

THE RED HAND

TORMENT[™]
TIDES OF NUMENÉRA[™]

NATHAN LONG

From the Depths: Red

TORMENT

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by Nathan Long

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Chapter 1

Sahi swept the graceful curve of Avza's cheekbone onto the paper with a sure hand, then sketched in the arch of her brow, her flashing eye. His medium might be nothing but a crude tally-man's stick, his canvas only a ruled log-book stolen from the foreman's station, but his subject was a goddess, so the rest didn't matter.

"Beautiful," said Parna, leaning over Sahi's shoulder. His breath smelled of mushroom beer. "Amazing! How can you draw so well?"

Sahi laughed. "With Avza as my model, how can I not?"

Parna dropped heavily on the bench beside him, sloshing his drink. "Ha!" he said. "I'm sure I find her just as beautiful as you, but if I tried to draw her, she'd end up looking like a Bayan thumb-breaker."

"What are you saying? Are we going to have to fight?"

"Who, me? For Avza? No, no. You two are meant to be together. I've never seen anybody so in love with a girl."

"It's true. But I do wish she'd quit thrashing around so much."

Sahi, Parna, and Avza were at the Black Pit, a bar in the Nil-Deeps' squalid forty-ninth strata, the very bottom of the underground city of Haref.

Not even the rulers of Haref knew the origins of the three-mile-deep, quarter-mile-wide bore around which the city was built. Some said it was the long-abandoned lair of some ancient and unimaginably large beast, others that it was the barrel of a weapon built by one of the old races, a weapon big enough to shoot down the moon. What they did know was that the earth around the hole was rich in minerals and metals, and that it was latticed with vast veins of long-buried relics and machines, the recovery of which had made Haref one of the wealthiest cities in the region.

Of course, the Black Pit wasn't in the borehole itself. That was for the synthsteel lifts and bridges and cargo platforms that clattered up and down all day and all night. Like most of the city, the Black Pit was in the carved-out depths surrounding the Bore, a great vertical warren of mines, workshops, mushroom caves, slurge farms, slaughterhouses, distilleries, markets, palaces, mansions, armories, barracks, prisons, and slums, all sunk four hundred and seventy-nine levels into the earth.

The Black Pit was a rowdy bar, but not a fighting bar like the Slurge's Urge or the Pick and Shovel, places where fists flew every night. It was more the spot for heated debates and political ranting, for the sharpest young minds of the Nil-Deeps to try, as they had for centuries, to stir their fellow Nil against their ancient oppressors, the decadent, sun-blessed Sona and their monolithic guardians, the Bayan.

And that was exactly what Avza was doing, which was why Sahi was having such a hard time finishing his sketch. She was far too full of righteous fury to stand still.

"Brothers!" Avza shouted, stamping the table upon which she stood. "Sisters! Our emancipation cannot wait for next year! It cannot wait for next month! It cannot wait for tomorrow! We all know nothing will change if we do nothing. We have waited generations for the Sona to listen to reason. We have held strikes and issued demands. We have sent a thousand petitions up the Bore. We have proved our worth ten thousand times—in the mines, in the workshops, in the counting houses and kitchens—and still the Sona just smile serenely and send their Bayan brute squads into the strata to teach us manners and send us back to work with eyes as black as the drit in our lungs."

She raised a fist over her head and Sahi's heart melted as it always did at the beauty of her white-hot passion.

"They do not deign to notice our words, brothers and sisters! They do not deign to see our suffering! They are blind to it all! So I say there is only one way left to open their eyes! March to the Strata of the Sun and spill their blood on their precious white marble floors!"

The crowd cheered and whistled and raised their glasses. There were cries of "Hear, hear!" and "Avza!" and "Death to the Sona!" but still Avza looked disappointed as she stepped down off the table and slumped next to Sahi and Parna on the bench by the back wall.

"Always the same," she said. "They cheer, they stomp, they drink. But they never rise up. Do they think I'm joking when I say we can't wait until tomorrow? What is wrong with them?"

Sahi chuckled as he put the finishing touches on his sketch. "What is wrong with them, beloved, is that they know that if they rise up and follow you, big things might happen. Big enough that it might cut into their drinking time tomorrow night."

"I'm all for drinking tomorrow night," said Avza, reaching for her mug. "But why not do it where we can see the moon?"

Parna stood and patted Avza's shoulder. "The Nil will never rise, sister. We have been too many generations in the dark. Still, it's fun to try."

He finished his drink and mounted the table Avza had just vacated. "Three cheers for Sister Avza! The bravest of us all!"

The crowd cheered again and he waved them down as Avza snuggled sulkily against Sahi's shoulder and looked at his sketch.

"You always make me more beautiful than I am," she said.

"Ha! So it's not only the Sona who are blind. I have never drawn you even half as beautiful as you are. No matter how hard I try."

Avza punched him, then kissed him, then turned back to listen to Parna as Sahi turned the page of his sketchbook and put charcoal to paper once again.

"Children," Parna was saying. "That's what they think we are. Little blue-skinned children. Smart enough to do their accounts for them? Certainly. To tutor their offspring for them? Of course. To run their mines and herd their slurge-stock for them? Why not? To test their relics for them? Absolutely. But smart enough to rule ourselves? Smart enough to own property? To live as equals beside them? To police ourselves? To hold rank in their armies? No. We are too wild and capricious. We might hurt ourselves. We might embarrass them!"

He raised his cup. "I understand Avza's anger, and her urge to fight, but I am still not convinced. I still feel that if we could somehow frame the argument correctly, if we could ask the right question, or befriend the right Sona, we could reach the sun and the moon peacefully, without—"

A splintering crash from the front of the bar stopped Parna and brought everyone's head around. A pair of massive purple-gray Bayan watchmen—twice the height and five times the weight of the slight, blue-skinned Nil—were ducking through the door,

truncheons in hand. Another crack, much closer, and the back door caved in too. A third Bayan squeezed in, her muscles bulging under her leather uniform and slurge-shell pauldrons—a sergeant of the watch. Her short-haired, heavy-boned head brushed the ceiling.

"No one move," she rumbled. Her voice sounded like boulders rolling down a tailings scree. "By order of the Sona Assembly, you are all under arrest for fomenting unrest and plotting rebellion. Kneel and put your hands on your—"

The patrons of the Black Pit didn't wait for her to finish. They bolted in every direction. Some dodged around her and her men and out the doors behind them. Some squirmed through the transoms on the street side of the bar. More ran for the secret doors that were the elementary precautions of any meeting place for rabble-rousers.

"Stop."

The massive sergeant strode forward, trying to grab a mob of Nil who were all fighting to dive down a hatch in the floor. Sahi saw his chance. He caught Avza's arm and called for Parna.

"Parna! Come on! Out the back!"

Sahi laughed as they ran through the broken door into the alley and the sergeant called after them. How did that lumbering cow expect to catch a pack of running Nil? She was far too big and slow.

Two more hulking watchmen loomed out from the shadows of the alley. Parna tripped over the body of a bruised and battered Nil lying on the stones. Sahi and Avza hauled Parna up and ducked under the Bayans' swinging truncheons. The Bayan turned and pounded after them, heavy feet shaking the ground.

"Stop."

"Why do they bother saying that?" panted Parna. "Has anyone ever obeyed?"

"Less talking," Avza gasped. "More running."

They dodged around Mother Beda, the old Nil woman who sold grilled mushroom skewers in the mouth of the alley behind the bar, and plunged into the shadows of the subterranean street.

"Damn kids!" Beda shouted. "Watch your shenanigans, you—"

The Bayan watchmen burst out of the alley, knocking Beda's cart and grill to the cobbles and spraying her with hot coals. Beda shrieked and stumbled away, clutching her bare, burned arms.

"Bayan pigs!" She shook her carving knife at them. "Look what you did! You ruin everything!"

Sahi looked back at Beda's shout and saw one of the Bayan club her with a casual backhand. His truncheon was as big around as Beda's leg. It smashed her to the ground.

Sahi skidded to a stop. "No!"

Avza tugged at his arm as the Bayan lumbered closer. "There's nothing we can do."

Sahi couldn't pull his eyes away from Beda as she clutched her bleeding head and tried to get back to her feet. She reached out to steady herself, then sank back down, unconscious or dead. Her hand left a bloody print on the back wall of the bar.

"Sahi! They're coming."

Avza and Parna grabbed him and hauled him bodily around the corner and deeper into the shadows of Strata 49's endless maze of slums.

It was a hard morning at the armory the next day.

Sahi, Avza, and Parna worked there together in the Relic Sorting Room. It was where they had met, formed their friendship, and begun talking of revolution.

The sorting room existed because the Sona, the rulers of Haref, wanted to be a great military power in the region, and to that end they required weapons, armor, and the troops to wield them. Consequently, their underground city had to expand. And it had. The population had almost doubled in the last ten years, while at the same time the coal and iron mines below and around it were dug deeper and wider, the smelters and the workshops took over more and more space, and more caverns were hollowed out for growing mushrooms and the husbandry of the city's primary source of meat, the great snail-like land mollusks known as slurgen.

The by-product of all this new digging was a steady stream of recovered devices, chipped with care from the earth where they had lain buried for untold millennia—

relics, perhaps, from the long-forgotten days when the borehole had been new. Most were broken or unpowered or had been crushed under the weight of the sediment that had piled on top of them since whatever civilization had originally used them had died out, but some were in good condition and proved to be of great use. Indeed, some had become the greatest weapons in Haref's arsenal. Thus, all of them, from the most insignificant-seeming to the strangest and most monumental, had to be checked for potential. And it was the Nil of the sorting room who checked them first, before passing on the ones with potential to better-trained Bayan nanos who made the ultimate decision on their use.

Sahi, Avza, and Parna worked with six other Nil at a large round table in the sorting room, a large chamber filled with rows of such tables, all piled with numenera devices dug from the most recent excavations. Around the tables were various testing stations that would determine if a device was functional, if it needed some kind of power source, and if it had a recognizable function. Each table also had three big bins, labeled "Broken," "Usable," and "Requires Further Testing," respectively, and it was the Nil's job to sort the jumbled devices into those three bins.

The work was dull and occasionally dangerous, as it was not uncommon to find kalyptein crabs hiding inside larger devices, or for unstable relics to explode during initial testing, but compared to the Nil who dug the mines, hollowed out the new chambers, or tended the slurge-stock, the sorters had it easy. They weren't breathing drit all day, or using dangerous and often faulty relics to blast great holes in the earth, or dying in their hundreds when some poorly supported tunnel collapsed on their heads or they were attacked by scavenging coccitans or chance moths.

Sahi had been at it for three years, with only a burn scar the size of a plate on his ribs and a white streak in his blue-black hair where a device that shot some kind of beam had almost put a hole through his head to show for it. Avza had scars on both hands and a missing left little finger courtesy of a device that had turned out to be some kind of trap. All of Parna's hair had fallen out overnight after he'd handled a device with an unknown and unshielded power source.

"Fragment," said Avza, flipping a piece of broken casing into the bin. "Shattered. Broken. Broken. Another one of those little fat ones that don't do anything."

"Just like my cousin Isfil," said Parna.

Avza chuckled, but Sahi shook his head as he drew another device from the pile—something that looked like a tarnished silver bracelet set with a square, knuckle-sized red jewel. "How can you two joke? We were seen! They will come for us! We should have run into the Floods."

"You worry too much, Sahi," said Parna. "The Bayan break up gatherings like ours every night, but they're just trying to scare us into staying home. There's no way they have the manpower to follow up on every single raid. And I'm not going anywhere near those old tunnels. There could still be magmids in there. I'll take my chances with the Bayan."

"And besides," added Avza. "We got away quick. We were off in the dark before they were hardly out the door."

Mother Beda's bloody handprint flashed through Sahi's mind as he remembered the chase, then more frightening images pushed it aside. "Well, we should have at least not come to work."

"Nothing would have pointed the finger at us quicker than hiding," said Avza. "The foremen would have reported it immediately. We have to keep our cool, Sahi, no matter how much we want to fight or flee, or our revolution will never get off the ground."

Sahi shrugged and ran his eyes over the bracelet, looking for a button or switch that might activate it. He saw none. "I know. I know. But just sitting here waiting for something to happen is making me crazy."

Parna smiled. "Nothing's going to happen. We're only tiny little cave fish. They don't care about us. They just like to break heads."

Avza squeezed Sahi's hand. "This will all blow over, beloved, and we can keep planning for the future."

A future that doesn't have any revolutions in it, thought Sahi, but he kept it to himself. Though he hated the Sona and the Bayan as much as Avza and Parna did, and though he loved Avza for her revolutionary fervor, among so many other things, deep inside, he was a lot more like the Nil he had been joking about the night before, the ones who cheered Avza but didn't actually want a revolution because it might

interrupt their nightly drinking. Sahi, though, didn't want a revolution because he was afraid he might lose Avza.

He knew she was right. Their life was hard and unfair, and their people had no freedom, but Sahi was willing to live with all that as long as he got to keep drawing and keep loving Avza. There was no telling what would happen if they started trouble. He might die. Avza might be thrown into prison. They might end up destroying the city instead of saving it from the oppressors. They might all get crushed under the iron-shod boot heels of the Bayan.

He could never tell Avza about these misgivings. She was so focused on saving the world that she wouldn't understand his pathetic attachment to his day-to-day life. Other than her love for him, she didn't seem to have those kinds of weaknesses. Indeed, he was certain that if push came to shove and she had to make a choice between him and the revolution, the revolution would win every time. So he kept his true feelings to himself and instead tried to use reason and caution to keep her from passing the point of no return.

"Then can we be more careful in the future?" he asked. "Can we not speak at the Black Pit, or at least—"

"All Nil, stand at your stations!" It was the foreman shouting through the voice-amplification device that made it sound as though he were standing right behind you, no matter where you were. "Prepare for head count!"

All over the room, the clatter of sorting and conversation stopped and everyone stood in the squares painted on the floor around each table, both hands out and palms turned up.

"What is it?" a Nil near Sahi whispered. "Another inspection? Did some fool steal a device again?"

Sahi twisted his neck around as far as he could in an attempt to see what the foreman was doing, but his square faced the back wall. He couldn't see anything.

He glanced at Parna in the square beside him. "Can you see?"

"Not a thing."

He would have liked to ask Avza, but her square was almost halfway around the table. He could see her, but he couldn't whisper to her. Nil were supposed to be absolutely silent during inspection. He tried to get her attention by jerking his head around, but she was staring across the room, her eyes wide. What was she seeing? What was coming?

Heavy footsteps shook the floor behind him, and then four figures came into view in front of him. The first two were Nil guards armed with shock-spears. They stood aside, moving to attention with their backs to the wall. Striding in front of them was the foreman, also a Nil, but with his nose so far up his Bayan bosses' behinds it was a wonder his head wasn't brown all the way down to his shoulders.

And looming over him like a living purple cliff was the female Bayan sergeant from the Black Pit.

Chapter 2

"Here, madam sergeant," said the foreman, motioning to Parna. "This is the only entirely bald Nil we employ."

