of her evening gown rustled noisily as she stalked toward the door.

Before she reached it, Elijah was across the room, his hand barring her exit. “You cannot ask it of anyone else.” She knew it, and yet the way she stared back at him, her eyes blazing in defiance, he feared she would act foolishly.

She set her chin with determination. “Then you must trust me.”

“It is not *you* I don’t trust.” He could not shake this terrible sense of foreboding. “When has Malachi ever granted anyone what they wanted without demanding *everything* in return?” Of all the fates, the Fate of Fire especially was not known for his compassion, but for his ruthlessness and pride. It had always been this way.

And yet Sofie had decided *he* was the one to beseech.

Elijah was furious when she first revealed that she had bound herself in servitude to him. It could never be undone.

“But I am a chosen one. Malachi’s flame runs through *my* veins.”

He sighed with forced patience. Sofie was young and arrogant, her faith in those who had given her immense power unwavering. She had not yet felt their wrath.

Her fingertips traced the outline of his jaw, beckoning him to meet her stare. “If we do nothing, then I am soon gone. I would rather die tonight than lose my hold on this world tomorrow. But I *will not* die. *You* will not die. Malachi has assured me of that much,” she insisted, smiling up at him. “And we will handle whatever repercussions should arise. *Together.*”

She exuded such confidence. He desperately wanted to believe her. There was a reason she was both revered and reviled within the guild. Her powers were unparalleled in this world.

And while those powers would slip away from her eventually, she was willing to sacrifice them *all* this night for an eternity with him, a truth not lost on Elijah.

“You are insufferable, woman.” There was no hint of anger in his tone.

“Yes, but I will be *your* insufferable woman, for always.”

He collected her hand in his, bringing it to his mouth to press his lips against the smooth white stone of her wedding ring. He ended the gesture with another sigh, and they both recognized it for what it was—surrender. Elijah would not delay this any longer.

Pulling away from him, Sofie glided to the expansive bed, where they had spent many nights tangled within each other’s limbs. A single candle burned on a nearby table, the only source of light in the chamber but one that glowed bright and permeated the air with the sweet aroma of honey.

He watched with growing arousal as she shed her gown and undergarments until only a canvas of bare skin remained. With a mischievous smile, she mounted the bed and knelt provocatively, her ample breasts heaving with each breath. He could sense her pounding heart, the headiness of her exhilaration. She had implored the fate—drawing on her powers until she'd drained every ounce—and he had heeded her call as the foreboding hour chimed.

“Perhaps these humans are right about their Christian beliefs and *you* are their devil, here to tempt them,” he teased as he approached her. A nude and eager Sofie was impossible to resist, no matter how dire the circumstance—a fact she well knew.

“Then surely they should never cross me.” She reached for his breeches.

“And is *this* a requirement of the invocation?”

“This is *my* requirement. A toll, if you will.” Her fingers moved deftly over the hook and eyes, undressing him with haste. Soon, his clothing lay in a heap next to her silk gown.

They made love with their usual fervor, until their skin glistened, and their heavy breaths tangled, and their cries surely carried through the castle for the household to titter about come morning.

When they were both sated, Sofie swept the damp hair away from her neck, beckoning him forward. “May the fates be merciful,” she whispered, peering up at him through unguarded eyes. They hinted at the same trepidation that consumed him.

He leaned in to inhale her intoxicating scent of rosewater, more potent after their exertion. “If not here, then in Za’hala.” That was a fool’s dream, for it was doubtful his kind would ever pass into that hereafter, but it was a dream worth wishing for. He scraped his teeth against her delicate skin—merely a harmless act of seduction in the past. This time, however, she arched her back, enticing him with the rush of blood that surged through her veins.

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Sofie blinked away the fog of unconsciousness while staring at the dense velvet canopy draped above. Murky daylight glimpsed through the window, casting shadows in the bedchamber. Church bells tolled, announcing early service in the village. The faint, sweet scent of smoke and honey lingered in the air.

She smiled, the crushing fear of failure lifting from her chest. She had succeeded.

Weakness weighed down her limbs. Elijah said that would be the case. But already, she sensed that she was changed. Within her body a new heart thumped, slow and steady. This was a new dawn for her. Fates willing, she would see countless more with love and friendship at her side.

“Elijah?” she croaked, her throat raw with thirst. She pawed the mattress beside her, searching for his formidable shape. “It worked. We did it.”

Silence answered.

She turned to the side and found the bed vacant. It was odd that he would abandon her on this morning of all mornings, but perhaps he had gone to fetch breakfast from the staff. He knew how she enjoyed her first meal in bed, and he was always eager to please her. Though, she supposed her meals might look different, especially in these early days.

