

EXALTED

THIRD EDITION

FALSE IMAGES



AARON ROSENBERG
AND LAUREN ROY

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CHAPTER ONE

Night hung heavy over Nexus, weighing the city down like a sodden cloak; the thick, velvety folds clung to every crevice, eased into every gap, and filled the city with rich darkness. It had a presence, a power, all its own, and for most that was both a comfort and a concern. One such figure defied the night's power with every step. Every movement, every gesture pushed back against the night's weight, slicing through the darkness as a part of it, spurning its shroud only so that she might wrap those shadows more firmly about herself.

As she moved, the long tails of her vivid red jacket streamed behind her, her long red tresses flowing out to match. She was like a flame in the night herself, dancing across the rooftops. Flitting from shadow to shadow and corner to corner, her lithe form coiled and uncoiled in a ballet of motion that carried her across the city. Novia Claro did not hide from the night, nor did she fear it.

She embraced it.

Novia loved the night, loved feeling the dark, cool air rushing past her, lifting her as she leapt but having to surrender her again each time as her feet once more touched down on tile, slat, or beam. She could roam the city like this for hours. From up here, Nexus was clean and beautiful, all its grime hidden, all of its rough edges smoothed, its tired grandeur given a new gloss beneath moonlight and starscape. The moon illuminated the Nexus District's ancient towers and the spindly sky bridges connecting them. It shed its soft glow on the mansions of Bastion atop their hills, and the sprawling farmlands down below the city. From this height, the Night Market's many lanterns were a bright beacon in an otherwise darkened district. The rivers that surrounded the city glistened, beautiful ribbons of black and silver entwined as far as the eye could see. Nexus hung between them like a jewel, a dark pearl with a gloss all its own.

Right now, she was most focused on one sliver of that pearl, the edge where it touched up against the Yellow River to the north. She alighted atop an old warehouse perched alongside the docks, its warped wooden walls leaning out over the dark water like an old drunk teetering as he attempted to stand. The shingles beneath her threatened to creak, but she urged them to quiet and they obeyed. They held her weight, and for that she thanked them before turning her attention to the scene below.

Two men stood upon the dock. Their attention was on the battered old barge that was even now rocking up against that portion of the worn wooden

walkway, a heavy rope securing it to the rusted but sturdy stanchion imbedded in the dock just past the tip of its nose.

A strange hour to pull into port, Novia thought. Most sailing vessels would have waited until dawn before trying to settle into a slip here. Nexus was known for its treacherous channels which served as both a strong defense and an occasional deterrent. During the daytime, with an able pilot at the helm, such a task was easy enough. At night that same feat became extremely risky, yet clearly this barge had done so.

Just as clearly, the duo she observed was tasked with greeting these eager visitors.

The dockworkers were an odd pairing. At first glance, they did not appear dissimilar. Neither was overly tall or short, overly heavy or slight, overly dark or pale. They wore serviceable breeches and shirts beneath official robes that were tattered and worn, short enough to not interfere with walking but long enough to conceal and contain various tools and implements. They also wore plain dark caps, their surfaces marred only by the crest at the front, the emblem of the city itself, and both had on sturdy sandals, the same as many other locals wore, strong and able to provide good traction even on water-slicked boards such as the ones beneath their feet.

Yet the two men could not have been more different. To Novia's careful, well-trained eye, the man on the right was still and calm, his steps unhurried, his hands steady. The second man, on the other hand, was anything but calm. He was constantly shifting, shuffling his feet, tugging a coin from his belt pouch and flipping it from hand to hand.

"Check the logs, did you check the logs?" the second man, whose name was Jiro Hatan, asked the first, who was called Miroku Bakar.

"Yes, of course I checked the logs," Miroku replied, just the barest edge in the words. But Novia saw the way he quickly turned away from his partner and scanned his clipboard to check said logs, and had to repress a snort of her own. So, although the calmer of the two and outwardly the more competent, Miroku was just as useless. *Interesting*.

A woman emerged from the boat's main cabin and sauntered across the worn deck before hopping over the rail and onto the dock with a casual grace. Novia sized up the newcomer with a practiced eye. Short, perhaps on par with Novia herself, but more solidly built, legs slightly bowed from years adjusting to the roll and pitch of a deck, hands heavily callused, tired smile, but eyes alert. Someone who could handle herself, clearly.

"Ho!" the woman called out as she approached the pair. "Apologies for the late arrival—we got waylaid by some heavy crosswinds just after dawn, had to fight our way through. It set us behind schedule." Reaching the men, she proffered a rolled-up parchment. "Here are our docking papers, all arranged through your dockmaster last month."

Novia's sharp gaze did not miss the flash of gold briefly visible beneath that paper as it changed hands, nor the way Miroku — the senior partner — tilted it so the coin slid into his waiting hand, which then dipped quickly into the pouch at his waist. There was no one else around to witness the transaction, which was just another part of doing business here.

Bribes were par for the course in Nexus. They bought access to important people or moved your forms to the top of the pile. Fail to bribe the right people, and you might spend months waiting for a meeting with an administrator. Your paperwork might be shuffled among the wrong departments for weeks, or lost entirely, or your requests simply denied. Miroku was only doing what thousands of dock inspectors before him had done.

But Novia still filed that information away. It could prove useful later.

Miroku glanced over the documents, then passed them to Jiro, who studied them more closely, the parchment trembling in his hands. Also interesting, but not particularly unusual— Miroku had the seniority, so he took the bribes and did the official sign-off, but passed as much of the work as possible on to his nominal subordinate.

Novia suspected this was why Jiro had hired her: He did all the work, but saw very little of the profits. Although that was typical in positions like his, Jiro wasn't willing to wait for the day *he* got to be the one pocketing the bribes. Turnover at the docks was slow, and Jiro was impatient. Thus, he'd reached out to Novia — carefully, and with surprising subtlety — to help speed up the process.

"Everything looks in order," Jiro said finally. The barge captain hadn't moved during the perusal of her papers, but Novia saw her stance shift ever so slightly now. She was relieved, and understandably so. Even for an honest boat captain with legitimate papers, there was always the risk of a shakedown or a screw-up. Either would cost money that had not been budgeted for the trip, and so ate into what were probably already meager profits at best.

Jiro's partner nodded and made a mark on his clipboard. He accepted the papers back from Jiro, signed them, and affixed the chop hanging from the clipboard's top. The captain accepted the papers with a more open smile, saluted, and made her way back to her boat. Most likely she would sleep on deck—the night was pleasant enough, and it was both safer to stay close to whatever wares she'd ferried in and far less expensive than seeking even the basic accommodations the city had to offer.

With the boat captain gone, Novia once again focused on the two men. They chatted about inconsequential matters as they strolled unhurriedly to the small, sturdy hut perched just past the point where all the docks converged. Novia followed, creeping across the warehouse until she reached its end, and jumping the distance to the next one. She knew once the men slipped into that hut and shut its door against the wind she would be unable to hear them any

longer. Not unless she wanted to drop down to street level and approach the hut itself, but that would be taking an unnecessary risk.

Besides, she had all she needed from them.

For now.

After seeing them safely ensconced in their small workspace, she set her sights on a different building a short ways beyond. This was a larger, more imposing structure, still made of wood but with significantly thicker beams, heavier posts, and sturdier frames. It faced the docks and stood like a guard dog protecting the city beyond it from the riffraff off the river. The warehouses were arrayed behind it like nervous merchants huddling for protection. This was the Northern Dock Station, where most of that locale's extensive inspection, recording, and taxation divisions worked throughout the day and often deep into the night. At this very moment at least half the windows were lit, as inspectors hurried to finish the day's tasks before heading home to meager suppers and fitful slumbers.

Novia was drawn toward an office at the corner of the topmost floor, but forced herself to ignore it for now. Best to handle these matters in the appropriate order, she knew, and so she quelled her own impatience. She jumped down into the alley between the two buildings and landed lightly, settling into the shadows. Then, trailing those same shadows behind her like obedient pups, Novia exited the alley and moved silently but purposefully toward the office building's front. Anyone who might have seen her would have assumed she had some official reason for approaching that structure, based solely upon the confidence she exuded. But, even with the bright beacon of her jacket and her hair, no one noticed her.

Having studied the building's layout on a previous scouting mission, Novia knew exactly where to go. She slid in through the front doors, shutting them silently, then crept down the long, dim hall. A few late-night workers were present, most of them hunched intently over their desks. They took no notice of Novia as she slipped past. At the first branching, she turned right, then left, then right again, finally arriving at a closed door. The placard beside it read "Yanitae Sou, Junior Dock Overseer."

Listening at the door, Novia heard a soft susurrant from within. Holding her breath, she tried the handle. It wasn't latched. Easing it open a crack, she peered inside.

Clutter littered the office, with jumbled piles of paperwork on every surface. Pages stuck out of ledgers, some stacked so haphazardly they were an avalanche of vellum in waiting, poised to crush an unsuspecting official at the slightest jostle. Yanitae Sou, the office's occupant, was a heavy man, made more so by complete indolence and, no doubt, frequent drink. A nearly drained bottle on his desk confirmed that last detail, as did the empty glass beside it. He lay sprawled in his chair, head back, arms out, legs forward, eyes closed, mouth

open. The noise had been his snores. Novia only regarded him a second or two before sliding the door shut again.

Next she headed for the building's narrow, rickety back stairs. One flight up she found her next destination, a door marked "Saria Lenko, Senior Dock Overseer." There was a light on behind this door as well, but different sounds emerged through it — that of a quick scratching, with the occasional pause. Saria Lenko was not only still awake and still in her office but still working, writing reports or making notations with quill and ink.

So here, at last, was someone competent.

That was reassuring, though not for Novia's specific purposes.

Looking in on Saria would be impossible without garnering attention, and that Novia could ill afford. She turned away and headed for the the top floor and her final stop of the night — another office, this one larger and significantly more grand.

The sign here read "Fumo Anasol, Northern Dockmaster."

Fumo was an important man, second only to the Rivermaster himself. He was in charge of all water trade in and out of Nexus along the Yellow River via the north dock. His counterpart oversaw all commerce along the south dock facing the Gray River, and together they kept the Rivermaster advised about what came and went to their fair city.

Fumo Anasol was an older man and had held the post of Dockmaster for the past decade or more. He had worked the docks his entire life, which now comprised some six decades at least. Novia had spied him from a distance more than once, but this was the first time she had approached him directly.

But, as with Saria below, she was only able to go so far. As there, Fumo's office still showed light, and the sound of writing emerged when she pressed her ear against the door's smooth, polished wood — not against the frosted glass set into it, for if he had looked up then, he might have seen her shadow.

His writing was slower than Saria's, with more fits and starts and the occasional muttered curse, followed by more frantic scratching. Mistakes, no doubt. He was an old man, after all.

More knowledge to file away.

For now, however, her night's work was complete. This had been a fact-finding mission only, and Novia counted it a successful one as she stealthily made her way back down the stairs, through the halls, and out a small side door that let her out behind the building. She was smiling as she allowed the shadows to swallow her up as she turned her steps away from the docks. Tomorrow she could set some of her plans in motion.

CHAPTER TWO

Her paying business taken care of for the evening, Novia took to the rooftops once more and made her way southward. Her contacts within some of the syndicates had been buzzing about murders down on the Gray River's docks recently, and Novia had decided to find out more herself. It wasn't that murder was unusual — in Nexus, violent deaths were all too commonplace — but the victims had piqued her interest, because several priests of Hushanti had turned up dead, and no one knew who'd killed them, or why.

Hushanti, the Gray Lady, Pearlescent Mistress of Tide and Current, was the goddess of the Gray River that ran along the south side of Nexus. Although she had shrines all over Nexus, often paired with those of her brother Shunanto, the Tawny Lord, Saffron Master of Shoal and Bank, the god of the Yellow River, the center of her worship was the ancient, majestic, crumbling temple that occupied pride of place at the very southern tip of the south docks.

Novia had heard the first whispers from the Smoke Lion Syndicate, when the body count was still low. One mercenary chalked it up to random violence, while another theorized the high priest had ordered his two subordinates' deaths as punishment for stealing alms. A week later, two Furious Waves speculated about whose wrath the priests must have invoked, for four of them to be dead. This morning, the pale young courier who'd been handling the correspondence between Novia and her client at the Northern Dock Station had wanted to talk about the half-dozen dead priests.

"Just awful," he'd said in his hushed whisper. "I heard one of them was found in pieces."

Novia owed Hushanti no allegiance. She was fairly certain the remaining priests couldn't afford to hire any bodyguards, let alone pay for Novia's particular services. It was unlikely they had any contacts in the Guild or on The Council of Entities who could appoint a mercenary crew to patrol the temple's perimeter and escort the clergy around the city. Unless the Emissary himself took interest, or a syndicate agreed to be paid in prayers, Hushanti's priests were on their own.

Yet they were part of Nexus, just as she was. They distributed food and clothing to those in need. When the Gray River flooded, Hushanti's priests helped clear the silt from deluged homes and lay dry wooden planks along

the roads. When mold got into peoples' lungs from all the damp, they brewed healing tonics from the Yellow River's waters and distributed them to the sick. They cared for those who needed them and asked little in return. Perhaps, Novia had thought as her courier twisted his hands in worry, it was time for someone to care for Hushanti's priests as they'd cared for the Cinnabar District's downtrodden.

At the very least, Novia could take a look around the temple and see if anything struck her as suspicious.

Anonymously, of course.

If the Northern Dock Station stood like a guard dog keeping the docks at bay from the rest of the city; the Temple of Hushanti was a lion in repose, majestic as it surveyed its domain, proud and powerful even in slumber. Yet gold fell away from columns in a patter of tiny flakes, cracks and gaps ran dark threads through joints and walls, tiles had faded and chipped, and rather than blaze with light, many of the iron stanchions along the exterior stood empty, their gaping frames allowing shadows to pool and build and creep up along the temple's walls like ivy suddenly grown hungry for the house it had once merely decorated.

But not all of the stanchions were empty. Those by the silver-inlaid copper doors bore massive torches that cast a powerful, writhing glow upon the intricate pattern inlaid in the tiles just before them. Novia's eye caught glints of light flickering behind several of the building's stained-glass windows.

Briefly she debated a method of approach. Stealthy or bold? Direct or circuitous? Confrontational or observant?

Before Novia could reach a decision, a ponderous creak issued from the double doors. Instinctively she darted forward and slipped into the shadow of the nearest column, the torchlight casting that shade into sharp relief and providing ample coverage. From there she had the perfect vantage as a small knot of men and women ushered forth, speaking in hushed tones that carried easily to Novia's sharp ears. They were all dressed in similar garb: a long, soft-gray robe with darker gray cuffs, collar, and hem; loose cotton pants of the same dark gray over sandals dyed that shade, a pale gray undershirt visible only at the throat, and a cap of the same soft gray as the robes, with Hushanti's sigil displayed proudly in silver across the front. They each had their long hair pulled back in a traditional fisherman's plait and tied with ribbon in some shade of gray.

Novia had seen the river goddess' clergy walking the docks, speaking with dockworkers and merchants and sailors alike, giving out alms or accepting them. But she had not realized there were still so many.

The priests arrayed themselves along the upstream side of the dock. Most of them faced the river, but a few kept their eyes on the temple and the dock, peering into the darkness for signs of movement. These ones, Novia saw, gripped narrow-bladed boning knives, better suited for carving up a fish than a

person. *As though they'd do any good against someone who's killed six of their number.* It made them feel safer, though, and even an inadequate blade was better than nothing.

The rest of the priests performed an evening ritual, one Novia had stopped to watch them carry out before. She realized now how empty the docks were tonight. In the past, at least a handful of adherents came to witness the day's last prayer, but it seemed fear was keeping them away. Perhaps it was for the better: In the past, Novia had appreciated how this ritual was like an underwater dance, each priest's motions flowing into the next as they poured sacred oils into the currents or drew a pail of river water and washed their neighbor's hands in it. Now, though, they seemed distracted and rushed. Their movements were furtive. Clumsy. Stilted. Their voices shook as they asked the goddess to bless and protect her people. One stumbled over her words. Another kicked the ritual pail into the water by accident, and soaked the sleeves of his robes retrieving it.

When their prayers and offerings were complete, a handful huddled together to look out over the water. Novia, still concealed in the shadows of her column, edged a little closer to hear their conversation.

"Poor Brother Lin!" one of them lamented, wringing her hands together. "So horrible!"

"Gutted like a fish," another agreed. "Just like the others."

"Perhaps it *was* a fish, getting back at him for all its brethren he consumed over the years," a third suggested with a sly grin, but quickly dropped that line as the others rounded upon him.

"How can you joke at a time like this, Brother Po?" a tiny, frail-looking priest demanded in a voice as deep and ponderous as thunder. "With Father Kai still missing, you are the senior monk here after Brother Lin, and yet instead of showing proper respect for him and grief at his loss, you stand around issuing jokes? Turn your thoughts back to the proper current!" Although the speaker had many years on Brother Po, who had several inches and many more pounds on him, Po hung his head at the stern rebuke.

"Turn your thoughts to the proper current" was a favorite saying of their order, as befitted those who followed a river goddess.

"You are correct, Brother Tensai," Po admitted. All humor had drained from both voice and face. "I humbly beg the pardon of each of you, and of our dear departed brother Lin, of our absent Father Kai, and of our patroness Hushanti, may her waters ever provide comfort and sustenance. It is often my way to lighten the burden with humor, but this is not the time. We must prepare the proper rites for Lin and continue our search for Father Kai. These are dark times, my brethren, but if we are together and look to Hushanti, we will come through this time of crisis intact, as her waters weather any storm."

Brother Tensai let Po dangle a moment before he nodded. "Well said, Brother Po. These days are trying for all of us, but the Gray Lady will see us

through. Now, let's go inside. We must rest, as there's much work to be done tomorrow." The others bobbed their heads and sketched the symbol of their goddess, bowing and muttering prayers to her as they turned back toward the temple. The priests with the boning knives walked on the outside of the column, glaring into the night as though something might reach out of the darkness and snatch one of their number up.

Interesting, Novia thought as she watched them scurry back inside. They reminded her of frightened mice scared out of the barn but then terrified to leave their shelter even if they suspected a cat somewhere amid the hay. That did not sit well with her— though not an adherent of Hushanti's, Novia did respect the goddess and her followers, who were fixtures in Nexus and had often performed good works over the years. If their fear made them venture out less, it would be to the city's detriment.

The doors had shut again, sealing the priests inside and her out here, but Novia was not concerned. If anything, she preferred it this way. In their terror the priests would no doubt light every torch and lantern available. However, for this manner of work, Novia much preferred the comfort of the shadows. She drifted back into those same shades now, and began a slow, careful circuit of the temple. Its back and sides were flush with the edges of the dock, but she could still walk the front, then climb a column and pace the roof for a view from on high to see if she could spot anything unusual.

It was quiet out here, this late at night. The river rushed past, muffling other sounds that echoed across the night, but not entirely muting them. Novia could still faintly hear the clangs from the forges in the Nighthammer District, where production never stopped. From inside, she heard a priest's singing, and the sounds of the temple's inhabitants preparing to bed down for the night. All should have been well. This should have been a lovely, tranquil scene, and yet Novia couldn't help but feel the dread hanging over it all.

She had nearly reached the far front corner when the column there suddenly bulged outward near its middle. No, not the column. Someone had been standing there, much as she had closer to the door, and was now stepping away from that shelter. Someone garbed in armor rather than robes, or even leather and cloth like a normal dockworker.

Someone she instinctively knew did not belong here.

Abandoning some of her stealth for speed, Novia increased her pace, lengthening her strides into a near sprint as she pursued the stranger. She was armed, of course—she never went anywhere without her numerous blades— and although she had left her spear at home for ease of rooftop travel, she still carried her sword at her side. She chose not to draw yet. Better to confront the interloper first. Perhaps she could pull answers from him without the need for a single weapon.

She had nearly closed the distance when he shocked her by glancing back, dark eyes homing in on her position at once. Novia was not used to being spot-

ted unless she wished it, and even now she had kept to the shadows during her approach, but there was no denying that he had seen her.

He twisted about, and she registered that his armor was ornately carved and carefully gilded. Something flickered like silver in his hand before leaping out in a straight line, lightning fast and bright against the moonlight. Only Novia's reflexes and agility allowed her to duck beneath the sword that had just swung straight for her throat.

She managed to keep her feet and was now on the weapon's other side, facing the man, but he stopped the arc and reversed the blade in an instant. Thus, before she could blink twice Novia found herself facing an obvious warrior, his sword raised between them.

He's fast.

Novia was used to being the fastest person in a fight. It had been a long time since she'd gone up against someone who could match her speed, let alone potentially surpass it. Alarms sounded in her head as she stared down the length of the blade. The way he moved told her he was well-trained, but he'd also *picked her out of the shadows*. And, if she was honest about it, had nearly taken her head with a single blow.

Even though she knew how dangerous fighting him could be, a part of her thrilled at the challenge.



CHAPTER THREE

“Whoa, there!” Novia blurted out, then cursed as the words rang out through the still night. She had not meant to speak at all, but his sudden attack—and the suspicion that he was more than human—had startled her. Still, now that she had shattered the silence she saw no reason not to continue, and said, “Slow down there, friend! No need to be so quick with that thing!” The blade was nearly as wide as her palm, and the color of a vibrant flame. Deep red at its center faded to almost golden along its edges, and bore runes all down its length. A daiklave, forged from red jade! His hair was also red, she noticed now, as was his armor, which consisted of small, cunningly carved plates that overlapped and slid against each other with a dry whisper as he shifted his stance.

His eyes glowed like embers from within. They had narrowed upon sight of her, but now they widened slightly. His fiery appearance, plus that massive red jade weapon told Novia what she needed to know: her opponent was most likely Dragon-Blooded, and a Fire Aspect.

He was studying her openly now, this Dragon-Blooded stranger. Perhaps he’d expected her to run, as any normal peasant ought to when faced with such a foe. Or maybe he was as shocked she’d dodged his blow as Novia had been at the speed of his swing.

She was thinking furiously behind her smile. Who was he? She didn’t recall seeing him around the Cinnabar District before, and certainly not down here by the temple. He was new to her part of town, but from whence had he come? Why was he here? And what did this man’s presence have to do with the priests’ recent troubles? It could not be coincidence that she had caught him snooping around Hushanti’s temple. That his first instinct was to swing at her spoke volumes.

“Why don’t we talk about this, you and I? There’s a lovely tea house a few minutes’ walk from here, where I’m sure we could clear up whatever misunderstanding lies between us.” A walk that would get him away from the temple, and take them past taverns where Novia’s syndicate contacts liked to drink. With a subtle gesture, she could have a handful of mercenaries following her, ready to jump in should she give the signal.

But he wasn’t interested in talking. He frowned and swung that blade again, once more aiming for her head. He moved blindingly fast, but Novia had been ready and easily skipped backward, just out of reach. The daiklave’s tip cut through the air less than a finger’s width from her chin.

To her surprise, the stranger nodded as if pleased with this result. Then he smiled, an unpleasant expression that twisted his thin lips into something between a grimace and a sneer. “Unlucky for you, choosing tonight to visit the temple,” he declared, his words thick and heavy with an accent Novia had heard many times before: Lookshy. “I’m only here for the priests, but your death will serve my purpose all the same.”

“What purpose is that?”

His sneer slipped, a change so fleeting that at first Novia wasn’t sure she’d truly seen it, or whether it might be a trick of light — a lantern’s glow reflecting off the river, perhaps, or the flicker from his own glowing eyes. But, no, there it was again. Confusion and conviction battled for control of his angular features.

Keep him talking, find an advantage. “You don’t have to do this,” she said. “Whatever it is, let me help you.”

“Help me?” He struggled a heartbeat longer, but conviction won out. That sneer settled back into place. “The only way you can help me is to die.”

Then he attacked in earnest.

If Novia had thought him fast before, that had been lazy reflex more than anything. Now he was determined. His focus made him as quick as the river current where it ran deepest and fastest, quick enough to dazzle and blind. His blade had begun to glow, as if it too carried light within it, and tiny flames licked along its edge.

Novia slipped under his heavy sweep, her right hand dipping into the slit of her jacket. When she withdrew it, she held three knives between her fingers, handles up. With a quick twist of her wrist and a swing of her arm, she released all three at her new foe. The blades shot forth like hungry eels, straight for the man’s chest. He managed to bring his sword around to block one, but the other two slid through his defenses.

One caught him mid-chest, right over the heart — and rebounded, turned aside by his lamellar breastplate. The second found a gap between two plates but got no further, imbedding itself at an angle just below the left shoulder, where the armor was not as tight.

If the blow hurt him, the stranger gave no sign. Instead he snarled and swung again, that daiklave slicing the air in a vicious downward arc, its passage leaving tongues of flame in its wake.

Novia pivoted out of the blade’s path, and was sure she felt its edge slice through tendrils of her hair as she moved. But it did no other damage, and she couldn’t resist the smirk that rose to her face. “Is that the best you have?” she taunted, drawing three more knives and launching them. This time two bounced against his armor and his sword batted aside the third. His sneer transformed his otherwise pleasantly chiseled features into a mask of rage.

“Do you expect those pathetic little pins to harm me?” He released one hand’s grip on the daiklave to bang that gauntleted fist against his armored chest. “I am Karal Dacar! I’ve fought quoll-lions with sharper claws!”

With that, he crouched down, then suddenly bounded up — and up, fire streaking behind him as he shot toward the temple’s roof.

“Oh, going for the high ground, are we?” Novia muttered, drawing her sword with one hand and pulling another knife with the other. “Well, two can play at that game.” She leapt to the roof as well, alighting so gently she made no sound, just out of sword’s reach. “You’re not getting away that easily,” she warned. She smiled, sharp and hungry. It was her hunting smile. And he was now her prey.

Dacar seemed unfazed by this. “You think I would try to escape?” he asked slowly. “To flee? I merely sought the freedom to strike more easily, where prying eyes wouldn’t see us and think to interfere.”

He grinned. The very air around him burst into flame, cloaking his form in an aura so bright Novia had to squint and fight not to look away.

Which was, of course, exactly what he had been hoping for. He flew at her, his daiklave a blazing whirl in the darkness. It kept Novia from seeing exactly where he was, that fiery blade demanding all her attention. She brought her own sword up in a perfect arc, catching his blow and turning it aside. He struck again and again. Sparks flew when their blades clashed. The sheer force of his swings reverberated all the way to her shoulders.

He’s trying to tire me out. And it was working; her wrists ached from the brunt of his attacks, and she could feel herself getting winded. *Have to put him on the defensive.* Novia turned her next parry’s momentum into a new attack, curving her blade around into a low cut aimed at Dacar’s shins. He sprang back before she could connect, hopping out of her reach with surprising agility.

But he didn’t stay out of range for long. Instead he lunged forward, sword thrust straight before him, its point aimed for her heart. He had just enough distance to put the full force of a charge behind the attack, and because they were near the roof’s edge there was nowhere for Novia to backpedal, not without plummeting some forty feet or more. She was not entirely sure she would survive such a fall—landing on her feet was one thing, but on her back? At the very least it would leave her dazed long enough for the Dragon-Blood to follow her down and finish the job.

Novia took to the air instead. A single, prodigious leap and she bounded over him, his fiery blade slicing just beneath her. As she arced overhead, flipping forward and twisting about so that she would land on her feet behind him, she stabbed downward with her own sword. He wore no protective headgear, and all his effort was focused on the empty thrust. Her blade raked across his face, slicing him from chin to forehead. He roared with pain, stumbling to a halt just before the roof’s edge. He turned to face her again, blood streaming from the wound like a scarlet curtain had draped across half his features.

“Damn you, witch!” Dacar howled. He grimaced, squeezing his eyes shut, and the wound began to glow as it were a line of heated metal rather than a bloody furrow. As she watched, the skin sealed itself, shrinking second by second until only scattered droplets of blood remained. When he blinked at her, he wore a triumphant grin. “You can do only fleeting damage,” he warned gleefully. “But my blade will burn you from the inside out until nothing but ash remains!”

His pause to heal had given Novia a chance to catch her breath as well. Now she matched his grin with one of her own. “In that case, I’ll just have to make sure it doesn’t touch me.”

She leapt backward—and disappeared.

“What?” She almost laughed aloud, but of course that would have given the whole thing away. She was still on the roof, only now she was crouching behind the heavy stone chimney that she assumed led to the kitchens. Dacar spun about, swinging that daiklave to and fro in great, sweeping arcs, its flames lighting up the tiles over which it passed. But even when those fires lit up the chimney, Novia still escaped notice. She held utterly still, and though Dacar’s gaze swept over her hiding place, he saw nothing more than stone and tile.

Still, she had no desire to stay here all night. As soon as that sword had passed her by, she darted from her hiding place, a knife at the ready.

She had taken advantage of her own motionlessness to study Karal Dacar more closely. Especially his armor. There were chinks in it, she saw now. Places where, by the very nature of its construction, the protective garment became more vulnerable. She aimed for one of those, and let the weapon fly with an underhand toss. It lacked some of her usual power, but the blade started low and swept upward. It slid neatly into the gap just below his upper arm, where the armor cupped the shoulder but was open beneath to allow for full movement.

Which meant her knife had only leather to slice through, not enchanted jade.

Dacar screamed as the knife sank deep into the joint. He whirled about, daiklave at the ready, but Novia let her Essence cloak her form as she stood motionless. Once again, she went unseen.

The minute his back turned toward her, she slipped loose and repeated the throw, this time at his other arm.

She couldn’t decide which sound she liked better—his cry of pain or the clatter of the daiklave as it fell from his hand and struck the tiles. Then slid over the roof’s edge.

“No!” Dacar bellowed. He dove after his weapon, hands out and grasping desperately for it.

For the third time Novia left her hiding place to strike.

The kick landed right between Dacar’s shoulder blades and propelled him forward, adding to his existing momentum. Though he scrambled desperately

to slow himself, to grab onto anything, he simply had too much of a charge to stop. He staggered toward the edge of the roof, reaching for one of the decorative stone waves jutting up from it. He might have recovered his balance, had her knife not sunk deep into his shoulder joint. Dacar snatched at the wave's crest, but the pain forced him to let go.

He plummeted off the roof.

The wind tore the scream from his throat, swallowing it as it descended along with the rest of him, and letting it stop abruptly as he struck the tiles below with a massive clap.

Novia jumped lightly down after him, landing only a few feet away, and prodded him with the tip of her own sword. He didn't move. His arms were outstretched, fingers splayed as if he had hoped to arrest his fall by grappling the night itself. His open eyes, stared up unseeing at the stars high above. The light within them had faded away, leaving his dark gaze cold and empty.

It was done. Karal Dacar was no more.

Novia retrieved her knives from where they'd embedded themselves in his joints. She looked down at the dead man, allowing herself a second to exult in her victory — which was why she heard the gasp so clearly.

Spinning about, she spotted a grizzled old dockworker. He stood some thirty feet away, a basket of fish spilled out at his feet— an offering to the temple?— as he stared at the fallen Dacar.

Then at her.

“You killed him!” the old man declared loudly. “I saw you!”

Oh, sun and stars, Novia thought, swallowing a groan. *What do I do now?*

CHAPTER FOUR

Before Novia could think of a response — or turn and run — she heard the sound of metal groaning. She tensed, half expecting the felled Dragon-Blood to pick himself back up from the wreckage, retrieve his blade, and start for her again. But an instant later she recognized the sound as something far different but perhaps just as dangerous— the creak of the temple doors.

Moving quick as lightning, she shrugged her jacket off her shoulders. Beneath it she wore a red tunic over darker red pants, their shades a perfect match for the coat. Her short sword and its belt she discarded as well, wrapping the coat around the weapon and tucking the whole bundle under her arm where it could be mistaken for an oddly shaped bag or a wadded-up cloak. Anything but armor and a blade. *Good thing I left the spear behind.*

The priests came pouring forth like water from an overturned jug, and arrayed themselves around this strange tableaux. The ones with the boning knives were back, though the blades trembled in the would-be protectors' hands.

“What has happened here?” the wizened older priest with the deep voice, Brother Tensai, demanded.

Out of the corner of her eye Novia saw the dockworker open his mouth to repeat his earlier accusation. Novia had to think fast. “This man attacked me out of nowhere!” she improvised, pre-empting the dockworker and pointing at Dacar. “I arrived too late to watch your midnight prayers, but I thought I’d say my own, quietly, before I went home. He came out of the shadows while my back was turned. There was a lull in the current, and I was lucky to hear his boot scrape against the tiles.” She inclined her head toward the river. “The Gray Lady must have been watching over me.”

A couple of the priests sketched Hushanti’s symbol in the air, muttering prayers of thanks and praise to the goddess.

“You must have seen some of it, surely?” she asked the old man. “I know it’s dark, and late, and you’ve likely had a very long day. Perhaps that’s why you didn’t call out a warning?”

Several of the priests glanced over at the dockworker. For his part, the old man was quick to shake his head, holding up his now empty hands to disavow any knowledge or involvement. “No, miss, I’m sorry. He was dead when I came along the dock.” That wasn’t what he’d said when he first happened upon them, but Novia wasn’t surprised at his change in tune.

Here in Nexus, most murders went unpunished unless a victim's family or a mercenary company carried out a revenge killing. Once that happened, however, matters could escalate quickly. Some feuds went back and forth for years, until there was no one left to wield a knife in retaliation. Other times, the body count piled up quickly enough and the violence blossomed fast enough for the Council of Entities to step in and declare a conflict officially ended before entire neighborhoods descended into bloodshed. The dockworker would be a fool to involve himself here, and he knew it; should Dacar's people arrive and want payback for their loss, he might find himself a target of their ire.

But Novia was pleased to see that he also looked confused. Her emphatic statement had counteracted his own recollection of events, and as it truly *was* late and he was indeed old and no doubt tired, he was clearly beginning to doubt what he himself had seen.

That was often the way, Novia had noticed. Certainty could overcome even firsthand knowledge, if played well. Memory was a funny thing, especially in moments of danger.

Brother Tensai asked, "But then, what occurred? Why is this man, heavily armored as if for war, dead before our door?"

Novia caught herself before she began swearing. She had been so close to slipping away! But she didn't let any of her frustration show. "I don't rightly know, good sir. I came down here and everything was dark. I thought I'd pay my respects without disturbing anyone. But as I said, just as I turned to go, he appeared." She indicated the dead Dragon-Blood with a poke of her chin.

"I beg your pardon," the old priest intoned, and bowed deeply. "I sought only to ascertain what had occurred." His manner and hands suggested he had been a dockworker or some other form of laborer before turning to the priesthood, but his voice and language could easily have belonged to a district judge. And his eyes were still sharp, and not nearly as forgiving as his tone. This was not a man who would prove easy to fool.

The other priests began peppering her with questions.

"How did you escape him?" asked one, looking from Novia to the dead Dacar. He inched closer to the body, his eyes flicking between the armor and the daiklave nearby.

"It's all a bit of a blur," she said. "I've heard about the terrible things that have happened to your brothers and sisters these last few weeks, but I didn't want to let that keep me away. I looked around before I began to pray and didn't see anything. Then I heard him sneaking up on me, and turned to see that sword in his hands."

"Did he say anything to you?" another chimed in.

"No," she lied. What good would repeating his taunts do? He hadn't said anything that might answer *why* he was here, and telling them she'd tried asking would only create more questions.

“Brother Tensai, do you think he’s the one who’s been stalking us? Do you think he could be the one who killed Brother Lin and the others?” Several other priests clamored at that suggestion, their voices swelling like a wave until Brother Tensai held up his hands to silence them.

“We can’t know for sure,” he said, “not yet. But I find it quite likely.” Tensai, too, looked toward the abandoned daiklave. “A blade like that could easily have made the wounds we found on Brother Lin and the others.” His declaration set several of them to murmuring. Novia heard several variations of *praise Hushanti* ripple through those gathered.

A stout priest with twists of gray in her dark hair introduced herself as Sister Amelie. She insisted on giving Novia a once-over to make sure she was unharmed. She tilted Novia’s head this way and that, bringing her lantern close to the Night Caste’s eyes as she looked for signs of a concussion. She made Novia set down her bundle of weapons and frowned at how gingerly Novia moved, misreading the way she tried to keep her sword and knives from clanking together for a possible strained muscle. When Novia straightened, the sister ordered her to turn around slowly, in case she’d been cut and hadn’t realized it due to shock. Only when she was satisfied Novia wasn’t bleeding and had no broken bones did Sister Amelie allow the flood of questions to continue.

Novia kept up with them smoothly, balancing *I don’t know*s with small details: how quick her attacker had been, how intent he was on doing her harm. They gasped when she described the sound of his sword whistling through the air. She let them think she was shaken by the experience, but answered calmly and credibly. She hewed close to the truth where she could without ever admitting she’d fought him, let alone that she’d been the one who killed him.

As she spoke, Novia gauged the priests’ reactions and tailored her responses accordingly. She let those who wanted to comfort her take her hands in theirs. In turn, she patted the hands of those in need of reassurance. The ones who responded best to logic got a rundown of where she’d been standing and for how long, what she’d seen and what she’d heard. She felt a twinge of guilt as she honed in on the priests’ fear and grief and crafted answers to heighten those emotions — but it distracted them, and kept them from peering too closely at her story. She steered discussion away from avenues that might lead to deeper scrutiny about herself, and encouraged those that focused on Dacar’s presence and motives.

“What did happen to him?” Brother Po interjected at last. He was clearly feeling left out of the conversation. “A powerful, martial figure such as this — it is clear you could not have been responsible for his demise. But someone must have — so who was responsible? Who saved you?”

But what would they possibly believe had happened? This end of the docks was dark and quiet and no other buildings stood anywhere nearby, out of respect for Hushanti and her followers. Which meant there was little chance of

her claiming a stranger had just happened past and dispatched the man who currently lay broken at her feet. The dockworker was useless — it was impossible to imagine he could have defeated the Dragon-Blooded warrior. Even though Novia was good enough to make the old man question what he'd actually witnessed, there was no way she could make him believe he'd come to her aid. Indeed, Brother Po had a point: Given the amount of damage done to Karal Dacar, no one would ever believe a mere human could be responsible.

But what if, she thought, as a stray beam of moonlight struck the temple doors and illuminated the seal of the goddess there, *a god had intervened?*

Her eyes followed that shaft of silvery light as it slid across the doors and onto a stained glass window alongside them. The window showed a mighty figure rising up out of the waves to smite an infidel. Novia pointed at the image framed in glass and metal and declared, "It was him!"

"What?" The priests all turned to look, and gaped. The figure displayed there was tall and powerfully built, with long hair the same gleaming silver as river water when it caught the light, and eyes that flashed like black pearls. He bore a long trident of gleaming silver, the chosen weapon of Hushanti, and a medallion with her sigil hung from his chest. Clearly, he was the river goddess's champion.

"Yes!" Novia continued, not sure this was the right tack but determined to see it through. "He appeared out of the water, just like that! That man," she pointed accusingly at the dead Dragon-Blood, "had me cornered. His hands were on fire, and flames leaked from his eyes. I couldn't look away. I was sure I was about to die. But then this other man appeared. He doused the flames, stabbed him with that very same trident, and slammed him to the ground!" Clasp her hands to her chest, she dropped to her knees and bowed to the stained glass image of her apparent savior.

With only a second's hesitation, all of the priests followed suit, chanting and praying loudly to their goddess to thank her for sending this hero to rescue the person who had nearly perished on their very doorstep.

"He must have been sent because of Brother Lin and the others!" the gangly priest declared. "We begged Hushanti to protect us and she has! Her champion has slain the murderer for us!" He broke into song, his voice warbling but not terrible, and quickly joined by that of the other priests.

"Yes, praise Hushanti!" Novia agreed. *River goddess, forgive my presumption and accept the glory this act brings you.* She knelt with them a little longer, until they'd all but forgotten her in their excitement over Hushanti's miraculous response to their prayers. Rising slowly to her feet, Novia gathered up her bundled weapons and — making sure her jacket and sword were tucked securely under her arm — backed away, bowing over and over toward the temple as she did. "I will return and pay my respects properly," she promised. No one moved to stop her. The priests were too busy expressing their gratitude to their deity,

and the old dockworker just stared at the entire scene, clearly confused by what had occurred.

Novia darted away as quickly as she could. She let out a sigh of relief when the shadows finally swallowed her up once more at the edge of the docks. That had been far more excitement than she had bargained for tonight! Still, she had escaped without being pinned for the warrior's death or having any attention brought to her own abilities.

She considered that a clear victory. Which meant that she had something to toast when she finally arrived home.



CHAPTER FIVE

Novia found it difficult to drag herself out of bed the next morning. But duty called early that day, in the form of Kāvren, the enforcer for the Smoke Lion syndicate.

“Novia!” Kāvren banged on her door with what sounded like a large battering ram. “Open up!”

Novia grumbled, squinting in the dim light. The sun was not yet fully risen, only the faintest of early rays peeping at her through the curtains. She wrapped a silken robe around herself as she trudged over to the door. The battle last night had left her arms and shoulders aching, and the repeated adrenaline rushes of her successful outing, the combat, and the tension of having to sway the priests had her barely able to put one foot in front of the other by the time she’d managed to crawl into her quarters. Sleep had helped but she still felt the aftereffects, and it had her in a less than congenial mood as she cracked the door open and peered up at Kāvren’s wide, scowling face. He was nearly as dark-skinned as she, and his shaved scalp boasted swirling tattoos that displayed his allegiance for all of Nexus to see. Not that anyone had any doubts where Kāvren’s loyalties lay.