Sahi's heart pounded with an ugly mixture of horror and relief. When he'd seen the sergeant, he'd been sure she'd come for Avza, but she was here for Parna. That was terrible, of course—horrible—the same way it would have been had the Bayan come for him instead. But if she'd come for Avza, Sahi's world would have ended. At least he had been spared that.

"Yes," said the sergeant. "That is the one. He was the speaker." She pointed at Parna. "You. Come with me."

Parna giggled hopelessly, then stepped forward, shooting a look at Sahi that said, Don't do anything.

Sahi couldn't have done anything anyway. He was paralyzed with fear and shock. He just stared as the Bayan sergeant put her huge hand on Parna's shoulder. She was taking him! He was losing his best friend!

"Why are you arresting him?"

Avza's voice. Sahi looked around. She had turned in her square and her hands were down, both punishable offenses. Her eyes were wide with fury.

"He hasn't done anything!" she barked. "You've got the wrong Nil!"

The sergeant paused and looked at Avza, squinting her jet-black eyes. "You. You were with him last night? You were at the tavern?"

Panic smashed Sahi's heart against his ribs. Avza was going to say yes. He could see it in her eyes. She was going to throw it in the sergeant's face. They would take her too.

"No!" Sahi turned. "She was with me! In my dorm! Alone. We didn't go to any tavern!"

The sergeant's granite-hewn face swung his way. "You were there too? You are all friends?"

"I just told you! I wasn't! We weren't! We're not!"

"They weren't!" Parna squirmed in the sergeant's grip. "I was alone! Just me! They're not my friends!"

The sergeant's heavy brows knitted together. "Then why do you defend them? Why do they protect you?"

The three of them looked at each other, an unspoken conversation flying between their eyes. Avza was boiling. She was going to cross the line. Sahi knew it. He had to speak first. He gripped the table, trying to think. The gem in the numenera bracelet he had pulled from the pile was pulsing red, in time with the pounding of his heart. What could he say? How could he save them? How could he convince the sergeant they and Parna were not friends?

He looked up at the Bayan, the answer suddenly in his head. "I'm not defending him! I hate him! I'm defending her! She's my girl, but that rutting margr has been trying to take her from me and now the silly bitch is going to get herself arrested for trying to help him!"

Avza's eyes blazed. "What? Sahi! What are you saying?"

Parna was shocked too, but he smirked as he realized what Sahi was doing. "Oh yeah?" he called. "Well, I hate you too, you sad little cuckold."

Sahi ignored them both and kept talking to the sergeant. "Take him! Good riddance! But leave her. Maybe she'll come to her senses if he's out of the way."

Avza started around the table at him, balling her fists. "You bastard! You're letting them arrest him! Your best friend!"

The Nil guards stepped in her way. Avza kept coming, trying to push past them, and one of them jabbed her with his shock-spear. She went down like a sledged slurge, twitching as she hit the ground.

"Avza!"

Sahi rushed forward, reaching for her, and took the butt of the other guard's spear in the teeth. He sprawled on the floor.

"Back to your squares!" shrieked the foreman. "Both of you!"

Sahi sat up, wiping blood from his lips with the back of his hand, and looked toward Avza. She was sitting up too, her arms and legs shaking and hardly able to support her weight.

"Avza, are you all right?"

She just stared at him, a dull, cold look that made his heart shrivel.

Behind her, the sergeant turned away from the foreman as she steered Parna toward the far end of the chamber. "You should maintain better control over your workers, foreman. Nil emotion is a detriment to productivity."

"You're absolutely right, madam sergeant," said the foreman, trailing after her like a pet shanu. "I will take steps, I assure you."

Sahi crawled back to his square and pulled himself up to lean, panting, against the table. Across from him, Avza did the same. Their eyes met again for a second and then she looked away, staring furiously at the table.

"All Nil resume work!" came the foreman's amplified voice.

The room rustled with the sounds of the Nil picking up where they had left off and whispering about the day's excitement. Sahi tried to catch Avza's attention again, but she grabbed another device from her basket and began looking it over without raising her eyes.

Sahi groaned and picked up the bracelet, which still seemed to be pulsing in time with his heart. It hurt that Avza was mad at him, and it hurt worse that Parna had been taken, but if it had been Avza instead, he couldn't have lived with himself. He still didn't understand how he'd managed to trick the sergeant into believing Avza hadn't been at the Black Pit. Inspiration had never come to him that quickly before. He was always one of those Nil who thought of the perfect thing to say hours after it needed to be said.

More ideas were piling on top of that first one, too. His head was suddenly swimming with them—ways to get Parna out of the stockade, the perfect thing to tell Avza to calm her down, the lyrics to a protest song about what had happened that he could sing at the next gathering, a drawing of Parna behind bars that would stir the emotions of everyone who saw it. It was almost as if someone were sweeping out the cobwebs of his mind and firing up parts of it that were usually asleep.

Someone? Or something?

The ancient bracelet still pulsed in his hand, a living thing. And it seemed like every pulse brought a new idea. It was like it was feeding him—not ideas, but the fuel and fire he needed to bring them to life. The light was so warm and welcoming that he wanted to put it in his pocket and keep it with him always.

But no. Stealing from the sorting room was a death sentence under Sona law—the greatest crime a sorting Nil could commit. He couldn't take it. He couldn't risk dying, not with Avza still free and alive. Without her, nothing else was important.

He walked to the “Requires Further Testing” bin and dropped the bracelet in, then walked back to the table and pulled another numenera device from the pile. Blood dripped on it from his split lip. He wiped it off and looked up at Avza. Her eyes were still down. He glanced to his side, the place he always looked when he wanted to joke or commiserate with Parna. Parna wasn't there.

Sahi closed his eyes. Parna wasn't there because of him! He'd let the Bayan take his best friend in order to save his girl. How could a Nil live in a world where he was forced to make those kinds of choices?

He couldn't. He just couldn't.

"Hells with the Sona."

He wiped his lip again. His fingers came away bloody.

"Hells with their laws."

He turned and walked back to the “Requires Further Testing” bin and reached in.

"There's no need to explain!" hissed Avza. "I know exactly why you did it!" She stabbed a thin blue finger at him. It barely showed beyond the grimy cuffs of her beat-up old miner's jacket. "You did it to save me!"

"And how was that wrong?" Sahi hissed back. "How could I let you be taken away?"

She curled her lip. "How could you let Parna be taken away?"

They were in the basement laundry of Avza's dormitory, empty now because the Sona allowed the Nil only enough water for washing clothes every third day. It was one

of the few places in the building where they could have even a moderate amount of privacy, and they'd had to pay for it.

Avza slept in a vast open barracks in the unmarried female dormitory on Strata 46. Sahi's bed was in a similar barracks in the unmarried male dormitory a few carved-out blocks away. If they wanted to be alone, they had to find an empty space, and that cost money. The dormitory's common rooms—the laundry, the kitchen, the toilets and baths, and the stairwells—were all "owned" by building-wide gangs who charged a fee to use them if a resident wanted some privacy. Avza and Sahi had purchased half an hour, and Sahi had hoped they would spend it making up and making love. The making-up part was taking longer than anticipated.

"Nothing we could have done would have stopped Parna from being taken," said Sahi. "All we would have done was get ourselves taken too, or worse!"

"We could have fought!"

Sahi blinked. "Fought a Bayan? We—wait a minute! Weren't you the one, seconds before the sergeant showed up, who said we had to keep our cool or our revolution would never get off the ground?"

"Yes, but—"

"But what?"

"But how could I let them take Parna when it should have been me?" She looked up at Sahi with tears in her eyes. "Parna's no revolutionary, no more than you are. He still thinks we can change things by asking politely. And he's the one they grabbed? It wasn't right! I'm the one who's been calling for their blood! I'm the one who wants to tear the city down! It should have been me!"

Sahi slipped an arm around her waist, under her jacket. "Ah, Avza, I know you how you feel, but getting yourself killed wouldn't have helped anything. Parna would still be locked up, and I would be dead right beside you, because I couldn't have stood by while they... they..."

"Would we have died?" Avza squirmed out of his embrace and faced him, eyes flashing. "Would we? How many Bayan were in that room? One! And how many Nil? Fifty at the least! Every one of us with potential weapons at our fingertips. If we had all risen up, we could have killed a dozen Bayan! A score!"

"If," said Sahi. "If we had all risen. But it wouldn't have happened. The rest of the sorters would have stood there, shaking, while that giant stone-handed bitch tore us apart. The Nil are too scared to rise, Avza. They don't have the heart for it."

"But what if we had given them the heart? What if our sacrifice had been the spark?"

"Sorry. I wasn't going to risk losing you for a 'what if.'"

Avza sighed and took his arm, hugging it. "And that's why I want you to leave me, Sahi."

Sahi blinked. "What? Leave you? Where did that come from? I'm not leaving you."

"You're too kind to be a revolutionary. Too sane. You're not ready to risk yourself or those you love for the cause, and from here on out, that's what it's going to take. Last night changed things. Today, too."

"But—"

She kept talking. "You're a good Nil, Sahi. A Nil with a heart. But a revolution needs heartless Nil—Nil willing to do terrible things now so that good things can happen later. I'm that kind of Nil. You're not."

Sahi licked his lips. She was pulling away from him. She was going to leave, this time for good. He had to stop her.

"I..." He cleared his throat and tried again. "I think I am that kind of Nil. Now I am, at least. What happened today changed me too. They took Parna. They almost took you! And for doing nothing but asking for justice. I hate them as much as you do, Avza. Truly. And I'm ready to do what it takes to stop them."

Avza smiled and stroked his face. "You're not, Sahi. You're just not."

She stepped back and turned for the laundry door. "Come on, our time's almost up. I'll see you tomorrow in the sorting room, but not again off shift, all right?"

Sahi strode after her, grabbed her. "No, it's not all right! I love you, Avza! I'm not just going to let you walk away when I know you love me too!"

She smiled, but pulled her arm from his grip. "I do love you, and I always will love you, but I can't let you hold me back. What I'm doing is more important than love. It's more important than life. If you can't understand that, then—"

The laundry door opened, and Zika the Knife poked her ugly face through. "Time's up, poppets. Got another couple rarin' to go out here, so button up and beat it."

Avza stepped quickly to the door. "I'll see you, Sahi. Good night."

It took Zika ducking back in to shout at him again before Sahi could finally will himself to move.

Sahi ran down a dark alley hand in hand with Avza as hulking shadows loomed after them. He heard Parna running behind them, gasping, and looked back. There was no one but the shadows, stretching toward them across the walls like black mold. Where had Parna gone? He'd been there a moment before.

They burst from the alley and flashed past Beda as she grilled her skewers. The sight of her filled Sahi with a sick foreboding. He tried to slow Avza, pulling on her arm.

"We have to save her! She—"

"How can you save her when you couldn't save Parna?"

"I... I..."

The shadows burst out of the alley, knocking over Beda's grill as she shrieked and shook her carving knife at them. It was happening again. He had to stop it.

"Stop! Leave her alone!"

A shadow swung at her, smashed her to the ground.

Sahi skidded to a stop. "No!"

Avza tugged at his arm and shouted, but her voice was a hundred miles away. He couldn't hear her. All he could hear were Beda's sobs as she clutched her bleeding head and tried to steady herself. She sank to the ground, leaving a bloody handprint on the black wall above her.

"Sahi! Come on!"

Avza hauled him around the corner. He pushed off the wall as he ran and his hand came away wet. He looked at it. His palm was dripping red. He glanced back over his shoulder and saw that he'd left a twin to Beda's bloody mark on the wall behind him.

Avza pulled him to a door and pushed it open. Her hand left a red print too. They stumbled through and somehow they were in the Black Pit again. The place was crammed with Nil, all in rags, all gaunt and wounded and covered in coal dust, all staring at them as Avza pulled Sahi up onto the table beside her and raised her hand over her head.

"Avza!" the crowd called. It was like a moan of wind through the deeps. "Avza!"

They raised their hands in mirror to her gesture.

"Avza!"

Every Nil's hand was bloody. A hundred of them. A thousand! The red dripped down their wrists. They reached toward Sahi and Avza, stretching for them piteously as they chanted her name.

"Avza. Avza! AVZA!"

"Avza!"

Sahi woke with a start and sat up in bed, heart pounding like he'd just run fifty flights. The bunks around him were lit by a pulsing red glow. Was it part of the dream? No. There was light shining through the thin armory-issued blanket. The bracelet, once again throbbing in time with his pulse. Had his barracks-mates seen it? He looked around. Mercifully, they were still asleep.

He, on the other hand, was wide awake. In fact he felt more awake than he could remember ever having felt. That dream had been speaking to him. And he knew what it meant. It was all so clear.

He strapped the device to his wrist and began pulling on his clothes. It might be the middle of sleep shift, but there were things to do.

"Avza."

Sahi shook her as he whispered her name. She turned over and blinked open her eyes, frowning.

"Sahi? What are you doing here? You can't—"

He held out her jacket. "Don't worry. I paid off Zika. Come on. Get dressed. I know what to do."

"Sahi, we're on shift in a few hours. I have to sleep. I—"

"I thought you wanted to start a revolution."

Sahi had worked in a slaughterhouse before he'd been accepted as an apprentice in the Relic Sorting Room, so he knew where the blood was stored. Slaughtered slurgen gave up shells for armor, their various bodily fluids for solvents, lubricants and glue, and of course meat and blood. The blood was used in sausages and sauces, but it had other uses too. Processed correctly, it made a fine vermilion ink that was highly prized by scribes and accountants. The airless tanks that kept the unprocessed stuff from congealing stood in ranks behind every slaughterhouse, and most weren't that well guarded. A starving Nil was much more likely to go after the ice house where the meat was stored, so that's where the guards patrolled.

"Blood?" asked Avza as Sahi handed her a brimming bucket over the back fence of the slaughterhouse, then scrambled after it to join her. "Are... are you all right, Sahi?"

"Of course I am. I... Well, I was thinking about that spark you mentioned." He took the bucket and motioned for her to follow. "You know, the one you were hoping would get the Nil to rise up and fight. And I realized it had already happened."

"Huh? When?" asked Avza. She was still half asleep and grumpy, but at least she had come with him. They reached the stairs to the lower strata and started down.

"Mother Beda, remember? When we ran out of the Black Pit last night. The watch killed her without breaking stride. Just bashed her head in." He choked up thinking about it again, and the bracelet on his wrist pulsed. At the bottom of the stairs they stepped into Strata 49. He motioned for Avza to follow him into the Off-Shift Ward, where all the taverns were.

"Beda was no revolutionary," he continued. "She didn't give a damn about any of that stuff. She just sold her skewers and went home—an honest, hardworking Nil like thousands of others. But those big bastards didn't give a damn about that. She was a Nil and she was in the way, so, smash, she's dead."

Avza shrugged. "What makes that different than any of the other abuses the Sona and the Bayan have committed against us over the years? I don't—"

"It is different," said Sahi, as he turned into a familiar back street. "For two reasons. The first I already said. She was completely innocent. She wasn't a revolutionary or a disgruntled worker. She never said a bad word against the bosses in her life. The second..."

He stopped in the mouth of the alley where Beda had been selling her mushrooms and pointed to the wall. Her bloody handprint was still there. It had dried to a dark, scabrous brown now, but it was still visible.

"The second... is that."