She could still sense that innate spark deep within her core flickering in idle wait. Another oddity, given she had tendered her power to Malachi in exchange for this new, immortal form. She tried to call it forth now, but she was too weak, and the magic remained where it was, out of reach. Or perhaps it was now simply a phantom from her past life, a missing limb that tricked its owner by feeling whole.

The burn in her throat was unbearable. Elijah had said she would need to feed quickly to quell the discomfort and build her strength, and that he would be here to guide her through it. So where was he?

She heaved herself out of bed.

The sight of Elijah's naked body in a heap on the rug stole her breath.

She dove for him to give his shoulder a waking shake. "Elijah!" she called out in vain, her dread rising. His skin was chilled beneath her fingertips. Something was not right. His kind did not collapse like this.

Using whatever strength she could muster, she rolled him over.

She gasped at what stared back. "No, no, no ..." She cupped his cheeks within her shaky palms. Gone were the soulful brown eyes that reminded her of lush soil after a heavy rainfall. In their place was a vacuous gray haze. "Elijah!" She shook his limp body violently, even though she already suspected it was useless.

On instinct, she closed her eyes and called to her powers again. This time they rose to the surface, uninhibited. Malachi had not taken them after all. She couldn't worry about what that meant at the moment, though, as she sent probing tendrils into Elijah's still form, searching for answers.

Her heart stirred with hope at the image that materialized. He was alive, wandering through a thick, endless fog. "Elijah!"

"Sofie?" His voice echoed in the void, her name laced with fear.

"I see you!" she cried, willing him to hear her.

With a gut-wrenching scream of pain, he crumpled to the misty ground. The image vanished from her mind, slicing off their connection.

“No!” she wheezed, flowing her magic through him once more. This time it recoiled the instant it touched him, fizzling to ash. Again and again, she tried to reach him, until no more would rise to her call, her powers exhausted.

She let her forehead fall against his chest as she wailed in despair. Her time with the guild had taught her of this horror. The oldest texts spoke of a place between the folds of time and dimensions, where the fates would banish souls to wander an eternity alone, a hollow nothingness that was neither Za’hala nor Azo’dem but worse. Most cast it off as more ramblings of the seers. But Sofie knew now that the Nulling was real, and Elijah was trapped in it, far beyond her reach.

This was not supposed to happen. This was not what Malachi had promised! Was he watching? Did they relish her pain? “I do not understand! I am a chosen one!” she cried out, hoping he was listening. Did she not deserve this happiness? She’d been nothing but devoted. Had she not praised him enough? Had she somehow wounded his brittle ego?

Perhaps this was merely a lesson. Perhaps Malachi would free Elijah from this curse yet. She clung to that scant thread of hope as she wept, ignoring her hunger as sorrow overwhelmed her and she longed for yesterday’s return.

By nightfall, she shook from weakness and ached from loss. But more than anything else, she burned from regret. It was a mistake to trust Malachi. She saw that now. And yet he had not stripped her of the immense power she had tendered to him. That could only mean one thing—he was not finished with her.

“I will fix this,” she promised Elijah’s still form, her voice barely a whisper, hoping her words could reach him where her magic could not. “I will never stop.” She would feel the warmth of his touch and the tenderness of his kiss once again.

Or she would die trying.

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2020

Under the dim glow of lanterns, Sofie's slender figure remained as still as the body in the stone casket, her powers focused in prayer. She spent many hours here each day, on her knees in the crumbling vault beneath the chapel, until the stones cut into her flesh and her blood seeped into the ground.

Nearly three centuries of pleading.

Nearly three centuries of empty promises.

The years had been long, plagued with war and famine, with loneliness as she learned to survive, hiding in the shadows while she embraced her new immortal nature. She'd had to reinvent herself countless times to avoid unwelcome attention—changing identities, fleeing homes in the night, erasing any trails that might suggest to the guild and her other enemies that Sofie Girard had not long since perished.

In all of this, she had remained unwavering in her appeal to Malachi for mercy. The others would never acknowledge her, even though she'd tried to reach them. It was to the Fate of Fire that she was forever bound.

But Sofie had reached the brink.

She rose to her feet, ignoring the trickles of blood that ran down her shins from wounds that would heal within hours as if they'd never existed. With numbing calm, she climbed into the spacious sarcophagus to take her place next to her beloved.

In the early years, she had kept Elijah with her in the bedchamber of her various homes. It was not without difficulty, especially when disobedient servants stumbled upon what appeared to be a fresh human corpse in her bed. Rumors of wickedness and witchcraft followed her wherever she went, and she began to worry that she would not be able to protect him.

Finally, she reclaimed their first home together—the castle atop the hill—and chased the humans away. The decaying undercroft where no one ventured had become their haven.