“Kāvren, what do you want?” Novia demanded. She refused to let his size intimidate her — she had taken down larger foes than him. In fact, Dacar had been nearly Kāvren’s size, and significantly more dangerous. “No meet today — we just had one.” Athari Sparr, the head of the syndicate, liked to have a sit-down with every member of the Smoke Lions once a week to discuss whatever they were currently working on and what assignments should go to them next. Novia wasn’t technically a member of the syndicate, but she had ties to them, and they contracted with her to handle certain jobs they either wouldn’t or couldn’t take care of themselves. Unfortunately, Athari was an early riser, and insisted upon having such meetings at the crack of dawn, which Novia considered just another form of torture.

“Nah,” Kāvren replied. “Got a job for you.” He grinned. “You know Crane’s Wayward Daughters?”

She nodded. The Crane was an inn and tavern close to the business district, moderately upscale but still friendly enough to anyone who could pay, reasonably clean, reasonably priced. It was not the sort of place that Novia herself

frequented — she liked her taverns a bit wilder and a bit more wide-ranging in their entertainments — but she'd been there a few times in the past.

“They got some sort of problem,” Kāvren told her, his voice smooth and rich rather than the gravel most expected from him. “You’re the fixer. Fix it.”

Novia sighed but nodded again. That was the deal, after all. Athari paid her to serve as a fixer, and she was essentially on call anytime the syndicate had something that needed her expertise. If Athari had sent Kāvren to her, she couldn't exactly say no. Nor could she let the matter sit and return to bed, much as she might've liked to do so.

“I'm on it,” she said, closing the door on him before he could start a conversation. The syndicate paid her to take care of their problems, not to make small talk at the crack of dawn.



The sun was still lightening the sky, chasing away the stubborn shades of night, when Novia stepped into the Crane. It was normally a tidy little place: its floors kept spotless, its windows clean and clear. Most of the first floor was taken up by the tavern, where guests took their suppers and workers stopped in for a drink or three on the way home from a long day's labor. Its normal clientele were quiet sorts who appreciated the cozy atmosphere. Today, the place looked like it had been the sight of a wild revel — and that wasn't what the Crane was known for.

As she was studying the scene, a man approached her. Short and round, he could have passed for a prosperous merchant if his clothing were a touch finer, his hair more styled, and his hands less rough. But between his intercepting her, the apron around his waist, and the dish towel tossed over his shoulder, she had to assume he was the proprietor.

“You're Novia Claro,” he stated almost accusingly, his eyes narrow under a weak brow. “You're with the Smoke Lions.”

“I do some work for them, yes,” Novia agreed slowly. “I wouldn't say I was with them.” She was very careful to keep from becoming too entrenched in any one organization here in Nexus. Instead she had ties with several of them throughout the city and could move among each of them freely. “Someone broke in?”

“Yes, someone broke in!” the tavern owner snapped. “Last night! They left the place a shambles!”

While it was definitely a mess, Novia wouldn't quite have called it a shambles. Certainly, tables and chairs were overturned, and a few pieces had been broken. The bottles behind the bar were in disarray, some of them shattered. But the building was still intact, as were the front windows. And the door, for that matter. If there'd been a break-in, she would have expected to find a picked lock or a smashed window pane, but there was none of that here. To her,

that meant this was nothing more than an evening that had gotten slightly out of hand; she'd seen far worse after bar fights in other places. But clearly the Crane's proprietor disagreed.

"What did they get?" Novia asked. "Money? Goods? Rare materials?"

He shook his head. "No, they didn't take anything," he replied. "They just laid waste to my establishment, is all! Is that not enough?" He had pulled the dish towel down and was wringing it in both hands as if it were the neck of whomever had done this to his beloved tavern.

Novia wanted to snap at him—this was hardly worth her time! But she reined in her temper. Athari had sent her to take care of this matter, and the syndicate leader was not the sort of person to handle disappointment easily. This man must be in her good graces, and that meant he was in Novia's, at least for the time being. "Do you know who did this? Business rival? Former employee?"

"No, nothing like that," the owner, whose name was Nalak, she now recalled, snapped. "I'm an honest businessman — I don't cheat people, professionally or personally — and I'm on good terms with most of my fellow tavern owners." He glared up at her, for despite her own modest height she was still the taller of the pair of them. "Why are you asking me about all this? You're the syndicate's fixer. Fix this."

Again she had to bite her tongue to keep from saying something she might regret later. "How many guests do you have right now?" she asked instead. Perhaps one of them had seen something.

"Four," Nalak answered, frowning. "Why?" That was only a third of the Crane's capacity, without even considering people sharing rooms, but this was the quiet season as far as travelers were concerned.

"I'll need to speak with them," she said, not allowing any room for disagreement. "One at a time. At that table back there." She pointed toward the table in the room's farthest corner. "Immediately."

The tavern owner muttered a bit, but one look at her face convinced him not to argue. Much. Rousing his guests at this hour might annoy them, but it would be worth it if they could help Novia find out what had gone on. Surely a good innkeeper knew how to smooth his patrons' ruffled feathers. "One of them is ill," he said at last. "An old man. He's confined himself to his room for the past two days; we set his food outside the door. You'll have to go to him if you want to speak to him."

"Let's start with the other three. Perhaps I won't need to disturb him."

"I'll ask them to come down." Nalak clearly wanted to say something more, but Novia didn't give him the chance. She turned away and stalked over to the table she'd claimed to wait for her interviewees to arrive. But not without snagging a bottle and a glass from the bar along the way.



Sadly, the interviews proved less informative than Novia had hoped. One of the three patrons had not been in the Crane at all last night. She'd availed herself of one of the pleasure houses and had only returned here this morning, scant moments before Novia herself had arrived, to bathe and change. Another had retired early, having spent too much time out drinking the night before last, and had slept like the dead. The third, at least, had been in the tavern until shortly before closing, but his testimony didn't answer many questions.

"I might've heard something," Ortez Fangohl admitted under Novia's sharp gaze. He was tall and broadly built, more like a wrestler than a trader, and his robes were handsome enough but frayed and travel-stained, his hair and beard tidy but starting to show hints of silver woven through the black. "I'd retired to my room and was just preparing for sleep when I heard the sound of something breaking. But when I cracked my door and peeked out, I didn't hear anything more."

"And you didn't see anyone moving about? Or hear anymore fighting? There's an awful lot of broken furniture and glass here. Surely you'd have heard more of the scuffle that caused it."

Fangohl frowned, considering. "I don't... I don't think I heard more than the one bottle shatter, and certainly not a whole brawl."

"You didn't come downstairs to look? Or even step out of your room to peer over the railing?" It was a long shot. Even in an upstanding business like the Crane's Wayward Daughters, most people in Nexus knew better than to get involved in someone else's dispute.

He struggled to speak for a moment, confusion pinching his features much as Dacar's had last night. Like the Lookshyan, Fangohl's expression quickly cleared. "No, that was all I heard. I stood in the doorway for a minute, then I went back to bed. It was quiet the rest of the night, until Nalak started shouting this morning." He shrugged, a ponderous motion. "I'm sorry I couldn't be of more help."

Novia smiled. At least he had answered her questions without significant prodding. "Thank you anyway. Perhaps something more will turn up. Please do let me know if you should think of anything else."

Next, she climbed the stairs and headed to a room at the back of the inn, where Nalak said the old man was staying. She knocked loudly, in case he was asleep. "Sir? My name's Novia Claro, and I'd like to speak with you a moment, please, about the disturbance last night."

At first, she thought he might have been too deeply asleep, or too ill to come to the door. She knocked a few more times and was just considering fetching Nalak to open the door and check on his guest when she heard slow, shuffling footsteps approach, and the doorknob rattle. The old man who opened

it looked awful. His long white hair was mussed and tangled. Deep bags had formed beneath his eyes. He moved slowly, as though every bone in his body ached, and when he spoke, his voice sounded like he'd been asleep for a hundred years.

"Yes?" he asked, only it came out creakily: *Ye-e-ees?*

"I won't take much of your time, sir," Novia said. She almost begged off entirely, feeling bad for disturbing a sick old man, but then she caught sight of a medallion around his neck: Hushanti's sigil. He was one of her faithful, then. Perhaps the Gray Lady might bring her some luck in the shape of a clue, as a reward for killing the Dragon-Blood who'd been preying on her priests. "I was just wondering if the disturbance last night woke you, and whether you might have seen who was involved, or maybe heard them arguing beforehand?"

He stared at her with those rheumy eyes, and his lips shaped words she couldn't read. He seemed to grow even groggier and more befuddled as he struggled to speak. Alarmed, Novia reached out to steady him — had the very act of getting out of bed overtaxed him? He flinched from her touch.

"Nothing!" he spat out at last, panting with the effort. "I saw nothing. I slept through it all, I'm afraid." He gripped the doorframe and sagged against it. "I'm sorry, my dear. I can't be of help to you."

"It's all right," she said. "I'm sorry to have woken you. Would you like me to help you back to bed?"

He shook his head. "I can make it on my own," he replied.

She wasn't sure she believed him, but Novia nodded. "May the Gray Lady watch over you and speed your recovery," she offered, tapping her throat to indicate his medallion.

His mouth twisted. "I wish she could," he said, and closed the door.



The minute she came back downstairs, Nalak intercepted her. "So?" the tavern owner demanded. "Did you find out what happened?"

"Yes," Novia replied. "Someone broke in and broke a few things." It bothered her that she'd spotted no signs of the break-in, but then again, Novia herself could spring a lock without leaving a mark. Perhaps the trespasser was equally skilled. She dug in her purse and extracted several pieces of silver, roughly half a dinar in all. "This should cover your losses."

He started to protest, citing significantly more damage than she had noticed in her survey. But his hand still darted out and covered the silver, and when he dropped that hand into his lap the table was once again clear.

"I don't yet know who did this to your establishment," Novia clarified, taking momentary pity on him. This was both his home and his livelihood, after all. "But I will look into the matter further. I'll discover their identity, I assure

you. And they will pay for it.” The Smoke Lions would make the culprits pay, that was. The syndicate’s members were fond of the Crane’s Wayward Daughters and would count violence done against the establishment as an affront to their outfit.

The innkeeper ruined any sympathy, however, by opening his mouth again. “They had better,” he insisted. “I pay good money for protection, and this is what happens? Someone breaks in and destroys my tavern? And the most you do is toss a few scraps at me and claim you’ll find out? Why am I paying anything at all?”

The tavern was mostly empty at this early hour—only two patrons were downstairs, both at a table closer to the front windows, both apparently deep in their cups—but Novia leaned forward anyway, and pitched her voice low enough that the proprietor had to lean in as well in order to hear her.

“You should be very careful what you say, and how loudly,” she warned. “The Smoke Lions are not known for their forgiveness, and if you walk around impugning their integrity, they are liable to grow annoyed with you. And to send Kāvren to teach you a lesson.” Nalak shuddered, and she pressed the point home. “I will find out what happened here. And whoever did this will be dealt with. You have my word, and that of the Smoke Lions. But you need to be patient, and to not complain about how the syndicate is not doing enough or moving fast enough. Clear?”

He gulped but nodded. “Yes. Thank you. I’m sorry. It’s been a stressful morning, you understand.”

Now the pity was back, and Novia patted his hand. “That’s all right,” she assured him as she rose to her feet. “I think we can keep this little conversation between the two of us.” The look of relief on his face almost made her laugh, but she bit it back. None of this was his fault, after all. And it wouldn’t help anyone to have Kāvren break Nalak’s legs or torch the Crane.

She knew that the odds of figuring out who had done this to the tavern were thin at best. Still, she would ask around. And Nalak would keep his mouth shut now, so Athari never needed to hear about it. That was for the best.

CHAPTER SIX

Day had finally banished the last traces of night when Novia exited the Crane's Wayward Daughters. She paused in the doorframe to let her eyes adjust to the glare that greeted her beyond that limited shade. Then, tossing her hair back and setting her shoulders, Novia Claro strode out into Nexus.

At night, Nexus' Cinnabar District was a land of shadows and possibilities and furtive movement. Now, however, it had come fully awake, and was filled with life and energy and constant motion. The streets were thronged with people of all types, every size and shade and style mingled together into a chaotic, shifting patchwork. Mercenaries stalked the streets, and messengers streamed in and out of their compounds. Street criers stood on the corners, shouting out changes that had been made to the Civilities — the law-like decrees of the Council of Entities — since yesterday. As she listened, a runner came up to one of the criers and handed him a note. Just like that, the most recent decree was already voided, replaced by a new rule that contradicted the last.

Even the smell of the city was different. At night, the scents of the river dominated, the brine of the water overlaying all else and smoothing out any other sharp notes or sour ones. Now that was overlaid with the rich aromas of cooked food and spices from the restaurants, cafes, and teahouses, plus the bitter notes of grease and oil and metal. The heady mix could easily become dizzying for those new to the district, but to Novia it was a welcome bouquet that wrapped around her as comfortably as a favorite old shawl.

Nor was she herself the same as she had been the night before. In the darkness, she had been a shuttered flame, her brilliant red hair and long red jacket glimmering briefly from the shadows as she moved swiftly and silently about her business. She had been focused upon stealth and speed, and prided herself on how little she was seen at such times. Now daylight filled the streets with a warm glow, and Novia walked openly through the district that was her home. As she cut a path from the Crane's Wayward Daughters back toward the river and the Northern Dock Station, she saw several familiar faces along her way. She exchanged quick pleasantries as she passed, though she didn't stop. She'd found that if she walked purposefully, her determined stride and her reputation as a fixer in league with several syndicates convinced people to leave her alone, which was how she preferred it.

Novia loved Nexus. She'd been born in the Nighthammer District, where she spent her childhood amidst the clang of blacksmiths' hammers and the sharp tang of molten metal. As a teenager, she'd ranged into the Nexus District and over to Cinnabar, where she hung around the syndicates and learned the art of picking locks and pockets. She'd broken into rich merchants' homes in Bastion and absconded with their valuables. As she grew older, she learned how to charm and bluff her way into places well above her station and began cultivating contacts within the Guild. Soon the syndicates sought *her* out, rather than the other way around, hiring her for her quick tongue and sharp mind as much as for her skills as a thief.

She'd Exalted in the Firewaver District, on a night when creatures of the Wyld spilled forth and rampaged through the neighborhoods. She'd stood at the top of Sentinels Hill's towers and explored the Undercity's sunless streets. The Cinnabar District had her heart, though, and she'd made it her base of operations for the last several years. She didn't even mind the regular flooding — other places in Nexus were far more waterlogged, and none of them had teahouses quite as good.

Arriving at the Northern Dock Station, she found that institution transformed as well. Last night it had contained only those few souls so diligent — or so careless — as to remain behind past close of day. Now, however, operations were in full swing. Activity on the ships started at dawn, as sailors roused themselves to make repairs, and dockhands carted cargo up and down the gangplanks.

The second the dock station's building came into view Novia was struck by its resemblance to an active bee hive, with workers scurrying in and out of every door in a near-constant stream. Drawing closer, she heard the thrum of activity vibrating all through the building, and knew, even before she entered, that she would see the same level of energy and industry spread throughout every floor.

"Careful there!" A burly dockworker called out as she approached the main door and started to reach for it. "You'll get knocked over, you aren't careful!" Sure enough, the door swung open before her fingers made contact, nearly striking her hand as two workers came rushing through bearing a small locked chest between them. Novia had to backpedal quickly to avoid being run over, and only her agility saved her from landing on her rear in the dirt and who knew what else coating the cobbles that made up the building's front marshaling yard.

She had already begun to draw the shadows in around her, not so much concealing her from view as masking her just enough to avoid being recognized.

Inside, the previously dim halls were now brightly lit, every lantern ablaze to give the busy workers enough light to see by. Novia was forced to skirt

several men and women, half of them laden with packages and the other half with ledgers or notes, as she threaded a winding path toward the stairs. Those were packed with people as well, and she imagined it must look as if she were performing some intricate, complicated dance as she wove her way up, ducking here and sidestepping there, stepping over that way and gliding back this way. At one point a big, bulky clerk suddenly stopped and spun about right in front of her, his arms overladen with thick, heavy ledgers that blocked him from seeing anything around him, and Novia found herself instinctively taking a step back. Her foot slipped off the step and unbalanced her.

She reacted without thinking. Pushing off with the foot that was still solidly planted, she grabbed the pile of ledgers in both hands, using them for additional support as she sprang upward. Both feet left the ground and she released the books, curling into a tight ball as she flipped cleanly over the clerk's head, then uncoiling to land neatly on the now-empty step ahead of him. Dusting herself off, Novia glanced around — and saw one worker, barely beyond a girl, gapping at her acrobatic feat. Novia winked and turned away.

Reaching the top floor, Novia didn't hesitate. She retraced her steps from the night before, heading directly for the corner office she had eavesdropped on then. The door was still closed tight, but now a scribe sat at the small desk just to the side of it, also frantically scribbling. He glanced up as she approached.

"May I help you, miss?" he managed to stammer out, fumbling his pen and nearly dropping it. He finally set the quill aside, but not before leaving a small blotch on the open page. Novia pretended not to notice.

"No, that is quite all right," she answered airily, not pausing at his station but breezing right on past to the office door. "Fumo is expecting me." With a deft twist of the wrist, she turned the knob and slid the door open, gliding through and shutting it behind her. The door was made of thick, sturdy wood, glossy and slightly sticky from years of varnish, and all but silenced the surprised protests of the slighted clerk outside.

Inside, the office was large and well-lit, with big windows along both outer walls currently open to allow in both sunlight and a pleasant breeze. A single heavy desk occupied much of one wall, facing inward, and the Northern Dockmaster himself sat behind it. Fumo Anasol had been a large, powerfully built man in his youth, with thick black hair and a matching beard and piercing blue eyes. Now he was gaunt, the skin hanging from his emaciated frame, and his hair was gone save a thick, snowy white ring just above the ears. The beard, of an equal hue, was as heavy as ever, however. And although his eyes now possessed a filmy quality, they were still sharp as he lifted his head to study Novia.

"Who are you and what do you want?" he demanded, carefully setting his quill aside. Novia couldn't help but notice that he had not smudged a single character upon her abrupt entrance. The mark of a far more experienced hand than the scribe's outside.

Said scribe now opened the door and peeked around it worriedly. It was a brave move on his part, and Novia couldn't help but admire his dedication, even as it inconvenienced her. "I'm sorry, sir, she went right past me. I can have her removed, if —"

Novia's demeanor changed in an instant. Her almost aggressively bold carriage disappeared, and although she still stood straight, she seemed smaller now as she clasped her hands behind her back. She was all business, but just deferential enough to assuage his ego. "Lord Anasol," she started, her voice clipped. "I'm Epera Solat, and I'm here on behalf of some mutual friends of ours." She produced a medallion from her pocket, with the stamp of the Copper Feather syndicate embossed on it. She was careful to let Anasol see it, but not his scribe.

One look at the sigil and Anasol's annoyance fell away. "She's fine, Jaxith," he said to the dutiful young man. "Close the door and leave us be. Perhaps you should take your lunch a little early."

"Of course, sir," said Jaxith, with some measure of relief. He backed out of the office and shut the door firmly behind him.

Anasol looked slightly nervous now, as he gestured for Novia to sit. "I'm not sure what outstanding business we might have, Miss Solat, but I'd be happy to help in any way I can."

Novia smiled. "The Feather has a favor to ask of you, about a shipment coming through this station in the next few days. They'd like to keep this... quiet."

By "quiet," she meant "off of the official ledgers." It was an arrangement she knew the Copper Feathers had with the Dockmaster — for a cut he would excise certain shipments from the records. Now, however, he frowned.

"May I see that medallion again?" he asked.

Smart. She held it out, unworried. It was the real thing, after all, provided to her by the syndicate during her last job for them.

Fumo examined it carefully, held it up to the light and turned it this way and that. He did everything short of biting it to test the silver before he passed it back to her, satisfied she wasn't an agent of the Guild come to entrap him. "Tell me about the shipment," he said at last.

She produced a slim envelope. "All of the details are here."

Fumo opened the envelope with interest. Something that required separate instructions was sure to bring him a hefty windfall indeed. His lips twitched as he scanned the letter, and his eyes widened with surprise as they lit on the Feathers' offer. The sum listed was higher than the syndicate's standard percentage, but not so high that he'd be suspicious of it.

"This is quite generous of them," Fumo said. "I'm honored they've chosen me for such an important task. I'll be certain to arrange everything this afternoon."

“They’ll be pleased to hear it.” Novia passed him a copy of the agreement, and he signed it eagerly. She made small talk as the ink dried, then folded up the paper and tucked it into her pocket.

“Please tell our friends with the Copper Feather it’s a pleasure working with them.” Fumo said, slipping the envelope into a drawer and easing it shut again.

“Oh, I will,” Novia promised. “Thank you for your time.”

She had half worried that the old man might insist on walking her out of the Northern Dock Station, taking the opportunity to ask for some last-minute clarifications on the deal, or perhaps to try to increase his cut, but once she closed his office door, it remained firmly shut. A moment later Novia was descending, allowing the flow of traffic to carry her with it all the way to the ground floor, down the hall, and out the front doors.

Once she had escaped the building she glanced back, toward the windows of that corner office. If she closed her eyes, she could pretend that she could see Fumo Anasol chuckling as he returned to his work, making plans for the ill-gotten money he’d soon receive. Novia didn’t worry too much about him hiding the paperwork she’d left with him. He wouldn’t destroy it, which would be the sensible thing, or take it home, which would at least get it out of the Northern Dock Station. When she’d first taken this job, she’d snuck into his office and rifled through his papers. That was when she’d learned that he’d been taking the Feathers’ bribes for decades now, and had records going back several years. Perhaps he’d been cautious once, but years of not getting caught had made him complacent.

Novia allowed herself a wide, satisfied smile as she turned away. This job was shaping up nicely.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Temple bells rang out as Novia left the docks, dredging up last night's confrontation with Karal Dacar in Novia's mind. What had happened with his body? she wondered now. Had the priests performed funeral rites for him? At the very least, they would have wrapped him in sailcloth, sewn that shut, and then committed him to Hushanti's tender embrace before the night ended. Quick and efficient, and ensuring the Dragon-Blood's hungry ghost wouldn't rise. Normally, placing a corpse in any of Nexus' rivers went against the Civilities, but the Council made exceptions for organizations like Hushanti's priests. Their funerary rites prevented hungry ghosts from rising, which killing someone and dumping their body did not.

But where had Dacar come from? Why had he been frequenting Hushanti's temple and evidently killing her priests? What meaning did that moment of confusion have, when she'd tried talking him out of his actions? Had he actually been conflicted about his actions? Was there something else she could have said that would have broken through to him and stopped him? *Too late now*, she thought, though she couldn't stop turning the problem over in her mind.

Too many questions for Novia's comfort. She didn't like not knowing all the answers, hated not being the one holding all the cards.

The only way to correct that was to return to the temple and seek some of those answers. Any other plans she'd had for the day would have to wait. Right now, Novia knew she needed to satisfy her curiosity before she could focus on anything else. With a sigh, she surrendered to her own drive to understand, and turned her steps toward the southern dock, and the temple perched at its far end.

Upon reaching the temple, Novia was unsurprised to see that Karal Dacar's body was gone, as was his weapon, and the ground had been scrubbed free of blood. It was impossible to tell where his body had been tossed off the docks, but Novia assumed that the big man's corpse had sunk like a stone — and had likely been weighted down with them.

She made a slow circuit of the temple. Broad daylight meant there were few shadows to hide within, but Novia was content to just stroll about. She could have been any of the faithful, approaching to show her respect and perhaps ask for the goddess's favor. Fortunately there were others here as well, perhaps doing the same thing. Some of them might have heard about last night's incident, since there were

already more people milling about the place than she had seen near this temple in many years. Perhaps they were hoping for a glimpse of the river goddess's champion. She felt a slight twinge of guilt, knowing she'd made him up.

Novia was unable to resist studying the stained glass again as she passed in front of it. There he was, her mythic savior, with his silver hair and dark flashing eyes and matching trident. The hero she had claimed had saved her.

"Forgive me my little deception, noble Hushanti," she whispered. "I meant no disrespect." She dipped her head toward the window, and the face only faintly visible in its upper corner: The round visage of the river goddess herself, watching over her people with kindly eyes. Novia hoped the deity was looking out for her now, and didn't take offense at Novia's having foisted credit — or blame — upon her own champion instead of taking that on herself. But surely the goddess understood Novia's need for anonymity. After all, the river could be subtle at times, with its hidden currents and buried shoals. There was a time for boldness and a time for quiet, and success often hinged upon knowing which was which. So Novia had given credit to Hushanti and her champion when she was not in a position to claim such for herself. That hardly seemed a sin, and she could only hope that the river goddess would agree.

Unfortunately, Novia wasn't seeing anything that could give her further insight into Dacar's plans. She'd hoped to spot some sort of hiding place, for example, where Dacar had lain in wait for the priests he'd murdered. She could have scoured that spot for any clues. He might have secreted himself atop the roof while waiting for one of them to leave the temple alone and unprotected, but she couldn't leap up to that height right now to investigate, not with so many other people about and with the sun beating down, exposing her every move. That would have to wait until later.

She considered disguising herself so she could interrogate the priests, but they were busy with the temple's sudden influx of visitors. It would have to wait. A few of them were out on the docks now, talking about last night's incident to small clusters of curious people. Novia gathered Essence around her and moved slowly through the crowd, listening to snatches of conversation. They knew little more than she did, but to her chagrin, they'd fully embraced her story about Hushanti sending her champion to fight their attacker.

She spotted Brother Po and Sister Amelie, as well as some of the priests who'd acted as guards the night before. They'd traded in their boning knives for prayer books, which pleased Novia immensely. They all seemed bolder, their skittishness largely dissipated, though their grief remained. She could see it in the way they looked out over the water in quiet moments. A small shrine to the departed priests sat beside the temple's doors. Brother Po's shoulders sagged as he stopped beside it to straighten their portraits.

For now she would simply have to accept that she could learn no more about the stranger she had fought, and come back under the cover of darkness.



Done with the docks for the time being, Novia headed deeper into the Cinnabar District. Places like Firewaver and Nighthammer were more dangerous parts of Nexus, but that didn't mean Cinnabar — with its tranquil-looking teahouses and walled mercenary compounds — was any less deadly. It would never do to drop one's guard, even in familiar, friendly territory. Having contacts within the syndicates might give some thieves pause, but there were plenty of cutpurses who had no idea who Novia Claro was, and would see hers as just another pocket in need of picking. Novia kept her eyes roving, her wits sharp, and her hand near her knives while she walked, ready for anything.

Which was why she spotted the trouble the second she rounded the corner.

The motion was what caught her attention. The building on the corner jutted out farther than its neighbor, creating a small alcove where they met, as if an alley had once stood there but had since been crushed between the two buildings as they had come together, leaving only the mouth of the alley as any sort of evidence to its continued existence. Two figures currently occupied that very space.

At first glance, the two of them might have been locked in an enthusiastic but rough embrace, arms wrapped around each other's heads and necks. Upon a second look, Novia saw that the man had his arms up over his head in a protective manner, while the woman was using fists and elbows to punch at his face.

Then Novia realized she knew both of the people involved.

"Hey!" she shouted, striding toward them. But the noise around her was such that neither of the two combatants heard her.

Rasira Iresh was a tall, powerfully built woman with a great wave of glossy black hair that fell halfway down her back in long ringlets. She was an enforcer for the Furious Waves, one of the other syndicates in Nexus, and bore their distinctive wave tattoos all up and down both arms to prove it. Novia herself had worked with the Waves many a time, and thus far had resisted the leader, Keti Monaxa, and his steady push for Novia to join them and become a full-fledged member. But Novia prized her freedom, and her ability to work for whomever, whenever. Not being beholden to any one syndicate earned her a degree of respect and even trust from all of them. More than once, her impartiality had helped de-escalate disagreements that might otherwise have turned to bloodshed.

Rasira was one of the parts of the Furious Waves that Novia genuinely disliked. The big woman clearly took great delight in her job, particularly when it came to inflicting pain. Novia wasn't above causing pain herself, but she only did so when it was necessary or at least expedient. She didn't hurt people just on a whim or for amusement. Rasira did.

And right now the man she was roughing up, who was taller than her but far thinner, with a hook nose and lazy eyes and a thatch of straight, thin, straw-colored hair, was Cynis Kopet, who had proven himself a reliable source of information on some of Nexus' more elite citizens. The Dynast was officially in Nexus on behalf of his Great House, representing their interests to the Guild. Unofficially, he provided gossip and intel, not only about Nexus' power players, but about his fellow Dynasts as well. He was on the invite list for many events up in Bastion. When he attended them, he proved adept at sitting quietly and completely escaping notice while listening and absorbing everything that was said around him. A trait Novia had found supremely useful on more than one occasion. His fees were high, but his information was always good.

Apparently this time he had absorbed something Rasira did not like.

"Shut it!" the burly enforcer warned. "They're not dead! They're not!"

"I'm sorry, but they are," Kopet whined from behind his protective barrier. "I just heard. I'm sorry!"

"My brother is alive, you hear me?" she shouted. "Him and all the others."

Kopet never knew when to quit, unfortunately. "It's what I was told," he said. "The entire Wavefront. Wiped out."

Novia knew of the Wavefront, had seen them a time or two when they had returned to Nexus: They were a mercenary company, mostly formed from members of the Furious Wave whose propensity for brutality broke the Dogma against committing wanton violence, and who had therefore been encouraged to take their talents outside the city. Rasira's older brother Tempar had been one of them, Novia recalled.

The operative term apparently being "had."

Though an only child, Novia could imagine how upsetting that would be, to learn that your beloved sibling had just perished. And to receive that word from the likes of Cynis Kopet — yes, she could see how the informant had attracted Rasira's anger.

Rasira landed a blow with her knee to certain soft portions of Kopet's anatomy. The lanky informant doubled over — and the enforcer's fist slammed full force into his jaw, sending him backward to bash his skull against the wall behind him with an ominous crack. His body jerked and then slumped, and Rasira stepped back enough to allow him to slide to the ground at her feet.

Novia launched herself forward, all restraint forgotten. If Rasira didn't stop, she'd kill Kopet, and the woman showed no signs of letting up.

No longer caring whether anyone saw, Novia put on a burst of speed. As she leapt, she jumped up and kicked off from the wall behind Rasira to give herself some extra height. She slammed into Rasira from behind. The other woman was nearly twice her size, but Novia had no intention of exchanging punches. She clasped her fists together, and brought them down just behind

Rasira's right ear. Hard. Her blow caught the large enforcer unawares. Rasira barely had time to groan before she dropped to the ground, as limp as the man she herself had struck barely an instant before.

A quick glance around confirmed that no one else had seen her strike Rasira down. Novia ensured that both were still breathing — indeed, Kopet was starting to stir.

Novia's first impulse was to flee. He hadn't seen her, she was fairly certain, and neither had Rasira. She could disappear back into the crowd and he would wake up none the wiser. But then he would wonder what had happened, who had saved him from the enforcer's fists, and would start asking questions. Rasira would want to know who'd dare to knock her out. Between Kopet's offers of coin for information, and Rasira literally shaking down any potential witnesses, They'd eventually find her out. Sure, no one was standing in the alley's mouth gawking, but she couldn't be certain that nobody had spotted her strolling down the street just now. Novia couldn't risk it. She and Rasira already disliked one another, and pissing her off would cause problems with the Furious Wave as a whole.

Which meant she had to provide Kopet with a different answer.

It came to her in a flash, along with the renewed scent of the river drifting in on a sudden breeze. Crouching down, she gently shook Kopet, then helped prop him as he tried to lift himself up. "Did you see?" she asked, affecting breathless wonder. "Did you see him?"

"Him?" The informant asked, rubbing his head and blinking against the sunlight. "Who?"

"The man," Novia continued quickly. "The one who saved you! I saw the whole thing! She was beating on you and then all of a sudden there was this man. He was tall, with long silver hair." She frowned. "He had some kind of weapon across his back, a trident, I think. He grabbed Rasira and tossed her away like she was an empty wineskin. Then he turned and darted away. I came over to make sure you were all right."

Cynis frowned, eyes squeezed shut. "He had long silver hair?" he asked slowly. "Where have I heard that before?" Then he blinked up at her. "Oh! There's talk of someone like that appearing at the temple of Hushanti last night. I heard about it just before I found out..." He glanced at Rasira and grimaced, then looked back at Novia. "Do you think that could be who stopped her?"

She nodded, knowing exactly what his questioning gaze meant. "I think so," she agreed. "It sounds like the same man." Then, before the slowly recovering snitch could ask her for any more details, she rose to her feet, dusting off her dress. "I need to go, but you'll be okay?"

He glanced around, studied Rasira's recumbent form, and a slow smile crept across his narrow face. "I'll be fine," he promised, eyes beginning to light up at the prospect of a story many would wish to hear — and would pay well for.

“Good.” Novia smiled down at him, then strode off. It only took a few steps to clear the little nook and let the crowd swirl around her again, once more granting her its protection.

This imaginary champion of hers was beginning to prove very useful indeed!



CHAPTER EIGHT

That situation dealt with, Novia continued on her way. The day was already more than half spent, the sun beginning to slip more and more behind the buildings. Its rays filtered through their gaps, the shadows creeping out to cover what the sun had temporarily abandoned, by the time she reached her destination.

Which was perhaps for the best. She did not usually relish entering this establishment at any time, but somehow the notion of doing so during blazing daylight was even more unsettling. At least, with twilight just over the horizon, she felt like they were entering her time, when she was at her strongest.

The Guild's administrative headquarters lined an entire block in the center of the Nexus District. Their towers soared above the city, but even though Novia loved heights she'd never warmed to looking out over Nexus with a heavy pane of glass between herself and the view. Give her the gusting winds and the danger of falling any day. Still, business was business, and her contact worked several stories up. At least she'd be in company she enjoyed.

Dreysa's blonde head was just barely visible at her desk. She hunched over one stack of reports, so close her nose nearly touched the page she was poring over. Piles and piles of binders covered the rest of the surface. Scrolls filled the windowsill. The chairs were heaped with documents, and the far corners of the room were lost to mountains of paperwork. As Novia entered, one of Dreysa's underlings scurried past with a new stack, which she set down atop another precariously balanced one, and scurried back out at Dreysa's dismayed yelp.

"Just... put it over there," she muttered as Novia navigated her way toward the desk, trying not to disturb the air lest she scatter vital pages.

"I'm not your apprentice," Novia said, smiling.

Dreysa finally looked up, and let out a whoop. "Novia Claro! It's been too long!" She peered around her office and frowned. "Give me a moment, I'll find you a place to sit." The woman extracted herself from behind the desk and lifted the stack atop one of the chairs. She held it for a moment, turning first one way, then the other, before she gave up trying to find it a home on her desk and started a new pile on the floor. "Very sorry," she said. "I feel like I'm in Nighthammer during the floods, the way this all keeps coming in."

Novia laughed and pulled the chair closer to the desk. Dreysa returned to her seat and rearranged a few stacks on the desktop so she could see Novia unobstructed. From a drawer she produced a bottle of spiced rum and two glasses and poured them each a generous shot.

“I’d apologize for disrupting your work,” said Novia, as she accepted her glass, “but it seems you could use a bit of a break.”

“You’re never a disruption.” Dreysa grinned at Novia, but her mirth was fleeting. “This isn’t a social call, though, is it? Why do I have the sinking feeling you’re bringing more work my way?”

Novia smiled sheepishly. “I am, a little. But it’s going to make you happy, I promise.”

“You have my attention.”

Novia had met Dreysa at an event uphill in Bastion several years ago, when both women were trying to build names for themselves — Novia as a fixer, Dreysa as an up-and-coming young clerk in the Guild. Novia’d come alone, her invitation a convincing forgery. Dreysa’s was real, but came with strings attached. Her mentor had sent her running back and forth across the merchant compound’s grounds all night, carrying messages to other Guild members, fetching drinks and food, fetching her coat and putting it away again. By the time Novia had bumped into Dreysa, the young woman was winded, sweaty, frazzled, and about to drop from exhaustion.

Something about the other woman had made Novia want to help. Part of it was just plain common sense: If Novia helped her now, Dreysa might do her a favor later. Part of it was the chance to test her own skills at intrigue and subterfuge, chatting it up with Guild dignitaries and collecting the information they didn’t realize they were letting slip. Part of it was pure attraction — Dreysa was clever and determined, and her dry humor got Novia laughing. It didn’t hurt that she was easy on the eyes, too.

Novia had spent half an hour hovering near Dreysa’s mentor, observing not only her conversations but also her mannerisms. She had known the woman’s tells ten minutes in. After fifteen, she’d determined who the mentor’s enemies were. By twenty, she’d sussed out the woman’s fears. When next the woman sent Dreysa scrambling, Novia sidled up to her and uttered one single sentence.

The mentor had fled the party by the time Dreysa returned.

A month later, Dreysa was promoted. Since then, she and Novia had often traded favors. When Guild bureaucracy bogged down Dreysa’s projects, she called on Novia to find ways to circumvent the machinery. When Novia needed the Guild to let some syndicate operation continue unimpeded, she came to Dreysa with an offer.

Now Dreysa waited eagerly as Novia withdrew the slim envelope from her jacket. “This can’t sit,” said Novia. “Another client is depending on me to deliver.”

Dreysa unfolded Fumo Anasol's most recent contract. Just like his had done, her eyes widened at the amounts... and also at the Northern Dockmaster's audacity. "Is this a joke?"

Novia shook her head. "He's been accepting bribes from the Copper Feather for years. This is just the latest."

"Years, you say." Though bribes and false records were ubiquitous throughout Nexus, there was a certain expectation that went with them: *you made sure the Guild got their cut*. Fumo and the Copper Feathers had been circumventing that step, keeping shipments out of the Guild's records and pocketing the profits for themselves. Untaxed. The Feathers would be able to bribe their way out of trouble. Fumo would not.

"You'll find records supporting it in his office. The upper left hand drawer of his desk has the latest, including a copy of that same agreement."

"Novia..." Dreysa frowned. It was the look she got when she had to ask a question, even though she didn't really want to know its answer. She was awful when it came to plausible deniability. "Are those papers... Did you plant them?"

"I did not. He put them there himself." She'd made sure to watch him do it precisely so she wouldn't have to lie to Dreysa when the question inevitably came up. All the bribes the Guild's agents would find were equally real.

"How? Wait, no. Better question. What will the Copper Feathers do now, with the person they've been paying so long suddenly gone?" Dreysa refilled her glass, then Novia's. With the initial shock now past, her curiosity kicked in. "I can't imagine they'll be thrilled about losing Fumo. Do they know you're doing this?" She glanced at the contract again. "This looks real. Are they going to be angry with you?"

Novia laughed. "One thing at a time. They'll be inconvenienced for a while, I suppose. Maybe they'll become upstanding citizens and pay their fair share of taxes."

Dreysa snorted. No way would that actually happen.

Novia chose her next words carefully. The truth was, the Copper Feathers *did* know they were about to lose Fumo. Novia had given them some time to shift their cargo around, diverting ships to dock in other parts of Nexus or bringing the goods in over land instead. For the next few months, they'd avoid the Northern Dock Station altogether, then they'd find some other official to work with. Fumo had been faithful and reliable, certainly, but he'd also grown expensive, asking for larger and larger cuts with each passing year. They could start their new contact at a far lower rate.

They'd already hired Novia to keep an eye out for likely candidates. She was composing a list.

"Don't worry," she replied finally. "They have no reason to be angry with me over anything that happens to Fumo."

“And what do I tell my higher-ups?”

“Nothing,” Novia answered. “Not until Fumo’s been dragged out of his office. Then you tell them you’ve just saved the Guild impossible amounts of money because you rooted out corruption at the docks. Say you noticed a discrepancy and followed a hunch.” She gestured around the room, at all the piles stacked up. “Are they truly going to question whether you have the proper paperwork someplace? Are *you* sure the evidence isn’t in one of these piles right now? Maybe it’s already here, and you’d have found it six months from now. I’m just speeding up the process” She grinned. “It’s why you keep me around.”

Dreysa had to concede that point. “All right,” she said. “I’ll send a runner and get things moving.”

“Thank you.” Novia drained her glass, then rose and stretched. “As soon as possible, yes?”

“Of course.” Dreysa put the bottle away, back to work already. “Novia? What do I owe you for this?”

Novia paused in the doorway and threw Dreysa a smile. “A favor,” she said. “Like always.”



Dreysa was as good as her word. Novia suspected her friend had the ear of at least one person high up in the Council of Entities — maybe even one of the Councilors themselves — though she’d never asked outright, and Dreysa had never offered that information. Doing so would change the dynamic between them. Novia might not act upon it at once, but at some point it wasn’t impossible she’d take a job requiring her to lean on someone high up in Nexus society. If she knew Dreysa had that kind of access, she’d want to use it, and Novia could list any number of ways that doing so would destroy their friendship. Better not to know for as long as she could, and simply be pleasantly surprised by how fast Dreysa got results.