Avza frowned. "I don't understand."

"Everyone else will, if we tell them."

"Sahi..."

"Listen. You and Parna can stand on tables and shout to your friends about the centuries of abuse and oppression. You can scream about fighting for better pay, for safer working conditions, but if you want to reach more than your friends, if you want to reach the regular Nil, you need to touch hearts, not minds. People know all the things you talk about are bad, but it's all so general and so everyday that they don't feel it anymore. You need a simple story, one that will fill everyone with outrage, and you need a simple symbol to sum up that story so that people will feel it in their hearts every time they look at it."

Sahi motioned her farther down the back street. "Follow me."

Avza followed as he led her out onto Trough Street, the central nexus of Nil carousing, with its bars and taverns and food stalls, all now empty and boarded up for sleep shift. Halfway down the block, mounted to a glowglobe street lamp, there was a patrol box—a locked synthsteel box where Bayan watchmen kept the log sheets they had to mark every time they made their rounds. The face of it was cast with the sun sigil of the Sona rulers in heavy relief.

Sahi set down his bucket of blood and dipped his palm into it, then stood. The red gem of his numenera bracelet pulsed as he slapped his hand against the patrol box's

face. It left a red, five-fingered palm print that dripped and ran in a satisfyingly gory way. It even seemed to glow in the red light of his bracelet.

"There," he said. "Perfect."

"Ha! Yes!" said Alva. She finally seemed to be waking up. "No, wait. Not yet."

She grabbed Sahi's dripping hand and dabbed at it with her forefinger, then wrote under the handprint—Beda.

"Now it's perfect."

They grinned at each other. Sahi's heart was pounding. His bracelet was pulsing. Avza was glowing. He knew she had said goodbye, but he couldn't help it. He kissed her.

She kissed back.

After a long moment of breathless joy, she broke away again and stroked his face, beaming, then snatched up the bucket of blood.

"Come on," she said. "Let's go do more."

Behind them, the bloody handprint still seemed to glow with a strange red light.

Chapter 3

"Who's Beda?" asked a Nil in the tightly packed crowd.

Avza shot a sideways smile at Sahi, then raised her voice over the general muttering.

"Mother Beda was a grill woman," she said. "Had her stand just outside the Black Pit. The Bayan killed her because she shouted at them after they knocked over her cart."

"She was seventy years old," added Sahi. "Maybe older."

"A grandmother," said Avza. "Never been in trouble a day in her life."

They were standing outside the armory, waiting with the rest of the workers for the gates to open so they could begin their shift, and there was a bloody palm print with the name "Beda" scrawled beneath it right in the center of the ornate sign that displayed the house sigil of the Sona noble who owned the place. The hand was unnaturally red, as if the blood were still fresh, and even with the glowglobes turned up to on-shift brightness it still seemed to emit an internal light. Everybody was staring at it. A lot of them were talking about it—and Beda.

"The animals," snarled a muscular mechanic. "They don't even see us, do they? Knocked her down no different than her cart."

"I knew Beda," said a furnace stoker behind them.

"So did I," said another. "Bought mushies from her loads of times. Never had a bad word to say about anyone, not even the bosses. How could they just step on her, like she was nothing but a coal beetle?"

"Just shows what they'd do to us, if we got in their way," said her friend, clucking her teeth.

"I hate to tell you, friends," said Avza. "They do it already, all the time. Nil die every shift under the watchmen's clubs. The Sona just keep it quiet, is all."

"Then how did this get out?" asked the mechanic. "How do we know about Beda? Where did all these red hands come from?"

"Aye," said a cleaner. "Seem to have popped up overnight. Spotted five of 'em on the way here this morning."

"Somebody saw it happen," said Sahi. "Somebody who cared. Somebody who wanted every Nil to know."

"Stirring up trouble with the bosses," said the mechanic, spitting.

"And why shouldn't they? Killing old ladies for nothing. It's savagery!" The furnace stoker shook her head. "If I could get one of those big bastards alone and out of his slurge-shell armor I'd... I'd...."

The bell rang and the gates swung in, and the throng of Nil pushed forward onto the armory's grounds, dispersing as they headed to their various jobs.

Sahi and Avza exchanged an excited look. All around them, Nil were whispering to each other about Beda and the hands and how they had appeared like magic in the night. Even better, they were shooting slantwise looks at every Bayan overseer and guard they passed. The air had an angry tang to it.

"We've struck a spark," said Sahi.

"You did," said Avza. "It was your idea."

"And you're fanning it into a flame. It's working."

Avza shrugged. "We'll see. It will likely burn out by the end of shift."

They entered the sorting room and got to work.

The furor did not die down. At midshift meal, people were still talking about it. In fact, new rumors were circulating. The Bayan watchmen had not returned Beda's body to her family. They hadn't bothered to check who she was. They'd just dumped her ashes in the mass pauper's grave up on 41. Her son had been beaten by the watch when he reported her missing. Even back at the sorting tables afterward—where the Nil tended to focus on the work and keep to themselves—the whispers were getting angry. Sahi and Avza were amazed.

"It seems the Nil have a last straw after all," whispered Sahi while they were both at the "Usable" bin.

Avza nodded, awed. "I can't believe it! I wish Parna was here to see it."

Sahi hung his head, guilty all over again. "Yeah. Me too."

By the time the Nil swarmed back out of the armory gates at the end of shift, the red hands were gone—scrubbed out or painted over.

Avza grunted with anger as she saw the fresh paint." Gone already."

Sahi looked around. The other Nil were glancing at the painted-over places too, and whispering to each other. He nudged Avza and nodded toward them.

"But they're still talking about it," he said. "And there's always more slurge blood to be had. We can put some more up tonight."

Avza grinned and squeezed his hand. "Meet you after off-shift mess."

Sahi walked back to the unmarried male dorm like he had springs in his shoes. Last night had been more fun than he and Avza had had together in ages. He couldn't wait to do it again.

"Damn! There are guards everywhere!"

It wasn't like the night before. The Bayan were out in force this sleep shift, patrolling in twos up and down the main streets, through the alleys, and in the squares and plazas. It had taken Avza and Sahi more than two hours to put up six hands. Last night they had put up fifty in that time.

Sahi edged back as a watchman's stony gaze swept toward the alley where he and Avza hid. "Maybe we should wait a few days for things to die down a bit," he said.

"Then go out again."

Avza shook her head. "It means more if we do it when it's hard. People have seen the patrols. They'll know what it took to make our mark."

She turned up the collar of her miner's jacket, then beckoned Sahi forward as the patrol started down the street and away from them. "We'll follow them. Hit where they just left."

Sahi swallowed and crept after her. He'd had plenty of courage last night when there was little danger of being caught, but tonight his stomach felt like it was full of pit spiders. He wished they had one of those cloaking relics he'd heard the Nil in the sorting room talk about. How sweet it would be to just walk past the Bayan and know they couldn't see you.

They crossed the street, then darted into a doorway alcove less than thirty paces behind the patrol.

"Here!"

Sahi set down his bucket, then dipped his palm into the blood. The bracelet pulsed as he pressed his red hand against the wood of the door, just as it had each time he'd made the mark last night, and again it seemed to leave a red afterglow that lingered in the blood. Avza did as she had done last night as well, scrawling Beda's name below the handprint with the residue from Sahi's palm.

"Good," said Avza. "Where are they now?"

Sahi wiped his hand on the cloth he had brought for the purpose, then peeked out of the alcove. The Bayan had reached the end of the street and were turning the corner. Then they stopped. Another two-guard patrol had come from the other direction, and they were stopping to talk.

"Hold on," said Sahi. "They met another patrol. They're looking every which way."

Avza peered over his shoulder. The Bayan were conversing in their emotionless, almost gestureless way, hands slack at their sides, eyes looking past each other, always scanning.

"Stone-faced dullards," she said. "They could be talking about going drinking, or killing Nil for sport, or ravishing their womenfolk. You'd never know by looking at them."

Sahi nodded. "They'd be so much easier to read if they talked with their hands like the Nil."

Avza chuckled and glanced back at the palm print on the door. "We do talk with our hands, don't we?"

Sahi started to laugh, then choked and ducked back into the alcove. "Skist! The other patrol is coming this way!"

Avza tried the door. Locked. She shook it. It was solid. Sahi risked another look out onto the street. There was no cover, no place where the Bayan would pass behind any structure long enough for them to duck out and away without being seen, and if they stayed where they were, they were sure to be spotted. The door alcove was only a yard deep.

"Bottomless depths, we're trapped!"

"No," said Avza. "We run. Now, while they're still far away. Back to the alley."

Sahi picked up the bucket and took a deep breath. "Right. I'm ready."

He took Avza's hand. She squeezed it. "Now!"

They bolted from the alcove and plunged into the alley. Behind them, the Bayan bellowed and the clang of their iron-shod boots rang after them like an alarm.

Answering footfalls echoed from all around them as more Bayan converged on the disturbance. Sahi almost shrieked with panic, but Avza pointed up. Buildings had no roofs in the strata, at least not the cheap buildings of the Nil commerce district. They reached all the way up to the rocky ceiling of the level, for they had been carved out of the solid rock. Many buildings, though, had balconies or illegal additions retrofitted onto their upper floors to give the residents more space. It was to one of these that Avza pointed. It had an open window.

She ran to a drainage pipe and shinned up it in a scramble of elbows and knees. Sahi quickly hid the bucket of blood in a drift of trash, then followed right behind her. As she reached the window he clung and waited, feeling naked, while she pulled herself in.

He looked back. The running shadows of the Bayan loomed on the alley wall.

"Your hand! Hurry!"

Sahi reached out and she hauled him through the window. They collapsed together with a thud, then froze as they strained their ears, waiting to hear Bayan shouts.

No shouts came. They heard shuffling below the window and a rumble of Bayan voices, but none of them seemed to have guessed where they'd gone.

Avza let out a relieved sigh. "Thank Fate! Looks like we're in the—"

"What in the dark are you dirty laaks doin' in my home?"

Sahi and Avza whipped around. A naked old Nil was rising from his sleeping mat and reaching for a poker as his wife cowered beneath the sheet, wide-eyed.

"Shhh!" whispered Sahi, but it was too late. The voices of the Bayan were rising below them.

"What do you mean 'Shhh?'" said the old Nil. "Are you telling me to shut up in my own—"

The unmistakable sound of Bayan truncheons knocking on the door stopped him in his tracks. He turned furious eyes on Sahi and Avza. "You brought the Bayan down on me? You young hoodlums! Get out! Back the way you came!"

He advanced on them, slashing with his poker. Sahi and Avza were unarmed. They backed away.

"But they'll kill us!" Sahi squeaked.

"And they'll kill me if they find you here," snarled the old Nil.

"He's right," said Avza. "We can't allow another to die in our wake. Come on."

Sahi gulped as Avza hopped onto the sill of the window and dropped out of sight down the drainage pipe. He couldn't make his legs move. Then the old Nil took a swing at him with his poker and his paralysis vanished. He ducked the swipe and bounded out the window after Avza, scraping his palms as he slid to the ground. He was just reaching for the bucket of blood when Avza looked around the corner of the tenement and shouted at the Bayan at the front door.

"Hey, skist-stacks! Over here!"

Sahi heard the Bayan rumble a command to stop, then Avza spun from the corner and grabbed his wrist.

"Come on! Run!"

She pulled him on and he missed the handle of the bucket by an inch. It was too late to stop and go back for it. He ran with her, heart pounding with panic—but also excitement.

By the time they had dodged and ducked and tiptoed their way back to the Strata 46 unmarried dormitories, the excitement had faded to disappointment. Sahi returned Avza's embrace, but he shook his head as he pulled away.

"Only seven hands done in a whole night. It hardly seems worth it."

Avza squeezed his arms. "There will be other nights. I'm not giving up. It's too good an idea."

Sahi smiled sheepishly. "Fine. If you're not, then I'm not."

They kissed and parted for their respective dorms. Sahi was glad Avza liked his idea and seemed to have changed her mind about leaving him, but still—only seven hands.

At the beginning of the next shift, however, as he and Avza walked to the armory to start work, they saw red hands everywhere. Sahi counted more than ten in the dormitory area alone, and at least twenty as they passed through the Market Ward, all different sizes—small hands, big hands, smeared hands, but all with the name "Beda" written below them.

"Who did all these?" he asked. "We really must have struck a chord."

"It... it doesn't seem possible," said Avza. "Even when things are at their worst it usually takes a while for people to get behind this kind of defiance. This all happened in two days! Where's the passion coming from?"

Sahi pouted. "Well, it is a pretty good symbol."

Avza laughed. "No offense to your symbol, but there's something else going on here. The average Nil must have been more discontented than I'd thought."

As they reached the street that led to the square outside the armory, the press of Nil became thicker and slowed almost to a standstill.

"What's going on?" asked Sahi. "These Nil don't all work in the armory. Where are they going?"

They found out as they finally squeezed into the square. The old gallows platform was surrounded by a silent throng, all staring at three young Nil hanging dead from nooses, their naked blue backs red and raw from floggings. A sign had been nailed to the gibbet above them.

"For Public Vandalism."

Sahi felt sick to his stomach looking at them, but there was also a faint tickle of relief, though it made him guilty just thinking it.

At least Parna isn't among them.

Chapter 4

For two days, a strange quiet reigned. Neither the Bayan nor their Sona masters made any public announcement about the unrest, nor did any Nil rabble-rousers start baying for Bayan blood on the street corners, but during every off- and sleep shift, Bayan watchmen filled the streets, patrolling ceaselessly, and every on-shift more red hands would be found right where they'd been painted over the day before. There were more dead Nil every on-shift as well, swinging from the gallows, again for "Vandalism."

Every time they saw the dead, Sahi and Avza checked with anxious horror, but Parna was never among them.

During each day's off-shift, Sahi and Avza met in secret with their fellow revolutionaries from the Black Pit, trying to determine how best the movement might capitalize on this windfall of Nil rage. As usual, there was more argument over who deserved to do what and who would write the manifesto than over what steps should be taken next, but by dint of her charisma and the strength of her rhetoric, Avza was starting to bring all sides to an agreement on an actual plan of action.

Events, however, did not wait for that plan to be finalized.

It started during the sleep shift of the third day. Sahi had just fallen asleep after another night out painting symbols with Avza when he woke to the nearby sound of shouting and the smell of distant smoke. The other Nil in the barracks room were waking up too, squinting around sleepily.

"What's happening?"

Huru, the Nil in the next cot, shook his head. "I don't know. I thought I heard Bayan downstairs, and somebody cursing at them. I don't know what it's about."

Sahi swallowed. Were they here for him? Had he and Avza been seen? They had put up fifteen hands that night and dodged as many patrols. One might have followed them back to the dorms. He was just reaching for his boots in preparation for making a run for it when Dyon, their floor monitor, ran in, wide-eyed.

"They're taking Gali, the forge workers' spokesman! They've got him in chains!"

"Huh?" said someone. "What has old Gali ever done except sleep through guild meetings?"

"They can't think he has anything to do with the red hands," said Sahi.

"Maybe they do," said Dyon. "There's more Bayan across the street in the married housing, and I saw them dragging out old lady Meer, the reading and writing instructor at the armory school, and Rogo, the head shop steward at the refinery. Looks like they're pulling any elder who ever said a word against the bosses."