It was here that she built a new sanctum where she could summon Malachi daily without fear of discovery. Sometimes, like today, her prayers were met with silence. Other times, with an audience. Malachi would arrive in his corporeal form to order her to be patient, for her day with Elijah would come. He had sent her on odd missions that she could not make sense of and was told not to question—part of a web of schemes he was concocting, surely. Occasionally, he would demand she undress and offer herself to him on the altar, so he could use her in ways that made her body and heart ache for different reasons. Those visits were growing more frequent as of late, the requirements bolder.

After three centuries, Sofie no longer believed Malachi had any intention of granting her husband his freedom.

She smiled sadly as she stroked her fingers across Elijah's cheek. He was as handsome now as the day Malachi took him from her. It was callous to preserve him so impeccably. It would have been easier on her had nothing remained of him but dust and bone. That was what the fates dealt, though—cruel tricks for even the most loyal.

“Forgive me, my love.” She gripped the smooth obsidian bone handle of the dagger, allowing the fire's light to flicker off the sacred metallic blade. She was not certain the wound

she was about to inflict upon Elijah would free him from this curse, but she knew it would release her from hers—the curse of eternal anguish.

“May the fates be merciful,” she whispered, knowing they would not. She brought the tip of the blade to Elijah’s chest, gathering the courage to drive it through his flesh.

A glimmer caught the metal, stalling her hand. Again it flashed, hinting at movement, and the sound of scraping against stone followed. Rodents lived in these walls and felines hunted them, but she did not sense their heartbeats, and besides, none made such a noise.

Sofie’s pulse raced as the glow blossomed within the vault, illuminating the cracks in the stone ceiling and walls with warm, flickering light. Dropping the dagger, she climbed to her knees.

Her mouth dropped in awe at the looming silhouette in the center of the dank vault, his majestic horns alight with flame. She had laid eyes upon him countless times, but never like this.

“The time has come,” Malachi’s deep voice rumbled. “Are you my loyal servant?”

She scrambled out of the coffin to drop to her knees and press her forehead to the ground before the Fate of Fire. “For eternity.” To bring Elijah back, she would do whatever was asked of her.

Chapter One

“Caviar, miss?” The starchy waiter blocks my path through the milling crowd, thrusting the silver tray forward.

I made the mistake of accepting once. It was my first assignment for Korsakov, and I was nervous, eager to blend into my high-society surroundings, so I accepted the ceramic spoon of tiny black balls that other guests were flocking toward like ducks to strewn bread. It took every ounce of my strength to force the slippery mouthful down my throat.

Offering a curt head shake as I snake past him, I head to the bar in the corner. My heart beats with the steady rush of adrenaline that always accompanies me on these nights. “French 75,” I order, settling in to survey the landscape of lavish floral topiaries and designer dresses. Precious jewels wink at me from every angle. For a charity event intended to raise funds to combat hunger, it’s ironic that the amount of money hanging off wrists and encircling fingers could likely feed the country’s starving for years.

These people have no clue how the other side lives, but they’ll take any opportunity to pat themselves on the back for a good deed while sipping their flutes of Moët & Chandon.

My mark stands twenty feet away, the black tuxedo he chose for tonight flattering on his trim stature, his graying hair freshly cut during his afternoon visit to the gentlemen’s club on 57th. He smiles as he watches the violinist draw her needle across the taut string, weaving a haunting tune. To the unaware, it would appear he is merely a connoisseur of fine classical music. I’ve been casing him for the last few weeks, though, and I know better.

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The young musician's eyes are closed, lost in the melody, but in between each piece, she always makes a point of meeting his steady gaze and adjusting herself in her seat, as if she can't bear the wait until she can straddle his lap in the SoHo apartment he rents for her later tonight.

How his wife, standing ten feet away, hasn't picked up on her husband's taste for the doe-eyed college student, I do not understand. Or maybe she has and considers it a fair trade-off for their Upper Eastside life and the digits in her bank account.

"It is a lovely instrument, no?" A female voice laced with a smooth accent fills my ear.

"Hmm." I hum my agreement but otherwise pay the woman no heed. I don't talk to people while I'm working. Conversation leaves a trace, which leads to a trail, and trails that lead to me could end in a visit to the bottom of the Hudson River with a concrete block tied to my ankles.

I collect my drink, noting with disdain the smudge of graphite on my index finger. I did a poor job of washing my hands after my art class, but that is unimportant. What *is* important is moving to a safer vantage spot, one where no one feels compelled to talk to the solo woman by the bar.

"What is it that Viggo Korsakov is paying you to steal from that man?"

I freeze. A sinking feeling hits my gut as I turn to meet the owner of such a careless and dangerous statement. A striking woman with emerald eyes and hair the color of a freshly minted penny watches me intently. She's unfamiliar to me. I've never seen her at one of these events before, and she is someone I'd remember.

It takes me a few heartbeats to gather my wits and plaster on a baffled look. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Her painted red lips twist in a knowing smile, as if she can hear the alarms blaring inside my head. But then she dips her chin. “I must have mistaken you for someone else.”