Two hours after her visit with Dreysa, Novia stood watching the Northern Dock Station’s main entrance. A squad of five people went in just before the last vestiges of sunlight disappeared from the sky, setting the river ablaze with molten hues. One bore Guild insignia on her lapel. Another carried a scroll, and read from an official decree as she climbed the stairs.

The other three were Copper Feathers.

From her perch, Novia watched the windows in Fumo Anasol’s corner office. She saw the door swing open, and the five enter. The Guild official and one of the Copper Feathers searched the room for incriminating evidence. Novia wouldn’t be surprised if she was planting some extra evidence, while making other incriminating documents disappear. The Guild official very likely knew, and had been paid well not to notice such things. That was the way of Nexus. The other two Feathers restrained Anasol. The one with the scroll continued reading, likely listing the crimes Anasol had to answer for.

Novia could just see Anasol's scribe Jaxith standing in the doorway, wringing his hands. As long as he stayed quiet, they'd leave him be. She hoped for his sake that his loyalties to Fumo didn't run *too* deeply.

They took Fumo Anasol out of his office, and a few moments later the six of them exited through those wide front doors. A small train of clerks and lesser officials trailed out after them. Novia noted Sarai Lenko and Yunitae Sou among the crowd. Dockworkers heard the commotion as well and came to see what the fuss was. Fumo wasn't going quietly, proclaiming his innocence but then immediately undermining himself as he begged the Copper Feathers to tell everyone how he'd only done as they'd asked.

Novia spotted Jiro Hatan in the crowd of dockworkers. He looked as gob-smacked as the rest of his peers, Either he was that good an actor or he hadn't yet recognized her hand in this. It would become clearer over the next few days, she imagined.

With Fumo Anasol gone, the position of Northern Dockmaster would now be open. Exactly as Novia had planned.

Step one of the plan was now complete.



CHAPTER NINE

Novia rarely slept through the night. She had awakened in the wee hours, not only refreshed but restless, and had taken to the roofs without a second thought. She leapt from building to building, letting the wind ruffle her hair and caress her cheeks. The cool night air raised a delicious chill across her flesh even as her own momentum warmed her from within.

She had no particular destination in mind — there was no urgent business to attend to, either her own or any syndicate's. Novia found her path wending toward the river's edge again. She angled toward the south side, where Hushanti's temple stood.

As she sprang from one building's peak and sailed across a wide street to land lightly on the roof opposite, Novia mentally replayed her unexpected duel with Dacar, trying to find clues buried within her memories of the fight. *I'm only here for the priests*, he'd said, which wasn't quite a confession, but considering he'd been so intent on killing Novia herself she found it a reasonable assumption. Brother Tensai's observation that the daiklave had matched Brother Lin's wounds was extra confirmation.

But that still left the question of *why* he'd been killing them.

She'd wondered if it were some twisted interpretation of the Immaculate Philosophy — from what she knew of Lookshy's families, Gens Karal was known for its adherence to Immaculate tenets. Still, she'd met Immaculate monks before, and as long as other gods weren't placing themselves above the Five Elemental Dragons and weren't exploiting their worshipers by making them pray themselves to death or live in misery, the Order usually had no quarrels with them. And Hushanti was a benevolent goddess, from all reports. Even if she wasn't, Nexus was far outside of the Realm and Lookshy's influence in most things, including religion. Dacar would have had no authority to punish Hushanti or her adherents.

Novia tried approaching the problem from other angles. Perhaps Dacar had been an assassin, paid to kill the priests. But who would benefit from such an act? The clergy lived simple lives, and claimed neither wealth nor power. What could any of them have that would require so many to die, and so brutally? If someone wanted them dead so they could raze the temple and build something new in its place, why not poison them all in one go, rather than picking them

off slowly? Every theory she formed, Novia quickly dismissed. Dacar's actions left her utterly baffled, which told her that she must be missing pieces of the puzzle.

Reaching the last of the buildings before the temple itself, Novia paused to study the scene. It was late enough that she'd missed the evening's last ritual by several hours, but there were signs along the docks that it had been well-attended. Offerings lined the edge, left there by devotees. Much as it had been the other night, all was quiet, though several torches still guttered along the temple's outer walls and she could see additional lights flickering within. Some of the priests must still be up; perhaps praying, preparing food for tomorrow, or seeing to personal business.

She began examining the buildings nearest the temple. They were all shuttered and sealed and locked for the night, but Novia crept around each of them in turn nonetheless, examining each window and door to make sure none had been conveniently left unbarred and ajar. But all were dark and still and secure. They all would have made good hiding places for Dacar, though a quick glance through the windows showed no signs that he'd been holed up in any of them. No bedrolls, no candle stubs or stockpiles of food.

When she reached the second building in that grouping, she paused. A side door was not as tightly closed as it should have been — a thin crack of light was visible beneath it, and a larger sliver along one side.

Sidling up to that entrance, Novia tried the door. It was latched, but without any sign of a proper lock, which explained why it hung slightly looser than it might have otherwise. She eased the latch open and swung the door out just far enough for her to slip through, then tugged it shut again behind her.

The light was brighter in here, and she quickly squeezed her eyes shut, flattening herself against the wall and willing the shadows to conceal her until she could adjust and see once more. After several seconds she cautiously allowed her eyes to slit open again. Then, once she was sure she had adapted, she opened them fully and took a quick glance around.

She found herself in a small room made of rough wood. A wide door led farther into the building. Hooks lined the walls here, above a pair of built-in benches. From the fact that the exterior was big, square, and unadorned, Novia had already guessed this was either a warehouse or a workspace. Both would require an antechamber like this, where workers could hang up cloaks and stow heavy boots before proceeding in to work. The light was emanating from beyond the inner door, shining through a glass pane set at head height. Novia yanked the door open and leap through, ready to defend herself as necessary.

Nothing happened.

After an instant, Novia rose from the defensive crouch she'd assumed and studied this new space. The main room of the warehouse opened out past her, its walls stretching away and its ceiling soaring above so that for an instant she

felt as small as a dormouse if it had wandered into a mighty temple. All along the sides were row upon row of racks, crates, bins, and cages, carrying the smell of rope, wax, oil, blood, dust, and mold all mingled into one.

But those were not what had captured her attention.

No, that was reserved for the racks lined up on either side in front of the warehouse's other inventory.

The racks laden with swords, spears, and other weapons.

Before she approached, Novia quickly scanned the room again. She didn't see or hear anyone around. Was she truly alone? Who would leave such a cache as this completely unattended? Although perhaps that was why the door had been ajar at all — the guard might have gone to relieve himself and forgotten to latch it properly.

In which case, she had best hurry.

Setting her usual caution aside for haste, she strode quickly toward the first of those racks. The weapons upon it gleamed, and she lifted one of the swords for inspection. It was well made —not masterfully so, perhaps, but certainly well enough for general use. Its blade was clean and straight, its balance good, its handle tight, its edge sharp. She examined the blade and the hilt, looking for a blacksmith's mark. Growing up in the Nighthammer District, Novia had come to learn most of the sigils used by the various smiths and foundries, and thought she might be able to tell who'd made all these weapons. But the steel was blank, everywhere she looked. Replacing it, Novia moved down the row. All of the weapons were of the same quality, and all of matching design, none of them marked. *Whoever made these, they don't want to get caught.* There were enough arms here to outfit a small army. Every citizen of Nexus could recite the Dogma, the handful of edicts that no one would quite call laws but were the closest thing the city had to them. One of those was *None shall bring an army into Nexus.* Novia supposed there was a difference between bringing an actual army here and merely bringing enough weapons to *outfit* one, but it was a hell of a hair to split. But who was behind this? Not any of the syndicates — she would have heard something about all this, even if only in the form of murmurings and hushed conversations when they thought she was not listening. If none of them had engineered this, who had? A faction within the Guild? One of the merchant houses? Some member of the Council of Entities looking to stage a coup?

After a second, Novia shook herself free of such speculation. It didn't matter whose weapons these were, or what they planned to do with them. A stockpile like this was forbidden here in Nexus, and leaving them here left the potential for too many people to get hurt.

Which meant that these weapons had to go.

But how? The easiest way was to set the building on fire. But if the fire spread it could destroy other buildings nearby, as a breeze could carry a sin-

gle spark to an entirely different neighborhood and have parts of everywhere from Firewander to Bastion up in smoke before the night was through. But something had to be done about them, certainly — there was no way she could simply leave these weapons here for anyone to find and use.

Sadly, Novia's skills were focused on stealth and speed and subtlety, not weapons disposal. She would have to find some other way to get rid of them — preferably before the guard returned to his post. She couldn't simply pitch them out into the river — there wasn't enough time. She could go up and down the rows, bending or breaking each one, but that would take just as long. For a brief moment she considered overpowering the guard and leaving to enlist the help of some of the syndicates, but there was no way that would end well. They'd more likely want to divvy up the weapons than destroy them, which would make Novia complicit in distributing them to Nexus' citizens anyway. If she chose only one to help her — say, the Smoke Lions — the others would accuse her of playing favorites. Even if she could somehow convince them to work together and destroy the weapons, it would require calling in every single favor she had owed to her. No, the syndicates were out.

What then remained?

Studying the racks and their placement, Novia's eyes drifted as her mind churned. She glanced up to the sturdy beams supporting the floor above, and the joists that connected them. Then smiled as an idea came to mind.

Without pausing to reconsider, she drew her knives and hurled them, spinning about as she did. Each blade caught just below one of the main ceiling support beams and sheared through the ropes that wrapped tight around each joist for added support. Then she selected a weapon from the nearest rack, not a sword or even a spear but a warhammer, with its heavy, sharp-edged metal head.

After giving it an experimental heft or two, Novia hurled it with all her force at the nearest ceiling joist.

The heavy hammer flew true. Its head slammed resoundingly against the joist, striking with all the force of an Exalt behind it. The wood split with a loud crack, and without the ropes to help hold it together, the support suddenly crumbled away.

Leaving all the weight of the second floor supported by only three over-taxed joists.

Listening carefully, Novia claimed a second warhammer and repeated her feat on a different joist, destroying it as well. The ceiling groaned ominously, and she could see the two remaining joists starting to bow.

Once more Novia took aim with a warhammer, and once more she obliterated a joist, leaving only a single support valiantly attempting to balance an entire floor's worth of goods.

That was a fight doomed from the start.

Novia skipped backward to the entry room. With a loud creak and a groan and something like a tree splitting down the middle, the warehouse's second floor came crashing down — directly on top of the first. She watched from her sanctuary as those racks of weapons were crushed and buried under bags of dirt, seeds, turnips, and grain. Even if any the weapons had survived that impact from above, digging them out would take time, and great expense, and would expose the person who'd smuggled them here in the first place.

Problem solved.

Novia was about to slip away when she spotted something strange off to the side. Something green. Crouching down, she reached out to pick it up. It was a strand of seaweed, still damp with the river's spray. It must have been tracked in on a worker's boots.

That gave her another clever idea.

Straightening, Novia approached the wreckage that had once been both this floor and the floor above. She carefully laid that seaweed on the ground right where the troubled area began. Then she took one of her knives and scratched Hushanti's sigil on the entry room door.

Perfect, she told herself as she quickly backed away, taking to the shadows as always. By the time the guard came charging back to investigate the noise and commotion she would be long gone, vanished without a trace — and any credit for destroying this weapons cache would go to Hushanti's chosen champion, who at least this time had been kind enough to leave his calling card.

That made Novia laugh, and she was still smiling and shaking her head as she slipped past the returning guard and back out into the night.

Hushanti's chosen champion was certainly the busy sort!

CHAPTER TEN

“Miss Novia! Miss Novia!” The pounding upon her door made Novia sit bolt upright, startled out of her sleep. She’d grabbed her knives on pure instinct, and it took her a moment to convince her fingers to loosen their grip on the blades. For an instant she thought Kāvren had returned to summon her for another mission. But the voice was smaller and more high-pitched, that of a child, and the pounding was likewise less powerful, for all that it was frantic.

Swinging her feet over the bed and onto the cool wood of the floor, she pulled her robe around her, grumbling about yet another early-morning disturbance. She’d only been home for a handful of hours after her late-night excursion to the southern docks and her tour of the warehouse. Would she never get to sleep in again? At least the soreness from fighting Dacar was gone.

Tugging the door open a crack, the face peering back at her so anxiously was just shy of her own level. It was a ruddy face, skin tanned from constant exposure to the harsh sunlight, and the thatch of hair above that bleached from its natural honey tones to nearly white. Novia knew that face, though it was not one she had often encountered in her front hall.

“Mocca, what are you doing here?” she demanded. The boy was always in the bazaar. He ran errands for the merchants, fetching drinks or carrying messages or lugging parcels. He also kept his eyes and ears open for anything that might warrant Novia’s attention, and traded her information for coin, or asked her to buy him lunch from his favorite stall. But she always sought him out when she visited there, to get the latest news. She could not recall any time when he had come to her.

“I am sorry to wake you, Miss Novia,” he stammered. “V’kai Aram sent me to find you with all due haste.”

“V’kai Aram?” Now Novia’s interest was piqued. He was one of the wealthier merchants in the bazaar — he sold fruits of all sorts, and specialized in dried dates and figs and other delicacies of that ilk. Novia knew him, of course, but they were not what one might call close. They knew each other to speak to, and were on good enough terms to exchange greetings and pleasantries when Novia purchased his wares, but otherwise had no other dealings with each other. Which made the fact that he would send Mocca to her doubly strange. “What is it he wishes of me?” she asked the youth now.

“There is trouble at the bazaar,” the boy replied, and Novia frowned. “A stranger,” the urchin continued, “is throwing his weight around. He is brazen and bold and arrogant, and V’kai Aram fears that there will be conflict. He’s making his way along the aisles, insulting the sellers at every stall. V’kai asks for your aid, as you are renowned for solving such problems, and often with more delicacy than others might manage.”

The statement was obviously rehearsed, and Novia had to laugh. She could picture the fruits merchant giving Mocca the message and then insisting he recite it back until he had it perfectly memorized. “All right,” she told the boy now. “Run back and tell him I have received his message and will be on my way at once.”



Locating the stranger in question was not difficult. As soon as Novia approached the bazaar, before even being able to see more than the outermost stalls, she could sense that something was different about the place. The air felt taut, crisp, as it did in the moments before a storm, yet the sky was clear and the sun shone overhead. Nonetheless she could feel the energy throughout the market, pushing back against her as she stalked between the booths and down the wide aisles, seeking the source of that disturbance.

Normally, the bazaar was packed with people of all sorts, from merchants and traders looking to unload or purchase goods, to laborers and sailors seeking something to eat, to thieves looking to lighten pockets. But today, for the first time, Novia didn’t have to force her way through the crowds. The aisles were largely empty, and those people she did see were subdued, huddling into the stalls and against the goods-laden tables as if for shelter. Or protection. Even the sounds were different, hushed and stuttering rather the usual full, frantic wave of noises from every direction melding into a steady thrum that filled the head to throbbing. The smells, at least, were the same as expected, that mix of spices and cooking food and human sweat and old sun-warmed leather and canvas and burlap. The aroma was rich and comforting, and Novia breathed it in deep, letting her eyes flutter shut a second before reopening them to resume her quest. She followed the unnatural hush toward the fruit-seller.

V’kai Aram’s stall was near the bazaar’s center — a sign of his power and importance. He’d been in the same place for as long as she could remember. Novia headed in that direction, and after a moment she spotted the fruit merchant’s tables — and the stranger standing at them with his back to her, berating the silk-robed, turbaned gentleman she recognized as Aram himself. He was not overly tall, the stranger — not much taller than her, Novia guessed — slight of build, and dressed all in blue and white, wearing far more layers than she could imagine were comfortable on such a hot, bright day. She could see from here that his head was shaved clean but adorned with markings of some sort, and with numerous rings piercing each ear. She moved in closer to hear what he was saying.

“You call these dates?” The stranger was exclaiming with dismay. “And these figs? And these, I cannot even fathom what these might be.” He plunged his hands into the large, woven baskets in which V’kai Aram kept his wares, lifting out and tossing aside fistfuls of food as he spoke. “Whatever they are, they are not edible, I can tell you that much!”

“Those are olives, my lord,” V’kai Aram replied. The merchant looked as suave as ever, with his forked beard snow white and neatly parted, his turban neat above his high brow, his nose long and straight, his eyes bright, but Novia could see the tension in his gaze and his posture, and in the way his hands fretted together, long fingers intertwining and pulling apart and entangling again. “They are a delicacy, very rare and very expensive.”

“The expensive part I’ll agree with,” the stranger stated, scattering another handful. “But a delicacy? Not unless you like eating something that tastes like dried slugs.” He bit into one, made a face, and spat it directly at the merchant, the half-eaten olive striking him on the cheek and leaving a dark, oily smear. A muscle in V’kai’s jaw twitched, but he said nothing.

Novia had seen quite enough.

Just as she started to approach him, hand already rising to reach out and clasp this arrogant fool by the shoulder and haul him around to face her, Novia felt a blast of unexpected cold, as if a winter chill had just struck her full in the face. She stopped, mid-motion.

That was why he could wear so many layers and be unfazed, she understood at once. Because the air was colder around him. Embroidered on the sleeve of his very fine jacket were two symbols. The first displayed the pale coils of Mela, the Elemental Dragon of Air. The second one took her a little longer. Novia’d seen enough correspondence between Dynasts and Nexus officials in her dealings to recognize it as mon from one of the Great Houses. She wracked her brain for which it might represent. *Ledaal*, she recalled, for all the good it did her.

If those things, plus the frigid air swirling around him meant what she thought, this made him the second Dragon-Blood she had encountered in the past few days.

But the last one, Karal Dacar, Novia had faced alone, in the dark. Here they were in broad daylight, in the center of the bazaar. She could not risk confronting him, not physically, anyway. Not without exposing her own true nature to the people gathered around and putting herself and all of her work at risk.

She would have to find another way.

And quickly.

Novia lowered her hand and took a moment to compose herself. The Air Aspect continued berating V’kai Aram, and showed no signs of letting up. The other merchants watched in horror, but no one dared to move.

Novia suspected most of them were unconcerned about taking a few lumps — fights broke out here from time to time between competing vendors or dissatisfied customers. Sometimes syndicates and street gangs came around and roughed up sellers who were behind on protection fees. It was less fear for their own physical safety that kept the merchants quiet and more concern for their wares. Locals tended to stop short of destroying the vendors' carts. Oh, they'd smash a bowl here, or stomp on a fruit there, but go too far and you'd find yourself banned from the bazaar or receiving a visit from a syndicate member on behalf of their favorite seller. If this Dynast decided to smash apart some carts and ruin all their goods, the cost would be far more devastating. The Cinnabar District wasn't as poor as Firewander or the Undercity, but that didn't mean its citizens could rest easy. One spate of bad luck could send a whole family into ruin. Novia could think of very few merchants in this bazaar who could afford to lose all their inventory. V'kai Aram, perhaps. The rest would go hungry until they could replace what they'd lost. *If* they could replace those wares, especially when they were not bringing in any coin.

She needed to get the Dynast away from here.

Novia straightened her shoulders, lifted her chin, and adopted a bored, aloof expression as she glided over to stand next to the irate customer. "You seem displeased," she stated flatly.

"...this kind of garbage—" He broke off his rant at the fruit seller, startled by her sudden appearance.

Probably also because I dared speak to him. Novia resisted the temptation to steal a glance at the Dynast's face. She selected a fig from the pile, held it up to her face, and grimaced. "I can see why," she said as she tossed it back.

V'kai sputtered indignantly. Novia bought figs from him all the time, and often commented on how perfect they were. She'd eat an entire handful while she wandered the bazaar, then return to V'kai's stall and buy another bag to take home with her, they were so good. Wisely, he didn't say as much.

The Dynast stared at her a long moment, sizing her up. "And what would you know about quality?" He looked pointedly at her clothing, his nose wrinkling with disdain. *Ah.* Mocca's urgency meant she hadn't had time to do more than splash water on her face and snatch up last night's garments from the chair where she'd draped them. Her red jacket sported several wrinkles. Her boots were covered in dust. She'd only finger-combed her hair and wouldn't be surprised if it was still sprinkled with debris from the collapsed warehouse.

She decided to own it. Smoothing out one of the wrinkles, Novia smiled, slow and sensuous. "Long night," she admitted airily. "I met a dancer at a tavern, and by the time we decided to part ways I wasn't up for the climb back to Bastion." She paused and turned the tactic around on him, reaching out to pinch the fine silk sleeve of his tunic. "I would expect someone of your standing to be up there as well, or at least taking your breakfast in one of Cinnabar's finer teahouses, not in this dingy little bazaar."

He puffed up a bit as she spoke of his standing and Novia realized this Dynast was on the young side. She wouldn't be surprised if this were his first time away from the Realm; she'd seen it enough with the children of rich merchants in Bastion, or newly-minted Guild officials who came down here from the Nexus District to throw their weight around. That behavior, she suspected, was the same the world over. *But he's in for a surprise if he thinks people here will scramble for him because of that mon on his sleeve.*

"I see you *do* understand," he declared. "I wanted to taste the best of what Nexus has to offer, and someone directed me here. What a disappointment." He bowed slightly — in acknowledgement, but certainly not deference. "Forgive me for my abruptness. I'm Ledaal Kenu. You are...?"

"...appalled that someone told you this collection of rickety stalls was the best our city has to offer." Novia wasn't about to give him her name. Merchants within earshot gasped indignantly, but none of them challenged her claims. By now they'd either picked up on her ruse or simply didn't want to draw the Dynast's ire.

Kenu smiled. "Perhaps you could recommend somewhere more...suitable?"

"If you want to see what wares Nexus *truly* has to offer, you should go to the Big Market in the Nexus District," she answered. "Even the Little Market there is ten times the size of this one, and the poorest-quality goods are heavenly compared to what you'll find here. Or you could take your breakfast in Bastion, at the Impeccable Rose. They'll recognize someone of your status and treat you accordingly. I've heard Mnemon Baehlian stops for tea there any time he comes to Nexus."

He perked up on hearing another Dynast's name. Clearly, that was the way to go. "Tepet Gilgameshi has an estate there. She throws the most lavish parties. I'm sure you'd be an honored guest." She pointed east, the fastest way out of the bazaar. "You could catch a pulley-cart and be there in no time, all this morning's dreadfulness forgotten over a cup of tea and the most exquisite raspberry tarts you've ever tasted."

"Ah, now, that's the kind of advice I'd been hoping for. Would that I'd encountered you first this morning, and not the idiot who sent me here." Kenu bowed to her once more, still only a cursory dip forward. "I thank you for your insights." He left without so much as a glance at V'kai or the other merchants.

Novia watched him go. She worried that he'd find the same fault with the Big Market or at the teahouse or any other place that didn't have someone like her to step in and calm him down. But at least up in Bastion and the Nexus Districts the merchants could afford bodyguards to deal with the likes of Ledaal Kenu. If he behaved the same way in the Big Market, a mercenary patrol would drag him out of there before he could throw a second fig, mon or no mon.

"Thank you," V'kai Aram told her warmly once the stranger was gone and Novia was able to approach the merchant properly. "He was content enough

to partake of my wares — until I chose to remind him that even one such as himself must still pay for the privilege. Then he became irate. I feared for my safety and that of anyone around me.”

“Of course,” Novia replied. “I am only too happy to help.” And it was true. “He could return,” she warned the merchant, who nodded.

“Perhaps,” he agreed, stroking his beard. “But not if I know his type. He will tell anyone who’ll listen about his terrible experience here, and as long as he finds sympathetic ears, he’ll stay away.” He offered her a short bow and a wide smile. “Thanks to you.”

She laughed, and curtsied in return. It felt good to use her skills to help someone for no reason other than to do so, though of course a part of her recognized that V’kai Aram might now be disposed to help her some time in return. There was nothing wrong with friends helping one another, though, was there? She thought not as she helped herself to a dried, candied fig with V’kai’s blessing, and then strolled off, humming happily. Certainly not.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Novia decided that she might as well take a stroll down toward the docks. Time to check in on her project for her client, and see how he was faring with his new responsibilities.

The last time she had been down this way, the northern docks had hummed like a well-oiled machine. Everyone and everything had moved in its proper sphere, gliding together and around and under and over one another in an intricate dance she could not help but find fascinating.

Today, Novia noticed that the rhythm appeared slightly off. A dockworker stumbled and collided with another, who dropped a pail of something black and sticky — pitch for a deck, perhaps? A woman walking past him jumped back with a curse, the bundle on her shoulder swinging loose for an instant before she caught it and pulled the bag back under control — but that was just long enough for it to jostle another woman balancing two large buckets, who wobbled her heavy load and spilled a handful of small fish from them. Those flopped on the rough wood of the docks, several slipping through the wide cracks there, but one slid across and wound up under another man's foot, sending him flying. Novia shook her head. Was it always like this and she just had not noticed before? Or were these the moments of chaos when life's unpredictability intruded, shattering that harmony she had witnessed previously? Had Fumo Anasol's firing something to do with the chaos and confusion?

Or was today simply a bad day to be near the water? The god Shunanto watched over the Yellow River, but perhaps he was feeling his sister Hushanti's grief over her lost priests and the missing Father Kai, and it was affecting those under *his* protection. Slipping between a pair of men arguing over the disposition of a coil of heavy rope and sidestepping another man carrying a short but thick mast section, Novia threaded her way through the mayhem and toward the northern dock. Once there she glanced around, squinting against the bright sunlight reflected in a broad swathe off the water. She was headed for the dock station itself when she spotted a familiar figure trudging along the docks a short distance away. *That can't be right*, she thought. *He should be inside*. There was no chance to slip up onto a roof right now, so instead Novia settled for locating a short, heavy barrel that stood against a small, cramped-looking storage shed, and perched upon that.

Then she waited.

After a few more minutes, the figures had approached enough that she could make out their features. One was average in height but heightened in anxiety, his every limb atremble even between steps. The other was both taller and thinner, and walked with more steadiness but with much wringing of her hands and the occasional futile attempt to tuck wayward strands of dull, frizzy brown curls back beneath her cap.

“So we walk this every day?” she asked her companion as they stepped within Novia’s hearing range. “I guess you must know the route pretty well by now, huh?” Closer, Novia saw that the newcomer was young, barely old enough to hire on as a dockworker. Yet she wore the robes of a dock inspector, same as her companion, though she was tall enough that hers flapped against her thighs, and the cuffs only partially covered thin forearms already tanned by the sun.

“I do,” her guide — Jiro Hatan, looking more harried than when Novia had spied on him and Miroku Bakar that first night — agreed. “I know every inch of this dock, every bolt hole, every knot, every crack.”

“Wow.” The young woman shook her head. “I don’t think I’ll ever learn it all.”

“Of course you will,” Jiro assured her. “It just takes time, is all.” He laughed nervously. “You’ve been on the docks, what, a year now? A little less? And on this job all of two nights. Whereas I’ve spent the past six years walking this dock, first as a worker, then briefly as a guard, then as a junior dock inspector, and now” — he puffed up his chest — “as the senior dock inspector on shift.”

He acted quite pleased with himself for this apparent promotion, but Novia felt her lip curl in disgust. That was all her hard work had engendered? From junior dock inspector to senior? Still walking the same beat, still working crammed into that same tiny shack, not even housed at the main building but forced to sit out here like a dog being punished for trampling the flower garden?

After listening a few minutes more, Novia slipped back off the barrel and brushed away any splinters or cobwebs or other debris that might have clung to her while she perched there. She turned and slid through the shadows and around the corner, ducking away without drawing the pair’s notice. She had heard more than enough to confirm that, for Jiro, life was very much the same as it had been, the only real difference being that he was now the one able to pocket any bribes presented by those seeking berths or waiting on approval of their manifests. In the meantime, he was having to train his new companion, whose name was Rikki, in the tedious business of how to inspect each ship as it docked and waited for permission to come ashore and offload wares.

The fact that Jiro himself was happy about his improved status and prospects did little to assuage Novia’s own growing impatience. In her world, life moved very fast, fast enough that if you blinked you could easily lose an op-

portunity, fast enough that individuals rose from obscurity to power almost overnight — and occasionally plummeted back downward just as rapidly.

Evidently life on the docks moved at a significantly slower pace, at least for those who worked here rather than those who arrived and departed via the twin rivers. Jiro had even mentioned to Rikki how his old partner, the calm Miroku, had only worked the docks for seven years himself before being promoted just recently to junior dock overseer, a pace that was practically unknown, to hear him tell of it.

Novia hadn't called in favors from the Copper Feathers and gone to visit Dreysa so Jiro could stay out here on the docks. Nice as it was that *he'd* get to pocket the ship captains' bribes now, that wasn't enough. Novia was determined to speed matters up to a pace more to her liking. Jiro had hired her to get him better placement within the dock station, after all — she couldn't imagine he'd be satisfied with this incremental promotion for very long. *She* wasn't satisfied, and doing her job well was a point of pride for her.

Which meant she had more work to do.

Approaching the Northern Dock Station, Novia paused briefly to consider her strategy. Should she wait until nightfall, when it would be far easier to sneak in and out unnoticed? That would certainly feel more natural to her, since the docks were hardly her usual haunt and therefore not the place she felt most comfortable being visible, even if no one who saw her would be able to easily identify her later. But doing so would mean yet another delay, and no matter how short that gap actually was, it would feel interminable to her, she knew, now that impatience already had her in its tight, needy grip. Which meant going in now rather than later. The front door was for all business, including visitors, and so no one would think it strange if she entered that way but it would, again, mean increased visibility.

But that would be the fastest route, and so Novia angled her steps toward those wide doors, picking up speed as she neared them.

She had almost reached the doors when the left one slid open and a figure darted through, squinting in the sunlight. He was pale and gangly, not quite grown into his height. He wore dockworkers' colors, though Novia could see they weren't official robes, just something similar. She had seen that face before, and recently. This was the young man who'd brought Jiro's letters to her and had chattered on and on about the murders at the temple while she looked over the job's specifications. Was he here on Jiro's behalf? She hadn't realized he worked at the Northern Dock Station, but that would explain how Jiro had found him in the first place. The young man glanced at Novia as he passed, but she knew he couldn't have identified her. After all, it wasn't like she was foolish enough to return to the station in the same guise as when she'd visited Fumo Anasol, and she certainly wasn't going to appear there as her true self while she was on this job.

Once inside the building, Novia pushed the encounter from her mind. Following her memories of that first night, she retraced her steps through the labyrinth, now slowed by having to dodge workers hurrying through the narrow halls. It was nearly as chaotic in here as it was out on the docks, she noted. One young woman nearly collided with Novia as she dashed past, papers clutched to her chest, holding back tears. Novia hugged the walls the rest of the way, until at last she reached a door that had once read “Yanitaë Sou” above the title “junior dock overseer” and now bore the name “Miroku Bakar” instead.

Putting her ear to the door, Novia listened. At once she heard the sound of scratching, of papers rustling — and of cursing. Soft but inventive curses, and all centered on the same name. That of the man who had held this office and this job just days before.

Evidently Yanitaë Sou continued to be less than diligent in performing his duties, and now Miroku Bakar found himself faced with the unpleasant task of having to pick up that slack.

Smiling, Novia backed away without ever touching the door itself. She had initially intended to sabotage Miroku somehow, but the fact that he was awake, alert, and irritable made that more difficult. Besides, he was attempting to correct his superior’s deficiencies, so it seemed cruel to sacrifice him now. And, petty as it might be, Miroku’s frustration in his new position served as a tiny bit of payback for not giving Jiro his fair share of their bribes over the years. She turned and wended her way toward what had been Saria Lenko’s office, one floor up, but was now the curse-bearing Yanitaë’s instead.

Upon reaching his office, Novia again listened. This time instead of the sound of penwork she heard a soft, breathy sound, whistling in and out. Snoring. Evidently Yanitaë continued the same work ethic he had demonstrated on her first visit. Reaching for the door handle, Novia twisted it gently.

It did not budge. The newly appointed senior dock overseer had at least grown wise enough to lock his door.

Novia concentrated. For an instant her skin felt hot, as if warmed by the sun even though she stood in a shadowy hallway. That heat traveled from the top of her head down her neck and shoulder and arm to her hand, the same one grasping the handle. There was a tiny surge, as if she had touched an open flame, then the sensation vanished.

She barely heard the faint click indicating that the door was now unlocked. She eased the door open and slipped inside.

The office was larger than its previous incarnation, with more room to maneuver, and had a visitor’s chair set before the desk, but otherwise was much the same — the desk itself was still strewn with papers mounded up along the front and sides, and in the clear space directly in front stood a bottle and a glass. Yanitaë Sou himself celebrated his recent promotion with victorious slumber,

slumped back in his chair, eyes closed and mouth open, arms dangling at the sides. He did not even stir as Novia crept closer.

Even in sleep, she noticed, his face was pinched. Was that worry she saw? Or unhappiness? Or both? It made no sense: A promotion ought to have alleviated his concerns. More money, more responsibility, the respect of his peers. This was a bigger step up than Jiro had received, and yet, where Jiro had been all pride and smiles down on the docks for his paltry promotion, Sou was miserable even in his sleep.

What had she missed?

Novia left Sou asleep and silently explored his office. The paperwork he'd inherited was Saria Lenko's, and as far as Novia could tell, the woman had been neat and efficient. Sou might've made a mess of her files as he settled into the office, but everything seemed up to date. The transition should have been far easier than the disaster he'd left for Mirokou Bakar downstairs.

She scanned his desk, seeking personal effects. In a small box he'd carried with him from his former office, Novia found a sheaf of documents concerning Sou's life outside work. A thick stack of repair estimates sat at the top, their amounts ever-increasing. She paged through bills for replacement furniture, lists of clothing ruined by water damage...one page listed Sou's address and Novia sighed as she realized where it was. The Cinnabar District was prone to frequent flooding, and Sou and his wife lived in a neighborhood that got hit particularly hard every time the Yellow River overflowed its banks. The streets were nearly always muddy, and dampness pervaded every building.

Sou's daughter had sent a letter, begging her parents to move away from the brackish waters, saying it was making them sick. She wrote of how her son, Sou's grandson, was breathing much easier now that they'd taken work in the Nexus District, moved to Sentinels Hill, and left the musty, mold-filled air of Cinnabar behind. *Come stay with us, papa, she wrote. We'll make it work.*

Beneath those, Sou had a stack of letters from across Nexus, all of them variations on a theme: *Thank you for your inquiry. We regret to inform you that we have no positions available at this time.* Some hinted that they might be able to find something, if he could raise a sufficient bribe. Others lamented his lack of backing, or asked for a letter of recommendation from someone with standing in their organization. Judging from the repair bills, there was no way Sou could raise money to bribe an official, and she was fairly certain his connections in Nexus were limited to the Northern Dock Station.

But Novia had a few strings she could pull.

Easing herself back out into the hall, Novia took care to slam the door enough to wake the room's occupant. Her first impression of Sou, a couple of nights ago, had been that of a man too lazy to handle his full workload. Having seen the letters, she now understood it wasn't laziness but pure exhaustion making him fall asleep in the middle of the workday. When he wasn't here,

he was home trying to repair never-ending flood damage, or out searching for some other, better job. One that would take him away from the Northern Dock Station and out of the Cinnabar District altogether. Novia smiled as she saw him startle awake and bend over his work once more. She traced his nameplate, and the words “Senior Dock Overseer” etched beneath it.

She was confident Yanitae Sou would not hold that position much longer, not once she called in a favor.

With that decided, Novia turned and let the flow of traffic lead her toward the main stairs and down them, then detoured from the flock to break for the front door. She was relieved to inhale clean air again, and to let the sharp tang of the river wash away the fogginess caused by breathing in so much of the dregs. She stood there a moment, just enjoying the sunshine and the open air, before blinking, smiling at no one in particular, and heading off toward home again.



CHAPTER TWELVE

When she finally bestirred herself the next day, Novia took herself down to the docks again. She did not go into the Northern Dock Station this time. Instead, she zeroed in on a small shack built precariously along the edges of the pier a few building-lengths away. The odd little structure was roughly square and had a full door on one side and a barn door on the other. The top half of the barn door was open, allowing access to the wide iron grill that ran level with the top of its lower half and from end to end. The back door was open as well, allowing the breeze off the river to keep the small shack cool despite the fire going, but even so the little chamber was filled with smoke. The strong smell of charred meat reached Novia's nostrils as she approached, setting off a rumbling in her stomach and a burst of saliva in her mouth. She had nibbled some cheese and fruit and flatbread before leaving, but suddenly found that she was ravenous despite the earlier repast.

Fortunately, it suited her needs to be just another patron, so she was happy to join the line of men and women queued up there. A line this long usually signalled that the food would be either particularly good or particularly cheap, and either was fine with Novia. Observing those ahead of her, Novia saw that they simply indicated a number, followed by a nod or a headshake in reference to a leather jack dipped in a bucket of what appeared to be watery ale. Reaching the front of the line, she held up one finger and nodded, then passed over a coin and received several chunks of meat on a stick, wrapped in a piece of toasted flatbread, along with a full jack. From there she turned away and found a seat at one of the plank tables arranged across the front of the little food stall. She did not have to fake enthusiasm as she dug into her meal.

As she ate, Novia was pleased to discover that this was one of those rare establishments where the food was both cheap and good. The meat was surprisingly tasty, not as burnt as she'd feared but nicely charred outside while still juicy inside, and seasoned with pepper and lemon and some other spices she could not immediately identify. The bread was nothing special, but it was hot and fresh and went well with the meat. The ale was thin but not unpleasantly so, and more sweet than sour with a hint of apples. Novia finished quickly, then just sat for a bit, licking fat and grease from her fingers and listening.

She had come here specifically because of the shack's clientele, not its cuisine. Everyone around her was either a dockworker or a sailor or a dock

official. There was no concern for rank right now, though — a lowly desk swab sat right beside a high-ranking official, both of them across from a man who might have been a ship captain or a pirate. It didn't matter here. Everyone ate the same food, drank the same drink, and talked freely.

That was why she was here, carefully making herself unobtrusive and unmemorable.

There were conversations about the weather, of course, and particularly about the currents. Captains talked about trade up and down the rivers, and compared the prices of various goods here in Nexus. Everyone told jokes about various other sailors and workers, and made jibes at other people's boats. All of that she let wash over her like the sounds of the river itself: a pleasant murmur in the background, yet not anything she needed to pay close attention to. But after listening for a few minutes, Novia finally heard something that made her ears perk up.

"Congratulations, Sou," a gravelly voice stated. "Heard about the promotion."

Novia turned and saw the newly-minted Senior Dock Overseer hunched over his meal. A man in a dock inspector's uniform stood at the bench across from him, and seemed to be waiting for an invitation to sit down. The smile Sou offered his colleague was forced, as was his "Thank you," and he did not maintain eye contact or attempt to extend the short verbal volley. After an awkward pause, the man finally got the hint and drifted toward another table.

Novia waited until the man was gone, then slid onto the bench across from Yanitae Sou. Unlike his coworker, she didn't bother asking permission. "I'd offer you congratulations as well," she said, "but I get the sense they're not entirely welcome."

Sou glanced up from his food and frowned. Novia looked familiar to him, she knew, though he wouldn't be able to place her face. That was because she'd modeled her image after one of the women whose office was on the other end of the hall — someone he'd likely seen in passing plenty of times but didn't yet know by name. Instead he did exactly as Novia had expected he would, pretending to recognize her without saying her name. "They're always welcome," he said, flashing that same brittle smile. "My apologies if I sound less than enthusiastic. It's been a busy few days and settling in is quite the undertaking."

"I can imagine," Novia agreed. "It seems the entire station has some adjusting to do. I hope at least they've made it worth your while."

"Oh," Sou said, "you won't hear me complaining about that. The increase in salary will help immensely at home."

"You live in one of the lower neighborhoods, don't you?" she asked. "I think I've seen you about, near my own apartments. It's always so damp there. I keep an extra pair of boots in my office so I don't have to spend the day with wet feet."

That elicited a smile. “Perhaps, with my raise, I’ll buy myself a new pair.”

“I envy those bastards up in the Nexus District,” Novia grouched. “I bet they never have to worry about things like damp shoes or mold getting into their lungs.”

“I suspect that’s why there are no jobs up there,” he said softly. “No one wants to leave. Not that I’m looking to,” he added hastily. “I’m happy where I am, or will be once I’ve settled in.”

“I believe you. Though, just between us, if someone offered me a position further uphill, I’d take them up on it faster than you can blink.” Novia finished her ale and placed a coin on the table. “Have a drink on me, to celebrate. Raise a glass to better days coming.”

“You won’t stay to toast with me?”

Very polite, this Yanitae Sou. Novia could tell the invitation was only politeness on his part. He’d been quite content eating alone, and she wasn’t going to stretch out their interaction any more than need be. “I have a lot of work to do, I’m afraid. I’ll see you around the station.”

Sou nodded and raised what was left in his jack as she turned away.

Novia headed back toward the docks. But halfway there she heard a different bit of conversation, one that made her pause anew.

“Didja hear about the boat?” one sailor was telling another. “Just pulled into the south harbor. Something not normal about it, I heard ‘em say. Not natural.”

That sounded odd enough to make Novia curious. Tossing back the last of her ale and then dropping the empty jack into a large bin set just past the tables for exactly that purpose, she exited the outdoor dining area and reoriented herself toward the south. She was out here already, after all. Might as well find out just what was so unnatural about this new arrival.