There was a nervous laugh from someone. "Endless dark, isn't that every one of them?"

Panic welled in Sahi's heart. "I—I don't understand. Do they think some conspiracy organized the red hands? It just happened. It was spontaneous!"

"That's not how Bayan think," said Huru. "They haven't got a spontaneous bone in their muscle-bound bodies. Of course they think we planned it, and now they're going around picking up any Nil who ever organized anything, even if those Nil were appointed as leaders by the Sona themselves, and they're going to beat them black and blue until one of them confesses, just to make it stop."

"Or spills on someone who actually did put up a hand or two," said Dyon.

All the Nil went silent at that, looking around at their neighbors uneasily. For the past few nights, as the red hands had become more and more talked about, and more and more Nil had whispered about slapping their own blood-wet palms on the walls, the floor monitors had turned a blind eye to the increased comings and goings during their shifts. How blind could you be, though, when the Bayan were breaking your fingers one by one in a synthsteel vise? And Gali had been monitor on the ground floor... he might have seen any one of them slip out.

Sahi swallowed. Others did the same. They all knew that, right at that moment, in the bowels of the watch stations, their elders were being put to the question, and no matter how tough they were, or how loyal to their race, sooner or later, they would break.

As Sahi walked to the armory with Avza the next day, she told him that two leaders had been taken from the female dorm as well, and that she had heard of more taken across the strata.

"They dragged Niss from the farm corps out of the natal ward and left her baby crying with no one to take care of it. And—"

She stopped and gasped as they came around the corner onto Trough Street. Sahi turned to see what she was looking at, and he gasped too. The Black Pit was burned out and black to the roof. Of course the stone of the building hadn't burned, but all the fittings were charred and the sign had been torn down and smashed. Yellow letters had been painted across the front.

"Closed by Order of the Haref Council for Incitement of Unrest."

And the Black Pit wasn't alone. Up and down the street, every bar and tavern was boarded up or burned out, or both. Tables and benches had been thrown out into the street and every establishment had been sealed with the same sign as the Black Pit—"Closed for Incitement of Unrest."

"So that was the smoke I smelled," murmured Sahi. "By the dark, they've closed every place we could meet or talk. They're trying to make us stay home."

"As if that'll do any good," said Avza. "We'll talk on the workshop floors. We'll talk in the dorms. They're fools!"

"Aye, they are," said an angry Nil who was walking near them. "No one gets between a Nil and his drinking. No one."

The square outside the armory was wall-to-wall Nil, and this time they weren't silent. Sahi and Avza pushed through the crowd. The murmur of angry whispers was like a wind through the lower mines, loud and urgent.

Sahi stood on his tiptoes to see what it was all about and his stomach dropped into his guts. There was a new gallows in the middle of the square, higher and bigger than the normal one—it looked like it had fifty nooses, and every one had a Nil hanging from it. Sahi scanned for Parna and didn't see him, but there were many more that he did see.

"Black depths." Avza shivered inside her heavy jacket. "There's Niss, and old Yavo."

"And Gali!" said Sahi. "Bayan bastards! Did they even question them? Or did they just hang them, guilty or not?"

"Ha!" Avza's laugh was more like a sob. "Can't you see? They're all guilty. They're Nil!"

As they squeezed closer, one of the Bayan on the platform, a captain by the red slashes on his pauldrons, stepped forward and spread a hand toward the neat lines of hanging corpses. "This lesson has been ordered by your Sona masters to remind you that unrest in any form will not be tolerated. If the red hands continue, these nooses will fill again, just as many, every—"

A rock sailed from the crowd and hit the captain in the mouth. His head jerked back and the Nil held their breath, leaving the square as silent as a grave.

The captain wiped his narrow lips with the back of his heavy hand. "You will bring forward the Nil who threw that rock. You will—"

Two more rocks hit him. Another sailed over his head.

"This will cease," he said. "There will be no—"

A torrent of rocks battered him, and he backed into the thicket of corpses, shielding himself with the dead as he ordered his soldiers forward. At his word the rest of the Bayan, at least fifteen of them, jumped from the platform and waded into the crowd, truncheons swinging. In their loud, dull voices they recited: "You will disperse! Go to your homes! You will disperse! Go to your homes!"

The Nil drowned them out, shrieking with rage and fear as they began to run. But to Sahi's surprise, they didn't run away from the Bayan. Instead, they ran straight at them, swarming them, beating them with whatever they had—rocks, tools, fists, knives.

Sahi was in a cold sweat. A riot! It was a full-scale riot!

"Come on," he said, looking around for Avza. "We've got to get out of—"

Avza was already surging forward with the rest of the Nil, a chunk of pavement in her hands.

"Avza!"

She didn't turn.

With a curse, Sahi picked up a rock of his own and plunged after her.

At first, it went their way. The Bayan, even though they were giants compared to the Nil, even though they were armed and armored, were so used to the Nil cowering and fleeing that they were surprised when the crowd attacked. Many went down under the waves of blue bodies, dying with their eyes gouged out and hundreds of small wounds puncturing their thick hides. Then more watchmen were called, shield-armed and moving in blocks, standing shoulder to shoulder and swinging their massive clubs in unison. Nil went down by the score, heads crushed, limbs broken, guts ground into the broken cobbles under the Bayans' iron-shod boots.

Soon Sahi found himself with Avza, mashed against the iron gates of the Armory, scarcely able to draw a breath, in the middle of a hundreds-strong throng of Nil as the Bayan pressed in on all sides, reapers mowing down a field of blue grass.

"They're going to kill us all," said Sahi. "They're just going to keep pushing until they meet in the middle and we're all dead."

"No. It can't end here."

Avza looked over her shoulder through the iron bars of the gate. Nil foremen stood with their Nil guards and their Bayan overseers, watching uneasily, well back from the gates.

"Brothers!" cried Avza, reaching through the bars. "Help us! Open the gates! They are killing us!"

Some of the Nil guards looked ready to run forward, but then they cast sideways glances at their Bayan bosses and stayed where they were.

"Brothers, please! Will you truly do nothing while your own people are crushed to death? We are your family! Do you stand with our murderers?"

The Nil didn't move.

"Apparently they do," gasped Sahi.

The crush was getting so bad it felt like his ribs were going to collapse. He had to fight for space just to inhale. Beside him, Avza started squirming and pushing at his back.

"What are you doing?"

"Let me up. Onto your shoulders."

"But—"

"Just do it!"

Sahi turned and made a step with his hands. Avza climbed him like a ladder, ending with her feet on his shoulders and one arm braced on the gate.

"Brothers! Sisters!" she shouted to the crowd. "If we do not move as one, we will die as one! There are weapons inside the armory! Powerful weapons! We must break the gates! Turn and push on my count! One, two, three, HEAVE!"

If there was one thing the Nil were good at, after centuries of forced labor and working in teams, it was moving in unison. It took only another three counts before the whole crowd was pushing as one.

"One, two, three, HEAVE!"

It was hell at the front. The gates seemed immovable at first, and with an entire crowd of Nil behind him pushing on his back, Sahi felt like he was going to be squeezed through the bars like paste. His cheek and collarbone were bleeding where they pressed against the iron bars, and his feet weren't even touching the ground. The crowd had lifted him like a tide.

"One, two, three, HEAVE!"

Finally, the gate began to surrender. The bars flexed, and Sahi heard the studs that slotted into holes in the street shrieking as they scraped across the flagstones.

"One, two, three, HEAVE!"

A Nil beside Sahi went down and was trampled by others rushing in to fill his spot. Sahi clung to the bars in desperation. There would be no getting up if he fell. Above him, Avza was standing on the shoulders of the crowd like they were a carpet, the Nil so close-packed that there was no space for her to fall.

"One, two, three, HEAVE!"

Another tidal push, and then all at once, release. The locks cracked and the gates shuddered inward, the crowd of Nil stumbling after. Many did go down then, immediately lost from view as their comrades swarmed over them, but Sahi swung in with the gate and saw Avza holding on above him.

"To the weapons lockers, brothers and sisters!"

Sahi caught her as she lost her grip and they stumbled together away from the gate, then ran with the others, moving farther into the compound. The Nil foremen fled before them while the Bayan overseers strode forward to meet them, clubs at the ready, but before the towering enforcers reached the crowd, the Nil guards, who had been paralyzed when Avza had called to them, finally found courage, and stabbed the Bayan with their shock-spears from behind, bringing them down so the crowd could overwhelm them.

Avza and Sahi ran past the scattered fights, racing to reach the front of the throng.

"This way, brothers and sisters!" Avza shouted.

She led them past the sorting room and on to the fitting building where the devices determined to be of some use as weapons were fitted with the grips, stocks, sights, or harnesses needed to make them usable by the soldiers who would wield them in war. There were many weapons here, and not just those currently being constructed, but also those stored in the weapon lockers and awaiting distribution to Haref troops or buyers in foreign cities such as Vebar or M'ra Jolios.

Of course, this meant that it was also the most heavily guarded building in the armory. There were Bayan security teams at each main door, all armed with powerful relic weapons of every shape and function. There were bars on all the windows. There were high walls topped with stronglass shards, but defenses like that meant little to the Nil, who had never been allowed to enter through the main doors anyway.

Though the workshops of the fitting building were staffed and guarded entirely by Bayan, the Nil were still the ones who cleaned the place, loaded the weapon crates onto the shipment wagons, took out the rubbish, and made the food that the Bayan ate. The kitchen doors, loading docks, and garbage chutes that were the portals into the Nil world weren't so heavily guarded, and that is where Avza led them.

Following her, the Nil came up through the fitting building from the bottom, rising and spreading like poison through the veins of some heavy stone beast, swarming past Bayan guards before they even knew to close the doors they guarded. The Nil flooded into the fitting rooms and the build rooms, snatching up half-assembled devices almost none of them knew the use of, then turning them on the Bayan guarding the weapons lockers.

There was a horrific fight there, and many Nil died, many by their own hand as they misused the strange weapons they'd found—pointing them the wrong way, setting off concussives they thought were guns, overheating them, melting themselves in blooms of unshielded radiation. Sahi cringed as expanding globes of blue and white and flame-yellow light erupted all over the workshops and Nil went flying, limbs shredding and bodies disintegrating, but there were hundreds of Nil, maybe a thousand now, and those that lived learned from the mistakes of those that died, and the next time some fatal device was used, it was pointed in the right direction, and it was a Bayan who burned beneath a stream of acid jelly, or a steel door that melted before a high-pitched sound, or a lock that exploded in white fire when touched with a crystal wand.

And soon, as Avza urged them on, laughing and more beautiful and wild than Sahi had ever seen her, the storage lockers were thrown open and the Bayans' proven weapons of war were in the hands of the Nil. They were too big, of course, the massive grips clumsy in the Nil's small hands, but they worked.

"Kill the bosses!" Avza shouted as the Nil poured out of the fitting building and into the compound. "Death to the Bayan! They have killed us by the score. Now it is their turn!"

Sahi was appalled. Killing in the heat of battle was one thing, but cold-blooded extermination? "You're going to kill them? All of them?"

Avza laughed at him like he was mad. "Of course we are, beloved. What did you think the red hand meant?"

"I thought we wanted equality, not... slaughter."

"The one has never been achieved without the other, Sahi. Now come on, let's achieve it."

Armed with a heavy tube that made things rise off the ground and shake to pieces, Avza led her followers through the armory, hunting down any Bayan foolish enough to linger, then she took the Nil out into the streets and squares of the strata, sweeping all before her. The mob spread in all directions, using the blood of their Bayan victims to slap red hands on every surface they touched. They smashed windows, doors, and furniture in an eruption of madness that did not distinguish between Bayan and Sona property and Nil possessions. The Nil had been crushed down for too long. Now, with the pressure released, their rage was like a geyser, and no one was safe from getting scalded.

Finally, Avza, Sahi, and the core of sorting-room Nil that had gathered around them came to the Bayan watch stations. Mostly they were deserted. The watchmen were no fools, and when they had felt the rumblings of the Nil earthquake, they had retreated up the Bore to their own levels and pulled the lifts up after them.

It was in the third watch station that Avza and Sahi found Parna. He lay in a cell with half a dozen other Nil, all gaunt and crusted in the filth of neglect. The Bayan watchmen had fled with the keys, but Sahi had a device like a fiddle bow with a glowing wire that could cut through anything, and he sliced through the lock and hauled open the door.

Avza ran through and fell to her knees beside Parna, stroking his scab-studded bald head. "Parna! Thank Fate you're alive!"

Parna blinked at her like a cave qui in the light. "Avza... Sahi. Where did you spring from? Have they locked you up too, or—" Then he saw the other Nil outside the cell, and the weapons, and he came to at last. "By the sun! You... you did it! You've risen!"

Avza gripped his shoulder and flashed him a dazzling grin. "Aye, brother, and chased the Bayan out of the strata. We own the Nil-Deeps!"

Parna shook his head. "I can't believe it. I didn't think anything could wake the Nil from their complacency. How did you do it? What did you say?"

Avza laughed and looked back at Sahi. "It was nothing I said. It was all Sahi. Him and his red hand."

"I won't even pretend to understand that," said Parna, as Avza helped him to his feet. "But I am thrilled that the time has come at last. Now maybe we can find some

equality in this city—some dignity. Maybe this is finally the beginning of the age of justice and reason that I have always dreamed of."

When the last Nil had been set free from the last watch station and the last lock had been cut from the last cell door so that no one could ever be locked within them again, Avza, Sahi, and Parna returned to the square outside the armory. There the crowd was laying out the Nil they had cut down from the nooses, and families wept and prayed over the dead.

A hush fell over the square as Avza mounted the gallows. Sahi could hear Nil whispering her name.

"She's the one who called us to knock down the gates."

"That's the one who put up the first hand."

"Avza led us to the weapons lockers. She gave us the power to face the Bayan."

But there were also other whispers.

"If she hadn't killed the guards, my boy would still be alive!"

"Is anything worth all this blood?"

"How will we recover from this?"

The whispers died as she stepped to the front of the platform.

"Brothers!" she said. "Sisters! There has been much death today, and I am saddened by it, saddened by the loss of so many Nil, like these poor martyrs whom you have cut down from their nooses. Some of you lay the blame at my feet, saying that the red hands that Sahi and I put up on the walls brought the Bayan down on us, forced this crisis upon us."

There were some murmurs of agreement from those who had shot her hard glances before. She let them build for a moment before continuing.

"But I didn't start this. And neither did you. Not even Beda started this, though it was her, and not me, who laid the first red hand on the first wall. For it was not her who painted her hand with the blood that made that mark, it was the Bayan guard who cracked her head and made her clutch at the wall for support."

The murmurs were turning angry, and again she let them build.

"So when you ask me who started this, I say it was the Bayan who started this! And it was the Sona who gave them their bloody-handed orders! With their casual killing of an innocent old Nil, our age-old oppressors have started a tide of revolution that cannot be stopped, a red flood flowing from the shattered forehead of Mother Beda, the grill woman, that will drown them in their blood, and lift us all the way to the sunshine!"