“Yeah. Definitely.” I shrug it off with a wooden laugh while I steal a glance around. Whoever this woman is, she’s polished and regal, and attracting curious looks from every direction. She’s the *last* person I should be standing next to tonight while I’m trying to remain unnoticed. “If you’ll excuse me—”

“Was it not you who took that diamond necklace at the gala in the summer?” She leans in to whisper conspiratorially, her eyes flickering with mischief. “I heard you plucked it off that woman’s neck without her notice.”

My heart hammers in my chest as I struggle to school my expression. That heist made headlines here in Manhattan. She could be guessing. “Sorry, no.”

Her brow pinches. “And was it not you who made off with that actress’s million-dollar diamond bracelet last spring?”

“Who the hell are you?” I can’t keep the shake from my voice. That she would peg me for the Cartier robbery in Chicago is far too coincidental. She can’t be a cop. Korsakov has too many of them in his pocket for us to not hear about an investigation.

Her head falls back with husky laughter. “I am not with the authorities, if that is what you are thinking. I am, how do you say ... an admirer?”

She’s crazy, is what she is. And she speaks oddly, like she belongs in another era. “I’m flattered, but you’ve got the wrong girl.” I down half my drink as I scan the ballroom for the two security guards on Korsakov’s payroll. They’re supposed to be within a head-nod’s reach in case of emergency, but they’re nowhere to be seen.

As much as I want to run, I need to know how big a threat this woman is to me. Leaning into the bar, I match her coolness. “Sorry, I didn’t catch your name.”

“Sofie,” she offers without hesitation. Fake, I’m sure. But even fake names can become real if they’re used enough. Everyone on the street knows me only as Tee, short for Tarryn—the name of a grifter I met at a shelter when I was fifteen. She took me under her wing and taught me how to steal and not get caught. At first, it was food, books, clothes—necessities. Eventually, that turned to nail polish and hoop earrings, and then wallets stuffed with credit cards and cash. When Tarryn got busted for grand theft auto and locked away, I assumed her identity.

But I’ll play along with this act. “So, do you live in New York, *Sofie*?”

“No. My husband and I reside in Belgium presently. It has been some time since I’ve been here. Almost a decade, I believe.” A tiny smirk curls her lips. “Elijah has yet to visit this city of yours, but I imagine he would be *beguiled* by it.” She takes a long, leisurely sip of her wine. If she was at all wary or nervous about approaching me tonight, it doesn’t show. Every inch of her exudes fearless confidence. Normally, I would envy that.

Now, I’m deeply unnerved.

The violin music has ended. The brunette musician is in the corner, tucking her instrument into its case. Nearby, my mark is in conversation with another man, but the frequent glances at his watch tell me he’s trying to cut away. I’m going to miss my window if I don’t make a move soon, and I *cannot* miss this one.

“What would you say if I offered you double what your employer is paying you for tonight?”

Sofie startles me yet again, pulling my attention back to her. It's pointless to keep denying that I'm the thief she has pegged me for. Someone has been feeding her solid intel, and I'll get more information out of her if I play along. "And what is it you think I'm going to steal?"

She shrugs, her astute gaze locked on the mirror's reflection behind the bar. "I have no idea, and I care not. But if I were to hazard a guess, I would say those cuff links would be of significant value."

Those cuff links are worth four hundred grand based on what the rich prick forked over at auction last year, not that I'm about to confirm her suspicions. "Thanks for the offer, but I'll have to decline."

Her impeccably sculpted eyebrow arches. "Triple, then?"

I falter. While I didn't start out earning much, now that I've proven my worth, the bundles of cash after a job well done more than pay for my living expenses. *Triple* that amount? Most thieves in my line of work would bite on that lure. But they'd be idiots, because no one crosses a guy like Viggo Korsakov and gets away with it.

Then again, if I don't show up in his office tonight with those diamond-studded cuff links in hand, it'll be my second miss in as many months. My worth to him is already on shaky ground.

"Who sent you?" Everything about this situation screams of a trap. If I weren't *literally* in the middle of a take, I'd think Korsakov himself was behind this, a way of testing my trustworthiness.

Her eyes sparkle with mischief. "Malachi."

"Never heard of him." But I'll definitely be asking around.

She studies my face, as if I'm an object worthy of scrutiny. "I can see that you are terribly wise for your youth. And loyal. I appreciate that."

"More like I like breathing," I mutter through a sip. The drink was meant as a prop, but I'll be ordering another to fill my sweaty palm soon.

"So, it is fear that keeps you with him. A need for self-preservation."

The last decade of my life has been all about self-preservation.

Despite my veil of suspicion, I pity this woman. Whoever Malachi is, he sent her here on a fool's errand. I lower my voice. "Maybe you should take some lessons, then, because dropping Korsakov's name around the city like this? It's a *bad idea*."