As soon as the southern docks came into view, Novia spotted what had to be the ship that sailor had mentioned. All the other vessels anchored along here were nothing unusual, though they ranged in size from tiny rowboats to enormous sailing vessels, and in condition from battered almost beyond usage to gleaming and pristine. This one boat, however, was something very different.

To start with, at first glance Novia had thought the vessel was painted all in black, or perhaps just covered liberally in pitch, but not just the deck — the hull and spars and mast and sails and railings as well. Upon looking again, however, she saw that the entire boat was simply dirty, as if deliberately coated with mud and slop, rather than just the normal muck that came from being at sea for many days with no fresh water available. The sails were not in fact black, but had turned a grimy gray-brown, and from here she thought the wood of deck

and hull looked worn through and ready to collapse. It was as if the boat had somehow been assembled out of driftwood, each plank weathered and warped by wind, wave, and sun, and then somehow painstakingly fitted back together.

Second, she could see no one onboard. The sails were furled and although the boat sprouted several oarlocks from belowdecks, the oars were not in evidence. No one stood at the helm or the prow, and the rigging was likewise empty. It appeared to be a ghost ship.

This image was not helped by the fact that the boat sat bobbing gently upon the mild waves of the harbor. It had not pulled in to dock, and after a moment Novia spotted the thick, rusty chain trailing from over the boat's side into the water, where it quickly disappeared. So someone was on board, and had possessed enough presence of mind to anchor the ship in the middle of the harbor.

Which showed good sense, seeing as how the reason it could not dock was the ring of men lining the nearest portion of dock, longbows in hand, arrows nocked and at the ready. Each arrow's head gleamed a dull black in the sunlight, and small braziers stood on iron stands before each man. Once dipped into those hot coals, the pitch around an arrow would ignite, allowing them to rain fire down upon the strange ship. If even one of those arrows struck anything flammable—which, aboard a boat, described most things, including sails and deck—the entire boat would ignite like an enormous bonfire, fast and furious.

The only way to make sure that a ship containing contagion never put Nexus' citizens at risk was to make sure it never got close enough to pose a threat. The city was built on the bones of the First Age city of Hollow, and though the Council of Entities had outlawed such speculation, they couldn't stop the locals from talking about the plagues that scholars said haunted the old city. Some believed a plague-spirit lived in Hollow's ruins, and it was only a matter of time before an excavation set it free to rampage across Nexus. Others braced for a new sickness they were certain would begin any day now, buying charms and talismans to ward themselves from contagion.

Even if those stories were all nothing more than superstition, Nexus was home to more than a million people, and served as the intersection of trade routes from all across Creation. One small outbreak could kill thousands before it was stopped. Keeping a ship potentially full of disease away from the docks was simply common sense.

A tall, broad-shouldered woman with long, straight black hair beneath her cap stood behind the archers, hands upon her narrow hips. "This is Daniella T'lee of the Southern Dock Station," she called to the ship. No flags flew to signal who might be aboard. No one stood on the deck to return her hails. Nonetheless, she squared her shoulders and continued, "Please show yourself and state your name, land of origin, and purpose in coming here!"

Nothing moved aboard the strange ship, not even the flutter of a curtain at one of the windows.

“If you do not show yourself, and state your case, your ship will be impounded,” T’lee went on. “You will have to identify yourself before you can reclaim it, or depart it and come ashore.”

Still no response from the boat.

T’lee sighed before trying again. “Ahoy, the boat!” Her voice carried easily over the still water. “Please respond! You will be placed under quarantine otherwise!”

The boat was utterly silent and still.

The inspector waited another moment, a frown upon her face, before finally turning to the man beside her. “Ring it,” she ordered. He nodded, dipped his arrow into the coals, and then sighted on the boat, took aim, and released. The flaming arrow arced upward, disappearing from view for an instant as it passed before the sun, then reappearing and sailing downward, to plunk into the water mere feet from the boat’s hull. The rest of the men and women followed suit, firing their own arrows into the water all around the boat. A band of fire quickly spread as the pitch slid from the arrows and floated atop the water, still burning. Soon a thin ring encircled the mysterious vessel, burning bright enough to cast shadows against the hull but low enough that there was little risk of those flames jumping to the wood. The fires would eventually die out, but by then the crew would have tossed a white cord out as well, marking the space that boat was confined to until granted approval to proceed — or be destroyed completely. The flame was as much a warning to the boat’s inhabitants as an indicator to anyone watching — do as you are told, stay where you are ordered, or it will be the fire for you.

“Place men here to watch at all hours,” T’lee instructed her second. “I want to know the second anything moves out there.” She frowned again. “But send fruit and bread and cheese as soon as you can. And drinking water.” That was decent of her, Novia thought. The docking personnel were required to call for medical assistance if they deemed it necessary, and to respond with force to any perceived threat, but they did not have to offer food and water. That was entirely up to the inspector on duty, and T’lee’s decision spoke of a kind and generous heart, in addition to a sharp eye, a strong will, and a desire to maintain discipline.

Novia liked her already. Her competence kept the people calm where they might otherwise have been buzzing with fear. She was very glad that T’lee was here on the southern docks. It would have been a shame if the woman had been stationed on the northern docks, and had wound up running afoul of Novia’s scheme.

Deciding that the strange ship was in good hands but still resolving to check back in on it — and, if she was honest, on Daniella — herself from time to time, Novia turned away.

Her route off the docks wound up taking her back past the food shack again, and she was amused to spot a certain anxious figure in the line awaiting his meal. Unable to resist, she slid up beside him.

“Congratulations on your most recent promotion,” she said softly, a twinkle in her eye. “I’m sure even greater success is on its way for you.”

Jiro Hatan turned and blinked down at her. “Oh, ah, yes, thank you,” he stammered, barely able to meet her eye. Strange. Perhaps he just was not comfortable discussing such matters out in the open, even though Novia’s voice has been quiet enough and the general hubbub loud enough that she was confident no one else could have heard. She chose not to press the matter. Instead she simply nodded before turning and continuing on her way back toward home. She needed another day or two to set up Yanitae Sou’s departure.

For now, however, Novia hoped Jiro was satisfied knowing she was still on the job.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

When Novia returned to Dreysa's office a day later, she noticed a new underling sharing desk space with her friend's other aides. The dark-haired young woman had the slightly terrified look of someone in way over her head but determined to plow through. She reminded Novia of how Dreysa had looked the first time they'd met and suspected that might have been exactly why Dreysa had hired her.

The number of precariously balanced stacks of paper on Dreysa's desk was much reduced from her last visit, the chairs clear, the floor mostly uncluttered. Novia suspected a significant amount of that paperwork was on the new employee's desk; she didn't envy her one whit.

That didn't mean Dreysa's desk was empty, however. Now, instead of having to peer around ledgers and missives to find her friend, Novia's view was obstructed by an almost comically large fruit basket. "It was a gift from my superiors," Dreysa said from behind the basket. She shoved it to the side and tossed Novia an orange. "Their thanks for catching out Fumo Anasol and the Copper Feathers." She plucked a letter from a smaller stack and waved it at Novia. "Then, of course, the Feathers sent a letter offering more information on Fumo, as long as we consider the matter closed as far as they're concerned."

"No doubt that's why they volunteered to help remove him from the Dock Station as well," Novia said.

Dreysa grunted. "I'll be passing their letter along to someone with the proper authority to make that decision, but I suspect the matter will be resolved quickly. Still, a job well done, eh? Did your client get what they needed?"

"Part of it, yes, though the job's not quite finished." *One of these days*, she thought, *we'll talk about something other than work*. But today wasn't that day. "I have to confess," Novia said reluctantly, "congratulating you isn't my only reason for being here."

Dreysa paused, her hand hovering over a golden fig. "Calling in the favor so soon? You're awfully busy these days."

Novia nodded. "I'm efficient. There's another dockworker, an Overseer named Sou." She explained his plight to Dreysa, and saw the sympathy bloom on her friend's face. "He has no connections outside of the docks. No money for bribes. But he's an expert when it comes to shipping manifests and trade

schedules, and I expect it wouldn't be hard for him to apply what he's learned to a similar position elsewhere." She tilted her head. "I don't suppose *you* might know of some office within the Guild that could use his skills...?"

Dreysa rose and fetched a thick book from her shelves. Novia came around to peer over her shoulder, scanning it. Names and positions filled the pages, contacts Dreysa had built up over the years throughout the organization. Many were scratched out, as people changed jobs, got promoted, or left. At last she stopped and tapped a particular name. "I think I see a place where we could fit him in. I'll need to arrange a meeting."

"You're doing a good thing here, Dreysa," Novia assured her. "He won't know it came from either of us, but Sou will appreciate it all the same."

"If you're suggesting I'm doing *him* the favor and not *you*, Novia Claro, it's not working."

Novia grinned. "Can you blame me for trying?"



For the next few days, Novia steered clear of the docks. It grated on her to stay away, of course. She tended to invest herself in her work, and right now she had put a great deal of time and effort into this project, so she felt a strong urge to oversee it constantly, in case any elements needed additional management. But Novia had learned through bitter experience that she could sometimes get in her own way, and that upon occasion it was good to absent yourself and let things progress at their own pace. At least for a while.

She filled the days with tasks for the syndicates, and spent her spare time trying to track down anything she could about Karal Dacar. By now, if he had contacts in the city, they should be out looking for him, and might even have heard about someone matching his description meeting his end at Hushanti's temple. But all was quiet. Even Cynis Kopet, who specialized in scuttlebutt concerning the Dragon-Blooded, had heard nothing. Novia was also relieved to learn that no other priests of Hushanti had gone missing, further cementing her belief that Dacar had been the one preying upon them. The reason he'd done it seemed to have died with him, though, and that infuriated Novia.

The strange ship remained at anchor in the south harbor. Novia had eavesdropped on Inspector T'Lee's meeting with the other dock officials, and learned the decks still remained empty, the dockmaster's hails met with nothing but the wind. The boat she'd sent out with food and water had gone unacknowledged. They'd burn it out, if it was still silent in a few days' time, and the debate had turned toward whether anyone might be brave enough — or foolish enough — to volunteer to search the ship first, to see if there were survivors or riches aboard. Novia had considered swimming out herself, to see what treasures might lurk belowdecks, but she wasn't keen on exposing herself to any deadly surprises either, especially when there was no guarantee it would be worth the effort.

Still, she couldn't stay away from the Northern Dock Station forever. It took three days before curiosity's clamor grew too loud to ignore. She had to see how her latest plan had shaken out, and whether Jiro had finally been pulled off the docks and into the office he deserved. Upon reaching the Northern Dock station, Novia paused and frowned up at the large, imposing structure. As always, her first instinct was to start at the top, going right for the highest level. But that would definitely raise suspicions, so Novia carried on as before, wreathing herself in vague shades and then aiming herself at the large front doors set directly in front, beneath the colossal city emblem. She schooled herself to move with casual purpose, someone come to inquire about a shipping issue that was important, but not life-or-death urgent. Novia followed a pair of arguing scribes in through the door and up a flight of stairs. They turned to the right and she veered left instead, stepping quickly behind another man who was staggering under the weight of a heap of scrolls and books piled as high as his forehead. He nearly careened into a door there off the stairwell, but Novia slid past him and managed to tug the door open just in time, then nudged another man out of the way to avoid a possible collision.

"Thank you," the overburdened scribe managed, his words muffled by the mound of papers pressed against his face.

"Happy to oblige," Novia replied, which was true. Trailing along behind him and darting forward to open doors or clear a path provided a perfect cover. But at last they reached a place where the narrow corridor split, and parted ways. "Good luck!" she called after him before turning to study the door before her. It was a door she was already familiar with, having visited it twice before. Each time it had borne a different name upon the small plaque mounted outside. *Senior Dock Overseer*, it read, with no name beneath. The office was empty of Sou's personal effects, and someone had come in and neatened up the paperwork, yet no one new had moved in. She frowned. She'd expected them to bump Miroku up, then bring Jiro in as the new Junior Dock Overseer. The only person who could tell her why that hadn't happened was the new Northern Dockmaster, Saria Lenko.

Finding a handful of scribes, Novia stepped into line behind them, following them as they made their way toward the stairs. They were also heading up, so she was able to stay with her new cover all the way up to the next floor, where she split off to follow the hall down to the office that had formerly belonged to Fumo Anasol, and now bore the name of Saria Lenko.

The secretary's desk was the same, though freckle-faced Jaxith was nowhere to be seen at the moment. The office door was shut and Novia heard the sounds of writing from within, which did not surprise her any — she had noted on her first visit that Saria was the diligent sort. Novia rapped quickly on the door.

"Come!" she heard from within, and promptly pushed the door open. Saria Lenko was short and slight, with lank hair that could have been a deep,

lustrous brown if better maintained. “Yes?” Her eyes registered no familiarity upon seeing Novia, who had adopted the mien of a middle-aged woman. She carried herself with the air of someone who’d been at her job forever and was damned good at it. “Dockmaster Lenko,” she called out, “I’m Auri Nysal, from the Southern Dock Station. I’ve been working here a few days, while you sort through your personnel changes.”

“Ah,” said Saria. “Yes, of course. I appreciate your help. I’m sorry we haven’t spoken before now.”

Novia’s gamble had paid off. It made sense for them to send someone to help, and she was glad she’d arrived before the actual person who’d be doing so. “I’d heard about Yanitae Sou receiving an offer from elsewhere,” Novia said. “Do you know who you’ll be bringing in to replace him? Not to rush you,” she held up a placating hand at Saria’s dark look. “I’d simply like to send word back to my colleagues so they’ll know how much longer they might be without me.”

“It might be a while yet. Damn him for leaving and making me fill that spot all over again!” Saria groused. She glared at the papers before her as if they were personally responsible, before selecting one document and dragging it free to study it. Peering in over her shoulder, Novia saw that it contained a list of names and titles, many of them recently crossed out.

“I could promote that other idiot, Hatan, I suppose,” Saria muttered, tapping a finger against his name. But then her digit shifted to a different spot on the page. “Tamil has more experience, though, and has been here longer.” She shuddered slightly as she spoke the name, which allowed Novia to study the list more closely. Marco Tamil had been the same level as Yanitae Sou before everything had started, which did put him forward as the most sensible person to advance now.

That shudder, though... Novia quickly sifted through her memories of the Northern Dock Station’s layout, of whose names were on which offices. *Tamil. Tamil... Which one was...*

Oh.

“Oh, not Tamil,” she murmured.

“Hm?” Saria frowned up at her. “Why not?”

“Oh. It’s just, well, Tamil is...” she paused. Novia had seen him in her travels. He always stood a little too close to pretty young women, and seemed to enjoy their discomfort. Several times, when she’d passed his office, she’d spotted him with a hand somewhere inappropriate on one of his aides. Once, a woman had come out of there barely holding back tears, and Novia’d been sure the sobs would come as soon as she was alone.

She’d put Tamil on her own, personal list, to be dealt with once Jiro was in place. But now...

Two birds, same stone.

“I know I’ve only been here a couple of days, but... Do you know the women here tell each other not to be alone with him, if they can help it?”

Saria didn’t look surprised. “I’d heard something similar, but I’ve never worked with him directly before now, and no one’s come forward.”

“I’ve *seen* what happens when he thinks no one else is looking. But of course, you need to hear this from someone firsthand,” Novia agreed, and Saria nodded. “Wait here.”

Novia went downstairs and found Marco Tamil’s office. Tamil wasn’t in, possibly gone off to lunch, but that was fine by Novia. The woman who’d left his office in tears sat at her cramped desk, poring over some manifests. Novia sat on the edge of the desk and waited for the woman to look up. Her mouth was set in a grim line, and she looked as though she hadn’t been sleeping well. “Can I help you?”

“Me? No, but you can help Saria Lenko, and probably every woman in this department, Miss...?”

“Teril.” The woman peered at her. “Do I know you?”

“We haven’t been formally introduced. Call me Auri. I was just in Dockmaster Lenko’s office, and she’s deciding who to promote to Yanitae Sou’s old post. Your boss is currently at the top of the list.”

Teril’s mouth twisted. “Of course he is,” she muttered. “But I don’t see what that has to do with me.”

“I saw you leaving his office in tears last week. I have a pretty good idea what he did to upset you, and I’m betting he’s done it again since. Not just to you, but to anyone he thinks he can get away with.”

The young woman glanced around in case anyone might be eavesdropping, but Novia had made sure their conversation was muffled. No one was looking their way. “I need this job,” she said. “Other people who’ve had it, if they spoke up... They get demoted back out to the docks. Or transferred to some nothing position down in Firewaver. There’s nothing anyone can *do*.”

“Come with me,” Novia said. “Talk to Saria Lenko and tell her what’s been happening. She’s in a position to do something about him right now.” Teril wrung her hands. She peered around Novia, her gaze lighting on the other women in the office, and Novia understood. *She’s trying to protect them from him, acting as a buffer.* Novia could see how much she wanted to believe Saria could make a change but how frightened she was of it backfiring. “You can do this,” Novia said. “I’ll be with you. I’ll back up what you have to say and no one will have to worry about him again.”

Teril closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “All right,” she said at last.

They made their way upstairs, moving swiftly. Novia kept Teril on her far side so she couldn’t see the curious looks her colleagues gave them, though she doubted the other woman had missed the whispers that followed in their wake.

The young woman was nervous walking into Saria's office, but the dockmaster came around from behind her desk and insisted they sit on the low sofa by the window. The more Teril talked, the deeper Saria's frown became. Novia stood by the door, making sure no prying eyes or ears disturbed what was going on. In the end, Saria thanked Teril for coming to her.

"Things will change," she promised, and motioned for Novia to fetch her secretary. "Jaxith," she said once he'd been summoned, "go find Marco Tamil and have him come see me at once. I don't care if he's having lunch with the Emissary, bring him here. And send up two of the biggest dockworkers you can find. I'd like them to be here to escort him out of the building."

Jaxith took off at a run.

Teril gaped at Saria. "I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything. Make a list for me of all the people he's pushed out of a job. We have work to do."

Teril thanked her, thanked Novia, and took her leave.

"That makes that decision easier," said Saria. Lifting her quill, she drew a circle and then an arrow linking what had just been Yanitae Sou's office to a different name.

That of Jiro Hatan.

Novia managed to restrain her whoop of delight, but only barely. "Thank you, sir," she said demurely, mustering all her self-control to calmly back away and out of the office.

Happy that her plan was back on track, Novia practically skipped out of the building. The sun was high in the sky, shining down on her, and she beamed right back at it.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

With the rest of the afternoon ahead of her, Novia returned to the southern docks. She wanted to see if the strange ship was still in the harbor, and was half-hoping for a moment to chat with Daniella T'Lee, if she could finesse a meeting with the formidable inspector. Perhaps she'd be interested in meeting Novia for a drink sometime. Possibly even tonight.

She was nearly to the harbor when she heard a commotion: Raised voices, and the unmistakable slap of a fist striking flesh. Other passersby had noticed as well and were rushing toward the southern dock to see what the hubbub was about. Intrigued, Novia followed. The ship — and the intriguing inspector — would have to wait a little longer.

A group of sailors and a knot of dockworkers were pushing, shoving, and shouting at one another. People stood around them in a semi-circle, hollering encouragement and cheering or groaning whenever a blow would land. One enterprising sailor was rushing about, taking bets from the crowd. Brawls were common down here, where life was rough and hard and any opportunity to let loose was welcomed by one and all.

Even as she watched, one of the sailors turned and slugged a dockworker, punching the other man full in the face. The stricken worker staggered back from the force of the blow. His back foot slipped on the wet wood of the docks, flying out from under him and sending him plummeting backward.

Right off the edge of the dock.

He hit the water with a mighty splash, his shout of surprise quickly turning to a choked gasp as he swallowed debris-thick water. His arms and legs flailed, then disappeared beneath the river's murky surface. The water was deep here in the harbor, cold and dark. Novia knew that if the man was not dragged back up quickly, he would sink to the bottom, one more frozen corpse for Hushanti to hold.

The fighting stopped the instant the man had gone into the water. Whatever insult had started the altercation was instantly forgotten. Brawlers from both sides of the fray kicked off their boots and sandals, and tossed aside jackets and hats, preparing to dive in after him. But before anyone could jump in to the rescue, the river in the area where the man had just disappeared began to churn.

Novia stared along with the rest as the river's surface distorted, bulging upward, pushed and stretched by some tremendous force. Then, between one

eye blink and the next, that bulge burst, transforming from a tenuous bubble into a vigorous spout. Water gushed high into the air and arced back down onto the dock in a glittering diamond spray.

In that isolated fall of water, seeming to form out of it rather than flow downward with it, Novia began to pick out a shape, one that became clearer with each passing second.

It was a man.

The waterspout ended as abruptly as it had begun, retracting like a stung tentacle, its lower half subsiding back into the rest of the river, the portion that had already struck the docks draining away through gaps and cracks, and the man stood there, calmly facing them all. He was tall and broad-shouldered, with long hair swept back over his shoulders and a wide, strong face. In his arms he cradled the unconscious dockworker. The newcomer's hair gleamed like purest silver in the sunlight, and his eyes, which were black, sparkled and shone. A medallion stood out upon his bare chest, displaying the trident, pearl, and flowing waters of Hushanti, the Gray Lady, Pearlescent Mistress of Tide and Current.

It was the river goddess's champion. The same one Novia had claimed had saved her from Karal Dacar's wrath outside of the temple. The same one she had borrowed from the image in that stained glass panel and breathed fictional life into so that he could prop up her flimsy excuse of a cover story.

Only now he was clearly very real.

How can that be?

"He will recover fully," the stranger declared, his voice deep and filled with a faint rushing sound like the noise the river made where its currents ran strongest and deepest. "I have pulled the water from his lungs." Kneeling, he set the dock worker gently down on the planks before him. Then he rose and stepped back, allowing the man's friends to rush in to prop him up. The stranger waited, arms crossed over his chest, face impassive, until one of the men shouted, "He's all right!" A cheer rose from those assembled, and now the newcomer's face creased in a broad, self-satisfied smile, revealing clean white teeth that sparkled in the sunlight.

One of the dock workers, an older man hunched from years of backbreaking labor but still hale and hearty, approached the stranger. "Thank you," the old man stated, pulling off his woolen cap to clutch it before him in both hands. "He'd have drowned if not for you."

The stranger shook his head. "Hushanti decreed, in her infinite wisdom, that he be saved," he announced in that ringing voice of his. "I was merely her vessel in this, as I am in all things." He swept into a deep bow. "I am River's Right and Proper Course, and it is both my honor and my duty to carry out the Pearlescent Mistress's wishes."

This proclamation was greeted with many mutters from the assembled crowd, though none were hostile as far as Novia could tell. Rather, the response demonstrated an even mix of excitement, interest, curiosity, and confusion. Who was this stranger really? She'd never before heard the name he had just given, though she hardly claimed to be a loyal adherent of Hushanti's teachings. Certainly it was a name befitting the champion of a river goddess, but that meant little. His appearance, and the manner in which he had emerged, spoke more plainly to his potential origins, but Novia had never been one to accept anything at face value — she knew all too well how easily appearances could deceive, given how often she had used that to her own advantage! The fact that this stranger would appear now, so soon after she herself had claimed sightings of him and even planted clues hinting at his presence, was too convenient to be mere coincidence.

Then again, if the Unconquered Sun had chosen Novia as one of his own, why could Hushanti not have done the same for someone else? It would explain how he matched that image in the stained glass so closely, and how he had managed to emerge from the river and drain its waters from the near-drowned man.

Clearly, she would have to observe him further in order to determine the truth of his claim.

At least, Novia admitted to herself, that would not be an onerous task. For River's Right and Proper Course was well built, with an impressive physique speaking as much to grace as to sheer strength, as evidenced by the sleek play of muscles along his bare chest and arms. And although his face was not perhaps classically handsome, it was clean and well-featured, with a long, straight nose and a strong, squared jaw, a brow neither so deep as to hide his bright eyes nor so shallow as to appear vapid, and cheeks that were lean without being cadaverous. There was an air about him of brightness, a sparkle to his eyes and his smile, but at the same time a faint coolness, much like the way the river's surface reflected the sunlight back in dappled rays.

As the crowd exclaimed over the mysterious newcomer, Novia heard the sound of chanting, distant at first but growing rapidly closer. It was a refrain she'd heard recently, so she was not surprised when a cluster of men and women appeared at the far end of the crowd and began forcing their way slowly but steadily closer toward the center, where River's Right and Proper Course now stood conversing with several of those gathered. Those in question wore loose-fitting robes of soft gray, their plaited braids swaying behind them almost in unison as they advanced, their song serving to alert others to their approach. Someone must have run to the temple to inform them of the miracle on the docks. Brother Po led the way, Brother Tensai and the others following behind him in a flowing line like a stream of water trickling downhill. River's Right and Proper Course glanced up as the priests approached, and his smile returned to its full intensity. "Brothers and sisters!" he called, and dropped to one knee

before the startled Brother Po. “You who answer our Lady’s call and follow her dictates, who minister to her people and do good works in her name, I humbly prostrate myself before you and ask for your blessing. Our mistress has sent me forth to assist you, and I pledge myself to your service as all of us are bound to hers.” His hands sketched some sort of symbol, a gesture similar to what Novia had seen the priests do before.

His proclamation brought the small procession to an immediate halt, as they all stood and stared at this stranger before them. But even though their mouths were frozen their limbs were not, and six hands reflexively sketched the symbol. “Greetings, brother,” Brother Po at last intoned, doing his best to match the gravity and grandeur of the newcomer’s voice and failing utterly. “Welcome, in the name of Hushanti, Pearlescent Mistress of Tide and Current. I am Brother Po — in the unfortunate absence of our leader, Father Kai, and the recent murder of Brother Lin, I maintain our Lady’s temple here and oversee our priesthood.”

“Your dedication shines like the pearl glinting from the oyster’s mouth,” the man before him stated, lifting his head to meet Brother Po’s gaze squarely. He rose to his feet and towered over Po and the others. “I ask your favor, and would request your sanctuary and guidance, for having only just emerged from our Mistress’s embrace I know nothing of this place beyond these planks, and possess nothing beyond what you see before you.” He gestured down at himself, unclad save for his loose gray pants.

“Of course!” This came from Sister Amelie, who had been so intent on making sure Novia was unharmed after the battle with Karal Dacar. “You must come with us, brother! We will clothe you, feed you, and teach you of this city our Lady has led you to!”

“May her waves grant you peace and prosperity,” River’s Right and Proper Course intoned, clasping his hands and bowing before seizing a surprised Sister Amelie in a sudden, quick embrace. “Bless you, sister.”

“And you, brother,” the priest replied upon freeing herself, her broad face now blazing crimson. “May her waves bring you contentment and success in all endeavors.” She linked an arm with his and half-led, half-dragged him back the way the priests had come. River’s Right and Proper Course seemed a bit bemused, being pulled along by the much shorter priest. Novia sympathized; Sister Amelie was nearly as much a force of nature as Hushanti herself. The rest of her group quickly closed ranks, shielding them both from the touch of those beyond. As one, the priests pivoted and began their retreat, clearly intending to head back to their temple.

As the cluster inched its way across the docks, many of those watching broke off, grumbling and chattering and returning to work now that the immediate excitement was over.

Others followed the priests and the champion in a ragtag procession, and Novia was only too happy to fall into line with them as they wended its way

back toward the temple. All around her the people were abuzz about River's Right and Proper Course — his looks, his garb, his manner of speaking, the way in which he had arrived, and his role in saving that dock worker. They called out to passers-by along the way, gathering more followers by the minute. Many spoke of the champion's recent deeds, passing along tales of his heroism: How he'd saved a worshiper from a killer's blade, how he'd stopped one of the fiercest of the Furious Waves from beating a man to death, how he'd destroyed an entire warehouse full of weapons, all to keep the district safe.

Novia let the conversation wash over her, smiling and nodding whenever a comment was directed her way but otherwise staying quiet. She hung far back, as she didn't want the priests to recognize her at this particular juncture. Even though they were currently intent on their champion, she preferred not to risk it.

She was more than a little awed at how her stories about Hushanti's champion had spread, and even grown in the telling: in some versions, he hadn't faced down one Furious Wave but an entire tide of them. A woman to her right described to her friend how he'd knocked the warehouse down with one mighty blow. Even the tale of him rescuing the dockworker — an act many of them had witnessed firsthand, not a quarter of an hour ago — was already becoming embellished. *He'd appeared riding the crest of a giant wave. He'd had a fish's tail until he stepped onto the dock.*

Soon enough the temple came into view, and then the priests' sandals were clacking across tile rather than clunking against wood. Novia stopped with the rest of the crowd, which arrayed itself in a semi-circle facing the temple's main doors and waited to see what would happen next.

Two priests hurried forward and grabbed the handle of the nearest door. Then, as if by some unnoticed sign, they tugged their half of the entrance open. Brother Po and the Sister Amelie led River's Right and Proper Course inside without pause, but on the threshold he turned and waved at the assemblage, smiling that dazzling smile. For just an instant Novia thought his flashing black eyes found her own, but then they were past and he was guided into the sanctuary. The priests pulled the doors shut again behind them. Clearly they wished to spend some time alone with their goddess's champion.

Now that the spectacle was over, the small crowd began to disperse. Novia frowned, studying the closed doors, but could think of no good way to enter without drawing far too much attention, both from those without and within. Fortunately, Hushanti's priesthood was not of that variety that believed in closing oneself off from the outer world — they preached involvement and aid, and practiced those principles regularly. Which meant that she could fully expect them to lead their new champion out into Nexus at some point, perhaps as soon as the following morning.

For now, she would simply have to wait.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The next day, Novia rose with the dawn. She hated being awake this early, unless it meant she was coming home from a night spent running over the rooftops, or in the pleasure of a lover's company. The world looked too rosy by far, painted in such delicate hues, the sky streaked with lavender and rose and lilac and pale gold. The city was too quiet for day but too noisy for night, with birds beginning to chirp and people starting to stir, drowsy voices emanating from behind closed doors and shuttered windows, groans and creaks indicating they were rising from their beds and dressing for the day. The smells were all wrong as well — not yet the heady mix that filled her nostrils closer to noon but not the clean salty tang of the river at night, undiluted by those other aromas.

All in all, Novia confirmed that she was not inclined to rise before the sun had reached its zenith, if even then. This being up and about before it had even fully crept past the horizon was definitely not for her, and most likely not for anyone with any sense.

Yet here she was, blinking against that odd morning light as she left her cozy, comfortable bed and took to the streets.

The priests of Hushanti rose with the dawn, prayed, broke their fast, then journeyed out into Nexus to conduct their charitable works and ask for alms. If she hoped to catch them with their new charge, her best chance was to do so as they were exiting their temple. Which meant she had to be awake and at least partially alert at this utterly unreasonable hour.

Approaching the temple, Novia was relieved to see the heavy doors just beginning to open. She had timed her arrival well!

So, apparently, had a good chunk of the Cinnabar District. A small crowd had formed in the temple's front courtyard with the same goal as her — to see this purported champion of Hushanti made flesh. Novia considered pushing and squeezing her way through to the front, but decided against it — she still didn't want to risk the priests recognizing her from the other night. Especially since a horrible thought had kept her awake into the wee hours: She had told them that Hushanti's champion had saved her from Karal Dacar. What if they'd asked River's Right and Proper Course about that night, and he'd told them he knew nothing about it? How would she explain why she had lied or what had really happened?

And what happened if he also denied being behind the other acts attributed to him, saving Cynis Kopet from Rasira and destroying the warehouse? Those incidents, at least, no one could pin on Novia, but they'd raise uncomfortable questions all the same.

The priests were beginning to emerge from the temple, so she thrust those thoughts back down to ponder later. Right now she adjusted her stance, slipping far enough into the crowd that she had a relatively unobstructed view between elbows and shoulders and heads, but was still hidden herself. As they had last night, the priests emerged in a loose, sinuous line. Brother Po was in front again, Sister Amelie and wizened old Brother Tensai right behind him, then several other priests after them — and then a majestic figure emerged at the end of the line.

River's Right and Proper Course had clearly found the temple's hospitality to his liking. He had washed and plaited his long silver hair into a gleaming ribbon, much like theirs, that did indeed resemble the course of the Gray River. Over his loose cotton pants he now wore a priest's long, soft gray robe with the darker gray cuffs, collar, and hem — except that, on him, the robe was more like a tunic, only reaching as far as just above his knee, the sleeves ending just past the elbow, the front belted with a dark gray sash at the waist and falling open above that to reveal the broad expanse of his chest and the medallion that hung there, gleaming brightly and catching the morning sun. It was astounding how he could take such mild priestly garb and transform it to a warrior's attire, showing off his build and subtly conveying that he was constantly ready to spring into motion. Even his sandals, fashioned exactly like theirs, somehow looked sturdier, and better suited to run and leap. Although he bore no weapons, she could tell by the strength evident in his arms and the way he carried himself that River's Right and Proper Course would be more than capable in a fight.

The people all around her burst into a ragged cheer, which only increased in strength and volume as he raised a hand in greeting. A wide smile creased his face, transforming it from merely strong to striking and bringing his eyes to life as well. Novia had seen far prettier men, but there was something about this one, a vitality, that she found incredibly appealing.

People from the crowd crept forward, toward the champion. They carried offerings with them, bundles of herbs, small coin purses, baskets of fish, all to honor Hushanti. Sister Amelie and Brother Po organized a space in the courtyard to collect all the gifts, as one of the younger priests frantically scribbled down what they'd received. It was likely more than the temple had brought in for a very long time, and the needy would benefit from the faithful's generosity.

Amazing, Novia thought, *the way people open their purses for a miracle.* The cynical part of her wondered if perhaps the priests might have taken her lie and run with it, hiring some muscle-bound entertainer from one of the other districts to play the part of their champion and start the money rolling in. But she dismissed the thought as quickly as it came. It might be a scheme Novia

herself would hatch, but Hushanti's priests were nowhere near as callous. No, if the champion was a pretender, he was pulling one over on the clergy as well.

Novia was surprised and impressed that no one in the line to greet River's Right and Proper Course jostled or charged, but everyone seemed diffident, even a little afraid, to approach this bold new champion. Or perhaps it was simply that they already respected him too much to rush him. After all, as far as the people of the Cinnabar District were concerned this man had already saved several lives and made Nexus safer.

It was just a shame he did not yet know about any of that.

But perhaps this was the perfect opportunity to correct that. As the people in front reached him, River's Right and Proper Course held his hands out over their heads as if casting a benediction. Each person smiled and nodded. Some bowed or reached out to shake his hand. The champion spoke to each in turn, listening to what they had to say as though no one else were around. He didn't glance back at the priests to be sure they were watching, nor did he look to them for encouragement. When he talked to someone, his eyes didn't scan the rest of the crowd, searching for more important faces. The person speaking to him received his full attention. He asked questions, made them laugh, touched their shoulders or their hands if they seemed to desire it. When they moved on, it was with smiles or relief on their faces. More than a few had tears in their eyes as they stepped aside, allowing the next person in line to move forward.

Which meant that Novia would be before him in a matter of minutes.



At last she reached the front of the line. River's Right and Proper Course gazed down upon her, as if from a great height, and smiled. "Good morning," he said. "May Hushanti's holy waters wrap you in their warm and loving embrace."

Novia bowed low in return. "May her bounty continue to guide you as well," she answered, "and bring you peace and prosperity. Welcome to Nexus," she told him, stepping back a pace to stare up at him. "My name is Novia Claro."

He showed no reaction to her name, but his smile widened still further. "Good morning to you, Novia Claro. I thank you for that kind greeting. I have yet to see the city proper, yet already I feel as if I were at home, swimming in the river right alongside."

"I hope you'll get to see more of it soon. They call it the Threshold Jewel for a reason." Novia didn't bother to mention some of the other, less savory names for the city. Hushanti's champion didn't need to know them just yet. "You know, I could help," she said brightly. "I certainly know Nexus very well — I grew up here, and I've explored all of its secrets. Perhaps I could show you around."

“Oh. You are too kind,” he said. “I would be only too happy accept your generous offer, but I’ve already accepted the hospitality of Brother Po and the others, as we all serve our Lady together.”

“Oh, I am sure Brother Po would not mind,” Novia insisted, leaning in and placing one hand upon his chest, just above where that medallion hung. “He and the other priests have their alms to perform. This would allow them to do so without needing to worry about inconveniencing you and without becoming distracted from their own tasks.” She gestured to where Sister Amelie stood, with the ever-growing donations. “I suspect their day will involve much of the same, collecting and cataloguing.”

Just then a gasp arose from nearby. Tearing her eyes from River’s Right and Proper Course, Novia shifted her gaze to find the old but still sharp Brother Tensai staring at her. “You!” he declared in that surprisingly deep voice of his. “It *is* you!” One finger stabbed accusingly at her. “You are the one who River’s Right and Proper Course saved down by the temple that night.” He turned to stare at the newly arrived champion. “The night you defeated that brute of a warrior, you remember?”

A murmur went through the crowd, as those closest repeated Brother Tensai’s words for the people behind them, and those people in turn passed the declaration along. Necks craned to get a better look at her, and Novia had to resist a strong urge to fade into the shadows. Normally, a bit of attention didn’t bother her, but this was all a little too much. Novia’s breath caught as River’s Right and Proper Course studied her, his bright, dark eyes far more thoughtful and discerning than she had hoped. But before she could start to make up excuses or craft a new cover story, he smiled. And nodded. “Of course!” he stated, beaming down at her. “How could I forget? Forgive me — I’m still dazzled by this city, and my head is all awlirl.”

She chose to follow the course he had laid out for her, and dipped her own head. “Quite all right,” she assured him.

Brother Tensai seemed unsure how he should react. On one hand, his champion had taken credit for saving Novia and killing Dacar, which confirmed the priest’s beliefs that Hushanti had sent him to help them. On the other, the priest seemed a bit disappointed, as though he’d expected to expose the silver-haired man as a fraud and had just seen his moment of triumph dashed. In the end, he settled on wary relief, and muttered a prayer of praise to the Gray Lady.

Novia beamed. “But now, you see, I have even more reason to serve as your escort around Nexus. I owe you so much — I owe you my life! — surely I must have at least this small opportunity to repay you?”

River’s Right and Proper Course frowned, clearly debating whether or not he should accept, but finally nodded. “Yes, you’re right. To refuse such an offer would be insufferably rude and inconsiderate of me.” He swept into a graceful bow. “I am at your disposal, once I’ve finished greeting those who are still waiting to see me.”

“Of course,” said Novia, stepping deftly aside so he could accept his next visitor. She put some bodies between herself and Brother Tensai so the priest couldn’t ask her more questions. Some people waiting in line stopped her, asking to tell the story of that first night River’s Right and Proper Course protected someone in Nexus, but Novia demurred, telling them she wished to pray and offer thanks to Hushanti. They let her go then, and Novia disappeared into the crowd.

An hour later, the throng had died down, and the last of the visitors finally left the docks. Many of them were headed off to their jobs, or on the way home after a night shift. Brother Tensai was still frowning at the idea of Novia leading their champion around the city, as was Brother Po, but Novia favored them with a wide smile. “Don’t worry, brothers,” she promised, sliding one arm through the crook of River’s Right and Proper Course’s. “I promise your champion is in the best of hands with me. I will bring him back in one piece.”

Provided I am satisfied with his answers to the questions I intend to put before him, she added to herself as she steered the champion away from the temple of his patron deity. Otherwise, I may instead return him to you one piece at a time.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Very well,” Novia said, taking River’s Right and Proper Course by the arm and tugging him away from the cluster of priests and the remnants of the visitors. He stopped to bless the stragglers as they passed, encouraging them to go to the temple and offer prayers to Hushanti. It amazed Novia how easy he was with them, how gentle. Eventually, the petitioners let him go, and Novia led him away from the temple and back along the dock toward where they intersected with the rest of the city.

“Where shall we begin?” she asked. “What have you seen thus far? How much do you know about Nexus already?” She assumed the priests had kept him sheltered in the temple overnight, but didn’t know what they might have told him about the city. His skin was smooth and firm under her grasp, but her hand detected a faint ridge, and glancing down she saw that there was a white tracery upon his flesh, an undulating line as if the river had etched her outline there. It was so subtle she would never have noticed it except by direct contact.

He laughed, a deep, rich chuckle. There was something unselfconscious about that laugh, as if to announce that he found something funny and did not care whether the rest of the world agreed with him or thought him mad. “In truth,” he declared as if he were pronouncing some monumental occurrence, “I’ve seen naught but the docks, and the temple. Before the Gray Lady summoned me to this place, I knew nothing of it, save only its name and its reputation for great commerce.” He glanced around — they were still on the docks, so only warehouses, a few shacks, and the boats in the river, were visible. “I trust this is merely a small portion of the whole?”

“It is,” Novia agreed. “Nexus stands between the Gray and Yellow Rivers where they intersect and run into the Yanaze. There was a major city here back in the First Age, and some of it still stands.” She waved her hand toward the city center, where the peaks of some of those elegant towers in the Nexus District were already visible. “The rest has been built up in the centuries since — not all of that has survived to this day, but some pieces have. You can see buildings from the original city, Hollow, if you know what to look for. They’re everywhere.”

She started to lead him away from the docks, but he planted his feet, halting her mid-stride. “A moment, if you will indulge me,” he said. He gently

pulled his arm free and he crossed to the water's edge, where he knelt and bowed his head.