The crowd roared as Sahi blanched. More blood? Hadn't there been enough already? Surely Avza realized that, now that they controlled the depths, the Sona and the Bayan would have to bargain with them. The lower reaches were where all the farming and mining happened, and where the Nil pulled new relics out of the ground as they dug out new chambers and halls. Without the food and fuel and weapons the Nil provided, their former masters would starve and die. There was no need for more conflict. They had already won. Now the concessions could begin.

Avza held up her hands and the roar quieted to an excited rumble. She raised her voice above it.

"We have won a great victory here this shift, brothers and sisters. But it is only the beginning. If we stop now, the bosses will regroup and come down here and kill us all. So we must strike first, and hardest!"

Another roar. Avza pulled off her miner's jacket and knelt on the platform. There was a dead Bayan there, a pool of congealing blood under him from the hundred cuts that had killed him. Avza found a spot where it was still wet and dipped her hand in it, then pressed it into the back of the jacket. She stood again.

"Sleep swiftly, my brothers and sisters! For before the next shift begins, we will fight again!"

She held the jacket over her head and showed the crowd the dripping red handprint she had made. They held their hands up in answer. Many of them were dyed in blood as well.

"Come the next shift we will rise up into the Bayan strata, and we will show them how we make red hands!"

The crowd's deafening roar pulled unbidden sobs from Sahi's chest.

Chapter 5

It was a short, brutal campaign, but the Nil won, and two weeks later, with Sahi and Parna in tow, Avza swept into the sun-drenched throne room of Overlord Phanios the Third, the ruler of Haref, and laughed as she saw the golden-skinned Sona on his knees. Her Fell Companions, the ragged band of Nil who had become her best soldiers, who had slipped through every Bayan and Sona defense during the campaign and sabotaged their every attempt at retaliation, were already there, hauling aside the bodies of Phanios's royal guard and forcing the few councilors and courtiers who had stayed to the end to kneel with their fallen leader.

Avza stepped to Phanios as Sahi and Parna exchanged a glance. They hung back, afraid of what would come next. There had been so much blood already, so much murder. The night they had risen into the Bayan strata, almost a thousand Bayan had died, and not just watchmen and soldiers but mothers, sons, daughters, and elders. Avza had told Sahi time and again that the slaughter was inevitable, necessary even, as a way to prove to the Nil that they were not powerless, that they had just as much strength as their erstwhile masters, and Sahi understood that, in his head at least. His heart, however, clenched every time another slug-thrower was raised, or another head was hacked from its shoulders by some shimmering relic blade. Even Parna had blanched at the worst of it.

"By rights," said Avza, looking down at the Overlord, "I should kill you like my Nil killed your knights and your Bayan thugs. It was from you that all their orders to suppress us and break our spirit came. You are the one who decreed that Nil could not own property, could not raise our children ourselves, could not travel alone above the twentieth strata, or walk in the sunshine unless on an errand from our masters. You are the one who turned away all our petitions for better treatment, all our pleas for mercy, all our cries for compromise."

Avza shook her head. "Had you met with us even once, had you made even one sympathetic change in your rules, this would not have happened. You brought it on yourself, and if you expect anything but death from me, you are a fool."

"What else should I expect from a Nil?" sneered the Overlord. "Cave laaks know nothing of mercy."

Avza slapped him so hard that his white hair flew and a red, hand-shaped blush appeared on his golden cheek.

"How funny," she said. "We say the same thing about Sona. And just to prove you wrong about cave laaks, I will give you mercy. All of you."

She laughed as the line of kneeling nobles all raised their heads in fearful hope. "I shall give you the mercy that you have given the Nil for all these centuries. Brothers and sisters, take them to the deepest mines, to the most far-flung slurge farms. Give them picks and shovels and slug prods. Give them the lash if they don't know their duty. Give them half rations if they slacken their pace. Give them the dark and the cold, but never, never again give them the sun."

The Overlord laughed. "So you accuse us of tyranny, but you act the tyrant yourself. Please, try my throne. It seems it will be a good fit."

Avza flushed under her blue skin, and her eyes flared. "No," she said. "No!"

She turned and raised the tremor tube at the Overlord's grand alabaster throne, a single piece of furniture as big as a married Nil's apartment, a golden sun inlaid in the back. The heavy chair rose into the air and started to vibrate as the tube made its strange moan.

Sahi stepped back. He had seen many times what the device could do, but the kneeling Sona just stared, open-mouthed, as the symbol of their dominance shook, blurred, and finally exploded. They cried out as a rain of white shards, gold shrapnel, and billowing dust bloodied and choked them, then they stared, coughing, at the settling heap of rubble on the floor.

"There will be no more thrones in Haref," said Avza, turning back to them with her black hair powdered white. "The people rule now."

Sahi's heart soared and he exchanged a hopeful look with Parna. Mercy and a refusal of power. The savagery of the revolution had been a horror to him, but this boded well. Perhaps Avza was done with blood, done with command. Perhaps now it was over. Perhaps now they could begin remaking Haref the way they had always talked about, as a city of equals.

Avza motioned to her Fell Companions. "Take them out of here. And you go too, Parna. I want to be alone with Sahi."

"Aye, Avza," said Parna. "I need a drink anyway."

"Aye, Avza," said Buar, the captain of the Companions. "We'll show these cave laaks their new jobs."

With laughter, slaps, and shoves the Companions herded the bloodied, limping Sona out of the throne room with Parna following, and then it was just Sahi and Avza and the echo of several thousand Nil celebrating their victory over their oppressors by running rampant through the Strata of the Sun.

Avza turned to Sahi, grinning from ear to ear. "We did it. We won justice for our brothers and sisters and made it all the way to the sky. And none of it would have happened without you and your red hands. Had we not won the Nil's hearts, we would never have won their loyalty, nor their arms."

Sahi's bracelet pulsed with the pounding of his blood as she pulled him into her arms.

"Just promise me," he said, edging back from her kiss. "That from here on we stop wrecking and start building, that the bloodshed is over."

Avza laughed and hugged him hard. "Of course it is. From now on, everyone who wants a better Haref is our brother—Nil, Bayan, and Sona, remaking the city from the depths up."

She tugged at his jacket, slipping it down over his arms. "Now come on. Take your clothes off. Let's make love where the Sona made war."

"H-here?" asked Sahi, looking around. There was still blood on the floor from the slaughter of the Overlord's guards, not to mention sharp shards of marble. "Now?"

Avza pulled her shirt over her head and stood bare-breasted before him. "What better way to celebrate the moment we have waited for all these centuries than to live it to its fullest?"

Sahi couldn't argue with that. He shrugged his jacket to the floor and ripped at the buckle of Avza's belt as he kissed her deeply, and a short while later the room pulsed to the red light of his bracelet as it matched the rhythm of their moans.

Later, much later, they picked their barefoot way through the rubble of the shattered throne and opened the doors that led to the Overlord's balcony.

They had been outside before. There had been numerous fights through the Strata of the Sun—the parts of Haref that rose up around the edges of the borehole like baroque stalagmites sticking up into the sky—but that had been in the heat of battle and they'd done nothing but squint against the light and fight on. Now, though, they were hesitant. Even with the blazing sun replaced with the comforting darkness of the night sky, there was too much space out there, too much headroom above them, too much distance to the ground. They could see too far away, and it made their hearts thud heavily in their chests.

"You first," said Avza, as they stood at the threshold.

"No," said Sahi. "You won this for us. You go first."

Avza swallowed, then nodded. "All right."

She took a deep breath, then strode out onto the balcony and looked around, her chin raised high.

"See," she said, turning back to Sahi. "It's not so bad. Come on."

Sahi chewed his lip, then stepped out as well. A shiver went up his spine as the openness engulfed him. He had to force himself not to dash back inside. He looked up. A pale, oddly shaped moon hung above them—far, far above them.

"How—how does it all stay up?" he asked.

"Wires, probably," said Avza. "Cables. Pretty, though, isn't it?"

"I suppose."

It was pretty, but it also looked like it might come crashing down on their heads at any minute.

Avza stepped to the railing and beckoned for Sahi to follow. He did, though his knees shook as he looked down. Below them was the borehole, a perfectly circular emptiness crisscrossed with bridges and gantries and shot through with lifts and synthsteel frameworks that held all the rest in place. It looked to Sahi like the giant black mouth of a stone worm reaching up to swallow him whole. To think, he had lived all his life at the bottom of that.

He was overcome with dizziness and stepped back. "I... I think...."

"Hoy!" said a voice behind them. "Put some clothes on, you barbarians. I've brought us some dinner liberated from the palace kitchens."

Sahi and Avza turned to see Parna wheeling an ornate cart around the rubble of the throne. It was piled high with platters of delicious-looking food. It smelled incredible.

Parna gave them a grin and a salute as he trundled forward. "Shall we eat out there, then?"

Sahi and Avza exchanged a frightened glance.

"No," said Avza. "It's... it's chilly. Let's find Phanios's dining room."

The food was a revelation—flavorful meats, vegetables, and fruits that none of them had ever seen before and didn't even know the names of. They gorged themselves and groaned as their bellies tightened.

"This must be the stuff they grow in the sunlight farms," said Sahi. "I can't believe how good it is."

"Another thing our masters kept for themselves," said Avza. "That's going to change. Every Nil is going to have a taste of this stuff."

"Mmmm," agreed Parna. "Beats the dark out of slurge steak, I'll tell you that."

He had his nose buried in a stack of books and papers looted from the Overlord's private files and had been only half-paying attention to the conversation.

They ate in contented silence for a while, then Avza leaned back, moaning, and looked at Sahi through half-closed eyes. "Just had a thought. We're going to need banners for the palace, and flags. Can I ask you to make them? Red hands on a black field, just like before. Only more... formal."

Sahi frowned and tossed another little fruit into his mouth, then popped it with his teeth and let the juice fill his mouth. "Of course I can, but don't you think we should put the red hand behind us now? That was our battle flag—a call to action. Wouldn't it be better to come up with a new symbol? Something that signifies coming together, rebuilding, making things better?"

Avza nodded. "I see your point. And I think the time for that symbol will come, but not yet. The people know the red hand. That's what they marched behind. They might get confused if suddenly we flew a different flag. Besides, the fighting isn't quite over yet. We've captured the palace. We're in control, but there are still Sona and Bayan hiding down in the shadows, hoping that they can take it all back. Not to mention the ones who fled to Sagus Cliffs and Sada Imidu and the like. They'll try to organize mercenary armies there to help them return to power."

Sahi nodded, disappointed. He understood her reasoning, but it still felt better to him to be working toward the promise of a more hopeful symbol, rather than trying to keep the fires burning with an angry one.

"Fair enough," he said. "You know best in these things."

Avza patted his hand. "It'll only be for a little while longer, Sahi. I promise—"

A snorting laugh from Parna interrupted her, and she and Sahi looked over at him. He was choking on a pastry, so they had to wait a moment for him to speak, and when he did, he stabbed a page in the book he had been reading with a finger.

"I just read—" He cut off to cough again. "I just read the most amazing—did you know—"

"Deep breaths, Parna," said Avza. "Deep breaths."

Parna nodded and waved her off, then got himself under control. "This is an ancient book—or rather, I think, a translation of an ancient book—about the beginnings of this city and the people who founded it."

"The Sona," said Sahi.

"Ha! No! Not at all!" Parna held up the book. "Look at this. You see all these warnings here. 'Do not read this book on pain of death!' 'Top Secret!' 'For the eyes of the Overlord only!' How could I resist reading it with all that on the cover? And I've just now found the reasons for the warnings."

"And?" asked Avza.

"Well, the book doesn't say who founded the city—not by name, at least. It's all, 'We did this' and 'We did that.' And it seems to assume that the reader would know who 'we' was. But one of the things 'we' did, was—well, here, I'll read it to you."

Parna cleared his throat and found his place. "Right. Here it is. 'For laborers to work in the facility, we looked to the local population, a hardy anthropoid race who call themselves 'humans.' They are reasonably intelligent and have an easily malleable genetic code.' Sorry, I have no idea what that bit means. 'We proceeded to modify them to suit our needs. Some we made small of stature and adapted to living in darkness and low-oxygen environments. These would be our workers, clerks, and managers. Others we made large and strong and thick-skinned. These would be our heavy laborers and our warriors, keeping out beasts, marauding tribes, and spies from other corporations."

Sahi stared, wide-eyed. "Deepest dark! They're talking about us and the Bayan!"

Parna held up a hand. "Wait, wait, wait! You haven't heard the punch line yet."

"So let's hear it," said Avza. She didn't seem as excited as Sahi or Parna.

Parna grinned. "Here it is. 'Still others we bred for grace and beauty—slim, gold of skin, white of hair. These would be our servants and concubines, pleasant companions with which to while away our idle—"

Sahi burst out laughing and sprayed wine across the table. "Servants and sex slaves? That's what our masters were? A bunch of pretty toys made for pleasure? Avza, can you believe it?"

Avza was not amused. "Whores who became despots. You'd think slaves would have fought for a more equal society, but no. They kept it as it was and just put themselves on top. Disgusting! And worse, they knew that we were all one race under the skin, and still they treated us as inferiors!"

Sahi nodded, ashamed of himself. "You're right. It's not funny. It only makes the Sona's oppression all the more terrible."

"Aye," said Parna, closing the book. "Well, that's all over with now. With the Sona cast down, Haref will finally be a city for all its people."

"Hear, hear," said Avza and Sahi in unison.

They raised their glasses and drank.

Chapter 6

"What other business do we have?" asked Avza.

Sahi sat with his back to a marble urn, sketching as he hadn't done since before the madness of the revolt had swept him away from normal life. Now he was sketching the members of Avza's transitional council, all sitting at a round table that Avza had had placed where the Overlord's throne had been. Though the setting was as different from the Black Pit as chalk was from cheese, with ornate chairs and crystal glasses in the place of crude benches and clay cups, a lot of the faces were still the same, and the debate over what to do now that they were in power was just as raucous as the debates they'd had back in the bar, arguing over how to take that power.

Munf, from the constitutional committee, raised his hand. "We've been petitioned by representatives from the Bayan and Sona. They're asking permission to review the latest draft of the constitution. They have questions about language they say makes them second-class—"

Avza held up her hand to stop him. "It does not make them second-class citizens. It merely makes their citizenship dependent on passing certain benchmarks of loyalty. Once those benchmarks have been met, they will have exactly the same rights as everyone else in Haref."

"Er, yes, Chairwoman Avza," said Munf. "I—I believe their complaint is that the benchmarks are somewhat... difficult to achieve. For instance, it says here, 'Citizenship will not be granted until no Bayan or Sona is in open rebellion against the new government.' This puts the loyal and cooperative majority at the mercy of the handful of rebels who still lurk in the depths, and worse, at the mercy of those who have fled to other lands and whose loyalty it is impossible to determine."

Avza nodded. "I understand their concern. It will be difficult, but at least they have a path to citizenship, a courtesy they never offered us."

"But the path is so narrow," said Munf.

"Then how wide should we make it? Would you have us grant them citizenship without any constraints? So that they can walk among us and join us in our councils and then pass our secrets to their rebel friends?" Avza sat back, spreading her hands.