"*Mais oui*, I understand he is a dangerous man." She waves her hand dismissively, and my eyes catch the gold ring on her finger. The band is chunky and ornate, the finish antique, and the sizable white stone held within the claws holds no sparkle. I might dismiss it as a bubblegum-machine prize if this woman weren't wearing it.

"You don't want to get mixed up with him, believe me." Maybe she thinks her beautiful face will buy her grace, but Korsakov is an equal-opportunity killer when someone threatens his empire.

She peers at me again with that measuring stare. "And why are *you* mixed up with him, then?"

"Because I don't have a choice." The words come out unbidden. I quietly chastise myself for allowing them to slip so easily. It makes me appear weak and fearful—nothing more than a pawn, a piece to play in someone else's game. And I suppose I am, to some degree, though I have my own game in play too. An endgame out of this life.

“You have a binding agreement with him.” Sofie’s eyes don’t reflect any pity. If anything, I see genuine interest.

“More like a debt I’ll never be able to pay off.” I was eighteen when I lifted that diamond bauble off the wrong hand at a nightclub. I took it to the pawnshop the next day, where I hocked everything I stole, knowing Skully would pay me a fraction of its worth, but he wouldn’t ask questions. That bulky wad of cash in my pocket had me literally skipping out of the shop. It would keep me afloat for months if I was thrifty.

The next day, three men tracked me down and dragged me into a black SUV. Turns out the ring I stole belonged to Viggo Korsakov’s daughter.

I still remember standing in the warehouse office in front of *the* Viggo Korsakov himself, a man with pinched eyes and a cruel smile. One of the fluorescent lights above blinked, ready to give out, making the whole scenario more ominous. It took every ounce of composure to keep my limbs from trembling and my bladder from letting loose as I sang apologies and excuses, begging him not to use the meat cleaver that waited idly on a nearby table. How would I survive without my hands? Stealing was what I was good at—and I was excellent at it.

He offered me a deal instead. Skully had told him about my eye for quality, that the “merchandise” I’d been delivering over the years far outvalued the typical trinkets and trash he bought from others. Korsakov had need of a thief of my talent and profile—young, pretty, unexpected, and most surprising, without fingerprints in the criminal system. If I agreed to work for him, he would forgive me for my grievous mistake.

I’d heard enough whispers on the street about the man to know it wasn’t a choice, not if I wanted to walk out of that warehouse with my hands, so I accepted his offer.

A Fate of Wrath & Flame by K.A. Tucker - Sample

That was three years ago, and while I don't have my freedom, my life hasn't been bad. Gone are the days of sleeping in youth shelters and vans, on couches, or tucked into an alcove at the public library when a night guard took pity. I now have a quaint studio apartment in Chelsea, with an exposed brick wall and south-facing window where basil and rosemary grow in pots on the sill, and my fridge is always filled with fresh fruit and meat that I paid for.

Korsakov tasked his daughter—the very one I had stolen the ring from—with transforming me from a scrappy street kid who loitered in dark corners to the pedigreed woman who could stroll into high-society charity events without earning a blink of suspicion. I no longer spend my days in search of valuables left in cars and careless fools who don't guard their wallets and purses. Now, I lead a relatively typical life, relying on my talents only when Korsakov taps my shoulder with a ticket to one of these parties, where I blend in like a chameleon long enough to appropriate well-insured jewels from rich assholes. That's what he calls me: his chameleon.

But in the end, I'm still a thief, one who feels more indebted to Korsakov now than I did three years ago. Short of disappearing into the night and spending the next however many years watching over my shoulder, I don't have options. I'm stuck with him until he's six feet under or he no longer sees value in me—which could mean *I*'m six feet under.

Sofie tips her glass to polish off the last of her wine before gingerly setting it on the counter. "Forgive me. I can sense that you are anxious. I shall not keep you from your *task* any longer. Do not do something silly, like get caught." She winks, and as quickly as she appeared at my side, she vanishes into the crowd, leaving me rattled to my core.

*

“He’s *pissed*.” Tony drums his thick fingers against the passenger door to the tune of the sweeping windshield wipers. “Two major screw-ups in a row. My brother’s little lizard isn’t worth his trouble anymore.”

I roll my eyes at the back of the big oaf’s head, knowing he’s watching me through the side mirror and will catch it. Tony is enjoying my empty hands far too much for someone who’s supposed to be on the same team. I’m not surprised, though. He was the one safeguarding Anna the night I stole her ring. It earned him a smashed nose that healed crooked and three broken ribs, as well as a demotion in rank that he hasn’t gained back yet. He has despised me ever since, made worse on nights like tonight when he’s assigned to babysitting duty.

Tony’s opinion doesn’t matter, but I know Korsakov will not take lightly to a second miss—especially not this one. He already had a buyer lined up, and he *hates* reneging on a deal.