Novia crept up behind him, moving as silent as a cat stalking a mouse. He was speaking softly, but she was able to make out the words:

"Holy Mother, blessed Mistress, sacred Lady, I ask that you grant me this boon," River's Right and Proper Course intoned. "Allow your servant to carry a trace of you with him, that you might be close to him at all times, and that I might then deliver you to those in need of succor and demonstrate your might and your glory to all those who know and honor you."

He thrust both arms down into the water up to his elbow.

She didn't know what she expected to see happen — a lady form out of the water and take his hands in her own, perhaps, a flash of light, a great water spout such as the one he had arrived in, or a river dragon rising up and wrapping itself around his shoulders like a writhing, scaly cloak.

Instead she saw only the river, flowing past and around and over his arms.

Except, now that she looked more closely, it was not flowing past him. At least, not all of it. The water closest to his submerged limbs was in fact not moving at all. It had paused, in much the way traffic on a busy street was brought to a halt when a mule suddenly refused to draw its cart any farther and instead sank down onto its haunches. The rest of the river still slid by, but that small stretch of water had stopped, and lingered as if awaiting further instruction.

After a moment, River's Right and Proper Course straightened and drew his arms back out of the water as he rose to his feet.

The water trailed after him, carried upward with his motion like a mother unwilling to release her child even as she passed him off to another for safe-keeping. It was a thin stream rather than a spout, and as the distance increased it grew more and more tenuous, reduced at last to a mere line of droplets. Then that snapped, and most of the water fell back to join the rest of the river.

All except the thin film still coating his hands and arms. That remained, like long gloves crafted from liquid, flexing with him as he moved, shining like silver when it caught the light, turning transparent in the shadows.

Novia had never seen anything like it.

"Thank you," River's Right and Proper Course stated, and Novia was not sure if he was addressing her or Hushanti. "We may continue now."

She nodded, a little dazed despite herself after what she had just witnessed, and led him away from the docks.

She did not attempt to take his arm again, though. She wasn't sure what touching that liquid would feel like, and she wasn't sure she wanted to find out. Especially if Hushanti were upset with her about her earlier deception. Water could be life-giving and restorative, but it could be deadly as well. There was

no shortage of bodies who had found out too late that the Gray Lady could be vicious and vindictive.

“This is the Southern Dock Station,” she explained as they passed the large building, which was a perfect mirror of its northern counterpart. “The people here run the docks on this side of the city, and oversee all of the commerce off the Gray River.”

“Ah, they do the work of our Lady, allowing her largesse to reach her people,” he replied, inclining his head respectfully toward the imposing structure. “They are to be commended for their dedication and their efforts.” He watched as a barge came to a slow halt alongside the pier, and a swarm of sailors and dockworkers tied it off.

Farther out, in the harbor, Novia spotted the grime-encrusted sails of that odd ship, still anchored within its ring. Surely, since it had been floating there in the Gray River’s waters all this time, Hushanti would have told her champion if it posed an immediate danger to the city? Later, perhaps, when Course had his feet more firmly under him and had seen more of the city, she’d bring him closer to see what he made of it.

“What should I call you, anyway?” she asked, as they continued on. “River’s Right and Proper Course is quite the mouthful.”

“It is, at that,” he agreed, smiling. “And your name is so succinct, Novia Claro!”

“Just Novia is fine,” she corrected, smiling herself. His grin was infectious.

“Well, then, a shortening of my proper name is only fair. River would be inappropriate, as I am merely her agent, not her avatar. But perhaps Course?”

She considered that a second, testing out the sound and feel of it, before nodding. “Course will work.”

As they stepped past the station, someone came running toward them. Novia instinctively dropped into a fighting crouch, one hand whipping aside the back half of her coat so she could more easily reach her knives, but the man didn’t even notice her. His attention was entirely upon Course, and his hands were open wide before him, signaling that he meant no harm. He was a dockworker, judging by his sturdy, water-stained clothes and cap and weathered skin, not old but certainly tempered and worn. “You!” he called out as he approached, slowing to a stop just a pace or two from Course. “It’s you!”

Then Novia recognized him. It was the man who had fallen into the water yesterday. The one Course had saved.

“Greetings, my friend,” Course replied, and bowed at the waist, hands together before him, palms touching. “I see you are fully recovered from your immersion? I’m glad for that.” So clearly he had recognized the man as well.

“Yes, thanks to you,” the dockworker replied. “You saved my life — and so much more.” He held up his right hand and flexed the fingers, tightened

them into a fist, then relaxed them again. "I haven't been able to do that in years," he confessed, his voice rough with emotion, his eyes bright with tears. "Too much time gripping rope, I guess. It was starting to look like I'd have to quit the docks, find some other way to get by. But when I woke up after you dragged me back out of the water, I could move them again! No pain at all!" He fell to his knees before the river champion. "Thank you!"

Course shook his head, his plait flying behind him. "It was not I who healed you," he corrected gently, "but Hushanti herself. The Gray Lady took pity upon you, and chose to grant you her favor. I was merely her conduit. But in her name I accept your thanks, and rejoice in your regained vigor."

The dockworker smiled. He waved off Course's offered hand and rose to his feet on his own. "Thank you," he repeated. "But — can you help someone else? My cousin, he messed up his leg a few months back. It just doesn't want to heal right. It's hurting something awful, and he can barely walk. He works the docks too, but lately the overseer's been threatening to replace him 'cause he can't keep up and he can't really put weight on it." It was then that Novia noticed the second man, who had also emerged from the station but had hung back, watching the scene unfold. He was dressed much the same as this man, and there was a certain similarity to his features. He was very clearly favoring his left leg. Having for many years borne a similar injury, Novia recognized the stance, and could wholly identify with the grimace of pain etched into his face.

Her companion was already nodding. "Of course." He gestured to the other man. "Approach, my friend. There is naught to fear here." The cousin hobbled toward them. "In the name of Hushanti, the Gray Lady, Pearlescent Mistress of Tide and Current," Course proclaimed, drawing attention from the handful of other people moving around outside the station, "I, River's Right and Proper Course, do grant you the healing of her waters. Let her mercy shine upon you and ease your pain and your hurt, as water nurtures, sustains, and soothes us."

Kneeling on the dusty path, he wrapped his large, capable hands around the dockworker's injured leg.

The water coating Course's flesh began to writhe. It slid forward, inching from him onto the other man, gliding around in long flat droplets that then linked up until they fully covered the injured limb. Then the water brightened, the sun's reflection soon surpassed by an inner glow until it was nearly too bright to look upon. That faded, and the water retreated, clinging to Course once more. As he straightened up again, Novia noted the liquid gloves, which had reached nearly to his elbows before, now only extended to mid-forearm.

"Hushanti be praised!" the second dockworker burst out. His face was nearly as bright as that glow had been as he declared, "It doesn't hurt anymore!" He flexed his leg, beaming, and then set it down, slowly shifting his weight until he was standing upon it fully. "And it works again!" To prove that statement, he kicked out with his other leg, letting the once-injured limb sup-

port him for a second. It stayed strong and stable, and he laughed, then grabbed his cousin and twirled around in an impromptu dance of pure joy.

Several onlookers had moved in closer to see what all the fuss was about. They'd watched in curious silence while Course worked on the injured dockworker's leg, and now exclaimed with awe as the healed man cavorted about. "Did you see that?" they murmured to one another, "Did you see?"

"Thank you!" the dockworker said when he finally stopped spinning and turned once more to Course, panting heavily. "Thank you!"

Course merely smiled. "Do not thank me," he said with only the mildest hint of rebuke in his rich voice. "As I said, I am merely Her servant. It is Hushanti herself to whom you owe your thanks."

"Yes," the man quickly agreed. His cousin bobbed his head as well. "You're right! I'll go to the temple as soon as my shift is over, and offer thanks. Every day. I'll go every day. Thank you! I mean, praise Hushanti!" Still grinning, he turned and hurried off, running with all the energy and enthusiasm of a man who had been sick but was now recovered at last.

Course laughed to see that, and Novia found herself smiling as well when he turned to her. "Shall we continue?" he asked, offering her his arm.

Stepping closer, she accepted it. Though she was careful to keep her own arm in the crook of his elbow, well above the edge of that strange, living water he carried. Just to be safe.

"Of course," she replied. "Why don't we head over to —"

But before she could finish that statement, she sensed motion nearby. Pausing, she glanced over — and tensed.

Two new people were rapidly approaching them.

It was only too clear they were not dockworkers seeking healing.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“What have we here?” one of them demanded. Novia recognized Ledaal Kenu from the bazaar, where he’d been harassing V’kai Aram. He was short, barely taller than Novia herself, and his slim form was once again swathed in too many layers of pale clothing, his head bare of covering or hair but adorned with strange patterns instead.

But he was not the one commanding the bulk of her attention.

The other man was also familiar, from his tall, rangy form to his ornate red-tinged armor, to his chiseled features, to the ember-filled dark eyes and the glossy dark red hair.

Horrifyingly familiar, since less than a week had passed since she had fought him.

And killed him.

Yet the man who was the spitting image of Karal Dacar barely spared her a glance, focusing instead upon her companion. As was Kenu. The two advanced until they were just beyond arm’s reach of Course and stopped, a few paces apart from each other, studying him carefully. Their bodies and faces were tense.

“Who are you, stranger?” The Fire Aspected Dragon-Blooded — who could not be Karal Dacar, it was impossible! — growled. “We saw what you just did to that man.” The way he said “man” was much like Novia might say “bug,” as something barely worth noticing. “Who are you, to have such gifts?”

Kenu stared at Course with those cold blue eyes of his, and Novia felt the chill radiating off him, like she had beside V’kai’s stall. His gaze flicked to her, but showed no recognition despite their interaction in the bazaar a few days ago. She stood differently now than she had that morning, confident but not haughty. Her coat had been cleaned and pressed since then as well, and her boots dusted off. Novia suspected he’d put her out of his mind as soon as he’d left the bazaar. Why should he bother remembering one peasant’s face in a city of a million people? If he were another person, or the circumstances were different, she might have been insulted, but today she was mostly relieved. She didn’t *want* either of these Dragon-Blooded to know who she was.

Novia wanted to tell Course not to say anything, but was unsurprised when her companion grinned broadly and spread his hands wide in greeting. “I am

glad to meet you,” he said easily. “I am River’s Right and Proper Course, the chosen champion of Hushanti, the Gray Lady, Pearlescent Mistress of Tide and Current.” He bowed to them. “And you are?”

The two men facing him frowned. Novia guessed that they were not used to being asked to identify themselves — certainly, if Kenu’s reaction at the bazaar was any indication, he just assumed that everyone would automatically know who he was and bow down to him.

But she was eager to hear his companion answer Course’s question. She had to know if she was seeing some kind of ghost, or what exactly was going on here.

Fortunately, the two Dragon-Blooded were too proud not to declare themselves. “I am Ledaal Kenu,” the smaller one stated, lifting his chin.

“And I am Karal Melik.” The taller one banged a gauntleted fist against his armored chest, just as Dacar had the night Novia fought him. He frowned at Course, his smoldering gaze narrowing. “How long have you been in Nexus?” he demanded. “Were you here, down at that temple, several days previous?” He bared his teeth in a feral grimace. “My twin brother, Karal Dacar, was. He has since vanished without a trace. I’m eager to locate him, but we keep hearing stories of some silver-haired warrior defeating someone just like him. I hope for your sake it isn’t true.”

His brother! Novia wanted to scream in relief. That explained it.

“I’m sorry to hear of your brother’s disappearance,” Course was saying. “I’ve been in this city only since last evening. I regret I cannot be of more assistance, though I will pray to Hushanti for his safe return.”

Ha, best not to, Novia thought to herself. Since the priests had disposed of Dacar’s body by consigning it to Hushanti’s cold embrace.

The surviving Karal brother stepped forward, putting himself in Course’s personal space. They were of a similar height and build, both tall and lean. Melik’s features were twisted into an utterly unappealing expression of hatred, arrogance, and disdain. Course, on the other hand, was calm, peaceful, and pleasant.

“I don’t think I believe you, *friend*,” Melik declared. “In fact, I think you should come with us. We can discuss the matter fully, then determine the proper judgment for your crimes.”

Novia had heard enough. “This is ridiculous!” She shoved her way between the two of them and pushed them apart. “You have no business being here,” she told the two shocked Dragon-Blooded. “And no authority. So you’d best be off, before the Furious Wave gets wind of you trying to throw your weight around their territory.”

This was a bluff on her part, pure and simple. The Furious Wave didn’t really care what others did in their territory, as long as they weren’t encroaching

on the syndicate's interests. If Course were under their protection, Keti Monaxa might take exception, but he hadn't been in town long enough to make friends among the criminals yet, and had no money to buy any muscle.

Unfortunately, while it was the sort of threat that worked nicely against most regular citizens, these were Dragon-Blooded, and she had already seen how they did not believe any regular rules applied to them.

"Who is this?" Melik scoffed, finally deigning to look at her properly. "Your bodyguard?"

"You should run now," Kenu added, still not remembering her, "before we choose to take offense at your continued presence here." He smiled, a chilly little thing, and Novia felt the cold freezing the tips of her hair, her nose, her eyelashes. She was hardly the type to frighten easily. She glared back at him, showing her teeth.

"That is enough," Course stated, still calm but with a harder edge to his voice than she had heard before now. "My companion is correct. I don't answer to you, and I don't respond well to threats. Kindly depart now, and trouble us no more."

The Dragon-Blooded stared at Course as if he were insane. "How dare you speak to us that way?" Kenu snarled. The air grew even colder. "Come with us now, or you'll wish you'd drowned in your old, dried-up hag of a river!"

That had been exactly the wrong thing to say, Course stiffened beside her. "You will show the Gray Lady the proper respect," he stated, his voice gone low and steely. "Or I will be forced to demonstrate her displeasure."

"I've heard enough!" Melik roared. "Let's see how many people you can heal once I've cut off those hands!" With a great hiss of stone against metal he drew the sword at his side — a daiklave identical to the one his brother had swung at Novia that night, its edges already beginning to glow red like coals just thrust into the fire. Beside him, Kenu grinned, and the air around his hands coalesced, frost turning to snow turning to ice, until he held long, slender swords of clear blue-white ice in both hands.

They attacked.

Novia instinctively ducked under Kenu's sword strike. She threw herself backward, toward the shadows of the Southern Dock Station, and instantly disappeared from view. Fortunately, the Air Aspected Dragon-Blooded had not seemed overly interested in her. His swing had been more in the manner of someone cutting through old vines in order to clear a path.

It was Course he had been trying to reach. She had merely been in his way.

Melik had swung at Course. Hushanti's champion ducked under the blow and stepped within the Dragon-Blooded's swing, blocking the Fire Aspect's sword arm while his other fist slammed into Melik's stomach. That took the wind out of his sails, and he slumped, gasping for air.

This gave Kenu room to strike. He brought both swords in, aimed at the medallion on Course's chest.

Course twisted around and sidestepped the attacks. Then he brought his own arms down, hard, on Kenu's forearms. Driven downward by the blow, the twin ice blades struck the surface of the dock and imbedded themselves in the wood with enough force that Kenu dropped them. He cursed as the swords vibrated all along their lengths.

Novia darted forward and stuck out a foot as Kenu backed up. He tripped over her and went sprawling across the dock, flat on his back, dazed. Novia vanished again. She stood motionless, watching for opportunities to help Course, but also curious about his skill as a fighter. Her impression of him yesterday said he had a warrior lurking within, and so far he hadn't disappointed. She was also reluctant to reveal her own abilities so soon, to Course and even moreso to a pair of Dragon-Blooded.

Melik didn't appear to have noticed his friend's misfortune. He had recovered his breath, and wasted no time renewing the attack. He swung his daiklave again, the sword slicing through the air, its flames immediately banishing Kenu's cold from all around them. His onslaught mirrored that of his brother, the massive daiklave whirling through the air in a blaze of heat and light.

Course twisted to the side, the daiklave's fiery blade gliding just past him, and jammed his elbow into Melik's ribs. Then Course's other elbow connected, right at the back of the neck. There was no armor there, and Melik stumbled, nearly losing hold of his sword as he did.

He recovered quickly, buoyed up by a blast of chill air. Kenu, too, was back on his feet, though much like Novia, he stood outside the fray, watching the other two battle. She was too far away to try disarming or distracting him, but kept one eye on the Air Aspect in case he decided to step back into the fight.

Melik swung at Course again. The daiklave sounded like a roaring furnace in Nighthammer, and emanated a similarly ferocious heat. Course flowed out of the way as though he were made of water himself. With every swing, Melik's rage grew hotter as Course continued to dodge the slashing blows.

To the side, Kenu brought one of his icy blades down in a chopping motion. A gust of wind blasted from it, driving Course backwards and giving Melik an opening. The Fire Aspect stalked forward, triumph lighting his glowing eyes.

But just as Melik raised the daiklave high above his head, Course rushed toward him and *shoved*, his palms flat against Melik's lamellar-covered chest. Melik flew backwards as though battered by a towering wave. He struggled to find his footing on the uneven planks of the docks.

That was too good an opportunity to pass up. Novia slid from her protective shadows to shove Melik and send him properly sprawling. The daiklave flew from his hand. It clattered upon the planks some good forty feet from where Melik himself at last came to rest, still awake but dazed and unsteady.

None of this had taken more than a handful of breaths. Course had not drawn or even presented any sort of weapon beyond his own body. Nor had he resorted to the water around his hands and forearms, even though Novia was sure he would have ways to use that blessed liquid offensively as well as benevolently.

For the moment, this particular skirmish appeared finished. Both Melik and Kenu picked themselves up off the ground and reclaimed their weapons. “This is far from over,” Melik hinted darkly, resheathing his sword. “Best make your peace with your sad little god.”

“Watch your backs,” Kenu added, taking up his ice blades. He poured his rage into the failed swords, and the wintry weapons cracked and then shattered, showering all of them with tiny little shards of ice. “Because we will be watching as well. Watching and waiting for just the right moment to strike.”

“I’ll be here, and I’ll be ready,” Course replied grimly, arms crossed over his chest. He made no move to cower and hide but did not press the attack either.

Novia watched them go, frowning. They were both formidable fighters, and things could have gone much worse. She’d seen how close Melik had come to slicing Course wide open, and didn’t believe for a second that those icy blades were the only tricks Kenu kept up his voluminous sleeves. Novia had the distinct feeling the purpose of this fight had been for the Dragon-Blooded to get a feel for Course’s skill, and little more. They’d given up too easily.

Next time, they’d be better prepared. She was sure of it.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Course watched them go, then spun around to face Novia.

“Are you all right?” he asked, his voice quick and urgent. He reached for her, but she couldn’t help backing away from those water-slicked hands.

“I’m fine,” she replied, holding up her own hands to show that they were unscathed. She was, she had to admit, touched by his concern. “They weren’t here for me, just for you. I ducked and they forgot all about me.” He’d been so focused on Melik, he hadn’t seen her when she’d darted in, which was how Novia preferred it.

“Good.” For an instant his gaze turned dark as the deepest pool, and just as chilling. “If they had hurt you I would have visited the full wrath of the Gray Lady upon them, and her currents are deep, dark, and strong.” Then it was as if the sun came out from behind the clouds, and he laughed. “But there is no need! They have run off, and we are free to continue on our way!”

“Of course!” She thrust her arm through the crook of his again. “Let’s be off!” She led him away from the docks, into Nexus proper. Though she affixed a cheerful smile to her face, the fight troubled her. If they’d heard about Dacar’s defeat at the temple before now, why had it taken them so long to come to the southern docks? Why hadn’t her inquiries into Dacar’s presence in Nexus dredged up information on Melik or Kenu? Surely such a trio would have garnered notice, so why hadn’t Cynis Kopet dug anything up on them? Could they have paid him to keep their whereabouts quiet?

Part of her wanted to return Course to the temple and chase them down. She could take to the rooftops and shadow them, watch who they interacted with, follow them to wherever they might be staying.

But if she brought Course home, he’d likely venture out into Nexus with the priests. While he’d certainly held his own against Melik, Kenu had mostly stayed back from the fight. If the two of them decided to launch another attack, a handful of priests wielding boning knives would prove insufficient backup. No, better that she be the one protecting him. She could seek them out later.

For the rest of the day, Novia led him all about the city. She showed him the battered alleys of Firewander, and the towers at Sentinels Hill that looked down upon them, built to alert the city when creatures of the Wyld broke free. She hired a cart to carry them from the roaring furnaces of the Nighthammer

District, to the impressive merchant mansions of Bastion, and back to the delicate tea houses of the Cinnabar District.

In the sunless Undercity, she brought him to where poor families huddled in shanties — and watched as he pressed his thumb to each beggar’s forehead, leaving there a single droplet that gleamed and glowed before being absorbed into the skin. Each recipient reacted the same way after that—their eyes widened, any haze disappearing, their gaze regaining focus and clarity, their breathing slowing and smoothing out, their tremors fading, the spark clearly returning to them. They rose to their feet then, even if mere seconds before they had been too weak to stand, and thanked Course profusely, clutching at his hands, his arms, his chest, hugging him, clinging to him. He told them, as he had the dockworker, that he was only the conduit of Hushanti’s mercy, and they thanked the Gray Lady as well, and swore to visit the temple and give thanks there properly. Each one watched him with shining eyes as he and Novia continued on their way. And each time, she noticed that the water on his hands and arms had diminished ever so slightly. It was a finite resource, and he was spending it freely.

“They love you,” she told him after a woman kissed him on the cheek. “If you’re not careful, they’ll be chanting your name every time you walk the streets.”

He smiled, but it was not the arrogant sneer of a man who knows only too well how much he is loved. This was warmer, more selfless. “I’m happy to minister to them. It’s part of my purpose here, to carry Hushanti’s kindness to those unable to seek her out themselves. But I don’t need their gratitude or their approbation. I’m here to serve, not to be lauded.”

Novia eyed him carefully, trying to get a read on this strange man who had appeared out of nowhere. Was he being serious, or was he teasing her? She couldn’t tell.

Although, she recalled with a brief flare-up of bitterness, for someone who said he didn’t want praise he was awfully willing to accept credit for Karal Dacar’s death. Why would he do something like that, when he knew he had had nothing to do with that situation? That made little sense to her, especially given his protestations of humility.

Of course, it wasn’t like she could confront him about his lie. Not without revealing her involvement in that fatal combat. That would raise other questions she wasn’t willing to answer, so for now she had to allow him to take the credit for the kill — which, ironically, she had pinned on him in the first place.

Throughout the day, Novia asked Course questions about what he remembered from before Hushanti chose him. Time and again, no matter the angle she approached it from, he denied having memories before he came out of the water. “I don’t think she shaped me from fish bones and seaweed and silt, if that’s what you’re asking,” he said once, “but I couldn’t tell you who I was before.”

Perhaps the experience of being chosen had left his recollection scrambled. Certainly, the days and weeks following her own Exaltation were a bit of a blur, as she gave in to the urges to *go*, to *act*, to *do*. His memories might come back once the strangeness of these last few days settled.

Novia also wasn't entirely sure *what* Course was. An Exalt of some kind? Did the water flowing around his hands mark him as one of the Dragon-Blooded? Or was he something entirely new, chosen by Hushanti for her own mysterious purposes? It wasn't exactly the type of question you sprang on someone, and with his lack of knowledge about who he'd been in his mortal life Novia suspected her guess as to what he was now would be as good as his. So she'd simply do as she always had, watching closely and gathering evidence.

He was kind and generous and considerate, and very solicitous of her in particular. Many times throughout the day he asked if she was feeling well enough, if she would like to pause somewhere, if she would like anything to eat or drink, if she wished to get out of the sunlight or away from the crowds or all manner of other things. Novia wasn't used to anyone doting on her quite so much — at least, not without an ulterior motive. On the one hand it was very sweet, but on the other it made her suspicious. What was it he wanted, exactly? She hardly had any money to give him, and her reputation was not such that it could be transferred. She could certainly use her influence with the syndicates to help him accomplish something, but he had given no hint that he had any wishes or needs in that regard. It appeared as if he was merely being courteous, and that perhaps he really did just enjoy her company.

And she was enjoying his. The more they walked and talked, the more relaxed he became. His smiles turned more casual, more comfortable. His jokes became less restrained and a bit more ribald, though they still were on the gentler side.

In many ways they were completely different, her and Course. They made a striking pair, him with his height and his pale skin and his long, gleaming silver hair, her with her smaller stature, darker skin, and fiery locks. They were like fire and ice, day and night, moonlight and shadow.

Course, it soon became apparent, was not the cleverest of men. And his apparent lack of guile only added to his naiveté. She had only to make a suggestion and he would follow it at once. If she posed a question, his every thought would bend in that direction. It was like guiding a large but mild-natured horse. A gentle nudge was all it took to make him turn his head in the direction she desired.

Novia soon realized that having Course here would in some ways serve her even better than when she had manufactured his presence. She would still be able to send him wherever she wanted, and to cause him to appear at any scene she felt warranted his attention — or anywhere she wished to distract people from her own presence. All she had to do was mention something and he would act upon it immediately.

He provided the perfect cover.

She put this to the test as they walked through the Little Market in the Nexus District. There weren't as many people in need of healing here, and word of Course's astounding feats had yet to spread outside of the Cinnabar District. Here, Course could merely be a tourist, enjoying the riches Nexus had to offer. She pointed him at a particular food stall and passed him a handful of coins.

Course struck up a conversation with the merchant, and soon had the young man utterly charmed as he asked about various wares. His laugh was infectious, as was his joy at a simple selection of berries. He had the vendor name where each variety came from, and Course made it into a game, buying a handful of them for whichever person nearby shared the best story about their place of origin. While he gathered a small crowd, Novia slipped among them, picking pockets. Merely for practice, of course.

The strangest incident that day — after the scuffle with the Dragon-Blooded, that was — occurred as they returned to the Cinnabar District. Novia had a favorite tavern she wanted to introduce Course to before she deposited him at the temple for the night. Her mouth watered at the thought of the savory steak and ale pies their cook baked. Right around the corner from the tavern, Course veered off their path to look in a shop window. He'd been easily distracted by interesting sights all day, but this was different. Before, he'd wanted to share whatever it was that caught his eye: a beautifully woven silk scarf, a songbird whistling a jaunty tune, the scent of fresh pipe tobacco. He'd asked questions loudly, turning heads and drawing others close to experience the same wonder he was feeling.

Now, though, he was practically hunched over as he pressed his nose to the display window. Novia saw nothing of interest there. The pewter cups on display were plain, the work of an apprentice rather than the master crafter who owned the shop. They'd seen better in the Little Market. She was about to ask if he wanted to go in and buy one anyway when she realized he wasn't actually looking *through* the glass, but peering *at* it, like a mirror. Between that and the hunching—was he trying to hide?

Novia turned about casually to see who might be nearby. A few people had spotted Course and were craning their necks to get a good look at him. Word of his deeds had spread even further throughout the district while they were off exploring, and his silver hair was hard to miss. But he hadn't avoided attention thus far, and it made no sense why he'd be trying to make himself invisible now. She scanned the crowd for Ledaal Kenu or Karal Melik but spotted neither. And, again, she found it unlikely he'd hide from either of them.

She saw a few others she knew, but no one who seemed a direct threat. The courier who'd carried letters between Novia and Jiro Hatan sat in a café down the way, staring into the distance. A trio of Smoke Lions exited one shop and entered another, on their weekly rounds to collect protection money. Novia

silently wished the merchants well; Isis of the Steel Flame and Silver Cascade of Light didn't accept excuses for short payments.

Novia herself turned away as Rasira Iresh stalked past on the opposite side of the street. Nothing unusual there, either; they were on the edge of the Furious Waves' territory. She had no desire to introduce the enforcer to Course, especially since he'd supposedly been the one who knocked her out the other day. Novia almost regretted starting that particular rumor; it was bad enough being the target of Rasira's anger when you'd actually *done* something to her.

Luckily for them both, Rasira never even glanced their way, intent on wherever she was headed.

After a moment, Course straightened up again.

"Who did you see?" Novia asked.

"What do you mean?" He tilted his head slightly, one eyebrow raised in a convincing display of confusion.

"Someone spooked you. Who was it?"

"No one," he replied. "I merely wanted to take a closer look at the—" he snuck another look at the window, "—cups on display. A new artisan! Such potential!" His stomach rumbled. "Now, where we can find these pies you were talking about?"

Novia let the subject drop but tucked his odd behavior away to examine later.

By the time the day was done, Novia had decided that she liked River's Right and Proper Course very much indeed. And that, even if she had not, he was far too useful for her not to keep around for the foreseeable future.

"Thank you very much for this tour," he told her as evening fell and she escorted him back to the temple. Its heavy front doors stood open as if waiting for him. "It has been both informative and enjoyable in equal measure."

"It's been my pleasure," she replied. "Perhaps we can explore more of the city tomorrow?"

"I would very much enjoy that," he said. "I still have much to learn."

So do I, Novia thought. She'd tried prodding him a few times during dinner about what had happened outside the pewter shop, but he'd continued feigning ignorance. The answers were there, she knew it. She just had to figure out the right questions to ask. "Until tomorrow, then," she said, and watched as he strode into the warmly lit temple.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The next morning when Novia arrived at the temple — once again indecently early, the sun’s rays just beginning to glimmer against the temple’s silvered doors, drawing them from shadow with the promise of day — she found Course already leaning against a pillar, arms crossed, waiting for her. His face lit up when she stepped into view, and he tossed something at her. “Here,” he called even as it flew through the air between them.

She caught it reflexively. Glancing down, Novia saw that the object in question was bulbous, its surface smooth to the touch and a pale green speckled with gold. A pear.

But not just any pear. She caught a faint hint of its scent and raised the fruit to her nose, closing her eyes and inhaling deeply. Cardamom and cloves. Her eyes flew open, and she studied her early-morning companion, who was still grinning at her, that expression now a touch smug.

Course shrugged as nonchalantly as was possible while clearly being so pleased with himself. “There was a cart,” he stated as if that explained it all. “They smelled good. I thought we might eat as we walked.”

Novia eagerly bit into the fruit, the delicate spices contrasting wonderfully with its sweetness. Juice dripped down her chin until, laughing, she wiped it away. Course had produced a second pear and happily munched on it as he pushed off from the column and joined her.

Part of her had to wonder about this seemingly lucky find of his. She knew exactly which cart he’d been referring to, because she knew there was only one person near the temple who stored his fresh fruit with his spices to give them added flavor. That canny fruit seller was none other than V’kai Aram, whose nephew Vr’dot took the fruits that were just past their peak and peddled those from his cart — for far lower prices. That fact, and the location of his cart, was one of the best-kept local secrets, one residents of the Cinnabar District never surrendered to visitors, no matter how noble or revered they might be. And Course had simply stumbled upon it? How long had he been waiting for her?

She pushed that thought away, but it lingered, casting a minor pall upon what otherwise proved another lovely day. Course was an engaging companion, full of questions about her and about the city around them. He never spoke of himself, except insofar as his present mood or thoughts. Still no new rev-

elations about his past, where he came from, how he had arrived here. The few times she tried to ask he neatly deflected the question, saying only that Hushanti had instructed him to present himself here at the docks, and he had, of course, acquiesced

The more they walked and talked, the more Novia's natural skepticism reared up. Despite his silver hair she guessed Course was not much older than herself, most likely in his second decade. He seemed a little worldlier the more time he spent in the city, less of the wide-eyed newcomer he'd been that first day. Most tourists gawked at the pulley carts carrying passengers and trade goods uphill from Nighthammer's factories to the Nexus District's markets; Course passed them by with hardly a second glance.

For someone who knew so little of Nexus, Course had an uncanny knack for choosing the merchants whose goods were of better quality, or who were willing to negotiate a deal — on top of that, he knew *how* to negotiate deals. Perhaps he'd simply picked up the rhythms and etiquette of it quickly by watching Novia and other shoppers, but the ease with which he spoke to the merchants gave Novia pause.

By now, he must have remembered at least a few stories about his life, his travels, the places he'd visited and the people he had seen. Why would he not talk about any of that? Share his experiences with her, as she was sharing her city with him?

Unless he had something to hide.



The next day, Novia arrived at roughly the same time but carefully took to the shadows before the temple came into view. Course was once again waiting for her by the columns. She paused to study him as he stood unaware of her presence. There was something familiar about him, but what was it?

He was alert, that was certain. The way he stood, one foot against the pillar, leg bent, the other slightly extended before him — he could push away and be in motion in a heartbeat. His arms were again crossed over his chest, showing off the impressive muscles in both, but they were loosely held — he could have his hands free and ready to attack or defend, block or strike, in an instant. He held still, facing forward, his eyes slightly unfocused, and that too was a trick Novia knew well — he would be able to hone in at once upon anything that flitted into his field of vision, whereas if he had been actively looking at anything it would take an additional second to shift not only his head but his focus.

When you had to worry about fighting to survive, that second could be the difference between life or death.

Which all added up to one thing — before he had become the river goddess's champion, River's Right and Proper Course had spent some time on the streets.

To test that theory, she selected a discarded nail from the ground nearby and tossed it across the way, so it struck a barrel on the far side of the temple square. Instantly Course was away from the column and in a defensive crouch, hands loose and ready before him, eyes alert and scanning. After a second he relaxed, straightened, and slowly resumed his previous stance, but Novia had seen enough to confirm her suspicions. At some point in his life, this man had had to fight to survive.

Which meant nothing, of course. Only that he had had a life before his Exaltation. So had she. Even the three Dragon-Blooded she'd tangled with over the last week — Ledaal Kenu, and the twins Karal Dacar and Melik — hadn't been born with power over air and fire. Now that she was questioning Course's past, a part of her — the nasty, suspicious part, the part that often saw through deceptions and thus kept her alive — asked, *what if it is not three, but four?*

What if Course himself was Dragon-Blooded, and not the champion of Hushanti after all? Did it matter to her, whether his powers came from the river goddess or an Elemental Dragon? *Should* it matter?

She found herself studying his every move, his every word, his every expression. Searching for lies and inconsistencies, anything to suggest he was not who he claimed to be.

Sadly, she kept finding them.

Such as the moment when he spotted Ketu Monaxa, the leader of the Furious Waves, and stiffened, just for a second, shifting slightly as if to duck his head.

The way one would when they did not want to be seen.



But she knew what she had seen.

She kept noticing how he moved, now — the way he angled his body away from those approaching as they walked, how he kept his hands free, how he kept just enough space between himself and passers-by that they would not be able to reach for his money pouch (if he had one, which he did not) nor would they be able to knife him without him spotting the blade first. All of which spoke to a rough upbringing.

Those did not trouble her. Novia suspected those were skills everyone who grew up on the streets learned, whether you grew up in Nexus or the Imperial City or Chiaroscuro. You figured out how to keep your coin purse about you or you went hungry. You learned to tell who around you was carrying a blade or you got cut.

The way he steered them toward a particular food vendor when they chose to stop for lunch — when another was closer but known to have slightly inferior food — or paused before cutting through a certain alley that had seen far too many ambushes and bloodshed despite its width and sun-spattered sides? Those things troubled her.

It was as if someone had briefed him on Nexus before his arrival. Someone who knew all the ins and outs of the Cinnabar District, all of the local tricks and history and color. Or that he'd known them himself all along.

She strongly doubted Hushanti had toured the city so carefully before sending her champion here.

Which meant that something about Course's story — what little of it he had revealed — was a lie.

The question, then, was what? And why? What was he hiding, and what was he up to?

Those suspicions forced Novia to up her game, pretending nothing was wrong even as she doubted her companion more and more. The cynical part of her was thrilled to claim this victory. No one was ever honest, no one could be trusted, and no one could ever be allowed to get too close. Believing that had saved her life several times, and prevented Novia from being drawn into other peoples' schemes. It shouldn't surprise her that Course was likely no different than anyone else.

The part of her that had enjoyed Course's company, however, mourned its bitter defeat, and curled in on itself, turning hard once more. She chided herself for it. This was exactly why she didn't form many friendships; people would only disappoint you, in the end. The man in question didn't appear to notice her turmoil. He continued to joke and laugh for all the world like a carefree companion. Novia forced herself to play along, to act just as light and unconcerned. Even as she grimaced and glared inside.

That skeptical part even raised another, more troubling question. If Course was not who he said he was, if he was Dragon-Blooded, what if his encounter with Kenu and Pyre had not been as random — or as antagonistic — as it had first appeared?

What if they had staged all that for her benefit, and that of anyone else watching? To further cement Course's role as the district's new protector? Karal Dacar had mentioned having some kind of purpose here in Nexus. Could Course be part of some elaborate scheme? What if all of this had been a setup? And if so, what could they be up to?

She considered again how Course's appearance had benefitted the temple. Every day, people came and left small offerings of coins and food. Though individually they seemed almost paltry, when you added it all together the temple had made a tidy sum in just a few days. She still didn't think the priests were in on it, but what if Course, Kenu, and Melik intended to steal the riches once the novelty of Hushanti's champion wore thin and donations fell off again?

Yet that fight had seemed pretty real. And Course's interactions with the priests read as genuine. Lies — telling them and detecting them — were Novia's livelihood, after all. Course might not be entirely truthful with her, but she was fairly certain his appreciation for Hushanti's faithful wasn't an act.

So what was?

The last two nights, after she left him at the temple, Novia had resumed her search. Cynis Kopet swore he'd heard nothing, that his Ledaal contacts in the city had no knowledge of Kenu, nor his Lookshyan friends of either Karal. Novia believed him, especially as her other contacts came up just as empty. She'd tried tracing the duo's passage away from the docks after the fight with Course. Enough people had witnessed it that surely *someone* had noticed which way they'd gone after they departed. But everyone she asked claimed ignorance. They'd been too focused on Course, some said, while other swore they'd gone right back to work and kept their eyes on their own business. No shopkeepers around the docks admitted to selling to the pair, no restaurant owners had fed them, no innkeepers had rented them a room. It was like she was searching for ghosts.

Clearly, she would have to get to the bottom of this. She would find out once and for all exactly who River's Right and Proper Course truly was, and what he was actually doing here.

Then she would decide exactly how to deal with him.



CHAPTER TWENTY

That night, after returning Course to the temple at sunset, Novia slid backward into the gathering shadows with a sigh of relief. When had gallivanting around the city with a handsome fellow become so exhausting? But she wasn't used to having to pretend not to notice or know something — unless it was something she herself was up to on the sly. Ignoring the mounting evidence that her companion was lying to her and had been the entire time, was proving significantly more challenging. Here in the dark she didn't have to pretend to be anyone or anything. She didn't have to front at all. Here she was just Novia Claro, chosen of the Unconquered Sun, prowler, spy, and occasional saboteur.

Right now she had a need to roam freely, without anyone watching her or judging her or, worst of all, trying to trick or manipulate her. To feel the wind in her hair, the roof tiles under her feet, and the sounds, smells and sights of the city safely beneath her.

Scaling the warehouse nearest the temple — the same one she had already climbed several times before — Novia was quickly back above the docks. She stood there for a moment, eyes closed, drinking in the cool night air, the smell of the water washing over her and invigorating her, the sound of the river running past revitalizing her. All of her fatigue and irritation washed away.

Now that she felt more in control again, she paused to consider her next move. Something was nagging at her, and after a moment she was able to identify the particular thorn in her side — the Dragon-Blooded. Kenu and Melik. They'd sworn vengeance for their ignominious defeat, and hadn't been seen or heard from since.

That struck her as odd. Neither had given the impression of patience, much less subtlety. Indeed, she'd half-expected to find them waiting outside the temple some morning, spoiling to resume the conflict from the other day. Or to attack while she and Course passed in that alleyway, the one so frequently a site of just such an ambush. Or any of a dozen other places that would have given them an advantage.

Novia wondered what they were up to, and now was the perfect time to find out.

Of course, she would have to locate them first.



She dropped in again on several of her contacts, pressing coins into palms and promising more if they could bring her word of the Dragon-Bloodeds' movements. Most of the stories were stale, of the fight against Dacar at the temple, the confrontation with Kenu at the bazaar, and both Kenu and Melik stirring up trouble with Course. But no one knew where the pair were staying. No one had overheard barkeeps or teahouse workers boasting about the Dynast and the Lookshyan dining in their establishments. Just like everyone had sworn the last few times she'd come asking after them.

Even Cynis Kopet, who had no qualms about selling information on his fellows from the Realm, still had nothing for her. In fact, her repeated inquiries seemed to cause him a measure of distress.

"I'm sorry, Novia," he said, sliding her money back across the table. "The only things I've heard about them involve you. You probably know more than I do."

She pushed it back to him. "Keep it, for when you hear something. I want to know the minute you do."

She was puzzled and irritated. Her gut told her they hadn't left the city. Which meant that either they were far more clever than she had given them credit for, and far better at concealment — or someone was helping them.

But who? And why?

These questions scattered like startled birds as a scream shattered the quiet. Novia instantly froze, head up, ears pricked as she listened. A second scream. It was arising from the south dock!