"If the Sona and Bayan want full citizenship, have them go into the caves and out to the foreign cities and bring their brothers and sisters into the fold. Have them pledge to the red hand. That will be a proof that I will accept. That will show true loyalty."

"But Chairwoman Avza—" Munf started.

Avza cut him off. "I don't understand you, Councilor Munf. Do you want our new society to be brought down before it has a chance to begin?"

"No, of course not," said Munf. "I only—"

"Good, good, then let's move on. What else is there?"

Munf's fingers clenched on the arms of his chair as Shol, from the workers' committee, raised her hand.

"I've got a lot of miners and slurge wranglers and smelters who want to know when they can come up out of the depths and see the sun like everybody else. There's a lot who want new jobs north of the Nil-Deeps."

"And I don't blame them," said Avza, "but this city still has to function if we want it to survive. People still have to work in the mines and the farms, and though we've sent as many Sona and Bayan down to help them as we could find, they're only a small amount of the labor that's needed. I'm afraid, until we get some kind of rotation system in place, our noble brothers and sisters at the mining faces and forges, and in the slurge fields, will have to keep at it for a while longer."

Shol nodded. "Fair enough. But could something be done about their pay? They're still getting what the Sona were paying them. In fact, because of the fighting, they haven't been paid in weeks."

"Something will be done," said Avza. "I promise you, but with all the repairs we're having to make after the wanton destruction wreaked by the Bayan and the Sona, who would have burned all their holdings rather than let us have them, there is little to spare. Please, tell them from me, their sacrifice now will win them a glorious future tomorrow. Once this state of emergency ends, there will be prosperity for everyone."

Shol grimaced. "Well, I'll tell them, but they won't like it. They want their glorious future now."

"We all do. And it's coming. All I ask is patience."

"Speaking of the Sona and the Bayan at the mining faces," said Beil from the public safety committee as Shol sat back. "We've had a little trouble on that front."

"What kind of trouble?" asked Avza. "Have they been shirking?"

Beil gave an amused shake of the head. "That's the least of it. It's the Overlord. He and his courtiers have been talking to the others we threw down there—Bayan soldiers, Sona knights, Nil collaborators—trying to convince them they could take it all back."

There were chuckles around the table at that, but Avza didn't laugh. She stared at Beil.

"Two sleep shifts ago," he continued, "old Phanios and a few Bayan heavies tried to break out of their dormitory building and make for the Floods, where the rebels are supposed to be hiding."

"What?" Avza was on her feet. "Why wasn't I told about this?"

Beil blinked. "Uh, I'm telling you now."

"Two days later!"

"It wasn't anything to worry about," said Beil, shrugging. "They didn't even make it out of their barracks room, let alone the building. Our Nil dropped them with those twitchers you issued and put them back to bed. It was over before it started."

"No," said Avza. "It isn't over. They were fomenting rebellion. They will be executed."

The table went silent. Everyone looked at her. Even Parna, who had been quietly reading at the other end of the table, lifted his head from his book and stared.

Sahi stared too. His hand stopped sketching. "But... but what about mercy? You offered them mercy."

"And with this they have thrown it in my face," snapped Avza. "Mercy is not the same as allowing our former oppressors to plot behind our backs. No. They were given a chance to redeem themselves and they tried to take advantage of this lenience to work against us!"

Avza raised her chin and looked noble. "They must be made an example of. The Bayan and the Sona, and yes, even the Nil, must see that we are fair, but never

pushovers. Work with us, do your part, support our new city of equals, and you will rise with the rest of us. Break your promises, work against us, or shirk your load, and we will treat you like the dead weight you are."

She punched the table with a balled fist.

"We will drop you."

"The red hand!" roared the crowd as the Overlord and eight other Sona and Bayan were led out onto the cargo lift by Avza's Fell Companions. They were in chains and dirty rags, heads shorn and hanging low, all except the Overlord himself. He walked with his head held high, glaring around like he still owned the place.

The lift was parked at the top of the Bore and the crowd filled the wide yard where goods made in the workshops and furnaces below were stored before being carted to other lands. Nil stood on crates and wagons and covered the roofs of the warehouses so thickly it looked like they might collapse. Everyone had come to see their age-old oppressors finally cast down.

"Perhaps this was necessary," said Parna. "For closure."

He and Sahi stood with Avza's other advisors on the balcony of the old wagonmaster's office. The rest of the inner circle cheered and clapped along with the crowd, but Sahi and Parna were quieter.

"I just hope this gets it out of her system," said Sahi. "I hope we can start moving forward now."

"I hope so too," said Parna. "There is so much to be done. Actual governing, for instance."

The roaring lessened as Avza stepped out onto the lift and raised her arms. She had a foreman's voice amplifier in one hand, and as the Overlord and his co-conspirators were bullied into a line behind her and the safety rail at the back of the platform removed, she lifted it to her lips.

"People of Haref! Nil, Bayan, and Sona! You are here to witness what happens when saboteurs threaten the new, egalitarian city you fought so hard to bring into being!"

She swept a hand behind her to indicate the prisoners. "These men and women were offered a place in that society—an equal place—doing the same work as the rest of us, living in the same houses as the rest of us, eating the same food as the rest of us, but did they thank us for allowing them to participate in our glorious future? Did they put their shoulders to the wheel and push with the rest of us?"

The crowd answered her, their "NO!" echoing off the far side of the Bore and battering Sahi's ears from every direction.

"No," Avza agreed. "They did not. Instead they conspired to smash our future of freedom and restore the slavery of the past. They stole arms and attacked their coworkers and made a desperate attempt to join with those vile remnants of the old regime that lurk in the farthest corners of the depths."

The crowd booed.

"The traitors meant to kill, brothers and sisters! They intended to murder the innocent Nil overseers who had trusted their false pledges of friendship and cooperation, and thus, to show that such duplicity, such barbarity, will not be tolerated, they will be killed in turn. For all must know that, though we hold out the hand of friendship to all who would join us in our great experiment, those who work against us get the red hand, and it will be the end of them!"

"The red hand!" bellowed the crowd. "The red hand! The red hand!"

"Buar," said Avza, looking to the captain of her Fell Companions. "Give them the red hand."

Buar saluted and turned to a Nil who held a bucket of slurge blood. Buar dipped his hand in the blood, then stepped to the first prisoner, a sullen Sona with crisscrossing scabs on his head from where the ungentle Nil barbers had razored off his long white hair. He did not fight or speak as Buar placed his blood-wet hand on his chest, but an involuntary shriek escaped him as Buar gave him a shove and he toppled backward off the platform into the abyss of the Bore.

The crowd drowned out that shriek before he had plummeted out of sight.

"The red hand! The red hand!"

The next was a massive Bayan woman, shackled at her wrists and ankles. Buar had to stand on tiptoe to reach her chest, and his shove hardly rocked her off her feet. But Buar had accounted for this. Two of his Companions came forward with shock-spears and drove her back, twitching and grunting, until her back foot finally found only air and she too toppled out of sight.

"The red hand! The red hand!"

And on it went, condemned to condemned, some stoic, some pleading, some weeping, but all inevitably pitching backward off the platform with Buar's red handprint still wet on their chest and the crowd's chant following them into the depths, until at last Buar came to the Overlord.

Phanios looked around, eyes blazing with fury as he tugged at his shackles and shouted at the crowd, but without the benefit of Avza's voice-amplification numenera, he couldn't be heard. The Nil laughed at his antics, which only made him thrash and screech all the more.

Finally Buar stunned him with a slap, then placed a blood-wet hand on his chest and shoved him back like all the rest. The Overlord teetered on the edge for a long second, fighting for balance with his bound arms, before he slipped at last, striking his chin and ribs on the edge of the platform, then flipped end over end into the bottomless dark.

"The red hand! The red hand!" roared the crowd.

Sahi closed his eyes.

Chapter 7

"Here are the new banners, master," said Nefele, holding up a sample for Sahi to see. She was an untitled Sona who had worked making calligraphic proclamations and invitations for one of the great Sona houses, and she had quickly become one of Sahi's best workers.

"Don't call me master, Nefele," Sahi sighed for the third time that day. "Call me brother, or foreman if you must. There are no more masters, and no more servants. We are all equal now."

Nefele ducked her head. "Yes, master. I mean, foreman."

Sahi chuckled uneasily. Was she tweaking him or was she serious? With her serene Sona features it was hard to tell. He looked at the banner she held. It was good, a cleaned-up representation of the original red hand with the crudity of swiftly slapped blood replaced with neat red shapes, but the vibrant violence of the act still present in the splay of the fingers and the aggressive angle of the hand against the black background.

Though he was pleased with the work he and his crew had put into it, it no longer stirred his heart. Nor did the red stone of his bracelet glow as it once had every time he'd made another hand. In fact he couldn't remember the last time his bracelet had glowed. Certainly not since the night he and Avza had made love among the ruins of the Overlord's throne.

Well, it didn't matter if it stirred him anymore. It still stirred the other Nil, and that was what counted, wasn't it?

"It's good, Nefele," he said. "Have them bundled up and sent to the palace. And we have another order just as soon as you're done with that. Thirty more for the Court of Justice."

"Right away, master. I will inform the others."

Avza wept in Sahi's arms that night.

"They're all so selfish!" she cried. "All trying to grab power for themselves, blaming each other! Blaming me! Why am I the only one who understands what has to be done, and how?"

Sahi stroked her hair. "Maybe—"

She wasn't listening. "Everyone on the transitional council is screaming at me to hold elections—now, now, now! How can we hold elections when we don't have a constitution?"

"What's the hold-up on the constitution?"

"The representatives of the Sona and Bayan are still manipulating the process, demanding I lower the bar for full citizenship, and that cold-blooded cave fish, Munf, is taking their side—even after the Overlord's rebellion proved that there are Sona and Bayan factions actively working against us!"

Sahi frowned. "So... there will be no elections until there is a constitution, and there will be no constitution until the representatives of the Sona and Bayan agree that they aren't allowed to be full citizens unless they can prove that none of their people are plotting your overthrow."

"Yes. Exactly!"

Sahi hesitated, afraid of starting a fight, but he had to say it. "So there will be no elections, ever."

Avza glared at him. "Of course there will be elections! What are you saying?"

"Avza, listen. Would you have agreed to that? If, three months ago, the Overlord had said he would write a constitution for Haref that allowed Nil to be full citizens, but only if you could prove that none of us were plotting against him, would you have said yes?"

"Certainly I would have. The Nil were never in open rebellion. We—"

Sahi laughed. "Avza! You said you wanted to spill the Sona's blood across their marble floors!"

"And then I went to work the next shift, just like everybody else. It was talk, Sahi. Something to say to get the Nil to stand up for their rights. We didn't rebel until the

Bayan started killing us. There were never any outlaw Nil hiding in the old mines like these Bayan and Sona terrorists."

"What about Zaph and his Pit Head Boys, the ones who lived down at the bottom of the old white iron mine?"

Avza rolled her eyes. "Those idiots? They couldn't have staged a coup if it was handed to them."

"They were still in rebellion."

"And I would have talked them around, or turned them in. If the Nil had had a chance to be citizens, I would have found a way."

"You—you would have turned them in? Your own people?"

Avza stood up out of the bed, naked, beautiful, and furious. She jabbed a thumb between her breasts. "My people are the people who are working toward a future where all the races live together in peace! They are not the people who protect their own at the cost of moving forward! If the Sona and the Bayan truly wish to be citizens in our new city, they should be laying the bodies of their disloyal brothers at my feet instead of trying to win citizenship without earning it!"

Sahi sat up and held out his hands. "All right, all right, forget it. Come on. Come back to bed. What are we doing talking about this stuff when we're alone anyway? Let's just lie down and sleep. Please."

Avza remained clenched for a long moment, her whole body shaking, then she sagged as if all her strings had been cut. She flopped back onto the bed and curled into Sahi's arms.

"I'm sorry, sweet," she said, stroking his chest. "I... I just get so frustrated. It just seems sometimes that I'm the only one who isn't blind. I'm glad you're still with me. I don't know what I'd do if you weren't."

Sahi nodded and held her tighter, and soon her breathing slowed and she was asleep in his arms. He, however, spent a long time staring sleepless into the dark.

There were more uprisings in the following weeks, worse than the first. Mobs of Bayan and Sona, frustrated with the lack of progress as the transitional council argued

endlessly over the constitution, erupted in useless spasms of violence only to be battered into submission by Buar and his Fell Companions, who were now calling themselves the People's Guardians.

Some Nil were rising, too. Miners and smelters and slurge farmers who had yet to see the sun—or better wages, or better beds—came up out of the depths and swarmed the streets of the Strata of the Sun, tearing up cobbles and smashing windows while demanding their share of the fruits of Avza's glorious victory. They too were put down by the People's Guardians, and the next week their leaders joined the leaders of the Bayan and Sona rebellions on the cargo lift and followed them down into the abyss, aided on their way by a wet red hand.

A week after that, rumors floated through the palace that members of the transitional council were plotting to stage a coup and send Avza to the lift. Sahi didn't believe the rumors and didn't dare bring them up with Avza for fear of getting into another shouting match, but he guessed that she already knew. She did not sleep in their bed the whole week. Instead she had a cot set up in her office, saying she had too much work to leave.

Sahi was almost relieved at this. Avza had become so preoccupied that it seemed impossible for her to either give or receive affection, and he had spent too many nights lying awake listening to her toss and turn and mutter beside him until dawn.

"Brothers and sisters," said Avza, as she strode into the meeting of the transitional council. "I have an announcement to make. We have had a breakthrough."

Sahi raised his head from his sketchbook as the councilors all cried out questions and congratulations.

"This is great news," said Munf. "What is the breakthrough?"

Avza smiled at him. "One that you have been waiting for for a long time, Brother Munf. After private negotiations with leaders from the Bayan community, and concessions and pledges on both sides, I am happy to announce that we have come to an agreement on a new draft of the constitution, and the Bayan are now ready to sign."

The council chamber erupted, everyone babbling at once. Sahi's heart pounded with hope. Had Avza come to her senses at last? Had she finally seen that compromise was the only way forward?"

Munf seemed amazed—frightened, even. "How did you do it, Chairwoman Avza? What were these pledges and concessions?"

Avza put a hand to her breast. "On my part, I agreed to allow the Bayan to become full citizens before they could guarantee the loyalty of their entire race, as long as they pledged to root out their disloyal brothers and sisters in a timely manner afterward."

The councilors gabbled questions, but Avza talked over them. "On their part, they agreed to remove themselves from the workforce so that more Nil could be employed in higher strata jobs as long as I pledged to find them employment elsewhere."

The room fell silent and the councilors looked at each other uneasily.

"Chairwoman Avza," said Shol of the workers' committee. "I don't understand. Where else do you plan to employ them? We don't have enough jobs as it is!"

Avza's smile broadened into a grin. "Under these new provisions, the Bayan will return to their traditional employment as watchmen, soldiers, and facility guards, as well as serving as my personal bodyguard."

Everyone started shouting at once. Even Sahi was shouting. "Avza, the Bayan killed Beda! They beat us! They hanged us!"

"Only on the Sona's orders," said Avza. "That is their greatest virtue. As long as the Bayan are paid and their families are safe and secure, they follow orders, no matter what those orders are, or who gives them. And since it is no longer the Sona giving the orders, there is no need to fear that they will be used as the tools of oppression."