I’ve learned not to show fear around these guys, though. Assholes like Tony will feed off it like a rabid coyote until there’s nothing left of me but bones. “It’s late. Drop me at home and I’ll go talk to him tomorrow.” Korsakov’s temper is scalding, but it cools quickly. It’s best not to be around him until it does.

“Nah.” Tony’s grin is wide and obnoxious. “He called before you came out. Said to bring you in tonight.”

“Fine. Whatever.” I feign indifference but my stomach roils. That doesn’t bode well for me. He couldn’t have known I’d failed by that point. But maybe he’d made a decision about my fate in case I did.

I focus on my breathing as our SUV meanders along the city streets, the hazy glow of brake lights and relentless blast of taxi horns oddly therapeutic. My target left before I could make my move, but it would’ve been too risky, anyway. I have to assume Sofie is somehow tied

to the feds, and if those cuff links went missing tonight, my studio apartment door would be the first they kicked down.

“What’s with the souvenir?” Tony asks.

He means Sofie’s glass that I swiped off the bar before the bartender could come by to collect, smuggling it out beneath my wrap, careful not to smudge her fingerprints. “You use it to drink wine.”

“You know, one of these days, that smart mouth of yours is gonna get you into real trouble. Why’d you lift it?”

“Because I needed a new one.”

He snorts. “Idiot.”

I took it thinking I’d give it to Korsakov when I told him about her, as a way of buying myself a pass for tonight’s failure. But the more I consider that plan, the more I realize it’s likely that he’ll decide I’ve been compromised. Last year, when Rolo was caught having a cozy chat with the DEA, Korsakov set him free with a bullet to the back of the skull. At least that’s the rumor—Korsakov is not dumb enough to murder with an audience. But no one, including Rolo’s wife and kids, have seen him since.

Tony is right. I *am* an idiot, for not slipping out the back of the venue while I still could.

My insides are churning when I spot the familiar vendor cart up ahead. “Stop here for a minute?”

“Seriously?” Tony twists his massive frame around to scowl at me.

“I’m starving,” I lie. I doubt I could manage a bite.

“You just left a penguin-suit party full of food!” He groans loudly—he always complains when I ask to stop—but then he nods at Pidge. “Fuck, yeah, *whatever*.” He adds under his breath, “Considering it’s probably your last meal.”

“I’ll even eat it outside,” I offer, my voice dripping with phony sweetness. The only thing Tony despises more than me is the smell of hotdogs and sauerkraut.

“Yeah, you will. You’re not stinking up this leather for the next week.” He shakes his head. “Can take the girl out of the street, but can’t take the street rat out of the girl.”

“There’s an umbrella under my seat,” Pidge offers as I gingerly set Sofie’s glass down.

“Thanks.” He’s quiet and the nicest of the bunch, but he’d still sell his own sister for the right price. I hop out, my clutch tucked under my arm. The dress I’m wearing is a sleek black satin halter style that pools around my feet—the least flashy of the designer lot the guys procured in their latest heist. Neither it nor my wrap offer any protection against the bone-chilling November air, but in my present state of mind, I barely notice.

I want to believe Korsakov wouldn’t end me, not over this. Ironically, the man has shown me more kindness than he does to most, albeit in his own way. Once, one of his goons took the “do not touch my pretty little thief” law as mere guidance and tried to force himself on me. Korsakov had the skin flayed off his back with a whip. I know because Korsakov made me watch the spectacle, smiling as proudly as a cat presenting a massacred bird at its master’s feet. Only Korsakov isn’t an ordinary cat. He’s a tiger who occasionally lunges at those who feed him.

But the phone call, the demand to see me with or without the cuff links ...

Does he already know about the red-haired woman sniffing around me?

Or has he somehow learned about the discreet inquiries I’ve been making into securing a passport? About the cash I’ve been squirreling away in my vent and the apartment in London

that I've looked at renting? If he has, would he see that as anything other than what it is—an escape plan?

My instincts are telling me to run.

I pick my way along the sidewalk, trying to avoid the puddles as I scramble to devise my strategy. Do I just kick off my heels and bolt? Do I wait until I'm a safe distance away to give myself a head start? I could cut through the park and jump into a taxi on the other side. Going back to my apartment to grab my stash bag would be a risk, but there's no point going to the train station without it. It has money, clothes, a fresh ID—everything I need to disappear.

I'm only partly surprised Tony let me out. He's stupid and arrogant enough to assume I won't take off. Or maybe he wants me to, so he has an excuse to give his brother when he delivers me battered and bruised.