Taking off at a run, Novia leaped from one roof to the next, vaulted an arched skylight, grabbed hold of a tall, slender chimney to swing around it and propel herself over a sharply angled roof and onto the flatter building beyond it. She hurled herself off the edge of the building, landing lightly on a different structure a few stories below and racing across that as well. In a matter of minutes she had reached the south dock. Another scream, and she was able to pinpoint its origin just before it cut off. A woman stood below, frozen in fear, staring at the monstrosity in front of her. Novia instantly had a knife in each hand, ready to pin the horrible creature to the wall so the woman could escape. But after an instant she straightened and sheathed her blades, then jumped down to the docks. She could already tell that the thing hulking so menacingly there was not in fact a threat.

Though exactly what it was, she could not begin to say.

The woman was terrified, but she didn't appear injured in any way. Novia gently set a hand upon her shoulder, and the other woman flinched. Then she turned, saw Novia standing there, and flung her arms around the surprised Exalt, sobbing.

“It was just standing there!” the distraught woman managed to gasp out between sobs. “It’s so awful, I don’t even —”

“Shhh,” Novia told her, patting the taller woman on the back. “It’s okay. You’re okay. You should probably go.” Comforting people had never been her strong suit, but just being there seemed to help. After a minute the other woman straightened, wiped at her eyes, and fled.

Which allowed Novia to turn her full attention to the thing before her.

It was a man, she saw at once. Or rather, it had been.

More precisely, it had been several men.

Parts of them, at least.

She counted six arms, from at least four different pairs. There were two heads, both mounted atop broad shoulders, and spines splaying out from the back on both sides like skeletal wings. It was as if someone had chosen to create a hideous sculpture — using people as the raw materials. Medallions hung around the gruesome thing’s necks. Novia recognized the sigils of several local gods there, including Hushanti and her brother Shunanto.

The question was — why? What was the significance of this horrible shape? Why craft such a terrible object in the first place? And why place it here, on the south docks? There weren’t any buildings facing this stretch, just the back end of an old warehouse Novia was almost certain had been shuttered several years before after parts of it had collapsed inward, killing several workers. Hushanti’s temple was a few minutes’ walk from here. There were a few boats docked at this end, but most were closer to the station, and there was another way to reach this end of the docks anyway, on the far side of the warehouse — a wide path that led directly to several small shops and a halfway decent alehouse. That was the route most would take to get to those farther berths. All of which meant that this spot was surprisingly secluded. If that woman had not happened to come this way, the figure easily could have escaped notice until the following day, or perhaps even later. But such an elaborate piece had to have a real purpose.

Then she saw what had been written on the planks at the creature’s feet, and her blood ran cold:

Fall away, ashes, fall away, skin.

She’d heard the nursery rhyme plenty of times growing up, had likely chanted it herself when she was a child running around Nighthammer’s streets. It was one of those singsongs parents shushed, which only spurred children to sing it louder. No one was sure quite what it meant, but the stories said it was carved on a child’s tomb in old Hollow, and that the deceased had died of a terrible disease. The words signified misfortune to come. Novia cast about, looking for something to help her wash the words away. If people saw the old saying, it could incite a panic.

The sound of running feet alerted her that she was about to have company, but it was too late to run back to the shadows, and Novia was too involved in her investigation to up and flee, anyway. A tall, broad-shouldered woman burst onto the docks, her long, straight black hair flying behind her. Daniella T'lee, the dock inspector Novia had noted previously.

Upon seeing the horrid sculpture and that awful rhyme, T'lee froze. For a moment she just stood there, staring up at it, then down at the words. Then her gaze shifted to Novia, and narrowed. "I know you," she said slowly, her voice calm but taut. "You're Novia Claro."

"You are correct," Novia admitted. Her work with the various organizations in the district often sent her to the southern docks. It wasn't entirely surprising that T'Lee knew who she was, but it was flattering all the same. "And you're Dock Inspector Daniella T'lee." She smiled at the surprise on the other woman's face before the situation caused her to sober again. "I am here to help, inspector."

T'lee considered that a second before nodding. "You fix things for the syndicates," she stated. "Sometimes more than one of them at once. So why would you care about... this?" She gestured at the sculpture.

"Because this is my home, and whoever did this is hurting people who live here," Novia answered honestly. She watched the inspector carefully as the other woman considered this. When T'Lee took her hand off her sword, Novia relaxed a bit. "Excellent," she said. "Now, I'm hoping you can tell me more about this than I have been able to discern thus far myself."

The taller woman shrugged, her attention returning to the grisly piece standing before them. "Looks like somebody's building monsters out of people," she pointed out. Her eyes reached the twin heads, and she scowled. "Good people."

"You know them?" Novia asked.

T'lee nodded. "They're dock inspectors," she stated, her tone flat and businesslike. "At least, the two heads are, and I'm guessing the arms are too. A whole bunch didn't report in for work today. Looks like we know the reason why."

"So someone captures a whole bunch of dock inspectors, kills them, and knits their bodies together to make that, which is then set back on the very docks they used to work? That's awful."

The other woman sighed. "Yeah, it is." Her dark tone, and the look in her eyes, said what she would do to that person if she ever caught them.

"I hate to say it," Novia said, "but I've been looking into the priests' deaths at the temple of Hushanti. Seeing those medallions, do you think some of the... pieces... could be...?"

"From the priests' bodies, too?" T'lee stepped closer. "I wouldn't rule it out. But I'd heard the Gray Lady's champion had killed the person responsible for that. Unless—"

“Unless he wasn’t working alone.”

They regarded each other for a long moment. “Damnation,” muttered T’Lee. “I’d been hoping the worst was past.”

Novia was about to say ask if the inspector knew of anyone with a grudge against her and her fellows, or if there’d been any sort of disagreements between dock inspectors and ships’ captains or syndicates, when a movement off to the side caught her eye. It was the shift of something long and glittering.

River’s Right and Proper Course marched toward her.

“What happened here?” he demanded once he was close enough speak without shouting. He nodded to T’lee, who was openly staring at him. Then he noticed the shape behind them. “Gray Lady have mercy,” he whispered, tilting his head back to peer up at it. “What did this to those poor souls?”

“We don’t know yet,” Novia answered. “Do you?” If he heard the sharpness in her voice, Course ignored it. He only shook his head.

T’lee found her voice again. “You’re River’s Right and Proper Course,” she said in a rush, still wide-eyed. “I heard what you did the other day.”

He pulled his gaze off the terrible statue and gave her a friendly if slightly preoccupied smile and a short bow. “You are very kind,” he replied, “but all credit must go to my Mistress, for whom I am merely a servant and a conduit.”

They were all startled by a wet, tearing sound. Novia turned in time to see one of the statue’s arms break free of the sculpture, tumbling to the dock like a piece of rotten fruit falling off the vine. The skin burst on impact, and thick black ichor oozed from inside.

The stench was awful. Novia had been down in the Undercity once when illness had broken out. Dozens of sick people enclosed in small, sunless spaces, choking in the stale air — she’d thought that was the worst she could ever encounter. This had it beat by miles. She tried not to gag. Beside her, Course did the same.

Inspector T’Lee covered her mouth and nose with a sleeve and inched closer, holding her lantern up to see better. Whatever it was she glimpsed, she recoiled and backed quickly away. “There’s a shed halfway down the dock with supplies,” she said. “We keep lantern oil in there, big jugs of it. Go, bring back as many as you can carry. *Hurry.*”

Novia and Course took off running. The supply hut was locked. *No time for subtlety.* Novia grabbed the handle and suffused the latch with her Essence. If Course noticed what she’d done, he made no mention of it. He ran inside as soon as the door swung open, tucking two oil jugs under each arm and another in each hand. Novia did the same, and they raced back to where T’Lee waited.

“Good,” she said. “Now quickly, douse it.” The three worked fast, pouring the jugs’ contents over the statue until the sharp smell of lantern oil mixed with

the putrid stench of disease. At last, they stood back a good distance, and T'Lee picked up her own lantern. She pitched it at the statue.

They all felt the *WHUMPF* as it caught, the flames licking up toward the sky. The smoke coming off it was ugly, dark, and greasy. It rose in great, billowing puffs that blotted out the stars. The statue burned fast and hot, and soon there was nothing left but a pile of ash and smoldering bones.

Course swept his hand out over the side of the dock, and as it had done that first morning, the river rose up to meet him. He waved his hand in a graceful arc, and the water followed. It splashed down on the remains, dousing them as quickly as they'd burned.

Only when the last bits of smoke and steam had dissipated did Novia draw a full breath. "That was some quick thinking, Inspector," she said.

The inspector nodded her thanks, then was all business again. "Whatever that was, it wasn't natural. We couldn't risk it spreading." She sighed and looked at the singed planks. "I'll get some of my people down here to clean this up. We'll do our best to identify the victims and notify their families." With the tip of her boot, she toed the awful rhyme scrawled on the dock. "And I'll be sure to have this scrubbed away."

"What can we do?" Novia asked.

"Go find who did this," Daniella T'Lee said. "And stop them from ever doing anything like it again."

Novia took Course by the arm and led him away from the horrific crime, leaving the inspector behind. "What are you doing here?" Novia asked as soon as they were alone again.

He frowned down at her. "I couldn't sleep, and so I thought to walk along the docks. The sight and sound of her waves soothes me." He shrugged. "Then I heard a scream. I came as quickly as I could, and found you standing there, in front of that...thing."

Novia considered that. He *had* been far closer than she had, already being on the south dock if at the far end. Sure, she moved very quickly across the night sky. She *could* have reached this location first, but by all rights he should have beaten her here. Why hadn't he?

Had he been nearby because he was the one responsible for all of these deaths? Had the Dragon-Blooded done it to protect him, or further cement his image as city protector, with themselves cast as the villains? One of their number had, after all, been murdering Hushanti's priests.

Novia was not sure what to think.

After seeing Course safely home and waiting until he had disappeared back into the darkened temple, she took to the roofs again. Soon enough she found herself at a rooftop garden whose owner was fast asleep. There she sat for a

time, barely noticing Nexus spread out before her, as she considered all the strange occurrences of the past few days. There was a pattern here, she was sure of that. She just had to figure out what it was.

And whether she could avoid suffering that same gruesome fate herself.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The next day proved easier than Novia had feared. She kept up a constant patter of light conversation, with frequent interruptions to introduce Course to anyone she knew along their meandering way through the city. He was friendly to everyone they encountered, and seemed perfectly content to listen to her talk and to join her in any discussion involving the weather, food, clothing, the state of a building or a walkway — in short, topics that had nothing to do with him or his past or his true intentions.

It was now clear in retrospect that he had used this same conversational gambit the entire time she'd known him.

He seemed slightly less outgoing when they ran across members of the various syndicates and mercenary groups Novia worked with — he still spoke to them, but there was a hint of hesitation upon first meeting. She wondered if the priests had warned him away from outfits like the Smoke Lions and the Nightarrows. However, when she asked about it, Course merely smiled and said, “Everyone has their purpose in Nexus. It’s not for me to judge their decisions.” Which, to Novia’s ears, sounded like a judgment itself. After that, she steered Course clear of syndicate members.

She was once again exhausted when they traced their way back to Hushanti’s temple as dusk settled its calming shroud over the city. “It occurs to me,” Course commented as they stepped from the cobbles of the streets onto the worn wood of the docks, “that I have yet to experience Nexus by night.”

Novia wasn’t about to invite him along on her search for Kenu and Melik. Since their encounter, Course seemed to have put the two firmly out of his mind, but she wasn’t ready to risk putting them together again. Too many things didn’t add up. “I’m afraid I have other matters that require my attention tonight,” she said, gently but firmly. “I am not merely your guide to this city, after all.”

To his credit, Course no showed no irritation or bitterness. “Of course. I have become so accustomed to enjoying the pleasure of your company, I should have realized that you are doing me a great service, and I’m no doubt taking away from your usual pursuits. Please forgive me.”

As soon as he was out of view, she glanced around. No one else was in sight. Taking a deep breath, Novia crouched and leaped, up and up, arcing forward onto the nearest roof. The instant her feet touched the fired tiles there, it was as if a great weight had fallen away. She was free once more.

Tonight she had a mission. Her search the previous evenings had proven fruitless, at least insofar as seeking the whereabouts of Kenu and Melik. Tonight she intended to renew her search, and find them. She'd been widening her search area the last few days, and had remembered some old haunts from her early years as a thief that might be worth scouting out. If they weren't taking advantage of Nexus' many luxuries, maybe they'd gone the other way entirely, roughing it in one of the city's less glamorous districts. But she was also on the lookout for anyone — or anything — that could have caused that grisly scene from the docks last night. No normal man or woman could have perpetrated such an atrocity, of that she was certain.



By the time she reached the edges of the Nighthammer District, where the stink of molten metal stung the nose, Novia was gnashing her teeth in frustration. Still no sign of them! How could such a pair manage to disappear so completely? Again she had to wonder if they were being aided by someone in the city, and if so who and why.

Leaping down onto one of the roofs here — most of the buildings in the district were not tall, for the simple reason that the forges ran so hot anyone attempting to live above them would roast like a well-dressed haunch of beef — Novia frowned and studied the area. This was where most of the city's smithies and foundries stood, and it was a cacophony of hammers pounding against anvils and files scraping and ingots hissing in water and the forges themselves roaring like caged beasts.

Still, over that noise, she heard the clatter of footsteps against the brick of the road.

Armored footsteps, from the sound of them.

Curious, Novia raced to the edge of the building, leaped the alley to the next one, then rushed to its farthest edge. The sounds were coming from almost directly below her.

She glanced down — and froze, very glad the shadows bunched so thickly across these roofs, shielding her from view even if the man stomping down the street should glance up. She hoped he did not.

After all, she had slain his brother in a rooftop battle, but winning that fight had proven a near thing. She had no desire to try that trick twice.

Fortunately, Karal Melik did not appear to notice her. Indeed, he didn't glance up once as he passed directly beneath Novia's hidden perch. He was carrying a large wicker basket, the aroma of cooked rice and fish and vegetables drifting up to where Novia watched and making her worry that her own stomach might rumble and give her away. She and Course had eaten some hand pies from a cart at lunch, and she hadn't eaten since.

But between his heavy footsteps, the rustling of the basket as it banged against him with each step, and the clatter of his armor, Melik was clearly in no position to hear even a normal person following him on the streets, much less someone as stealthy as Novia sneaking along overhead.

Nonetheless, she waited until he had completely passed the next building before leaping to that roof and stalking after him. Novia was an expert at following people, and kept back far enough that the heavily laden Exalt would never hear her or see her shadow, but close enough that she could easily track his movements. She didn't have to trail him for long — after only a few minutes he paused at a door and knocked, using a quick pattern of alternating long and short raps that went by too quickly for her to catch. A moment later someone answered and stepped aside to let him enter.

Novia was in motion before the door had closed. Now that she no longer had to worry about following him, she jumped onto the building he had entered and crept across its broad, flat roof, searching for a way in. There was a small trapdoor set off to one side that presumably led down to whatever rooms this place had inside, but it looked old and rusty and Novia knew there was no way even she could use that entrance without someone hearing it creak.

But at the roof's center there was an old skylight, which was missing half its glass and parts of its frame. The resulting gap was more than big enough for Novia to squeeze through.

Sliding through that makeshift opening, Novia landed lightly on a warped wooden floor and held herself very still, pressing against the mildewed wall and listening intently. Somewhere in the building but not nearby, she could hear someone speaking. It sounded like the words were rising from down below, so she prowled the hall and quickly found an old, narrow staircase leading down. She took it carefully, easing down one step at a time, distributing her weight so that they would not creak.

As she snuck down the steps and along another hall and then to a second stair, Novia visualized the Nighthammer District and mentally mapped out the route she had taken to follow Melik here. Finally she knew where she was, and suddenly understood: This was a warehouse, one that had gone out business some years ago, when she was still a girl. She couldn't remember why it had closed, exactly, though she felt the reasons were financial rather than physical. The place had sat vacant all these years.

It also explained why she hadn't been able to find Melik or his Air Aspected friend last night. She'd expected them to have taken a suite of rooms at a luxurious inn, or to be guests of some wealthy merchant up in Bastion. She hadn't been looking for someplace like this, large enough to fit a hundred men, too old and creaky for most to maintain any form of quiet within — and pervaded by the scent of molten metal still clinging to every surface. Novia braced herself every time she had to squeeze through or past a place where the ceiling

had collapsed or the wall had caved or buckled, and she was already sure that she would carry that metal smell with her for months after this.

At one point she passed a closed door and thought she heard faint sounds behind it. She could tell by its placement that the room beyond that door would not be large. This was not what she was seeking. Most likely it was simply mice.

Eventually she reached a small door on the second floor. The voices had grown louder and louder, and now were coming from behind that worn little portal, so Novia crept forward and gently pried the door open, then slipped through without a sound.

She was on an inner walkway, she saw at once. It ran around the exterior of the massive room, and crisscrossed it in several places. This former storeroom spanned most of the building, with no windows and only a handful of doors to break up the long, bare walls. In the center of the room stood a single table, with five chairs around it. Four of those were occupied, those seated focusing all their attention on the small feast laid out before them. Melik was there, and Kenu, along with two others she did not recognize but who also carried both the arrogance and the self-assurance of nobles. They were most likely more Dragon-Blooded.

In the four corners stood cots—two at one end, one each at the others—and beside each was a small pile of clothing and other personal gear. It was clear the people below her had resided here for several days or longer. The spaces looked lived in — not quite homey, but as close to it as one could get, hiding out in an abandoned warehouse. The corner she assumed was Kenu’s was piled with purchases he’d made in the markets: bolts of silk, fine lacquered boxes with exquisite inlays, and an assortment from one of the best chocolatiers in the Little Market. The corner with two cots she guessed had belonged to the Karal brothers. It was sparse, containing only whetstones and armor stands. One of the remaining corners had maps and scrolls unfurled on the bed, and a dog-eared copy of *The Thousand Correct Actions of the Upright Soldier* on a trunk next to the cot. In the final corner, the cot was neatly made, a pile of books serving as a nightstand beside it. A slender silver recorder sat atop them.

Crouching down, Novia crept across the walkway until she was directly over the quartet. Then she stilled and listened.

“Not terrible,” one of the women commented around a mouthful of fish and rice. “But I’ll be glad to be back home. I miss proper food.” She was solidly built, and the chair she sat in was far too short for her. Novia suspected she’d be at least as tall as Course when she stood to her full height.

Kenu speared a sliver of water chestnut with a slender knife and dropped it delicately into his mouth. “If you’re so impatient to be home, Leyal, why wait? Let’s do it now!”

“Absolutely,” Melik agreed, selecting a small loaf of bread from a basket and tearing it apart as if it had offended him. “I’m sick of waiting!”

“No.” That was the other woman, her voice as placid as her appearance. She had her hair braided, the sections a mass of deep blues and teals. “We stick to the plan.”

Melik quieted at once, looking slightly cowed, and the big woman smirked at him.

But Kenu was not silenced as easily. “Why?” he demanded, stabbing his knife into the table so that it stood there, quivering. “He’s left a trail of bodies from the Realm to the River Province. Dragon-Blooded bodies. *Dacar’s* body. What exactly are we waiting for, Tana?”

“You know what,” the quiet woman answered, not even glancing up from her bowl, where she was carefully dicing fish and vegetables and stirring them into her rice. She was clearly in charge. “We wait a few more days. Our contact still has plans for him.” Novia’s stomach twisted. She had a sneaking suspicion she knew who that “him” was referring to. But who was the contact? And what were these plans? She thought about the grisly creation on the docks, and shuddered. *Could* Course have been involved?

“He’s already ingratiated himself,” Melik grumbled. “They’re all throwing themselves at him.” His face split into that sneer that so defaced his handsome features. “Another few days of him walking through Nexus spreading cheer and healing the sick, and they’ll put him on their damned Council of Entities.”

“We wait,” the woman was saying. “Until our contact tells us it’s time. That was the deal, and we abide by it until the proper moment. Then we act. Then we bring him back home.” Her hand seemed to move of its own accord, and patted a strangely patterned metal fan resting on the table beside her.

“He ought to hurry up,” Melik grumbled, reaching for more bread. Kenu only grunted, but he didn’t try arguing again. The other woman only nodded her agreement and continued eating.

After a few more moments Novia carefully backed away. Once she was off the crosswalk and back onto the regular walkway she rose to her feet again and picked up the pace, retreating to the door through which she had first entered. Then she eased back out into the hall, and from there to the shattered skylight. A quick jump upward and she was back on the roof, allowing the night air to do its best at cooling the fury raging within her.

So Course wasn’t working with the Dragon-Blooded, but someone was, and whoever that was, they had plans that involved Course. What were those plans? And did Course know about them? Was he a willing participant, or a clueless pawn? These people seemed to know a great deal about him. How much of what he’d told her was a lie?

And who were these people, anyway? What a strange group! Four of them — five, including the now deceased Karal Dacar, and six if she included Course — and all of them powerful, but none of them particularly martial in the traditional sense, though the Karal twins must have at least served in Lookshy's Seventh Legion. This was no army troop. It was a band, rather — or a party.

A hunting party.

Were they a Wyld Hunt? If so, that put Novia herself in even more danger. They'd already be praised for dragging Course home to face justice. Imagine the accolades they'd receive if they caught her and paraded an extra Anathema before...who, exactly? The Scarlet Empress was missing. The Regent? The Deliberative? The heads of their Great Houses? Not that it mattered. Novia had no intention of getting caught.

And what was Course's role in all of this? What was he going to do that they were waiting for? What had he already done?

He's left a trail of bodies from the Realm to the River Province. What if he was still leaving them? Karal Dacar might have killed those priests but he was already dead when those dockworkers had been murdered to make the statue. Had Course been the one to commit that grisly deed, perhaps with the help of this mysterious contact?

Novia did not know. But, she vowed as she ran to the building's edge and leaped across to the next structure, and then the next, and the next, she intended to find out.

The time for secrets and lies was over.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“Wha—?” Course blinked once, twice, then bolted out of bed — or tried to. He couldn’t however, because, as he discovered, he was in fact pinned down.

By Novia, who was leaning over him with her hands on either side of his upper arms. The sheet was pulled taut across his chest, binding him in place. “Shhh,” she warned. “Wouldn’t want to cause a scene.” She glanced behind her, where the other priests lay on their own cots, still sound asleep.

“How?” Course managed in a strangled whisper, also looking around them. To his credit, he made no attempt to buck her off him or shout for help. His surprise was not unreasonable. For her to have somehow snuck into the temple, then into the sleeping room, and onto his bed, all without waking anyone, was nothing short of amazing. Novia wanted answers and she wanted them now.

“Meet me on the roof,” she instructed. Then she hurled herself backward into a full flip, landing soundlessly on her feet just past the bed. Not bothering to see if he did as he was told, she turned away and quickly made her way out of the room, down the hall, and outside. From there it was a quick hop to the roof, where she waited impatiently, gazing out at the river just beyond the temple. *You could make this easier for me, Hushanti,* she couldn’t help thinking while she waited. *Tell me he’s truly yours and at least that much will be answered.*

But the river goddess remained silent, keeping her own counsel.

After what felt like an eternity, a hatch near the peak of the roof creaked and opened slowly, protesting after being pressed into service again after many years of disuse. A head of silvery hair appeared, followed by first one hand, then another as Course lifted himself up onto the roof tiles. He approached slowly, carefully placing one foot and then the other, casting wary glances at the edge and the drop just beyond it. So River’s Right and Proper Course was not comfortable with heights. That was just fine with Novia. She preferred to have the advantage. It would keep him off-kilter as she pelted him with questions. Worrying that he might physically slip on the tiles made slips of the tongue all the more likely.

“An odd place and time for a meeting,” he said, his voice far softer than his usual boisterous near-shout. “To what do I owe this slightly dubious pleasure?”

“We need to talk,” Novia replied. “Now.” She marched over to him and poked him in the chest. “I know all about what you’ve been up to. It needs to

stop.” She was bluffing, of course, at least partially — she knew he was hiding things from her about his past. But she didn’t know all the details, and had only assumptions to go on about what he was doing in Nexus now. She was hoping that, by claiming she had the facts, he would start talking and tell her the rest of it.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he protested, but at the same time he flushed — even in the near darkness of a night with only a tiny sliver of moon showing, Novia could see that telltale sign of deception.

“I don’t appreciate lies,” she snapped, poking him again. “You need to come clean about all of it. Right away.”

He took a step away, putting some distance between them. He moved up-slope, away from the roof’s edge. “What are you accusing me of? I’ve done nothing wrong! I was brought here by my divine patroness to aid this city. You know that. You’ve been with me nearly every moment since!”

“*Nearly* every moment. But not *every* second of your day. You’ve been very busy after our tours ended, haven’t you?”

“No! I’ve come into the temple and helped the priests with the evening rituals. You’ve watched me walk inside every time.”

“Or maybe you’re getting up earlier than the priests and prowling about before dawn.” She thought about the pear he’d bought from Vr’dot Aram’s cart. The route would take him past the dockworkers’ barracks, where many of them slept between shifts. What if he’d bought those pears while scouting out the scene of his next murders?

“I’ve wandered the city some, sure, but...” He squinted at her, trying to see her face in the dim light.

Novia pulled the shadows close around her, obscuring her features. “Where did she bring you from, your Lady?” Novia demanded, closing the gap between them once more. “What were you doing there? Why did she bring you here? Why now?” With each question came another poke, and each time he flinched and tried batting her hand aside, but she was too quick for him. She came in at an angle, steering him away from safety and toward the edge with every jab. “For that matter, how did you become the champion of Hushanti? And why have you been lying to me — and to everyone else?”

She moved to poke him again with that accusation, but this time her finger was stopped before it could make contact — by a stream of water that flowed outward from him as if he were a beach and it was the tide, swelling up at his command.

“Enough,” he growled, and his eyes grew darker, their usual sparkle faded to an ominous black glimmer. “I am the servant of Hushanti, sent here to champion her name and her people. Nothing else matters.”

“Of course it matters!” Novia pushed harder, but that thin layer of water resisted, holding her away from him. “What are you hiding? Who are you working with?”

The water covering Course's broad chest coalesced, gathered, and swelled into a long but narrow wave — which then wrapped around Novia's finger, traveled up and over her hand, and moved to encircle her wrist, trapping her entire hand in place. "What I choose to reveal about myself is my decision," Course growled, his usual easy manner turned stiff and cold. "It is not for anyone else but Hushanti to issue orders and demands. Not even you."

"Oh, really?" Novia tugged on her hand, trying to pull free, but the water held it fast. "And what would Hushanti say if she knew the real you, hm? What would she say about what you've been doing these last few days? About what you're doing right now with the powers she granted you?" She couldn't break loose, but she managed to twist her arm enough to raise her hand between them, displaying the watery prison he had forced upon it.

For an instant, he glared down at her, his eyes black as the bottomless depths of an underground river, his mouth set in a grim line. Then, with a flick of his own wrist he freed hers, the water quickly unspooling and retracting.

"She would applaud my efforts and praise my successes." He scowled. "If that poses a problem for you, I would humbly suggest that the fault lies with you, and not with me."

Still rubbing her wrist to restore circulation, Novia laughed bitterly. "You're right," she agreed. "I don't know you. Not even a little bit. I thought I did, but it's clear now that was only a clever façade."

"I still don't understand." Course put another step or two between them. His right foot slipped on a loose tile and he froze, both arms spread wide, and he shifted his balance to the other leg so he could carefully reposition that foot. "I've done nothing wrong."

"Kenu and Melik seem to think differently."

He blinked. "Those two Dragon-Blooded who picked a fight with us at the docks? And you believe them? Over me?"

"At least I can call in some favors and learn things about them. You? No one knows anything about you before Hushanti coughed you up. They think you're a murderer, Course. You left a trail of bodies, they said."

A flash of guilt twisted his features, there and gone again. Most people might not even have noticed it, but Novia had spent years reading faces. Emotion always betrayed you, in the end: guilt, anger, grief. You could try hiding them, but they always broke free. "Whose bodies?" she asked. "Who have you killed?"

"No one you know," he claimed, but she could tell it was another lie.

"Don't lie to me. I can't help you if you lie to me."

For just a second, his face twisted with a terrifying rage. Novia took a step back, tensing for a fight. Then it was gone, and he looked... ashamed? "You don't sound like you're trying to help me. You sound like you're accusing me."

“I’m trying to figure that out myself. That’s why I came to you alone and didn’t show up at the temple with a dozen mercenaries at my back. Whose bodies, Course? The priests? Were you working with Dacar? Or the dockworkers? Who helped you with that?”

He stared at her, wide-eyed. Shock turned into outrage. “I would never harm Hushanti’s faithful. How could you even think I would do something so awful? And those dockworkers? No. You have to believe me, I had nothing to do with that. I saw them when you did.”

“Then tell me who you are. Who you were, before this.” She wanted to believe him. The hurt in his eyes just now suggested that, whoever he *had* killed, the priests and the dockworkers weren’t among them. But she couldn’t be *sure*. Not yet.

He shook his head. “I can’t. I’m sorry, but I can’t.”

She tried another tack. “Who are you working with, here in the city?”

“Just the priests!” Course threw his hands up in exasperation, but brought them quickly back to his sides as his balance wavered.

Good. Keep him defensive. “No one else knows you’re here? You’re not on some kind of mission? There are no plans you’re a part of?”

“No,” he said. “Nothing like that. I’m only here to help people. You have to trust me on that. Please, Novia.”

“You’re wrong. I don’t have to trust you. I *can’t* trust you, if you’re lying to me. I’m a fixer, Course. I have friends in the syndicates and in the Guild. If you’re in trouble, I can get you out of it, but not if I’m missing information.”

He stayed stubbornly, maddeningly quiet.

“Last chance,” Novia said. “Tell me the truth or I’m washing my hands of all this, and you’re on your own.”

For a moment, she thought he was going to confess. He opened his mouth once or twice, but no words came out. Then he shook his head, his expression hardening. “Then go.”

With that he turned his back on her.

Novia frowned but did not stop him as Course carefully navigated his way back to the roof hatch and lowered himself back down through it. A part of her wanted to race after him, stop him, and demand proper answers. Another part said to let him go and good riddance. If the Dragon-Blooded snatched him up off the street while he was out collecting alms with the priests, it was no problem of Novia’s from here on out. That colder instinct, the one that had kept her alive so many times, won out. The hatch closed, and clicked as Course locked it behind him.



Novia lingered a while longer, in case Course changed his mind and returned to give her the answers she needed, but he didn’t reappear. Finally, as

the night began to wane and the first sprinkling of sunshine began to dapple the night sky, she gave up and turned her own steps toward home.

As she raced across the rooftops, she mulled over their conversation. Novia knew she had ample reason to distrust Course, and that it had been best to confront him openly rather than constantly wondering. But this strange, soft part of her argued that whatever secrets he held, he might be keeping them for good reasons.

She certainly hadn't told him everything about herself. Then again, she didn't stand accused of murdering her way across Creation. But if he hadn't killed the priests and the dockworkers, who *had* he killed? That question had sparked his guilt.

And what did the Dragon-Blooded's contact need him to do? She thought back over their tours of the city these past few days, recalled his interactions with merchants and citizens alike. No coded messages that she'd picked up on, no odd hand gestures that might have a secret meaning. If they'd met the person in their travels, it had happened without Novia noticing. Or could it be that *Course* hadn't noticed it, either? Could the mysterious contact Tana spoke of be manipulating Course without him knowing it? If so, to what end?

She had so many more questions, and no answers readily forthcoming.

Perhaps, she thought, things would seem clearer in the morning.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The next morning, Novia awoke to find that the sun was nearly at its apex, her larder was empty, her eyes ached, and her heart still felt as heavy as it had when she had finally dragged herself home after her fruitless conversation with Course.

She considered storming back to the temple and dragging him out into the courtyard by his silver plait then pinning him down and pounding on him with her fists until he finally coughed up some real answers. As satisfying as it might feel, she knew that would cause her more trouble than she needed by raising all sorts of new questions about her and who she really was.

Next she debated the merits of appealing to Hushanti's priests who were giving Course shelter in the temple. If she shared her suspicions with them, would they help her apply pressure to him? That could backfire, if she didn't word her appeal exactly the right way: The priests had bought his story enthusiastically, and were clearly thrilled to have their goddess's champion there among them. And Brother Tensai was already suspicious of Novia. Despite Course backing her up about the night Dacar died, the senior priest still eyed her suspiciously whenever he spotted her.

She thought of the mysterious deaths and disappearances that had already occurred around the temple — their head priest vanished and a half dozen of the others violently murdered. Despite his insistence to the contrary, *could* Course have been involved? She had assumed that Dacar had done it alone, since she'd found the Dragon-Blooded lurking outside the temple and he'd attacked her. But what if he'd only been there looking for Course? What if he and Dacar had worked together to eliminate those priests and leave the rest of the group vulnerable and desperate for help so that they would leap to his side the minute he appeared?

It all made a certain dark, ugly sense, and she cursed herself for not knowing what to believe. Last night, she'd wanted to take his word that he hadn't been a part of the killings. But here in the harsh light of day, the holes in his story seemed all the wider.

If the priests did listen to her, they might grow so furious they attacked Course themselves, especially if they concluded he was behind their brothers' and sisters' murders. Their fists and knives wouldn't stand a chance against

Course and his goddess-given abilities. Then there was the other possibility, that the priests would not believe a word of it. After all, they'd embraced Course as a brother, a fellow disciple of Hushanti. Why would they not take his word over hers? Then she would have turned the priesthood fully against her, and cemented Course's position among them.

It was all so frustrating, and at the moment Novia did not see a way clear of the problem. Time to concentrate on something different, then. She often found that setting a sticky situation aside and turning to some other matter could give her the space she needed to see the first problem more clearly, so that a solution would present itself all on its own.

Even if it did not, she could certainly use the diversion.

Which meant it was time to see to the last phase of the project she had been shepherding all this time.

It was back to the docks once more.



An hour or so later, Novia was back at the Northern Dock Station, approaching the office that had first belonged to Saria Lenko, then Yanitae Sou, and now, finally, to Novia's client Jiro Hatan.

The station seemed to be in a bit of disarray, she noticed. Boats lined up at the docks, awaiting their turns to offload their cargo. A string of ships had dropped anchor in the harbor and were sending crews to shore via rowboats. Several harried-looking inspectors tried calming a handful of irate ships' captains, all of whom had problems with their manifests.

Novia spotted Rikki, the young woman who had been Jiro's junior last time she saw him here. Then, Rikki had seemed eager and ready to learn all there was to learn. Today, she looked like she'd aged five years in the last week and a half. Her robes were wrinkled, her fingers smudged with ink, and faint bags shadowed her eyes. Every time she sent a runner off to the dock station, another appeared with a new document for her to inspect.

Inside, things weren't much calmer. Workers rushed about, carrying stacks of ledgers to and fro. People shouted orders across crowded rooms, and several offices were crammed full of captains and merchants who'd grown tired of waiting outside and had taken their complaints to a higher power. Novia spotted Jiro's courier across the station's lobby, exiting through a side door as she came in through the front. She hoped he was on his way to a counting house to extract her payment. Novia went upstairs in search of Jiro, dodging around scurrying clerks and irate captains the entire way. She spotted her client bustling quickly along the hallway, balancing a small plant, a ledger, and a battered lunch pail as he headed toward his office. "Good morning, Senior Dock Overseer Jiro Hatan," she declared upon reaching her target, her voice pitched low enough that only he would hear her and the shadows shifted aside so that

he could see her clearly. “That is your new title now, is it not?” She smiled proudly. “Such a meteoric rise! Terribly impressive!”

Jiro let out a startled gasp upon hearing her call, but relaxed a little when he realized Novia was praising him, rather than hollering at him. He glanced sideways at her, and gave her a curt nod.

He must have spent the morning hearing from angry officials. “Let me take that for you.” She relieved him of the plant before he could refuse, and walked alongside him.

“Oh, ah, yes, thank you,” Jiro stuttered. His face flushed and he glanced about, but all of his colleagues were very studiously not paying attention to this particular conversation. It was best to appear circumspect, especially around the peer who had just been promoted to your superior. She imagined some of them were frustrated that he’d risen so quickly, leapfrogging over Miroku Bakar to such a lofty position. They had to be wondering who he knew, what strings he’d pulled, or what threats he’d made to take a job so many of them were better qualified for. That mystery should, for a while at least, drive them to stay on Jiro’s good side. Impress him, and maybe he’d use his influence to boost their careers. Cross him, and they might find themselves back out on the docks.

He held the door for Novia, and gestured for her to set the plant down on his desk. He’d had a few days to settle in, and had already made the office his. Gone was Yanitae Sou’s chaotic clutter. Jiro had moved the desk closer to the window, where he could work in the sunlight and look out over the Yellow River. The shelves were filled with ledgers and handbooks, with bookmarks protruding from the pages. Novia had a feeling Jiro was trying to learn everything he could, as fast as possible. He had a lot of catching up to do.

Novia knew she should be more circumspect, but she was tired of having to be so secretive, especially after all the work she’d done to win him this position. She closed the office door and took the chair across from Jiro. “Is this sufficient for your needs?” she asked softly. “Senior Dock Overseer, and so quickly! You do not require the Northern Dockmaster seat as well, do you?” She hoped not — Saria Lenko was actually good at her job, and very dedicated. Novia would hate to have to destroy that, especially with the plans Lenko had to improve the station. But a job was a job, and she had agreed to take him as high as he wanted to go.

Jiro only stared. “Um, no, I believe I am very blessed, thank you,” he replied, with much stuttering and stammering. “I cannot imagine what I did to earn such clear favor, but I will work hard to deserve such a lofty position.” He drew himself up more and more with each sentence. It would take time, but he might grow into his new role, and eventually even occupy that position with authority and calm perseverance.

It was strange he didn’t wish to talk about the contract, but perhaps that was just reticence about discussing such details. It seemed he still did not feel

comfortable talking about that just yet, or openly conversing with her in general. After all, aside from their brief encounter at the lunch shack the week before, all their previous communications had been by way of his personal courier, that pale, thin young man who waited patiently each time for her to read the missive and scrawl a short reply. It struck her as overly cautious to worry about even being seen near her, especially in such a busy station where people were always coming and going, bustling into and out of offices like bees in a hive. That was no longer her concern, however. If he pronounced himself satisfied with the arrangement, their business was now concluded. In which case she could collect the second half of her fee and move on to some other project.

Jiro did appear pleased, and he had said as much, so Novia considered that an official approval.

“Good,” she said. “I’m glad this has all worked to your satisfaction. Shall I be expecting your courier to stop by in the next few days?”

Jiro frowned, and glanced toward the still-closed door. “My courier?”

Was he afraid of eavesdroppers? Novia followed his gaze, but saw no sign of anyone spying. Still, the walls here were thin — she’d certainly listened through them herself while researching her plan to get Jiro promoted. *Keep it vague, then.* “Yes. You sent him to me regarding the transition into your new role.” She gestured at the shelves, with their books and ledgers, giving him something plausible to refer to should anyone be snooping and ask him about it later.

Jiro’s eyes lit up. “Ah! Yes! I’ll... send him by tomorrow?” She could see why he’d done all his planning via proxy. He was terrible at subtleties.

“Excellent. It was lovely meeting you. If you ever need my services again, you know how to find me.”

She was humming to herself as she wandered away toward the bazaar. She had nibbled a bit on the way here, but now she was ready for a proper meal. V’kai Aram still owed her for saving him and the other merchants from Ledaal Kenu. Right now felt like an excellent time to collect on that debt.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Novia had not yet reached the thoroughfare that would take her most quickly to the bazaar when she heard something like cloth tearing, only both louder and fainter. On its own, it might have been an unremarkable noise — the street she was on boasted a tailor shop and two fabric merchants — except for the way it echoed across the sky.

Then she heard the screams.

“All I wanted was some food!” she grumbled as she launched herself into a ground-eating sprint toward the sounds. They were coming from the south dock, but more toward the middle, not the area by the temple.

Where that strange ship had been quarantined, and the gruesome statue had appeared with its ominous warning.

Fall away, ashes, fall away, skin.

Racing between buildings, Novia was surprised to see a swarm of people all charging toward her, their eyes wide and staring, their mouths open, their chests laboring for air as they ran. This was a full-scale panic.

There was no room to duck aside, no way to backpedal, not even anything to grab hold of for support or stability. So Novia did the only thing she could think of with hordes of people blindly rushing at her — she went up. Crouching slightly, she unfurled into a mighty leap that took her over the mob’s head and clear onto the roof of the building adjacent. Now she could move more quickly, without having to worry about other people blocking the way. She doubted any of those she had just jumped away from even recall her being there, much less her performing such an impossible ascent. But whether they did or not was a matter for another day. Right now she had to reach the source of those screams as quickly as possible.

In mere minutes she covered the rest of the distance, and the south docks came into view. There was the Gray River, and the boats floating upon it, and the white circle the river guards had created around that strange boat — except the circle was torn, its center empty, its broken ends drifting aimlessly apart in the water.

Its ring had broken toward the city. The dirt-encrusted boat’s passage left a trail of muddy debris behind it in the water. The rivers around Nexus only truly

ran clear during floods. The rest of the year, they were full of waste running downhill from Bastion, or churned with the sludge the factories in the Nighthammer District poured into them. This ship's leavings should hardly have been noticeable. Yet an odd, greasy-looking scum had formed in its wake. That worried Novia. It reminded her too much of the ichor that oozed out of the statue.