"But Chairwoman Avza," barked Buar. "My men are your personal bodyguard. We are your guardians!"

Avza fixed him with a cold stare. "You were, until I discovered that you and Brother Munf were conspiring to overthrow me and take my place. Now—"

"It isn't true!" shouted Buar. "We have always been loyal! We are your Fell Companions! We—"

"Oh, shut up, Buar," said Munf. "Of course it's true. How else were we going to get anything done with this paranoid fool unable to trust anyone or give an inch on a single issue? The only way forward is through you, Chairwoman Avza, and if that means killing you, so be it."

Munf drew a relic of some kind and Sahi jumped up, shouting and ready to leap on him, but a beam of bubbling purple light shot from the chamber door and dropped Munf to the floor where he lay twitching and jerking before, finally, he pissed himself.

The councilors looked in the direction of the beam and saw a phalanx of Bayan shouldering into the room, all armed with the finest, deadliest beam-casters in the Haref arsenal, and all dressed in armored black uniforms emblazoned on the chest with the red hand.

Avza turned to the councilors, who were all staring in shock at the Bayan. "Until the full extent of this conspiracy can be investigated, I hereby disband this transitional council and grant myself temporary executive powers. This meeting is adjourned."

Chapter 8

The raids and arrests started immediately. Agitators of all three races were grabbed by Avza's black-clad Bayan—now dubbed the Revolutionary Guard—only to vanish into the Palace of Justice, never to be seen again. Nil councilors were dragged from their homes along with their families and put to the question.

Avza asked Sahi to make banners with slogans—"Loyalty is the road to freedom," and "Treason unreported is treason you helped commit."

He told her he needed to work night and day to fulfill all her orders, and moved his bed into the workshop. He didn't think she noticed. He also slowed down all work. He didn't dare not make the new banners, but he made them as slowly as possible, his heart sick, his mind dull.

"How did this happen?" he asked one night when Parna came to visit. "How did she become this... this...."

"Horror?" Parna suggested.

"There was no one who wanted justice more," said Sahi. "Not one of us who was more pure of heart, more dedicated to the cause. And now... now she's the worst of us!"

Parna poured himself a drink and passed the bottle. They sat between Sahi's bed and his drawing table in his elevated office while his employees—Nil, Sona, and Bayan—worked at a deliberate pace among the cutting benches and sewing stations in the shop below.

"One difficulty with every revolution I have ever heard of or read about," Parna said, "is that those with the passion to lead them to victory are very often the last ones you want leading them after victory. Speechmakers, firebrands, holy warriors—they all find themselves at a loss when faced with the argument and compromise of day-to-day governance. It is dull. It is frustrating. It requires diplomacy and patience. It requires trust and faith in our nature. It is not a fight one can win with brave words and brutal acts."

"But that's all they know how to do," said Sahi, nodding. "And so they make enemies so that there can always be a fight, just as Avza has done. If only there was

some way to show her, to convince her to step down, to..." He paused as he realized what he was going to say, then said it anyway. "To force her."

Parna chuckled sadly. "The other difficulty with revolutionaries after the revolution is that during the fighting they tend to accrue power, armed supporters, and access to the coffers of the previous regime, making it very difficult to force them to do anything."

Sahi finished his drink and stared out over the workshop, completely filled with black-and-red flags and banners in various stages of completion. "So their madness makes them impossible to convince, and their power makes them impossible to force. What can we do?"

Parna giggled. "Start a revolution?"

Sahi nearly choked. "You can't—you're not serious."

Parna raised his hands. "No, no, of course not. There are many strata to go before it comes to that. Street protests, work slowdowns, strikes, satirical songs—we'll see if any of those work first. We'll see if Avza hears the singing and remembers where she came from."

"We?"

"A lot of the old guard are talking to the newly disenfranchised. Do you want to join us?"

Sahi closed his eyes. "I don't dare," he said. "I don't dare."

The square in front of the Overlord's palace was filled to the edges and beyond, mostly with Nil, but also a few Sona and Bayan too, all holding candles and singing up at the balcony where Sahi stood with Avza and two of her enormous bodyguards. The crowd was singing a song the Nil had often sung during the revolution, an old song they had sung in times of unrest for as long as anyone could remember.

"We make the iron and we make the steel

We grow the food and we shoulder the wheel

We make half wages but we're always charged double

What make the bosses? Nothing but trouble."

Avza's fingers were clenched on the stone railing of the balcony. "How dare they sing that at me? I'm not their boss. I'm one of them. I'm only here to protect them, to keep them safe from the rebels, and yet they turn on me like I was Overlord Phanos himself!"

"Maybe you should hear them out," said Sahi. "They have a lot of legitimate complaints."

Avza shot him a look. "Such as?"

"They want what they fought for—better wages, freedom from oppression, the right to vote, that sort of thing."

"Those things are coming," snapped Avza. "Don't they realize that their life isn't going to be paradise overnight? We're still in a state of emergency! Nothing can be done until order is restored."

Sahi groaned. "But don't you see? The longer you wait to give them what they want, the angrier they're going to be, and the more disorder they're going to cause. The 'state of emergency' will never end!"

Avza waved a dismissive hand. "The Nil don't get angry. Don't you remember? We could hardly get them to cheer a good speech, let alone lead them out of the bar to protest."

Sahi shot a glance out at the crowd, who were still singing and staring straight at them. "Uh, it looks like they're angry now."

"Ha!" laughed Avza. "You're so naïve, Sahi. This isn't a real protest. These people were paid to be here—paid by my enemies from the council. It's nothing but an underhanded way to make me think that the people are against me and that I should step down. Well, I'm not falling for it."

"Avza, listen to yourself." Sahi was almost weeping. "How could your enemies pay all these people? They have no money. You have it all! Why can't you accept—"

Screams from below cut him off, and he and Avza looked out over the railing again. Black-uniformed Bayan were moving into the square from all sides, shoving at the crowd with heavy shields and cracking skulls with their traditional truncheons. The

crowd was beginning to boil with fear and panic, everyone trying to get away from the violence and trampling each other underfoot.

Sahi stared in horror at the chaos, then looked at Avza. She looked sick too, her beautiful face pinched and ugly, but her jaw remained firm.

"Avza," said Sahi. "How can you do this? They're your own people."

Avza started back into the palace. "Then my people are fools. This will teach them not to listen to the whispers of liars and traitors."

Sahi did not follow her. He stayed looking out over the railing, tears streaming down his cheeks. He had to do something. He had to.

But what?

The Nil no longer cheered the red hand. They feared it. The sight of it, bright against the black of a Revolutionary Guard's uniform, or on a looming banner hanging above the door of the Palace of Justice, made them curse and cringe. No more did it represent the battered masses showing the blood of their wounds to the powerful. Now it represented the bloodied hands of the guard, the jailor, and the torturer, standing over the bodies of their victims.

In the days that followed the disrupted protest, many more gatherings were broken up and many more heads broken. Arrests were made, seemingly at random—people hauled out of their houses and flats whether they had been out in the streets or not.

And the arrests and raids had the effect Avza wanted. After a week of brutal reprisals, the streets were empty except for those going to and from their work, and they moved with heads down and shoulders hunched, vermin scurrying along the base of a wall. The bars were closed, the markets deserted, the whole city silent except for the never-ending howl of the wind in the Bore. Only in the hospitals and the houses of chiurgeons was there any activity, for there had been many casualties.

Sahi let his workers and their families stay at the workshop. Thanks to his position as Avza's official artist, it seemed off-limits to the Revolutionary Guard, while their homes were not. In fact, Nefele's brothers had already been taken. She did not know where they were.

Sahi wanted to ask at the palace, but he didn't dare for fear of drawing attention to her and the others he was sheltering. He hardly dared go to the palace at all anymore. Avza's mood swung from black depression to murderous rage with monotonous regularity, and he felt like he was walking on eggshells whenever he was around her.

But then Parna told him that he and the members of the disbanded council were planning to present her with a petition the next evening, and he knew he had to return.

Sahi brought his sketchbook as usual, but he was too nervous to draw in it. It lay in his lap, open but untouched, as he sat in a chair by the wall and watched Avza pace the throne room and mutter to herself while twenty towering Bayan guards stood at impassive attention along the walls.

"I have no time for this. They will have nothing new to say. There is nothing to discuss."

She stopped pacing and looked up as the door opened and two more Bayan entered, then stepped aside to allow Parna and his coalition to pass through. Sahi saw Shol and Beil among them, looking grim and uneasy, as well as others he recognized as drinking companions from the old days before the revolution, but there were new faces too—a Bayan, two Sona, and some Nil he did not know.

They walked the length of the marble floor to the dais with Avza staring at them unmoving the whole way, then they stopped before her and bowed.

"Well?" said Avza. "Make it short."

"Of course, Avza," said Parna. "We only have—"

"Chairwoman Avza," she interrupted.

Parna smiled. "We have not come to you as councilors, Avza, but as old friends who used to drink and argue and trade speeches in the Black Pit during our off-shifts."

"I don't recall drinking with any Sona," sneered Avza. "Nor any Bayan either."

"They are new friends," said Parna smoothly, "but much like us in philosophy and temperament, so I hoped that we might all address each other as we did back then and have a quiet little chat, yes?"

Avza's face remained hard, but after a moment she nodded. "Fine. Then speak, though I see no reason for it. I already know what you will say, and I am already opposed to it."

Parna smiled again, and to Sahi's eyes he seemed perfectly calm, as if the danger of the situation was not affecting him at all. Maybe he was drunk, like in the old days.

"So," Parna said. "You think we are here to demand that you reinstate the council? That we wish to resume the drafting of the constitution and urge that you hold elections as soon as is feasible?"

"Aren't you?" asked Avza.

"Not at all."

Sahi raised his eyebrows at this. From what Parna had told him earlier, he had thought that was exactly what this meeting would be about.

"The events of this past week," said Parna, "have convinced us that you were right, Avza. It will be a long time before all the rebellious elements in Haref are eliminated, and since you have declared that moving ahead with elections will not happen until that is the case, it follows that you will be Haref's sole leader for a long time as well."

Avza's eyes narrowed, as if she was trying to determine if Parna was somehow mocking her.

"Go on," she said.

"We have therefore come, not with any demands, but to offer you our help. We know how hard it must be shouldering the governance of this city alone, how many details demand your attention, how many decisions have to be made, how long the days are when you must attend to every single thing yourself. Let us share that burden. Delegate some of that work to us. Many of us were already tending to these jobs as councilors—Shol with the workers' committee, Beil with the rebuilding committee, I with the schools committee—while Ushti here has the ear of the Bayan, and Psalmathe and Haleke can speak for the Sona. Why not make us your ministers—of labor, of public works, of education, of Bayan and Sona affairs—so that your government will run smoothly until that distant day when Haref will be peaceful enough to transition to an elected government?"

He smiled again and leaned against a pillar, the very picture of the Parna of old, propping himself up in the bar. All that was missing was his beer. "What do you think, Avza? Sound all right?"

Sahi held his breath, waiting for Avza to speak. He knew what Parna was doing, of course. He was hoping to make himself and his fellow "secretaries" a shield between Avza and the citizens of Haref, a way to blunt and mitigate her policies and calm the city down. It was a daring plan, and Sahi thought a good one, but would it work?

He stared at Avza, and for a second he thought he saw her lip tremble and her shoulders slump, as if the thought of having the weight lifted from them was about to make her weep tears of relief. Indeed he could have sworn he saw the glitter of tears in her eyes, but then she straightened and her eyes sharpened again.

"A clever trick, Parna," she said at last, "and I am weary enough to wish it were the truth, but I know it for what it is."

Sahi groaned. She had figured it out—seen through Parna's plan.

"You want my chairmanship," Avza continued. "And since you haven't the power to kill me for it, you try a more subtle method. You sweet-talk your way back into the palace, bowing and sucking like a Sona courtier." She shot a hard look at the male and female Sona. "And I think I know who you learned that from. You offer to take this off my hands, and then that, and then something else too, until finally you do have the power to kill me, and I'm tossed down the Bore, and you're sitting in here with your new friends. And suddenly Haref has an Overlord again." Another hard glance at the two Sona. "And a Sona Overlord at that!"

Parna's smiling calm was gone. He looked shocked and confused, just as Sahi was. How could Avza have gotten it so wrong? Yes, Parna had been trying to trick her, but only into letting his friends become a buffer between her and the people. He didn't want to be Overlord! He didn't want to kill her!

"Avza, please. I'm not out to get you. Nor are any of my friends. We're still for the people, just like we were back in the bar. We're just trying to make life easier, for you and for them, I—"

"Oh yes," interrupted Avza. "You've been seen talking to the people. You were seen with the leader of the rebel Nil, and Sona and Bayan agitators, too, like your friends here. All just waiting for the word, once you've moved against me."

"Avza, we would never move against you!" There were tears in Parna's voice. "We love you! Every one of us! You are the best of us! The bravest, the strongest, the sharpest, but... but you have lost the love of the people, and they will tear you down if you continue as you are. You must let us help you, for the sake of all we fought for, and for your own sake as well. Yes, we went to the rebels, Avza, to the Bayan and Sona and Nil who hide in the shadows in fear of you. But we didn't go to urge them to fight. We went to beg their patience. To tell them you would listen to reason. But if you don't..." He hung his head. "If you don't, they will kill you, Avza. They will show you their red hands."

Avza's face went cold and blank. "And there it is," she said. "The knife laid bare. Do what the rebels tell you or we will kill you. I have heard enough."

Parna held out his hands, pleading. "Avza, no. You haven't heard me at all. Listen—"

Avza turned to her guards. "Kill them all. Don't let any leave the room."

Sahi jumped out of his chair as the Bayan started to move in from the walls.

"What? Avza! No! You can't! It's Parna!"

He strode to her, reaching for her, but she shoved him back, snarling. "And he has turned against me like all the others! His mind has been twisted by the rebels, the Sona, the—"

"But he hasn't turned against you! Didn't you hear—"

"He threatened to kill me! He has to die!"

"He didn't. He—"

Avza shouted in Sahi's face, deafening him. "He has to die!"

Sahi stepped back, stunned, his ears ringing. There was nothing left of the Avza he remembered. Her beauty, which had grown harder but also wilder during the revolution, was gone. Her face was a mask of rage, and her eyes, once sharp with intelligence, were now sharp like the empty black glitter of an obsidian knife.

Sahi spread his arms. "Then kill me too, Avza. For I believe everything he believes, and I want everything he wants. If you think he's a traitor, then I'm one too, and I deserve to die."

Avza blinked at him, and for a second, a flicker of normalcy returned to her eyes. "No, Sahi. You are my luck. You are my hope. You are what the world should be. If you die, everything dies."

She signaled behind him. "But I can keep you away from bad influences until things get better. Sakti, have him locked up, then kill the others. And when you're done here, go to the Sona ghetto and do the same. Their poisoned tongues have corrupted even my oldest friends."

"Yes, Chairwoman," rumbled the Bayan.

Sahi reached for Avza, shaking. "Avza! Please! I—"

An iron hand cuffed the back of his head, making his knees buckle. He was caught up and thrown over the broad, armored shoulder of a Bayan guard.