I'm still weighing my best course of action when I reach the stand. Alton is hunched in front of the grill, turning a sausage over the flame. "Yeah?" He grunts before glancing up. Instant recognition touches his face. "Haven't seen you around in a bit." I've come a long way from the gangly kid with heavy kohl-lined eyes and bleached hair who stole a hotdog from him. But he once said that it doesn't matter how much makeup I hide behind or what color my hair is; all he needs to know it's me are my blue eyes. They remind him of his childhood summers by the Adriatic Sea.

It's been a few months. "I've been busy." I dare a glance over my shoulder at the waiting SUV, its blinking hazards earning angry horn blasts from vehicles coming up behind. Tony can't climb a flight of stairs without wheezing by the time he reaches the top; I could probably outrun him, even in my heels. But Pidge is smart enough to drive around and catch me on the other side of the block.

Alton opens his mouth to say something but promptly shuts it. I already know what he's thinking. It's what all my street acquaintances think: that I'm thriving as a high-end prostitute. I've never bothered to correct them. It's more honorable to peddle what you own than what you've stolen. "Glad to see you still kickin' around," he offers.

Not for long, possibly.

If I head for one of the benches in the park to eat, I'll have the best shot at slipping away without immediate notice. It might give me just enough time.

"The usual?" He holds up a foot long in his metal tongs.

I smile. "Yeah."

"One for him too?" Alton nods to his left, his eyebrows raised in question.

I follow his direction to the lump of blankets on the sidewalk fifty yards away, and surprise pushes aside my escape planning for the moment. "Is that Eddie?" Has it been six months already?

"Yup. He's been hanging around here for a few weeks now."

"And?"

Alton shrugs. "Hasn't scared away my customers yet. I think his eyesight's gotten worse, though."

Maybe Eddie's time in prison has helped where nothing else ever has. "Give me two dogs. Please." I always buy an extra meal when Eddie's around. Alton has guessed that he's someone to me, but he's never pressed for details.

I tuck a twenty under the napkin dispenser on the counter and wave away the change, as always. I've lost track of the meals the kindhearted street meat vendor has given me over the years, when I was starving and couldn't pay for them.

Gripping both in one hand while I huddle under the umbrella's shelter, I make my way over, ignoring the horn that blares of warning from the curb. The closer I get, the more potent the stench of stale urine and body odor becomes. "Hey, Eddie."

The man peers up from beneath his soiled quilt, squinting against the rain. Or perhaps it's to make out what's in front of his failing eyes. They cut his hair and beard while he was inside, so he doesn't look nearly as straggly as he did when I last saw him, and he's put on a few pounds. He's lost another tooth to decay, though. "Is that you?"

A painful lump stirs in my throat. "Yeah." At least he's aware tonight. "How are things?"

"They won't let me in at St. Stephen's anymore," he grumbles.

"That's because you threatened to kill a volunteer there. That's why you went to prison." It brought me comfort, knowing he had a warm, dry place to sleep and three meals a day, even if it was courtesy of the county jail.

"He tried to poison me. I saw him do it with my own eyes."

I bite my tongue against the urge to remind him that it was fresh parsley that the man—a schoolteacher volunteering at the soup kitchen—sprinkled over the shepherd's pie. Forget his weakening eyesight, Eddie's so far gone to delusion, he won't hear any version of the truth other than his own. "Here. I brought you something." I hold out both hotdogs for him.

His eyes narrow as he studies them, not making a move.

I sigh heavily. "Come on, Dad, it's me, *Romy*. You need to *eat*."

After another long moment, he accepts them with a grimy hand. Tucking one under his quilt for later, he scrapes the toppings off the other with a swipe of his dirty thumb. Sauerkraut and mustard splatters on the sidewalk beside my heel, a few yellow drops hitting my hem.

“So? Things are okay? No aches or lumps or anything that you should get checked out by a doctor?” He’s a forty-nine-year-old man who could easily pass for seventy, the decade of living on the street aging him far beyond his years.

“Watch out for the demons. Especially the ones with the twisty horns. They’re here, walking among us, wearing our skin.”

The foolish shred of hope I held coming over here evaporates. Nothing has changed.

“I will. Definitely.” It used to gut me to see this version of my father—perched on milk crates and park benches, ranting about monsters who lurk in the shadows and feed on human souls. That was back when the memories of our old life were still fresh in my mind.

Once, long ago, we lived in a two-bedroom apartment in East Orange, New Jersey. My dad was a line supervisor at a factory that made bolts and screws, and my mom was a grocery store clerk. I took swimming lessons and played soccer. We ate dinner at six p.m. sharp and would drive to a farm every fall where we would spend hours searching for the perfect pumpkins for jack-o’-lanterns.

I lost that version of my father the night he witnessed a woman’s brutal murder in the parking lot at work. He claimed a shadowy monster with wings and curly black horns was the culprit, tearing her apart with its talons, and that a witch channeling flames from her fingertips banished it back to Hell.