Reaching the building's edge, Novia skidded to a silent halt, dropping into a crouch to peer down upon the scene below. The mysterious boat had slammed up against the south dock hard enough to rupture its own hull against the sturdy pilings. Small flames played across its deck where the guards' arrows had struck, but apparently all that filth kept most of the structure from catching fire. Where the hull had torn apart, just below the prow, a massive figure was emerging, tearing the ship further apart with its enormous hands as it clawed and fought its way free of the wreckage and onto the dock.

Novia had never seen the fearsome beast's like, but it was easily nine feet tall and nearly as wide, largely human in shape save for the pair of heads sprouting from its broad shoulders. Both heads were more like those of a crazed deer than a man, complete with short but vicious-looking antlers. Had the pair of heads on the statue the other night been meant to herald this beast? *At least*, Novia thought, *it only has the one pair of arms*. Only a crude loincloth covered its body, but hanging from a thick rope belt were a pair of battle axes so large a big man could only have wielded one of them. It roared in rage as it finally tore out enough of the deck to clamber across onto the dock. The boat sank beneath it, its deck settling beneath the water's surface with a despairing groan of rotted wood. Then the creature threw back both heads and howled.

As if in answer, Novia heard the clatter of arms and armor, and troops marching in unison. The southern dock guard burst onto the scene. Leading them was a tall woman with long, straight black hair.

"Hold!" Daniella T'lee shouted. She had her own sword drawn, which she held with quiet competence — and which looked like little more than a toothpick against the gargantuan creature. Nonetheless, her voice never wavered as she continued, "Lay down your arms and come with us peaceably, or we shall be forced to attack!"

Novia wondered if the creature would even understand. But then it glowered at T'lee, snorted, lowered its heads — and charged, those deadly antlers all aimed to rip right through her.

"Suns!" Novia burst into motion, rising to her feet and reaching for her blades at the same time — but before she could do anything more, a familiar silver and gray figure came racing down the docks and hurled himself between the two combatants. The antlers struck him full in his side — even from this distance Novia could see the watery shield that flowed forward and blocked those razor points from tearing into his flesh as the force of the impact bowled him off his feet.

River's Right and Proper Course picked himself back up an instant later and turned to face the behemoth that had just tried to kill him.

Novia had the perfect vantage point as Course glanced back at Inspector T'lee. "Get back," he warned, and even from here Novia had to fight not to gasp at the look etched into his face. She thought she'd seen him angry the other night atop the temple, but that had been nothing compared to this. Now his strong features were as set as stone, and as fiercely glowering as the meanest gargoye. "Begone, foul beast!" he shouted up at the two-headed monster. The water swirled about him, gliding over his arms, legs, and around his torso like a cadre of protective snakes, and Novia thought she saw a glow about his hands as well.

T'lee wisely chose to heed his instructions, and pulled her troops back and out of the way. Still, she was clearly not one to back down from a fight. "Loose!" she shouted as they retreated, and her guards released a half dozen arrows, all of which struck the beast before them. Half a dozen clothyard shafts sank into its arms and torso. It ignored them all.

Then it bellowed with rage and lifted those two battle-axes, one in each hand. And charged again.

The glow around Course's hands brightened. It lengthened, merged, and widened, beginning to resemble a long staff. The wider end split, and split again. Finally the light began to dim and there, in his hands, was a long, silvery trident, its three tines gleaming in the light of the noonday sun.

It was this trident, the same one Novia had seen him pictured as wielding in that stained glass window, that he raised as he braced himself against the monster's attack. At the same time, the water coating his body thickened to form a second skin, completely enveloping Course in its protective embrace.

The creature reached him, and Course spun away, avoiding those antlers. It swung its first axe in a deadly arc.

Course blocked the blow, the tines of his trident circling around and under, and piercing the creature's forearm. It was a shallow thrust. He quickly retrieved the weapon before it could become entrenched in the monster's thick skin.

The beast bellowed and chopped down with its other axe.

Course brought the trident's shaft up, using both hands to catch and knock aside the creature's second swing. Then he lashed out, raking the trident's pointed endcap across the left head, narrowly missing the eyes but leaving a long, bloody gash across its forehead.

The monster screamed in pain and in fury, and hacked downward with the axe on that side, a lightning-fast blow that would have split a normal man in two.

But River's Right and Proper Course was no normal man. He managed to twist out of the way, and as the axe swung down his right hand came off the trident and grasped the beast's wrist instead.

The waters writhed upward like snakes and struck the creature, drilling deep into its coarse skin. It shrieked in pain and that hand spasmed open, the heavy axe producing an enormous, echoing clatter as it fell to the water-washed planks of the docks. Course gestured and a small wave rose from the river and splashed down onto the docks where that discarded weapon lay. When the wave receded, it carried the axe away with it.

The handful of people who had remained behind — and some who had returned to watch the battle — cheered. Course obviously heard them, because he grinned and briefly bobbed his head in acknowledgement. But he was too canny to turn his attention from his foe, even for an instant.

Which was good, because the creature used the noise as a cover for its next attack.

Its empty hand clenched into an enormous fist and it flung that outward, colliding with Course's chest and driving him back several feet. At the same time, the beast brought its remaining axe down in a vicious arc intended to cut Course in half while he still stumbled to regain his footing.

The silver trident caught the axe full on its shaft, but somehow was not sheared through. Instead the blessed weapon held. Course forced it upward inch by inch, battling the monster's massive strength.

But while Course was busy keeping the axe from descending, the beast delivered a second punch, knocking Hushanti's champion off his feet and sending him flying along the dock. The trident clanged to a stop beside him.

For an awful moment, Course didn't move. A murmur of alarm rippled through the crowd, drawing the beast's attention. Daniella T'Lee gestured to her troops, ordering them to draw their bows again. Novia heard the bowstrings creak in the sudden hush.

Then, Course's hand reached out, seeking the trident and clasping it tight. The crowd's relieved cheers turned to shrieks as the monster lurched toward them. Course was still pushing himself unsteadily to his feet. He'd never reach them in time.

Daniella T'Lee stepped into the beast's path.

"*Loose!*" she screamed, and arrows twanged as her archers released another volley. As before, they sunk deep into the beast's hide but didn't seem to cause it much pain. Still, it paused as they hit, giving Inspector T'Lee a chance to dart in with her sword and slash at its legs. The monster roared and swatted, but T'Lee was fast. She danced out of its range, then back in for another swipe.

She kept its attention on herself while Course regrouped. He shook his head to clear it, checked his grip on the trident, and rushed back into the fray.

Novia could no longer just sit back and watch. Not when she could help. She leapt to a rooftop where she'd be in throwing range of the beast, one that allowed her to maintain the advantages of height and stealth.

Up close, the rotten stench of the beast and the broken ship wafted over her. It smelled of sickness and decay, just as the statue had two nights ago. The thick odor clung to her nostrils, and when she breathed, she tasted death on her tongue.

She frowned, eyes narrowing in concentration as she tried shutting out that terrible perfume, and let fly with the three knives she held. Each one arrowed straight toward the beast, so fast they were mere slivers of light, and struck one, two, three in its twinned throats and the side of its left-most neck. It gasped in pain as each one hit and buried itself to the hilt, the sounds choking off as the weapons closed off its breathing.

A second later, Course's water did the same thing, wrapping around both throats and tightening. The creature dropped its remaining axe to grasp at the watery tendrils there, but its thick fingers could not get purchase. It could only glare down at Course with its two sets of beady little eyes, kicking and snorting its defiance until the end, even as its faces turned purple and its eyes began to bulge. Then it gasped, the sounds rattling in its broad chest, its body jerking and shuddering, its eyes rolling back.

Course held it upright a few seconds longer before recalling the water and letting the beast's dead body slump to the docks with a resounding crash that shook the entire area. Novia even felt the shudder atop her perch.

It was then, as Course sighed and leaned upon his trident, obviously weary, that two familiar figures emerged from the now sizeable crowd, pushing their way forward.

"Well done," Ledaal Kenu called out as he and Karal Melik approached. "Very impressive — for a renegade. But that's enough. It's time for you to come back home with us, and be judged for your many crimes." Those two glittering ice swords formed in his hands, and beside him Melik drew his fiery daiklave, grinning broadly as its flames flickered to life.

"Oh, no," Novia whispered, turning and ducking back over to the side of the building she was atop. "I don't think so." No one was below to witness as she dropped lightly to the ground then crept quickly forward, gliding through the crowd. When she was near the front, she stopped.

"You can't take him!" she called out, trusting in the size of the assemblage to keep her hidden. "He saved us all!"

Around her, people murmured agreement. "Yeah, leave him alone!" someone else shouted, and Novia could have kissed whoever it was. "Right, back off," someone else agreed.

"He's a hero!" Novia continued, pushing forward. And, just as she'd hoped, the rest of the crowd surged forward with her.

"Back away," Kenu warned, but already the people in front were crowding in around him, with more people coming up fast. He backed out of their

reach. Beside him, Melik kept his sword at the ready, shifting constantly to face the people rapidly surrounding him. Novia was close enough to see the sweat beading the Fire Aspect's forehead. It was clear he had already realized that, for all their vaunted power, he and his partner would have a hard time clearing the docks of foes before either of them could get lucky enough to get in close to Course.

Inspector T'Lee made it even harder.

She cut through the crowd, flanked by her troops. They made a ring around Kenu and Melik. Half had arrows nocked, half grasped the hilts of their swords. "You won't be taking him anywhere," T'Lee stated. "I don't know who you are, but you don't have any authority here. Besides, he brought down that monster. If it weren't for him, that thing would be halfway across the District by now, with who knows how many dead in its wake. He's more than earned his place here."

Shouts of agreement came from those assembled. "If you want him, you'll have to go through us!" someone hollered, and a few brave souls cried, "Yeah!"

Not everyone joined in, though. Most people were smart enough to know that in a fight like this, they'd be the collateral damage. Still, even if they did so in silence, they stood between the two Dragon-Blooded and Hushanti's champion, which was a brave act in and of itself. It bought Novia some time.

She slipped quietly through the throng until she was at Course's side. "Come with me," she hissed, resting a hand on his shoulder. That startled him out of his battle trance and he glanced down, his eyes widening when they saw her. But after a second he nodded. Then he reached down and took her hand in his, shifting the trident to the other.

The mob had grown louder and more irate, as mobs often did. Novia found she didn't need to do anything to incite them further as they yelled at Kenu and Melik. The two could break through the crowd's barrier, of course, but they would wind up slaughtering everyone here and drawing more unwanted attention. Nor would they get out uninjured, even if they ultimately won. Inspector T'Lee's troops were formidable. Novia hoped Kenu and Melik would do the wise thing and back down, but she wasn't about to stick around to be sure.



Novia led Course farther down the docks. As they darted away, the people in the crowd who hadn't joined the ring around Kenu and Melik stepped aside to let them by. Those same people then filled in the spaces where they'd passed, obscuring their escape route should the Dragon-Blooded break free of the crowd and give chase.

Novia followed the river's banks for a while, then detoured, dragging Course into a narrow alley between two buildings. A small side door opened into the one on the right, and with a touch Novia unlocked it. Then she ducked

through and tugged her companion in after her, shutting the door behind them. They found themselves in something barely larger than a shack, evidently a guardroom or clerk's booth tacked onto the front of the warehouse, but it was empty and private, and that was all Novia required just now as she turned on Course, arms crossed over her chest.

"All right," she told him, no longer angry with him, but still just as resolute. "Time to talk."

And, after staring down at her for a second, he sighed. And nodded.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The room they were currently hiding in did not contain much — a pair of tall, battered stools, an equally tall, shallow desk covering one wall, a lantern, a kettle hung over a small cookstove, and a row of shelves built into one of the other walls. Course sank down onto the nearer of the two stools and buried his face in his hands. Novia said nothing, just stood there, watching and waiting. Eventually with another heavy sigh he lowered his hands so she could see the tears streaking his cheeks. They were roughly at eye level now, and she saw how bright his eyes had become — and how distraught.

“I . . . have not been wholly honest with you,” he began slowly, those big hands of his knotting together and twisting back and forth. “I . . . am not who I led you to believe I am.”

Novia nodded sharply. “You’re one of them, aren’t you?” she asked, trying to keep it from sounding like an accusation. “Dragon-Blooded, like those two who came after you just now.” *Like their friends*, she couldn’t help adding to herself. *Like the Wyld Hunt*.

But she was close enough that there was no way she could miss how his eyes widened at that statement, or the sharp intake as he straightened on the stool. “What? No! Of course not! What makes you think... Oh.” He looked at his hands, still encased in the last of Hushanti’s waters, and at the armor that surged around him. “No,” he said. “That’s not what I am. At least, I don’t think so.”

“Then why do they think you are? They said you’re one of theirs, from the Realm. That you’ve killed people and that’s why they’re taking you back.”

“Listen,” Course snapped, his expression darkening as his tone sharpened. “I don’t know what you heard, or from whom, but it isn’t like that. *I’m* not like that.” He hesitated, and Novia could see him weighing how much to say, as if he were considering giving her a little slice of the truth, wrapped in yet more lies.

She wasn’t about to let him. She might not be up on a roof where she could keep him off-balance, but Novia could do the same with words. “Why should I believe you?” She asked. “Why should I listen to anything you say when you’ve already lied to me? Why should I think you aren’t just here to put one over on us all?”

Her rapid-fire questions worked. “Because,” he replied, grinding out the word even as he stepped down off the stool and rose to his full height, towering over her. His volume increased with every word, bouncing off the close walls, “I’m one of you!”

That shattered her train of thought as sharply as if someone had splashed a bucket of cold water on her... or tossed her off a roof. “What?” She backed up a step so she could see his face properly.

River’s Right and Proper Course sighed, but it didn’t sound as tortured as before. More like relief. “I’m riverfolk, too,” he repeated. “I’m from here, just like you. I’m from Nexus. I lived here all my life, until just a little while ago.”

Novia stared. “That’s not possible,” she insisted, the words emerging as a whisper. “You can’t be.” She would have remembered someone like Course — with those glittering black eyes and that long silver hair, he wasn’t exactly the type to blend in. Even if he were from Firewaver or the Undercity instead of the Cinnabar District, surely tavern gossip and rumors about him would have reached her. Nexus was a massive city, its varied districts practically making up independent cities of their own. Yet its information network was vast and interconnected. Street criers announced changes to the Civilities to every neighborhood several times a day, and most of them earned their tips by shouting news of interesting happenings for anyone who stopped to hear. People from Cinnabar crossed the city to work in the Nexus District and came home to regale their friends with stories of the day’s events over drinks. Every sledge full of goods from the Nighthammer District was accompanied by a drover with a head full of gossip.

And yet, these last few days, hadn’t Novia herself noted how his actions were unlike those of an outsider? How he knew little things about the city that only its natives would be aware of?

His face split into a slightly sheepish grin. “You wouldn’t recognize me,” he admitted. “I’ve . . . changed a bit since I left.” He slumped onto the stool, staring down at the floor, and when he glanced up at her his face was flushed. “My eyes were more of a slate gray,” he explained softly, hesitantly. “My hair was a lot shorter, barely more than stubble, and mostly brown but with patches of black and some red and even some blonde mixed in.” He fingered his long, straight nose. “This was all busted up, so bad it barely had any shape at all anymore. I had a bunch of scars on my cheeks and forehead and jaw, too. Some of them pretty nasty. And —” He held out his arms, hands open, fingers splayed wide, palms toward the floor. He traced the watery scars Hushanti had marked him with. “These were a whole lot darker. Black, in fact.”

She suddenly understood. They weren’t scars at all. Instead, they were all that was left of the black tattoos that had once covered both his arms. Stylized wave tattoos — just like the ones she had seen so many times before, around town. Most recently on Rasira Iresh. *She was there, the day he ducked down*

by the pewter shop. Rasira was the one he was avoiding. “You’re a Furious Wave,” Novia said softly.

Course nodded, then shrugged. “I was,” he acknowledged. “Until I got so bad even the Waves couldn’t cover for me anymore. So I did what all of us do, those who’re too mean, too brutal to stay in Nexus.”

“You became a Wavefront.” It wasn’t even a question. Suddenly so many other things made sense. All the little questions Novia had had about him and his past. Why he stood like a fighter and walked the streets like one born to them. How he knew to find Vr’dot Aram’s cart, or to avoid that one alley, or seek out that one food seller. He *had* grown up here in Nexus, in the Cinnabar District. That was why he had not wanted to talk about his past at all. It wasn’t because it was brutal and violent and nasty. It was because he’d been based here, where she had a very real chance of knowing all the people he had roughed up or worse. *Why he’d lied when he said he hadn’t killed anyone she knew.* Novia didn’t have any close friends, not truly, but she knew a lot of people in the district. More than one of her former acquaintances had run afoul of someone in the Furious Waves, and died for it. But she still didn’t recognize him. Unless...

She frowned and squinted, trying to see him differently, trying to incorporate the changes he had described. Battered, broken nose. Lighter gray eyes. Scars across his cheeks and forehead and jaw. And short hair, bristly and patchy. . . “No,” she said, the word escaping as a gasp. “You can’t be.” He watched her closely, his dark eyes haunted, leaning forward and waiting for her to finish that thought. Finally she was able to get one more word out, though she had to drag it clear of her teeth: “Atawe.”

His nod was resigned, his smile grim. “Yes,” he confirmed.

She could see it now, that battered, bruised, scarred face with this new, clean, healthy version laid atop it like a bright scarf of the finest, filmiest silk draped across a pile of refuse. And, despite herself, she shuddered a little.

Atawe had been the biggest of the big, the baddest of the bad, the worst of the worst. He had served as the Furious Waves’ lead enforcer for years, and he had absolutely thrived on causing others pain. Big and burly and ugly as a demon, Atawe had been one of the most feared figures in the district. Anyone who dared cross him wound up dead, beaten and battered almost beyond recognition. You couldn’t reason with Atawe, so the stories claimed. You could run, but he’d catch you. You could hide, but he’d find you. You could fight, but he’d break you. When he had at last been forced to leave town as part of the Wavefront — it had involved a prominent building, another man’s wife, several casks of whiskey, and a match — the syndicates had breathed one big sigh of relief. Even some of the Furious Waves had been glad to see him go.

Yet here he was, Atawe returned.

Only he didn't look like a scruffy, scarred, battered old thug anymore.

"What happened?" she asked. A few footsteps sounded nearby, and she reflexively dropped into a crouch against the far wall, daggers already in her hands, but after a few seconds the sounds had passed. Straightening up, she saw that Course had done much the same, mirroring her stance but with his bare hands clenched into fists. Yes, definitely someone who had fought for his life many times.

After a minute, when the sounds were nothing but a distant echo, Course returned to his story. "A few weeks ago, we were assigned to man the banks of the Gray River a ways from here, almost level with Thorns. Some group tried to sneak a boat up past us, and we got hired to stop them." He frowned at his hands. "Only, that didn't go so well. Someone tipped them off. They knew we were coming and they were ready for us — we thought we'd have the drop on them, but it was the other way round. It was a slaughter." He winced. "I remember somebody hit me with something — an axe, maybe, or a maul — and it spun me around. Then I took another blow to the back, and one to the side. My vision started to dim, I couldn't breathe without spitting up blood — I knew I was finished. I turned — I couldn't even tell you if I was looking to run away or just to get better footing for one last charge — and my foot slipped in my own blood. I went overboard. Then I sank, right to the bottom."

Novia nodded, another piece of the puzzle falling into place. That was why Rasira had been beating on Cynis Kopet, that day in the alley. He'd heard the news about the Wavefront getting slaughtered and she hadn't wanted to believe it.

But Course wasn't finished. "I thought I was done for," he admitted. "Everything started to go black. I couldn't breathe. I was drowning." He shrugged. "I figured, at least it's not a terrible way to go. Just drift off to sleep." His eyes sparkled again as he smiled, slowly, like the sun beginning to peek once more over the buildings after a long, hard rain. "But I was wrong. So very, very wrong."

Novia forced herself to wait and let him continue at his own pace.

"I was about to pass out when I sensed someone standing beside me," he recounted. "Whoever it was, I suddenly felt completely at peace. Like it would be all right to finally let it all go." He shook his head. "I closed my eyes and opened my mouth to take a deep breath and let the river do its work — and started coughing, but only because I'd been expecting river water and got air instead." His smile was warm and slightly dazed. "That was how I met Hushanti. The Gray Lady herself intervened and saved my life. I pledged myself to her, then and there, to her service." He ran a hand over his hair. "She didn't just save my life, though. She healed me. All the damage I'd taken over the years, she wiped it all away. The nose, the scars, the patches — all gone." He smiled and fingered a silver lock. "When I rose from the river, I changed my name. Atawe was dead once and for all. And River's Right and Proper Course was born."

“If this happened a few weeks ago, where were you in between?” It had been a full week between when she’d heard Cynis Kopet deliver his sad news and when Course first appeared to save the dockworker.

“I needed some time to think,” he answered. “I considered following the Gray deeper into the River Province, to see who else along her banks might need my help. Hushanti nourishes more than just the people of Nexus, after all. But the farther I went, the more I realized I was just running away. So I turned around and followed her currents home.”

“So *you* decided to come back here,” Novia guessed. “You, not her.”

He looked a bit embarrassed. “That’s right,” he said. “I wanted to make amends for everything I did back then. It made sense to start right here where I left off.”

Novia considered Course’s story. Really and truly thought upon it. She found that she believed him — deep down, she did not think he could have fooled her, not so completely. She remembered her own Exaltation, how the Unconquered Sun had reached out to her, given her a purpose, healed her. It made sense that other powers could do the same, especially for just one person. There were thousands of other Exalts, but she suspected Hushanti only had the one champion. A champion she had saved and healed and given a whole new life.

Which only left the one question. “But what about the Wyld Hunt?” she asked, and Course’s eyes widened again. “Kenu and Melik aren’t here alone — they’re two of four, once five.” She shook her head. “I found where they’re hiding out, and listened in on their conversation. It’s why I came to you with so many questions last night. The things they said, if you’d heard them, you’d have been suspicious, too.”

“And when you combined that with the things about me that weren’t adding up...” Course sighed. “I understand. I’d have done exactly what you did. I *did* do things like that, when I was with the Furious Waves.”

She nodded. “You’re their target. They think you’re a fugitive from the Realm.”

Course frowned. He seemed a good deal calmer now that his secret was out in the open. “I truly do not know them,” he declared again.

Novia believed that, as well. “They’re planning to capture you,” she stated, rubbing at her chin. “They intend to bring you back to the Realm to pay for your crimes. Or for the crimes of the Water Aspect they believe you to be. I wouldn’t be surprised if they dragged you through Lookshy first. The person they’re after’s been killing people throughout the River Province, too.”

“And they blame me for Dacar’s death.”

Novia nodded, then sighed. Course had shared his truths with her. It was only fair she came clean with him — not about everything, not just yet, but at

least a little. “I owe you an apology there,” she said. “I’m the one who killed Karal Dacar. I was at the temple trying to find out who was targeting the priests, and he spotted me. I don’t know if he figured he’d get rid of a potential witness, or if he just... liked killing. But I’m the one who did it, and I made you up because I didn’t want to deal with the attention it would bring if I took the credit.”

“Made me up.” Course grinned, and Novia couldn’t help but return it. “Don’t apologize for that. It’s certainly helped me with the priests and Hushanti’s faithful.”

“Fair enough,” she said. Then she returned to the topic of the Dragon-Blooded. “They were waiting on someone else’s word before they bring you in, those four. I’m wondering if Kenu and Melik got impatient and came to get you early, since the others weren’t with them. They were chomping at the bit last night.”

“Who do you think this other person is?”

“I don’t know. They said there was something their contact needed you to do before they could act, but not what it was. I don’t even think the Dragon-Blooded knew.” She eyed Course. “I don’t suppose you had plans today that someone else might know about? Or that the priests gave you a task?”

“Nothing,” he said. “I didn’t even know I’d be going toward the docks today until I heard the screams.”

Novia nodded. “I’m still missing something, but I don’t know what it is yet. I have to figure that out before it’s too late.”

“No,” her companion rumbled, offering his hand. “*We* need to figure it out. We’re in this together.”

After a second, she forced herself to accept his hand. It was large and warm and comforting to hold. “Fine,” she agreed slowly. “Together.” Then she grinned up at him. “Fortunately, I know where we can go to find out.”

A grin slowly spread across Course’s face, and he laughed. “Then, by all means, lead on.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“They holed up in Nighthammer?” Course whispered as Novia led him down an alleyway toward the warehouse she had spied on just the night before. “Clever. Nobody’d look for them here, that’s certain. And with all the smoke and fires and smells, no one’d ever notice anything amiss, either.”

Now that they were working together again, Novia found she appreciated his help. She enjoyed being able to talk about the city with him. Though, now that she thought about it, she rose up on tiptoes to smack him across the back of the head.

“What was that for?” Course grumbled, looking more annoyed than hurt as he rubbed the spot she had just struck.

“That was for letting me prattle on about all the glories of this city for days on end,” Novia said, “while the whole time, you knew Nexus at least as well as I did!”

He laughed. “I am sorry for that. But I was not yet ready to admit that I was from here. And you were so kind to offer your services as a native guide.” He grinned, his eyes sparkling even in the dark. Dusk had crept up on them as they’d crossed the city from the south docks to here. “Besides, you’re a very good storyteller!”

“Shut up,” she muttered, though her own lips kept threatening to curl up in a smile regardless. To combat that, she returned her focus to the job at hand. “I went in through the roof,” she explained as they slowed to a stop across the street, where they could eye the warehouse and its entrance. “I’m guessing that won’t work this time, however.”

His answering smile was sheepish. “I’m sorry, but no.”

That was one thing she had learned about him on their walk over here. River’s Right and Proper Course might be a powerful champion, able to defeat a two-headed beast nearly singlehandedly, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t vulnerable to some things, and wary — even afraid — of others.

One of his biggest fears she had seen the other night, when she had dragged him up onto the temple’s roof to confront him about his past and his present.

River’s Right and Proper Course was afraid of heights.

She could help alleviate his discomfort, at least. She selected a route that didn’t require their feet leaving the ground, and lead him along that path, using

as much stealth as he could muster. He hadn't been built for quiet, not in his old Furious Wave days and not now. The journey from the docks to here had taken more than double the amount of time Novia would normally have required, and walking the city from the ground level struck her as fundamentally wrong, but now, at last, they were here, studying the old warehouse.

"How do you want to do this?" she asked.

"Since I lack any skill in stealth," he pointed out, "perhaps we should simply go the direct route." He started across the road and stalked straight toward the warehouse, leaving her to gape after him.

"What? Hold on!" Novia was quick enough to catch him before he had taken more than a handful of long strides, and grabbed him by the arm. "We don't even know now how many of them are in there!" She was willing to bet that this particular Wyld Hunt was down to the four members she had seen the other night, but what if they'd brought in reinforcements, or were entertaining their mysterious contact? Even if they hadn't recruited help, the idea of the two of them taking on four Dragon-Blooded gave her serious pause. Her gifts — which she preferred to still keep hidden if at all possible — were geared more toward stealth than combat, and the Dragon-Blooded drew strength from their numbers.

Course frowned. "Fair enough," he finally declared, and she could see how difficult it was for him to adjust his thinking. Atawe he had been the biggest, toughest thing around. Now, as River's Right and Proper Course, he had been elevated to an entirely new level, which made it all too easy to assume he was still the toughest around. But they had only faced two of the Hunt thus far, and Novia suspected neither of them had unleashed their full skills — not if the Dacar's deadly assault atop the temple roof had been any example of their full destructive potential. If all four members were currently within, charging in could be suicide.

"What do you suggest, then?" Course asked.

She grinned at him now. "How are you at breaking buildings?" she asked impishly.

Something in her tone made him pause. "The warehouse collapse," he said after a moment. "The one with the weapons that all got buried. They said I did that. Was that you, too?"

She adopted her most innocent look. "It might have been."

Course chuckled at her. "You're full of surprises, Novia Claro. I think I can manage this one," he said, raising one big fist, water already flowing over it to form a protective gauntlet. "Since it seems I have a reputation to uphold."

"Good." She led him, not toward the warehouse's front door, but around to its side instead. "Let's find out exactly what we're dealing with."



It took only three blows, in the end. The first punch splintered the old wood of the warehouse's side wall, denting the boards at the blow's center, but no more. The second shattered those boards inward. The third tore through them and the inner panels behind them, creating a jagged, irregular hole the size of a man's head. Each punch shook the entire side of the building, and Novia, standing off to the side wrapped in shadow, knew there was no way any occupants could ignore that tumult.

Sure enough, just as Course was pulling his fist back to strike again, they heard the sound of a heavy door slamming open, followed by quick, ponderous footsteps. Novia put a finger to her lips and, at Course's nod, faded back into the shadows. Surprise suffused his face as she disappeared, but he didn't have time to ask questions.

A moment later, a figure burst around the corner. It was one of the women Novia had seen, the muscular one named Leyal. She had dark brown hair cut short along the sides, long in back, and stiffly upswept in front so that it resembled a frozen wave or a towering cliff. She wore a lamellar jacket, but even in the dim light the discs and panels looked duller than they should have, with none of the usual sheen Novia would have expected. She did not appear to be armed.

Upon seeing Course standing there, the woman skidded to a halt. "Get away from there," she said. "Who the Hell are you?"

"Good evening," Course replied pleasantly, turning away from the wall to face the newcomer fully. "I am River's Right and Proper Course. I have many questions, which I hope you'll be so kind as to answer for me." As agreed, he did not mention Novia or glance in her direction. As far as the big woman knew, the two of them were alone in the alleyway.

Leyal's eyes widened as the dim light caught his silver hair. "You're him?" she blurted out. She recovered herself quickly, squaring her shoulders and pointing an accusing finger. "You're the one who owes *us* answers, and penance, for all the crimes you've committed."

"I assure you, I'm innocent of all charges," Course said. "But I suspect we don't have enough time for me to convince you of that. Perhaps we can simply start with your name." He was still smiling, though he had taken a step or two forward as he talked so that he was now nearly within arm's reach.

The woman considered this a second, then straightened to her full height, which was considerable. Novia had been right: She was nearly as tall as Course. "I am Ragara Leyal," she declared proudly, banging one fist against her armored chest. "And I serve the Realm."

Course nodded. "And you are part of the Wyld Hunt?" That last was only half question, but Leyal nodded anyway. "Ah. I see. And what is your reason for being here in Nexus?" he queried next.

"I told you, we're here for you." She glanced around, sizing up the alley. Novia suspected Leyal was assessing Course's position relative to her own,

preparing to strike. “Now, you can come back inside with me willingly and wait for my friends, or we can fight it out, but I’d recommend the first one. It’ll spare you a nasty headache.”

Course sighed and lifted his own fists, but Novia was already tired of this posturing. From the shadows she loosed a trio of knives. The first struck Leyal in the side of her right knee, causing the big woman’s leg to buckle. The second hit the left knee, bringing her to the ground. Novia’d had her knives made to her specifications long ago, commissioning an old family friend in Nighthammer for them. They were perfectly balanced, and always flew true. It was no mistake, then, when the third knife struck Leyal hilt first, at the base of her neck. Its force caused her to slump and collapse, sprawled out on the dirt and old stones.

“What did you do?” Course demanded, quickly squatting down to check on his almost-adversary. “We needed her alive!”

“Relax,” Novia answered, emerging at last from her concealment. “She’s still breathing, isn’t she?” She shrugged. “In the meantime, she’s unconscious and we didn’t have to have a big, noisy scene that could have brought other people out into the streets to lend a hand.” Most days, people in the Nighthammer District were inclined to let conflicts resolve themselves. *No need to get involved in a fight that wasn’t yours*, Novia’s own parents used to say. But she didn’t want to count on that tonight. All it would take was one witness seeing her and Course here for things to go sideways. Perhaps they’d be lucky, and the person might be among those who Course had healed or helped these last few days. If that were the case, and they refused to aid Leyal’s friends when they inevitably came looking for her, their defiance would bring Melik’s wrath down upon them.

Not everyone would react the way the crowd at the docks had earlier, however. For the right amount of coin, or the right degree of intimidation, the person might simply point the Dragon-Blooded in the direction Novia and Course took Leyal.

Course appeared about to argue, but then stopped himself. Novia suspected he’d run the same scenarios in his own head and come to the same conclusion. “You’re right,” he admitted, though it was clearly grudging. “That was the smarter play.” Grabbing the unconscious woman under the arms, he hoisted her up. “We need someplace quiet where we won’t be disturbed.” He glanced about. “The Wrought Forge?”

Novia nodded. “Perfect.” The Wrought Forge been a busy smithy back when she was a child. But then the owner had gambled away his savings and been forced to sell. Since then the forge had gone through several owners, each one worse than the last. Now it was all but abandoned. No one would ever willingly go there. It was only a block or so away.

“Right.” Course bent down and lifted Leyal further, then straightened and tossed the unconscious Dragon-Blooded over his shoulder. “Let’s hurry. Why

don't you go on ahead, and let me know if anyone's coming? I can tell you're itching to be up on the rooftops."

Novia grinned as she strode along in front of him. She picked up the blade that had knocked Leyal out. The other two were still embedded in her knees. The pain of removing them might wake the Dragon-Blood up, so she left them in place. "Try not to jostle her too much. I want my knives back," she warned as she prepared to leap up to the forge's roof. He only grunted in reply, but she didn't mind. Thus far it was turning into an extremely productive night.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“Uhhh.” Leyal stirred. She shifted. She groaned again, unconsciously rolled her shoulders, moved her arms — and froze, eyes blinking open in surprise.

“Good evening,” Course told her. He was standing next to her, and from where she sat atop the old forge behind him, Novia could see the other woman’s eyes flicker toward him, then away, then down, up, and around, her brow knitting with confusion.

After all, she had stood eye to eye with him, back in the alley.

But now she was looking up at him.

“You must be wondering about this strange predicament you find yourself in,” Course continued, pacing back and forth, his hands behind his back. With his long silver hair and gray robes he resembled a wise old priest about to deliver a sermon. “I wished to continue our conversation from before, but you seemed disinclined to speak civilly. So I thought it best to take... precautions.”

In fact, their prisoner’s current state had been Novia’s idea. Upon reaching the Wrought Forge, she had scouted the old smithy and confirmed that it was indeed empty and cold. Then, after removing the lock that had bound its doors so that Course could carry their still unconscious captive inside, she had studied the old site’s interior. There was the forge, of course, massive enough for all three of them to step inside without squeezing. There were three large anvils, long and wide enough for even Course to stretch out upon. There were workbenches along the walls, and large buckets still full of brackish water. A handful of stools dotted the floor, several overturned and a few broken but at least two or three still intact. That was all the shop contained — any tools and other items of value had long since been sold or stolen.

Which was why the big woman now found herself tied to an anvil. Her arms and legs were secured to pillars that formed the four corners of what had once been an area to display finished wares. Leyal tested the chains and ropes that held her fast, but this was neither Course’s nor Novia’s first interrogation. They’d checked the fastenings several times as they worked. Leyal wasn’t going anywhere for a while.

“Now,” Course went on once his captive had taken a second for her situation to sink in. “I am going to ask you a few questions. If you answer them

honestly, I'll release you unharmed. If you do not —" He shook his head. "Do you understand?" He waited, but Leyal didn't do anything but glare. Finally, with a sigh, he pulled aside the rag they'd used to gag her and then repeated his question: "Do you understand?"

The big woman snarled, spitting at him. "When I get free of these ropes, I'll tear you apart with my bare hands! I'll shatter every bone in your body beyond repair."

Course shook his head and Novia had to smother a laugh. If there was one thing he had never feared as Atawe, it was pain. She kept silent, though. She'd already decided — and Course had agreed — that since Leyal hadn't seen her in the alley, it made sense to keep Novia's presence a secret. Let her think it was just the two of them here. She might be more vulnerable, more likely to let something slip, and Novia could listen for inconsistencies in her story.

"You are part of the Wyld Hunt," he said, ignoring her threats. "Who are you hunting here in Nexus?"

She spat at him. Since she was not able to twist her body at all, and had only limited movement for her neck as a result, she did not even come close to hitting him, but even so Novia saw Course's brow lower and his jaw tense.

"I had hoped we could do this the easy way," he said, shaking his head. "But if you insist upon the hard way, I can accommodate." He laid his hand upon her left arm, just below the elbow.

Although she had seen him use this same trick against the beast down on the docks, Novia still shuddered as she watched the water flow down around Course's hand, then across to Leyal's arm — and then rear back like a trio of tiny snakes before striking, biting deep into her flesh.

The woman threw back her head and screamed.

"Yes, give your pain a voice," Course urged, his own tone much harder than before. "No one can hear you." He perched himself on one of the stools that had still been intact, folded his hands over one another on his lap, and waited.

After a minute, the water dripped down out of the wounds it had made, and Leyal shuddered and went limp. She was still conscious, Novia saw, but dazed.

"What are you doing in Nexus?" Course repeated. When Leyal did not respond, he hopped down off the stool and crossed to her again. Novia did not miss the other woman's shudder at his approach.

If there was one thing Atawe had learned from all his years with the Furious Waves, it was how to give pain and how to use that pain to get the information he wanted.

"I will eventually learn what I wish to know," he pointed out now. "Whether from you or from one of your fellows or from somewhere entirely different." He shrugged. "Why not simply tell me and spare yourself more pain?" He

smiled, though it had a much sharper edge than he usually displayed. “No one will think less of you for giving in to the inevitable.”

Leyal just glared at him. After a minute or two of that Course sighed and placed his hand on her again, this time on the right arm, and repeated the process.

Her screams were just as loud as before. But this time he didn’t give her time to recover afterward. Instead, even as she hung, limp, from her restraints, Course leaned in to demand answers. “Why is the Wyld Hunt here in Nexus?” he asked again.

She started to shake her head again, but cringed when he reached for her left leg.

“All right,” she said quickly, her voice breaking. “Wait! All right!!”

Course glanced back behind him at Novia. She nodded. Leyal didn’t notice the look. She was genuinely terrified, which made it likely she would answer honestly rather than risk another bout with the water.

“What is the Wyld Hunt doing in Nexus?” he asked again.

But this time, Leyal actually replied. “We’re here for you!” She spat out each word. Then she started to laugh.

Course didn’t appear at all amused. “For me? How would you have even known I would be here now?” He frowned. “And if that were the case, why not just buy the first cabinet or closet or trunk you could find, pack me inside, and send it wherever you desire by boat? That would have been far quicker and far simpler.”

Leyal laughed again, the sound a deep rasp. “We had to wait for permission.”

“From who?”

“From the person who told us you’d be coming here to Nexus. He said you were on your way to the city, and if we agreed to wait a little while, we could have you once he was done with you. He said he’d help us.”

“What’s his name?”

“I don’t know!” Leyal cringed as Course’s hands hovered over her arm. “I swear I don’t know it! He came to us when we were a few days out of the city and asked if we were tracking you. He had information he was willing to trade and Tana negotiated with him!”

“What did he give you?”

“He told us where to stay. He said that no one would find us in the warehouse. Kenu hates it there. He’d planned on renting us rooms somewhere, but this person said he could guarantee no one would interfere with us while we searched for you. He told us where we’d find you, and sure enough, you came out of the river just like he said you would.”

Course frowned. “What could possibly have let anyone know I’d be there?”

Leyal shook her head, though her movement was limited. “He said we could lure you out with the priests.”

That raised Course’s fury. His hand clamped down on Leyal’s calf and she shrieked. “So you killed them! Even if I *was* who you were looking for, they had nothing to do with it!”

“It wasn’t me,” she panted. “It was Dacar!”

“You knew about it! You condoned it!”

“They were a means to an end!”

Novia thought he might kill her then and there. Course might have only been a street thug during his first life, while Novia was trained to think as a spy and scout and potential saboteur, but they both recognized the tactic Dacar had used: Attack your target’s loved ones, their weaker friends and family. Do enough damage, cause enough harm, and eventually they’d come out of hiding.

Course’s face twisted with rage and grief, and his fists clenched and unclenched while he stared at Leyal. But, after what felt like a long few seconds, he finally drew in a sharp breath and changed his line of questioning.

“You came here to hunt me,” he stated, his tone as cold as his gaze, and Novia wondered that the water surrounding him had not frozen from the chill. “On what grounds?”

“You’re a murderer. And a fake,” Leyal answered. She was obviously relieved to get away from the subject of the dead priests. “You’re not the river goddess’s champion, just a Dragon-Blooded Dynast gone rogue.”

“Explain.” Course rested his hand on her leg below the knee. He did not unleash the waters yet, but the threat was clear.

She gulped and started talking. “You’re a Dragon-Blood, a Water Aspect named Cathak Isay,” she explained, practically babbling now. “You’re from Lord’s Crossing. You went to the Spiral Academy. But just before you graduated, you went wrong. Nobody knew why. You killed one of your instructors and fled. Every time someone tried to stop you, they died, but it wasn’t just... it wasn’t just self-defense. You *hurt* them. You took your time. It’s like you got a taste for killing.” She drew in a shuddering breath and paused, waiting for Course to respond.

He said nothing, merely watched her, his expression unreadable. Novia knew that tactic, too: Let your silence unnerve the other person. The lack of response made people uncomfortable. Conversations were supposed to be a back-and-forth exchange. The longer you denied them any reaction — not even a nod — the more they were likely to spill, just to fill the gap.