The last thing he saw, upside down, head swimming, his cheek bouncing against the Bayan's back, was Avza watching, unblinking, as a bloody truncheon caved in Parna's head, and her Revolutionary Guard smashed the rest of the councilors to the red wet floor.



Chapter 9

Sahi paced his cell, crazed with grief and panic. His mind flashed back and forth from images of Parna's head shattering and hitting the floor to images of the same thing soon happening to every Sona in the city—Nefele, her parents, the other Sona from the workshop, and everyone they loved and knew, all smashed and broken and dead.

And it wouldn't end there, Sahi knew that now. Avza had already killed her oldest friends, so what would stop her from killing more Nil, and still more? Her madness had trapped her in a world where everyone was her enemy, and therefore everyone was fair game. She had to be stopped, but first the massacre of the Sona had to be stopped—if it wasn't already too late.

He looked around the cell, trying to imagine a way that he could escape and warn them of what was coming, but it was impossible. The walls were two feet thick. The bars on the door were close-set and thicker than his wrist. He was no jack or glaive like out of the stories who could cut through cold synthsteel and fight his way out of the palace dungeon through a hundred guards. He was no nano who could walk through walls. He was just a Nil, and not a particularly strong or clever one at that.

"What is that light?" rumbled the guard in the hall. "Do you have fire in there?"

Light, thought Sahi. What light?

Then he noticed it. A faint red pulse on the rough stone of the walls. He looked down. His bracelet. It was alive again. It hadn't glowed in months. Not since the night he and Avza had made love in the Overlord's throne room.

Well, he knew why it was glowing now. It always glowed in his moments of greatest passion, whether it was love, lust, inspiration, or rage, and he had plenty of rage just now. But what good was it? Before the bracelet had seemed to amplify those passions, giving him the energy to connect one idea with another to make a greater third, helping him see new ways to look at old ideas, giving him the clarity to understand which of many ideas would strike the greatest chord in the hearts of others. Now it just seemed to be amplifying his fear for all those who were soon to die at Avza's command.

His heart ached in empathy for the horror that would soon be theirs, but how were fear and empathy going to break down stone walls?

The Bayan guard appeared at the door, his dull, brow-shaded eyes frowning through the bars. His voice was like granite slabs rubbing together.

"What is that light?"

Sahi looked at the Bayan's impassive face. Was that what he was supposed to do? Was he somehow supposed to use his rage and empathy and fear to get the guard to help him? It seemed just as impossible as breaking down the walls. Bayan were notorious for their lack of emotion, and Sahi was no talker. That was Avza's forte. He'd always just sat back in the shadows and drawn. But what other tools did he have? He didn't even have his sketchbook and pencils. He had nothing but his passion.

He swallowed.

"Listen, guard," he said. "Listen to me. I need your help. I'm not going to ask you to let me out, or anything like that. I'm not stupid. I just... I just need you to tell somebody something. I need you to find some way to tell the people of the Sona ghetto that Avza is sending a death squad to kill them—all of them. Men, women, children. She wants them all dead, do you understand? And the squads are probably already on their way."

"Is the light from that bracelet? Is it a relic? Prisoners are not allowed to have those."

Sahi groaned. It was going just like he'd thought it would. "Endless dark, will you listen to me! People are going to die! A whole race is going to be wiped out!"

"Please pass the bracelet through the bars."

"Okay, okay, maybe you don't care about the Sona. I don't know why you would. I mean, it's true they've employed you since forever, but they've never cared about you, have they? No more than they ever cared about us Nil. They made you do all the dirty work, all the killing and hurting people and all that boring standing around guarding things, and never gave a damn if you got hurt or killed doing it. Why would you care if they got hurt or killed?"

"Please pass—"

Sahi kept right on talking. He couldn't stop now. It was all just spilling out of him, like blood. "But listen, this isn't going to end with the Sona, you have to know that. You've seen what's happened since Avza—I mean, Chairwoman Avza—has taken power. Do you think she cares about you any more than the Sona did?" Sahi laughed. It sounded like a laak's squeak. "She probably cares about you less than they did. I mean, until a few weeks ago, you were the enemy, right? Oh, sure, she's employing you now. She needs you to do the heavy work, just like the Sona did, but deep down she hates you, just like she hates... hates..."

A sob burst from Sahi's chest unexpectedly. He sucked in a shaking breath and continued. "Just like she hates everybody. Listen, right now she's sending you Bayan after the Sona. She's already sent you after the Nil. How long before she sends you after other Bayan? How long before she wants you to kick down the doors of your own people? How long before she wants you to turn against your family—your mother, your father, your brothers? What are you going to do then? Just stand there like the stone-hearted lumps everybody thinks you are and do what you're told? Well, are you?"

Sahi ran out of breath and ideas at the same time and sagged hopelessly, panting and spent. He expected the guard to fill the silence with another request for him to pass the bracelet through the door, but the Bayan just stood there, staring unblinking through the bars, as the pulsing red light underlit his broad, impassive face. He didn't seem to be able to take his eyes off the crimson gem. Was he asleep? Was he even listening?

Sahi took a deep breath and cleared his throat to try again. Something had to wake the guard's feelings. There had to be something within him he could reach. "Don't you understand? She's already ordered the deaths of her own best friends." The image of Parna smiling and leaning against the pillar came unbidden into Sahi's mind and it hurt so much he nearly staggered. "Of my best friends. What makes you think she would hesitate for even a second to order you to kill your—"

"My cousin," said the guard.

"Huh?" said Sahi.

"My cousin joined the rebels. In the caves off Strata 33. Chairwoman Avza sent us against them."

"So... it's already happened." A wave of heartbreak and sympathy broke over Sahi, as if he had received Avza's order himself. As if he had been sent after his own cousin. "Were you...? Did you...?"

"I arrested her. I told her they would only question her. I... I thought that was true."

"It wasn't?"

The Bayan shook his head. "No."

Sahi swallowed. "I'm sorry."

The Bayan looked up at him. "You did not let it happen. I did."

Sahi stepped to the bars. "Then don't let it happen again! Please! Warn the Sona before the Revolutionary Guard kills them all. You have to get them out of there!"

The guard said nothing and did nothing for a long moment—so long that Sahi wanted to scream. Didn't he understand that people might be dying while he stood there?

Finally, the guard tugged his keys from his belt and stepped to the door. Sahi edged back, afraid he was coming in to take the bracelet, but when the guard swung open the door, he moved aside and held it wide.

"The Sona will not listen to me. They will not believe me. They will believe you. Come."

The Sona did not believe him, not at first. Many of them knew who he was and thought he was there to trick them into doing something Avza could arrest them for. Finally, however, with the bracelet's gem pulsing and the Bayan guard, whose name Sahi learned was Havaka, corroborating his story, the Sona leaders sent out scouts to see if the Revolutionary Guard were coming. When those scouts came running back, breathless and shouting, the whole ghetto raced into the depths, babes and belongings strapped to their backs or pushed in barrows, and found their way to the hidden cavern stronghold of the Sona underground.

There Sahi had to tell his story and convince more suspicious leaders all over again, but with the accounts of Havaka and the Sona from the ghetto added to his, they were eventually let in.

After that the talk turned to more logistical problems of where to put a thousand new rebels, how to feed them, and how to defend them from the inevitable reprisals, and Sahi started to lose interest. He and Havaka had been running and shouting and explaining and running again since the guard had let him out of his cell, and now Sahi was dead tired.

A kindly Sona led them both to a makeshift kitchen tucked away in a side chamber of the main cave, and they were given mugs of slurge and mushroom stew and cave water—meager fare after the delicacies Sahi had become used to in the palace, but they both gulped it down as if it were the best food they'd ever tasted.

Before they were finished, a long-haired Sona poked her head into the kitchen. She smiled when she saw them sitting there.

"Sahi!" She crossed to their table and hugged him. It was Nefele. "I heard it was you who saved us. Thank you. Everyone at the workshop followed the exodus—Sona, Nil, and Bayan alike. We are all safe."

"Thank Fate for that," said Sahi, then raised an eyebrow at her. "You're calling me Sahi now?"

She grinned. "You are no longer my master."

"I was never your master."

Nefele laughed and rolled her eyes. "You might not have wanted to be, but no Sona or Bayan would have been allowed to run that shop. Nor would you have been punished had you beaten or killed us. What else would you call a person with that power?"

"Well, I'm glad to be quit of it," said Sahi, sighing. "I want to be quit of it all."

"What?" Nefele sat down opposite him and looked him right in the eyes. "You can't quit now."

"Why not?" Disgust welled up inside Sahi like nausea. "This whole business, from the moment Avza and the crowd stormed the gates of the armory till now, has been so

painful, so horrible—everything I thought I wanted turned on its head, Avza changing, going crazy. It all just sickens me. I... I wish I had never made those red hands. Look at all the terrible things they've inspired. That... that I inspired."

Havaka growled low in his throat. "And that is why you cannot quit. You are a good man, Nil. You are a smart man. But things you did have allowed terrible events to happen. You must use your smarts to make all those things right."

Nefele nodded. "There will be another revolution, Sahi. It is inevitable. You know this. It is your responsibility—your duty—to make this revolution be all that the last one should have been."

Sahi groaned. It felt as if all his strength had left his body at once. She was right, of course. They both were. He, more than anyone, had set all this in motion. All the death, horror, and upheaval had begun when he had slapped up the first red hand, but the thought of going through it all again, of the elation of the early days turning into despair, of the bloodshed that seemed so necessary in the moment but came to mean nothing at the end, of the ideals given life in the bar room dying from neglect in the throne room as corruption and paranoia triumphed, of the beautiful utopia of his dreams becoming the ugly reality of political infighting and petty power grabs—it all made him sick. It made him want to slit his wrists.

He swayed to his feet and stumbled for the exit, nausea choking him, tears blinding him. "I can't. I'm sorry. I can't do it again. I just can't."

Nefele and Havaka called after him, but their words were only distorted howling in his ears. He ran blind through the cavern, looking for someplace to be alone, to hide in the dark, to sleep and never wake up.

Sleep did not come.

Though he finally collapsed from exhaustion in a dark corner within the labyrinth of passages that surrounded the Sona's main cavern, though he curled up tight against a rocky wall and closed his eyes, though he lengthened his breaths and slowed his heart, he could not slow his mind. It whirled like a threshing machine, tossing around his fear and grief and shame like so much chaff.

It was wrong to run away. He knew that. And it was pathetic to consider killing himself to escape his guilt over what he had done—and not done—during Avza's rise. At the same time, though, the thought of trying again just made him laugh. It was futile. Revolution didn't work. The process damaged and corrupted the revolutionaries so thoroughly that by the time they had cast down the oppressors, they had become oppressors themselves and the cycle continued unbroken. Nothing would ever change.

But though he knew it was true, that there was no point in trying, that any attempt to right his past wrongs was doomed to failure, still a part of him teased at the problem like a laak trying to gnaw through a leather sack. What if there was some way to make it work? What if a revolution could maintain its ideals after the fighting was over? What if there was a way to make the rebels think of the struggle not so much as a war, but as a way to change the minds of the powerful?

That had been the problem with the symbol of the red hand. It had been a call to arms, a cry for violent vengeance against the oppressors. It had stirred the passions of the Nil toward the other races, making them feel like righteous victims, and it had justified any brutal acts they committed against the Sona and the Bayan as well-deserved payback, but the truth was that all of the races were victims of Haref's stratified society. Perhaps the Nil were the most obvious, with the least control over their lives and the worst living conditions, but the Bayan were victims too, denied emotion, denied creative outlet, denied a say in any of the decisions that affected their lives, allowed only to be the walking monoliths that the Sona wanted them to be. Likewise the Sona, though certainly better off than the other two races, were victims, completely unable to take care of themselves without rafts of servants to help them, sheltered and distanced from the nitty-gritty of life like birds born in captivity, lost the moment the cage door opened.

What was needed was a way for all three races to rise together, to replace a society where one race lorded it over the others—whichever race that might be at the moment—with one where Bayan, Sona, and Nil lived together on every strata and race had nothing to do with one's position in society.

But how was that possible? Even in rebellion, the three races had separated. He was in the camp of the Sona underground, but there was also a Nil rebel base somewhere, and a band of renegade Bayan in a third camp. If any one of them took

control, the other two would suffer and the social hierarchy would reassert itself. How could he bring them together to fight not for power, but for equality? Was there a symbol for that? A counter to the red hand? Something that was a call to action, but not a call to war? A call for unity, not for strife?

The trouble was that each group saw itself as separate from the others, as a different race that must defend itself and its identity from the attacks of the other two. But that wasn't true, was it?

Sahi's mind went back to that dinner in the Overlord's dining room, where he and Avza had talked about making red hand banners for the palace and Parna had been reading books stolen from the Overlord's secret library. Parna had laughed at a part of a book that had said that the Nil, the Bayan, and the Sona had started as humans, and had been modified into their current forms by long-forgotten masters who had shaped them to better fit the jobs they had been given. Underneath, however, they were all the same. They had the same brains, the same blood, the same organs, the same—

Sahi sat bolt upright as it came to him. He had it! The symbol that would draw the races together and let them know they were all the same race under the skin. The symbol that would be a call to united action, not to divisive war.

He patted himself down, feeling for something to write with, but he still had nothing. He looked around in the pulsing red light of his bracelet, but there were no rocks nearby either, not even a discarded torch for a charcoal stick.

Well, perhaps it was time for him to shed blood for his beliefs for once.

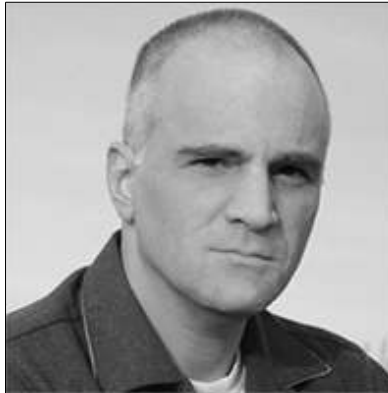
Yes.

It was long past time.

Hissing and flinching with pain, Sahi chewed at the end of his middle finger until the crimson flowed, then turned to the wall, raised his hand, and drew the thing all three of Haref's people shared under their different skins.

He drew a heart.

About the Author



Nathan Long is a screen and prose writer, with two movies, One Saturday-Morning Adventure series, and a handful of live-action and animated TV episodes to his name. As well as eleven fantasy novels and several award-winning short stories. He hails from Pennsylvania, where he grew up, went to school, and played in various punk and rock-a-billy bands, before following his writing dreams to Hollywood. Where he now writes full time— and still occasionally plays in bands.

Selected Works	
2004	Valnir's Bane
2005	The Broken Lance
2006	Tainted Blood
2006	Orcslayer
2007	Manslayer
2008	Battle for Skull Pass
2008	Elfslayer
2009	Slayer of the Storm God (Audio Book)
2009	Shamanslayer
2009	Gotrek and Felix: The Third Omnibus
2010	Bloodborn: Ulrika the Vampire Book One
2010	Zombieslayer
2011	Bloodforged
2012	Jane Carver of Waar
2012	Bloodsworn
2012	Jane Carver: Swords of Waar