He was never the same after, spiraling down a tunnel of hallucinations and paranoia that no medications or doctors were able to treat or explain. He lost his job, we lost our apartment, and eventually, it became unsafe to be around him.

We tried to get him help, but we had no money, and the system for people with no money is made from safety nets riddled with holes. My dad slipped through every last one until he landed on the street where he's been ever since.

I spent years angry and pretending he didn't exist, and then years weighed down by guilt and attempts to help him—arranging doctor's appointments he refused to go to, housing he wouldn't stay in, buying clothes he'd lose.

Now, all I have left to give him is a hollow heart, a cheap meal, and a few kind words when I run into him on the street. I have my own problems to deal with.

"I've got to go." A narrow path lies ahead, cutting into the bushes next to a trash can. If I pretend I'm disposing of the wrappers, it should buy me a small lead. Pidge and Tony will go straight to my apartment once I don't return, but if I wait them out a few days, I should eventually be able to slip in, get my things, and run.

"Your mother came by," my father says through a bite. "She asked about you."

Hearing mention of her always stings, but I quickly harden my heart. I know she still looks for me occasionally. "She still with *them*?"

He nods.

My molars gnash against each other. "Stay far away from her." I no longer fault my father for the illness that stole him from us, but my mother *chose* to abandon her own daughter for monsters. I'll never forgive her for that. "Take care of yourself, okay?" I perch the umbrella on the hedge next to him so it will offer some protection. Running will be easier without it, anyway. "Go to St. Vincent's and ask for Sam."

"Sam?"

Sometimes my dad listens to me and seeks out shelter. He never stays long, but it's something. "Yeah. *Sam*. Tell him you're Tee's friend. Okay? *Tee*. Not Romy. He doesn't know Romy." No one knows her. "He's one of the good guys. He won't try to poison you, so *don't* threaten him, okay? I've got to go now—"

My father's hand shoots out, grasping my calf with surprising strength. "Beware of the demon with the flaming hair. She hunts for you," he hisses, bits of bun and meat spraying from his mouth.

A shiver of unease skitters down my spine. I'm used to my father's raving, but they've always been anchored by the same figure—a shadowy monster with black, twisty horns. This is new, and it instantly stirs thoughts of a mysterious red-haired woman in a green dress. "What do you mean by flaming—"

"What the hell?" Tony barks, startling me. I didn't hear him approach. "We're sitting there waiting for you, and you're chatting it up with this *bum*." He sneers at my father.

But Eddie pays him no attention, his eyes boring into mine as if pleading with me to listen. His grip tightens. "The gilded doe has been here. She knows what you are—"

Tony's black boot connects with my father's jaw, sending him tumbling backward with a sickening crack.

"What *the hell!*" I don't think twice; I swing wide. My fist lands squarely against Tony's nose. The feel of bones crunching beneath my knuckles is satisfying.

"You bitch!" He seizes me by my biceps with one hand while cupping his face with the other. Blood trickles down around his mouth.

I kick at his shins, trying to yank myself free so I can check on my father. He's lying on the cold, wet sidewalk, moaning. His jaw is surely broken. "You're hurting me!"

“I haven’t *begun* to hurt you.” Tony squeezes harder as he tugs me toward the curb where Pidge has edged the SUV forward to collect us. “My brother just called. He wants us there *now*, and he ain’t messin’ around.”

Years on the street have taught me how to defend myself, but none of it will help me break free of Tony’s viselike grip. He has at least two hundred pounds on me, and he’s too strong. I have no choice. I reach into the slit in my dress and slip the small knife I keep strapped to my thigh from its sheath.

“I don’t fucking think so.” Tony moves fast for a large and injured man, roping his brawny arm around my body, pinning my back against his chest. “You think I don’t know about your little butter knife? What are you gonna do with that? Huh?” He squeezes my wrist with his bloodied hand.

I cry out as pain shoots up my arm, and I lose my grip. The blade falls to the sidewalk, out of reach, leaving me defenseless as Tony hauls me toward the passenger door.

Alton rounds the side of his cart, the baseball bat he keeps tucked away for protection hanging from his grip. “Tee? You need some help?”

Tony snickers. “You’ll go back to your hotdogs if you know what’s good for you.”

Alton pauses, looks at me, conflict in his eyes, and I know what he’s thinking: he has a wife and two kids he wants to go home to. But he also can’t stand idly by while I’m dragged into the car, kicking and screaming.

Tony isn’t posturing—he *will* shoot him with the Glock he has under his jacket.

I go limp and shake my head, warning Alton away. “I’ll be fine.”

“Wouldn’t be so sure about that.” Tony shoves me into the back seat of the SUV, climbing in beside me to keep me in place.

A Fate of Wrath & Flame by K.A. Tucker - Sample

The last thing I hear before he slams the door shut is my father's garbled cry: "Find the gilded doe!"