Leyal was no less susceptible. “Your House commissioned us to bring you in. Dacar and Melik joined us after we tracked you to Lookshy. Two weeks before we arrived, you killed some rangers from the Seventh Legion.” She

paused again, and a look of understanding crossed her features. Maybe she knew a little bit about interrogation strategies herself, and had figured him out. Her mouth twisted with anger and disgust. “I don’t know what the Houses will do to you when we get you back to the Blessed Isle, but I hope they do it slow. I hope it hurts.”

Course shook his head. “But I’m not from the Realm. I’m not even Dragon-Blooded. I am clearly Hushanti’s chosen champion! Everyone knows it! I have done nothing but help people since my return!” Course protested, but that got only another bark of laughter from his captive.

“You’d say anything to avoid being taken in. You’ve put yourself in the peoples’ good graces so they’ll protect you, not because you care about them. If we were to leave without you, it’d only be a matter of time before you turned on them all.”

It was clear they weren’t going to convince her that Course wasn’t who the Dragon-Blooded thought he was, not without producing this Cathak Isay. While the Earth Aspect’s attention was focused on Course, Novia signaled him to move on. At some point, Leyal’s friends would discover her missing and come searching. Novia wanted to be well out of the Nighthammer District before they did.

Course gave her a quick nod and changed direction again. “This word you were waiting on from your contact. Shall I assume it came, since Kenu and Melik came to confront me at the docks, not three hours ago?”

For a moment, it seemed like Course might have to revert to his harsher methods, but then Leyal snorted with contempt. “No, we haven’t heard from the contact yet. Those two finally got tired of waiting and charged after you against orders. Tana went to retrieve them.”

Course’s laugh echoed off the forge’s walls. “I suspect she’ll have to rescue them from the guards at the southern dock.”

Novia listened as Course asked further questions, but her attention was a couple minutes back. One thing about what the Dynast had said was still bothering her. “What about the head priest?” Novia asked, her words soft but carrying clearly in the quiet of the forge.

Leyal nearly wrenched her own arms from their sockets, she twisted about so hard. “Who said that?” she demanded. “Who’s there?” The foundry was dark and cold and they hadn’t bothered to light torches or lanterns — Novia could see clearly even in the dim light, and Course either could as well or did not need much sight when he was standing so close to his subject.

Novia did not bother to answer the bound woman’s questions. “You killed those priests,” she continued instead. “Viciously. You were setting up this idea that River’s Right and Proper Course has been slaughtering Hushanti’s true followers. But not Father Kai. Him you got rid of more quietly. Why?”

Leyal frowned, her lips clamped firmly together, but then Course nudged her. “Answer her,” he insisted, and she relented.

“I don’t know anything about the head priest,” she claimed. “We had nothing to do with that.”

As far as Novia could tell, she was telling the truth. Father Kai’s disappearance didn’t fit the Wyld Hunt’s pattern. All the other priests’ bodies had been found shortly after they went missing, but not Kai’s. Which meant it was still a puzzle, just not one that pertained here and now.

Course glanced over at Novia, one eyebrow raised. She nodded, and a slow, grim smile creased his lips. Without looking, he lashed out, one fist connecting solidly with Leyal’s right temple. She grunted once, then went limp.

“I should kill her and dump her body in the river,” he muttered, glaring down at the unconscious Dragon-Blooded. “But I gave my word.”

“So leave her,” Novia suggested. “She’ll get loose eventually — or she won’t. We have other matters to attend.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“Very well,” Course declared once they were back outside. “These other matters — I take it you were referring to the rest of her band?” He rubbed his hands together, his dark eyes alight with anticipation. “I say we take the fight to them straightaway. They won’t be expecting such an aggressive move, and they’ll be without one of their members, if we strike now.”

He was right — even if Leyal managed to break free of her bonds, the woman would still have to make her way out of the foundry and back to the warehouse. But Novia shook her head. Something else was still bothering her, and she couldn’t help but feel it was somehow important.

“The head priest, Father Kai,” she told her companion. “I think we need to find him first.”

Course frowned. “The one who disappeared? Why? And how? She claimed the Dragon-Blooded had nothing to do with his going missing.”

“And I believe her,” Novia admitted. “Which makes it all the more puzzling. This man, who is in charge of Hushanti’s temple, goes missing just as several of his sect turn up dead? Right after the Wyld Hunt arrive, and shortly before you appear? That can’t be a coincidence. Someone wanted him out of the way. We need to find out what happened to him, and help him, if we still can.”

“Yes, you’re correct,” Course agreed with a heavy sigh. “As a fellow servant of the Gray Lady, it is my duty to succor him if possible.” He glanced around them, at the neighborhood’s darkened streets. “But without knowing who took him or why, how do you propose we find him?”

Novia grimaced, shifting from foot to foot. Nexus was huge, after all. She’d spent four days showing Course around its districts, and they hadn’t explored even a tenth of what there was to see. How were they supposed to find one old man in a city of a million people, especially if someone had hidden him away and they had not a single clue as to where that might be?

Or did they? There was an odd itch in the back of her mind, like some bit of information attempting to wriggle its way forward — as if she did in fact have a clue. “So what do we know?” she asked, as much to help jar her own thoughts as to elicit Course’s aid. “You never met or even saw Father Kai, correct?”

“Not as River’s Right and Proper Course, no,” he agreed, smirking slightly. “But back when I was still Atawe I knew who the priests were. I remember seeing them about, every now and again. Father Kai was in charge then, too.” He closed his eyes, brow furrowing with concentration. “I remember him being thin and standing extremely straight, which always made him seem tall even though he was not. He was bald but had long, bushy eyebrows and a long, thin beard he was always stroking. It was mostly white back then, with a few streaks of black.”

Novia considered that. “So we are definitely looking for an old man. Let’s assume he’s still alive, since if he’s already dead none of this matters. And let’s assume that whoever took him didn’t just tie him and gag him and stuff him in a trunk or a barrel. They wanted him out of the way but still alive for some reason, and the easiest way to keep him that way is to give him some freedom of movement, enough to feed himself and relieve himself and sleep.”

Course nodded. “And we’re assuming he is still here in Nexus, as well,” he pointed out. “Since if they wanted him handy, they’d need to keep him close. Otherwise they’d toss him on a boat and spirit him away down one of the rivers, and no one would ever find him.”

“Right.” Novia paced as she thought this through. “If it was one of the merchants who took him, they could have him trapped in their compound and we’d never find him. But what would a merchant want with a priest?” She shook her head. “Besides, even if it was a merchant, they wouldn’t want to risk keeping an abducted priest in their own home. If anyone found out, it would be massively embarrassing, and they live on their reputations.” She tapped a finger against her cheek. “Which means whoever has him, they’d need someplace neutral to keep him. Someplace where it would not look odd to house an old man for a few days or more, some place they could make sure he was kept quiet and isolated but still fed and clothed.”

And then it came to her. The perfect place to stash such a man, the perfect cover to keep him captive — and she had been right there without ever realizing. She’d *spoken* to him.

Now, she turned and grinned up at Course. “I think I know where he is,” she said, and had to laugh at the irony. “Come on, let’s go see if I’m right.”



“What happened?” Nalak demanded as he unlocked the tavern’s front door and let her and Course squeeze past him and step inside. “What’s wrong?” He looked a bit bleary-eyed, and Novia wanted to chastise him for being asleep already. The night was barely half over! And this was a tavern! It should have been packed with people all night long!

A few patrons were down in the bar, which Nalak had straightened up since her last visit. The broken glass had been swept up, the bottles restocked. He’d

repaired what chairs and tables could be fixed. Novia spotted a few new pieces as well, much fancier than their old counterparts. He'd spent the coin she'd given him to cover his damages well.

"That one guest," Novia asked, pushing her other questions and frustrations to the back of her mind. For now. "The old man who was too sick to leave his room. He still here?"

"Of course," the little tavern owner replied, his forehead wrinkling. "Why? Did you find out who it was that broke in?"

"No, not yet," she acknowledged. "But we're not done looking into it. I'll let you know as soon as we learn anything." She brought the conversation back to her own questions. "How long did you say your elderly guest had been staying here, when I was here before?"

"Oh, at the time, only a day or so," Nalak replied. "He arrived in late evening, just as I was readying to lock up for the night. All wrapped in a long, hooded cloak, said he'd been traveling and would be moving on soon but was starting to feel poorly and needed a quiet place to rest and recover before he did." The innkeeper shrugged. "He paid for a week in advance, including meals. I wouldn't mind more guests like him." He frowned. "Unless he has something to do with the break-in? Is that why you're questioning him again?"

Novia smiled politely. "No, we're here to speak to him about another matter entirely. A *private* one." She pressed a coin into his hand.

"Oh. Oh!" said Nalak, taking the coin and making it disappear. "A private matter. Of course. You have my discretion." The innkeeper associated Novia with the Smoke Lions, and likely thought that's who she was referring to. Which was precisely the reaction Novia had been hoping to elicit from him.

"Is he still in the same room?" she asked.

"Oh, yes. Backmost room on the second floor," Nalak confirmed. "That way he could open the window and get clean air, not like the air out front." The Crane's Wayward Daughters stood just a block or two from the bazaar, so she understood exactly what he meant. The air in this part of the city was thick, almost cloying, between the scents roiling over from the nearby Nighthammer District and the scent of stagnant water and mold from the frequent floods. Even the locals sometimes wore kerchiefs and scarves across their noses and mouths when they had to walk these streets for more than a quick way to other neighborhoods. The air behind the small inn would almost certainly be cleaner, and healthier.

"Thank you," Novia told the little innkeeper, and then slid past him on her way to the stairs. Course followed, not bothering to go around the other man, and poor Nalak was forced to edge sideways in order to avoid being run down. Novia led the way up the steps but Course was right behind her, his longer legs giving him an advantage — which she handily denied by blocking him from getting past her and thus to the room first. "Ha ha!" she declared triumphantly as her hand reached for the doorknob of the old paneled wooden door before her.

But Course caught her hand. “You say they must have a use for him,” he pointed out, keeping his voice low. “And that’s why they wish to keep him alive.”

She nodded. “That seems the case thus far, yes.”

“Then would it make sense for them to leave him utterly unguarded?”

Ah. “No, probably not.” It hadn’t been guarded when she spoke to the room’s occupant before, but that was nearly two weeks ago now, the morning after she’d killed Dacar. And now that Novia thought back to it, *had* the old man truly been alone? He’d balked when she’d offered to help him back to his bed, a reaction she’d simply read as him trying to preserve his dignity. But what if... *what if there’d been someone in the room with him? Standing on the other side of the door, watching his every word in case he signaled for help?* If so, they might have put extra precautions in place after Novia left. It was what she would have done.

She shifted into full-on thief mode. She just had to look at the priest as being similar to a precious gem or some other item of value — whoever had abducted him had stashed him here to keep him safe, but they wouldn’t leave him without some form of safeguard.

In other words, she should expect all manner of traps.

“Allow me,” Course murmured. He reached out, hand up, palm out, fingers splayed — and stopped an instant before his flesh could make contact with the door.

The water flowed up and over his hand and onto the door like a strange sideways puddle. It spread out across the old, scarred wood in all directions, not falling or sliding or dripping at all — it was as if, at least for the water’s purposes, the door was flat on the ground instead of standing upright. The water spread and spread — and when one portion of it reached the doorknob, Novia saw it touch the barest edge of the metal and then recoil as if stung.

“Yes, the room has been warded,” Course stated, his voice still low, as if someone else might be listening. “Had you touched that knob — the results would not have been pleasant.”

“Can you dispel it?” she asked.

“I have not that art,” he admitted softly. Then he smiled. “But most traps are harmless once they have been sprung.”

And the water — reluctantly, it seemed to Novia — flowed down and over the doorknob, enveloping it completely.

There was a loud, sharp sound, a buzz like a million bees all at once — or like a lightning clap indoors. Steam rose from the knob as the water all boiled away in an instant. After a few seconds Course reached out again, and more water rose up, bridged the gap, and flowed down toward the knob. Its tendrils were equally tentative, touching the knob very quickly at first, but then when

nothing bad happened, they became more adventurous, and soon were sliding back and forth over the metal with no obvious ill effects.

Course turned to her, smiled, and bowed. “After you,” he stated grandly.

Without any fanfare or buildup, she grasped the doorknob firmly, twisted it, and opened the door. It swung away without a sound, and without any danger, and she found herself looking into a small room with only a single bed, a small table and chair, and a second little table beside the bed.

Someone lay in the bed. Someone tall and thin and bald, with a long, wispy beard. The medallion of Hushanti he’d worn the day she saw him now sat on the table beside the bed, just out of his reach.

They had found Father Kai.

“Father?” she called out as she approached, slowly. “Father Kai? Can you hear me? My name is Novia Claro. And this is River’s Right and Proper Course. We’re here to free you.”

But the figure on the bed did not answer, or even move save the steady rise and fall of his chest.

Carefully Novia circled around the bed and its current occupant. Yes, the older gentleman matched Course’s description. The fact that he still hadn’t woken up or even turned to ask who they were and what they wanted — this didn’t seem at all normal.

Course followed her into the room and shut the door behind them. He too approached the bed. “Hello!” he declared loudly, crouching down so he was head-height with the man. “Can you hear me?”

Still no response.

Course tried again, with the same results.

“I have a notion,” Course told her. He grimaced. “But I can’t be sure it will work, or even that it won’t hurt him instead.”

“If we can’t free him, he might as well be dead,” she pointed out. “Whoever took him would probably kill him once they find out we were here. Do it.”

Course held his hand out over the figure on the bed, palm down. Water began to drip from his hand and fingers, as if a tiny rainstorm had formed right there in his grasp.

As each droplet struck the figure, it squealed and vanished in a puff of steam.

After the first minute or so, the squeals and steam seemed diminished.

Course continued his deluge. After another minute, Novia was sure the reaction was less.

Another few minutes and there was only the occasional hiss and pop, like from a fire.

And then, finally, the water splashed down on the figure uninterrupted. He stirred and blinked and sat up.

It was Father Kai, there was no question of that. Course had even been correct about the beard, which was now all a snowy white except for a single stubborn black streak just left of center. The head priest appeared unharmed as he blinked and looked around. He looked confused. Had he been ensorcelled all that time?

Then his eyes fell upon Course, and lit up.

“You!” the old head priest declared, his voice rusty from disuse. “I know you.” He reached out to touch Course’s silver plait, the gray robes, and the medallion around his neck. Course allowed the inspection without comment. “Hushanti’s champion has watched us all from the glass these many years. Can it truly be you?”

“It is,” Course admitted with a short bow. “I am River’s Right and Proper Course, sent by our Lady to protect you.”

“Yes, of course!” Father Kai clapped his hands together, grinning like a small child. “Her blessed waters cancel out any affliction, and can disperse any malignant spell.” He shuddered and swung his legs off the side of the bed. “I need to be on my feet again.” Course helped the older man to stand, then let go to allow Father Kai both to test out his limbs and to enjoy being back on his own two feet. Father Kai retrieved his medallion from the bedside table. “My captor removed this from me before he laid his spell. I don’t know whether he was afraid the Lady might be able to protect me through it, or he simply wanted to deny me the symbol of her presence.” He kissed Hushanti’s symbol and said a prayer of thanks as he slipped the silver chain back over his head. “It’s good to know she was watching over me, all this time.”

Novia watched the entire scene from off to one side and against the wall, smiling. They had found and rescued Father Kai, and he seemed none the worse for wear.

She only hoped the rest of their plans went even half as smoothly.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“We must return to the temple at once,” Father Kai insisted as they made their way down the stairs and into the tavern’s common room. He was only mildly shaky, which could have simply been his advanced age, but Course hovered by the head priest’s side anyway, in case he should suddenly need help. Novia hung back. She wasn’t even sure the priest had truly registered her presence yet.

Nalak sat in one of the chairs at the nearest table, a bottle before him, and blinked wearily as the three of them approached. “Ah, you are feeling better, I take it?” he asked Father Kai, who frowned but nodded.

“Yes, thank you, my son,” the priest replied. “I’ll take my leave of you now.”

As the two men made for the door, Novia paused by Nalak. “It would be best not to mention any of this. To anyone,” she warned, setting a heavy coin on the table by his bottle. “Ever.” She added a second.

“Of course.” The innkeeper’s head bobbed in agreement even as one hand landed on the two coins and made them disappear from sight. “As I said before, you may count on my discretion.”

Satisfied that he would not speak of this — at least, not unless someone else offered him more money, or threatened him worse than the Smoke Lions could — Novia followed the others outside.

Father Kai paused on the corner, taking deep breaths of the night air. He stretched his arms to the sky, bent at the waist and straightened up, clearly trying to get used to moving again. He held on to Course’s shoulder each time the sudden exertion after all those days spent involuntarily bed-ridden threatened to topple him.

“Father Kai,” asked Novia when he had finished, “who did this to you?”

Kai grimaced. “I don’t know, not truly. I remember being out collecting alms, and someone coming to talk to me as I finished up for the day. I don’t remember what he said, but my head started feeling... light. Like I was drifting along on our Lady’s currents, even though my feet were firmly on the ground. I got the sense the man was leading me along, and thought perhaps he was taking me somewhere to get help. I felt a blanket placed around my shoulders, or perhaps it was a cloak.”

“Nalak said you came in wearing one. Wrapped up tight in it,” Novia remembered aloud.

The head priest nodded. “The man told me to pay for the room for a week, and to tell them I was sick and mustn’t be disturbed. I couldn’t stop myself from repeating it. They put me in the room where you found me, and I slept most of the time. I don’t know if I was under a spell those first few days, or if he’d simply drugged me.” It could have been either. The Guild regulated the trade of any number of substances that might render a person senseless, and such items were easily available all throughout Nexus. Usually the intended user *wanted* to let their consciousness drift for a while, but criminals found the effects quite useful as well.

“Do you remember me coming to visit you?” Novia thought about that meeting, how Father Kai had seemed so exhausted and confused. If only she’d known it was him, she could have rescued him much sooner.

“It’s hazy. I think... that was the morning after I nearly escaped. I’d woken up in the night and, though it was hard to move or even think, I made my way downstairs. I was going to ask for help, but there was no one there. Everyone had gone to bed. Before I could get to the door to go outside, *he* came back.” Kai shuddered. “I tried to fight him off — I was quite the scrapper, in my youth! — but he overpowered me, and brought me back upstairs. I believe that’s when he put the charm on me to keep me asleep, the way you found me.”

“So it wasn’t someone breaking *in* to the Crane that caused all that damage,” Novia stated, “it was you trying to break *out*.” She was going to have to tell Nalak the trail had gone cold, but she suspected another fistful of coins and some added patrols from the Smoke Lions for a few weeks would assuage his frustrations.

Father Kai nodded again. “No matter how hard I tried to tell you I was being held against my will, the words wouldn’t come.”

Novia winced. She couldn’t have known he was in distress, but felt terrible for not realizing it all the same. She’d been preoccupied by her confrontation with Dacar the night before, and by the job she’d been brought to the Crane to investigate. Even when she’d spied the medallion around Father Kai’s neck, she’d taken it for a sign the Gray Lady would help her, not a signal that *she* needed *Novia’s* help.

“You’re safe now,” Course promised, interrupting her thoughts. “We’ll find the person who did this, and they’ll answer for it. But first let’s get you home.”

It was still before midnight, though perhaps only just, and the streets were all but empty. Novia dearly wished she could take to the roofs instead. Course evidently guessed the path of her thoughts, for he turned to face her over Father Kai’s head and smiled. “Perhaps it would be best if you scouted the way for us,” he suggested with a half-smirk. “I will assist Father Kai.”

She nodded, forcing back the grin that threatened to break out as she turned away from them and slid into the nearest alley. Then, concealed from view, she

tensed and leaped straight up onto the neighboring building's roof. It was like finally emerging to sunlight after days of rain and fog, or casting off a heavy coat on the first day of true spring. It felt like being reborn all over again, the bonds that weighed her down falling away as she jumped to the next roof, spun about, and danced across it from sheer joy. This, gliding over the city at nightfall, was what she had been born to do. This was who she was in its purest form, and even as she rejoiced her heart and mind thanked Course for recognizing that and for offering her a way to honor any obligations while still being free to enjoy this.

She kept an eye out for any obstacles or intrusions that might slow the pair taking the slower, ground-bound route. Every so often she circled back to warn them of something that might present difficulties: "There's a fruit seller's cart blocking the next alley, best wait for the one after before making the turn" or "two shady-looking fellows around the next corner, under the ostler's sign."

As she scouted, she thought about what they'd learned. Whoever had set those wards on Father Kai's room, they had power. A great deal of it. The magic had not struck her as consistent with what she had seen of the Wyld Hunt thus far, and Novia didn't think any of them were sorcerers, which gibed with Leyal's claim that they hadn't been responsible for Father Kai's disappearance. But then who had?

She would have to look into it as soon as Kai was safe.



As they approached the temple, Novia slowed and waited for Course and Father Kai to catch up. The buildings ended before the temple courtyard, meaning she would either have to wait atop the last warehouse and simply watch from there or return to street level and walk the rest of the way with them.

The hair on the back of her neck prickled. Her teeth tingled. The wind against her skin and in her hair felt somehow thicker, more obstinate, as if it were trying to slow her.

As if something up ahead was trying to keep her away from the temple.

Reaching the warehouse before the final one, Novia paused. She perched at the lip of the roof, head up, senses open, questing for anything to explain why she was having this hesitation. The night sky was clear, the stars and the moon casting silvery light from above. The air was heavy with the smell of the river so close by. Other than the occasional muted tones of the water, and the gentle creak of leather and wood, and the soft cry of a bird, all was quiet.

But that was the problem, wasn't it? The quiet. Ever since Course had appeared, the docks by Hushanti's temple had seen a resurgence of visits from her followers. People came all throughout the day and well into the night to pray to the Pearlescent Mistress and beg the intercession of her champion on matters close to their hearts.

Yet now, when people ought to have been gathering for the first set of evening prayers, the docks were nearly silent.

Until she heard the unmistakable harsh scrape of metal against stone. And the steady groan of large, heavy hinges as the temple doors opened.

Vaulting the distance between the warehouses, Novia crept across that final roof, silent as a whisper in a crowded room. She stopped just short of its edge and inched the rest of the way forward, letting the shadows drape comfortingly around her as the temple came into view.

Figures emerged from within. Figures most definitely not dressed as priests.

There were four of them. Two big and bulky and armored, two smaller and slimmer. And Novia recognized all of them.

It was the Dragon-Blooded.

And they were clearly ready for battle.

Spinning about, she raced back across the roofs and found Course and Father Kai halfway along the stretch of dock overshadowed by a building. They stopped instantly upon hearing her tense whistle, and Course's face was already set into grim, expectant lines when he glanced up.

"It's the Dragon-Blooded," Novia whispered just loud enough for her words to drift down to him. "They're waiting at the temple. All four of them."

He nodded curtly. Leyal had evidently come to more quickly than they'd hoped, and made her way back to her partners. Or else they'd noticed her absence and somehow found and rescued her. Either way, they knew Course was onto them. Either they had convinced Tana to step up their timetable and confront him now, or their contact had finally granted them permission to come after Course.



Novia crouched and prepared to jump down, but Course shook his head. "Stay up there," he warned. "They won't know you're with me, and that's an advantage." He then turned to the elderly head priest beside him. "Father, it's best if you remain here, where you will not be harmed."

Father Kai stubbornly shook his head. "It's my temple, and I will return to it," he insisted. Then he relented and raised a wizened hand to Course's brow. "But I will hang back so as not to burden or distract you, my son. May the Grey Lady's waters envelop you and grant you strength and courage, and bring you victory in her name."

Course bowed his head, then straightened and held out a loose fist. Water sloshed up over the edge of the docks and then leaped upward to his hand, molding itself into a long, slender rod as it did and gliding between his fingers, a glow lighting the water from within as it reshaped itself to his need. A second later that glow faded, and he once again held the silver trident that was Hushanti's favored weapon. "Let's go," he said to Novia.

He strode forward, trident ready at his side. More water glided over his limbs, torso, and head, forming translucent plates as he went. Father Kai followed at a slower pace, uttering soft prayers to his Lady, asking her to grant her champion strength and lead him to victory. Novia checked her knives and other blades, and retraced her steps to that last warehouse once more.

The Dragon-Blooded were arrayed in a loose semi-circle out on the courtyard, facing away from the temple. Melik and Kenu were on one side, a glowing Leyal was on the other, and at the center stood Tana, the quiet one with the silver fan. Her face was as calm as it had appeared back in their hideout, her body relaxed, almost languid, but her eyes alive and dreadfully eager. They almost glowed from excitement as Course stepped into view.

“I am River’s Right and Proper Course,” he declared as he closed the distance, his words echoing across the small stone plaza. “I am the chosen champion of Hushanti, the Gray Lady, Pearlescent Mistress of Tide and Current. You bar my path to her temple, and I demand you remove yourselves at once. You are not welcome here.” In the moonlight his hair shone as if it were true silver, his eyes glittered, and the water all about him glimmered with a faint sheen every time he moved. If he was at all concerned about facing four Dragon-Blooded warriors alone, his posture, expression, and voice gave no indication.

The quiet woman bowed, a tiny smile fluttering across her thin lips. “I am Peleps Tana, known as the Resplendent Waterfall,” she intoned, her words equally loud but lacking Course’s sharp tone, somehow resembling rounded river stones more than his own bracing spray. She fixed him with her steady gaze. “You, Cathak Isay, are hereby charged with fraudulently presenting yourself as a divine champion, under the false name River’s Right and Proper Course, when in fact you are nothing more than one of our own who has strayed. And strayed widely, committing atrocities in the process. You have killed, you have maimed, you have left death and destruction in your wake, and we have come to restrain you, bind you, and deliver you to the Blessed Isle, where you will receive proper judgment.”

Course laughed, a deep, booming sound filled with menace. Novia remembered that from when he had been Atawe, and now it seemed only amplified by his new status as an Exalt. “You’re mistaken, Peleps Tana,” he announced, “for I *am* Hushanti’s champion. And I shall prove it.” He hefted his trident, his legs flexing into a ready position. “Your brother-in-arms Karal Dacar murdered six priests of Hushanti with your knowledge and permission. You were his accomplices, and I won’t let those crimes go unpunished.”

She shook her head. Her hair — which was beautiful, long and loose in shades of blue and white and green and silver — flowed about her. At her side her fan snapped open with a steely hiss. “So be it,” she replied. “Let our battle decide whose cause is righteous.”

And then she and her companions launched their attack.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Melik and Kenu raced for Course, the one wielding his fiery daiklave and the other his paired ice swords. Tana advanced at a calmer pace, walking casually toward her foe. But Leyal held back, positioning herself behind her allies.

The Earth Aspect crouched down and slammed both fists into the ground. The tiles reacted as if they were water, rippling from the impact. That ripple spread outward as if she had struck a still pool of water, swelling and rolling across the temple courtyard. Melik stumbled only slightly but kept moving. Kenu rose with a swell and then stayed at that height, hovering a few inches above the shifting stones and running as if still on level ground. Tana merely shifted her stance, adjusting to the unsteady ground in the same way a sailor adapted to the roll and pitch of a deck on choppy water. It was clear that they'd practiced this maneuver before.

Course stumbled as the wave hit and his footing shifted beneath him. He tried to keep his feet even as the very ground betrayed him. His focus dropped from the oncoming battle to merely staying upright.

Which was exactly what his adversaries had counted on. Melik grinned and raised his daiklave high, its flames casting harsh shadows across his features. Kenu's smile was colder and nastier as he poised his swords for a dual strike. A small smile even touched Tana's thin lips. All three were expecting an easy kill.

What they hadn't factored in, however, was the fact that their target had not come alone.

"Like Hell you'll take him that easily," Novia whispered. She drew her knives, three in each hand, and loosed them one blade at a time.

Six knives flew across the courtyard. One was aimed at Leyal, who had now stood and was charging after her companions. One targeted Tana. Two arrowed toward Kenu, while the last two sought Melik.

The first knife struck Leyal, once again hitting her already-injured left knee. Leyal cried out and toppled, catching herself at the last moment on a small bench set in the little courtyard. Melik batted away the two that came for him, while a mere wave of Kenu's hand caused the two that had targeted him to freeze in mid-air.

Tana's fan burst open, all its panels fully extended and glowing softly. A quick twist of her wrist blocked the last of the four knives. Novia cursed, especially when Tana glanced up, those muddy brown eyes homing in her at once.

“Ah, we have some local interference,” she stated calmly. “I’ll handle this.” Her gaze sought Novia again, sharpening slightly. She smiled, snapping her fan shut again and tapping it against the palm of her other hand as she approached the warehouse upon which Novia perched. “You’re not part of this,” she warned, staring up at Novia but not looking at all concerned as she continued. “I’ll give you one chance. Leave this alone and walk away.”

Novia loosed another dagger in response. It flew straight for the Dragon-Blood’s head, but Tana batted it aside easily. “So be it,” she declared. Another unhurried step brought her to the base of the warehouse. Tana swept a hand down toward the river, and a thick rope of water followed the appendage when she raised it back up. The Water Aspect grasped the watery rope, whirled it around her head once, twice, and let it fly toward Novia.

She had no time to dodge. The strange cable snaked around Novia’s wrist and yanked her downward — off the roof and straight towards Tana, who waited with that wicked fan, now unfurled to show its razor-sharp tips.

Novia floundered for a half a second as she found herself falling, but then gathered herself into a ball and kicked off the warehouse wall behind her. She uncoiled in a leap, propelling herself forward and to her left. She didn’t have enough momentum to jump to the neighboring building — not that doing so would avail her much — but she did land solidly on the courtyard tiles some forty feet to the side. Novia hurled another knife, hoping to catch Tana off guard, but the other woman turned and blocked that as casually as the first two.

“Nowhere to hide now, little one,” she said, and Novia realized it was true. There were no ready shadows here upon the courtyard.

Fortunately, when pressed, Novia could produce her own cover. “Think again,” she replied. The mark upon her forehead began to warm and glow. Tana’s eyes widened and her lips drew back in a scowl as that spot darkened and began to radiate shadows all around her.

“Anathema!” Tana hissed, waving her fan before her as if to drive away any taint from Novia’s proximity. The shadows spread, filling the entire quadrant of courtyard where Novia stood and causing her to vanish entirely from view. Novia padded soundlessly across the tiles, stationing herself some twenty feet from where she had last been visible. She readied another dagger, and waited.

“A clever deception.” After a moment’s disgust, Tana’s face resumed its placid expression, but her eyes were alive with hatred. “But I don’t need to see you in order to kill you.”

Tana whirled about with her fans, her movements as much a dance as they were steps in a fight. She was fast, too, spinning in wider and wider circles whose trajectory Novia had a hard time predicting. More than once, the Water Aspect came dangerously close to the place where she hid. Novia felt the wind as the fans passed. One slice cut off a lock of hair as she ducked. Novia didn’t dare stay in one place, and edged backward, heading toward the temple.

She only darted in once, to slash at Tana as she spun by. In the split second her movement made the shadows fall away, Tana spotted her. The Dragon-Blood whipped out with her fan, fast as a viper. The razor-tipped blades raked down Novia's left arm, biting deep. In seconds, her sleeve was soaked with blood.

Novia leapt backwards, retreating into the shadows once more. When Tana slashed with the fans this time, a ribbon of water flowed out from them in an arc. It raced over the courtyard, forcing Novia closer to the temple's outside wall. She crouched low as it hit the tiles above her with a sickening splash. Some of the older panels shattered on impact. She looked around for options as Tana advanced. The temple was behind her, and the Dragon-Blood had pushed her under the roof's overhang. She had no room to jump to safety.

To the side, Course was battling Kenu. Those icy blades sang like the Northern winds as they sliced through the air. A thin rime of frost had formed on the tiles. Course moved slowly, careful not to slip. Not far away, Melik was picking himself up from where Course must have knocked him prone, and Leyal stood close by, preparing to hurl herself back into the fray.

Novia couldn't get past them without drawing their attention. The warehouses and other buildings were out of reach behind Tana. The river ran along the far side.

She was trapped.

Desperate, she pulled the shadows around her once more. Even if she only had a small strip of courtyard to maneuver in, why let Tana know for certain where she was? She inched to the side, until she stood below the stained glass image of Hushanti's champion. Then she threw the dagger in her hand.

This time Tana didn't even bother to use her fan. Instead she gestured, and a watery tendril batted it away. "You have nowhere else to go. Surrender now, and perhaps I won't drown you."

Watching her from within those shadows, Novia smiled. "I don't think so," she replied. She drew three more daggers, and threw them all at once. She screamed as she let them go, the muscles in her injured arm sending spikes of pain up to her shoulder. But the knives flew straight, emerging from the shadows like a cat's claws extending mid-pounce, aimed straight at the Tana's head — and just before reaching her, they diverged.

One curved to the left.

One swept to the right.

The third angled upward, and then plunged back down.

All three struck true, burying themselves deep in Tana's temples and in the center of her forehead. She had only enough time to gasp, a sound that turned to a gurgling sigh, before falling forward, dead.

Peleps Tana, known as Resplendent Waterfall, was no more.

“So much for drowning me,” Novia said, letting her shadows fall away as she stepped forward and crouched to collect her daggers.

As she rose to her feet, however, she heard a cry behind her. “Die!” A pair of massive fists descended, aimed directly at her head, with more than enough force to shatter her skull.

Novia hurled herself to the side, twisting out of the way as Ragara Leyal struck, those heavy hands narrowly passing her by. Even though she’d missed her target, The Earth Aspect used her forward momentum to strike the ground again, sending another, smaller wave of ripples out toward Novia in a cone.

Novia’s balance was much better than Course’s. She let the wave catch her up and carry her across the courtyard, out of Leyal’s reach. It dissipated back near where she’d started, in front of the old warehouse. Novia used the last flicker of the wave’s motion to flip herself off the now-broken tiles and onto the roof.

As Leyal chased after her, Novia had time to think that perhaps she should have learned her lesson with Tana and avoided the high ground altogether. Leyal had no watery lasso like Tana’s with which to yank Novia off the roof, but that didn’t stop the powerfully built woman. She looked up at Novia. Looked at the warehouse’s walls. Back at Novia.

Then she grinned.

Leyal’s fist reared back. She slammed it into the wall, and Novia heard boards splinter. Still, the roof shook but felt solid under her feet. For a second, she thought she might be safe up here after all. *If Leyal wants to spend the fight punching walls, I’m happy to let her waste her —*

Creak. Groan.

The warehouse shuddered beneath her. For the second time tonight, Novia was falling off this damned roof. This time she had no chance at springing off the wall, as every foothold she found crumbled beneath her. She went down amidst the debris, and lay there a moment as the stars blurred and spun above her.

Until a figure blotted out the sky. Leyal reached into the wreckage and yanked the dazed Novia out by her throat. She flung her out into the courtyard, then set upon her, pummeling the Night Caste mercilessly. A blow to Novia’s stomach knocked the wind out of her. She tried to curl up and protect her middle, but that left her head vulnerable. She brought her arms up to shield her head, and Leyal’s punch connected right where Tana’s fan had sliced her arm open.

The pain brought Novia back to her senses. She flinched, using the motion as a cover to snatch a dagger from its brace on her hip, and waited for Leyal to lean back for another swing. As she did, Novia drove the knife into the other woman’s wounded knee. Leyal roared with pain and rolled away, scrabbling at the knife to pull it out of her joint.

Novia didn't wait for her to recover. She vanished into shadow once more, and readied another set of knives. She held utterly still, willing herself to perfect calm as Leyal lurched to her feet, growling. Then she let the blades fly.

Leyal saw her blur of motion, and charged in Novia's direction. Then the big woman froze, a look of utter surprise upon her face — and peered down, confused by the three knife hilts emerging from her chest. She toppled forward, and Novia stepped quickly back as Leyal struck the ground, her blood mingling with Tana's.

Two down. No, three. Across the courtyard, Course's trident stood quivering from Kenu's back.

Novia looked over at him, and he smiled. She could not help but smile back.

The moment was shattered, however, by a harsh laugh. "You fool!" Karal Melik declared, swinging his flaming daiklave lazily about him as he approached. "You threw away your only weapon."

"A warrior who can only fight with one weapon is no true warrior," Course replied.

"Your choice," Melik commented, a nasty sneer upon his face. "Your funeral. I will enjoy killing you slowly" — the sneer became an even uglier leer — "and the girl even more so."

Now Course frowned. "I think not," he answered. "You forget who I am, and where you are. I am the chosen of Hushanti, goddess of the very river we fight beside — and that means I am never truly weaponless." He gestured toward the water, and it rose up in a mighty spout that arced over toward Melik.

For his part, the Dragon-Blood seemed unafraid. "You think a little water scares me?" he taunted. He raised his daiklave in both hands, and the flames about the weapon grew longer and hotter, the heat reaching Novia where she stood. Fire rolled down the blade and arced toward Course.

But Course only smiled. "This is no mere shower." He flicked his fingers, and the spout came crashing down upon Melik, drenching him instantly.

But the water did not fall to the ground and disperse, as a normal downpour would. Instead, it stayed fixed around the Lookshyan warrior, trapping him in a column of liquid. His eyes widened as he realized this, bubbles escaping from his lips along with his remaining air. He floundered, slicing at the prison with his sword, but the blade swung cleanly through the water without disturbing it. Melik gulped, and began to choke as water filled his lungs. The sword dropped from his fingers and he clutched at his throat, but there was nothing he could do. In seconds he had fallen to his knees, his face going dark. Then his eyes rolled back, his body twitched and jerked, his hands fell to his sides, and he toppled forward. The column of water went with him, finally collapsing in on itself to wash over his corpse and then flow back toward the river from whence

it came, leaving Karal Melik there upon the tiles near his companions, dry as bone and just as dead.

Novia cast her gaze over the courtyard, Tiles lay smashed and broken, and debris littered the docks. Gouges marred the planks where Melik's daiklave and Kenu's icy blades had dug into them. The bodies of the four Dragon-Blooded lay still in the center of it all. Course retrieved his trident from Kenu's corpse, and returned to Novia's side. He leaned heavily on the weapon, and let out a ragged sigh.

It was over.

They had won.



CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

“Thank you.”

Novia looked up to find River’s Right and Proper Course watching her. On his face was a look she had not seen before. It was one of respect, but also of... awe? Fear? His gaze darted from her eyes up to her forehead, and then she understood.

“She called you Anathema, and the things you did — the smoke and shadow, the way you use your daggers, and that mark...” The empty golden circle denoting her as one of the Solar Exalted, stood proudly upon her forehead. Her anima banner must have been flaring brightly as well, until she had summoned the shadows that were its ultimate expression. “You are one, aren’t you?”

There was no point in denying it, at least not to him, and Novia discovered she was pleased about that. It was tiring, never being able to admit this part of herself to anyone.

“I am,” she told him. “I am one of the Night Caste, chosen of the Unconquered Sun.”

She was both relieved and happy when he didn’t flee, didn’t recoil, didn’t immediately declare her his enemy and try to finish what Tana and her crew had started.

“It all makes sense now,” he admitted instead, shaking his head.

“I do my best not to declare it,” Novia said. “If people knew, it would make my life a good deal more complicated. If we’d lost, I don’t know if they’d have slaughtered me outright or taken me back to the Realm as a prize. If others find out, they’ll come hunting for me.”

Her companion inclined his head. “I will keep your secret,” he promised. “And know that I am honored you chose to share it with me.”

A sudden noise made her turn, but it was only Father Kai. The elderly head priest had just emerged from between the warehouses at the end of the docks into the temple square, and now stood staring at the two of them, and at the bodies laid out before them. His eyes were wide and he was white as a sheet, but his voice was steady as he asked, “Is it over? Are we safe now? No more murders?”

Novia started to tell him that yes, they were safe now, but something made her pause. Something she had seen, and even before that, something she had

heard. What was it? She wracked her brain, trying to remember what was bothering her. It had been before the fight, before Course had reached the temple, before she had gone back to get him—she'd hurried ahead because she had heard...

"Oh, hell!" She turned and threw a desperate glance at Course. "The other priests!" They should have been out here by now, spilling forth from the temple as soon as Melik's body hit the courtyard.

It took Course only an instant to realize what she meant, and then he was racing for the temple doors.

The same doors Novia had seen the Dragon-Blooded emerge from when she had gone on ahead.

Which meant they'd been inside the temple before stepping outside to face them. Inside — with the rest of the priests.

She was right behind Course, and caught up to him as he grabbed one of the twin doors and hauled it open. The second she stepped inside she smelled it.

The stench of blood — and death. It wasn't the unnatural, disease-ridden scent of the grisly statue or the beast at the southern docks, but merely the coppersy smell of a side street in Firewander after a gang cut their enemies' throats.

"Brother Po!" Course bellowed, his words echoing through the vast building and off the high, vaulted ceilings. "Brother Tensai! Sister Amelie!" His voice rang out, shattering the eerie silence — but no one replied.

Feeling a chill that was more than just the cold of the marble floors seeping into her bones, Novia followed Course as he headed through the wide, column-lined main hall, down a side corridor, and to a row of smaller rooms with sliding paper doors. There were obvious signs of a struggle here — doors were slashed and shattered and torn apart. Blood spattered many of them, and down at one end Novia spotted a body draped over the wreckage. She pushed past Course and hurried over.

It was Brother Tensai, the wizened old man with the deep and powerful voice. Only he was not speaking now. His blood soaked into the wood and paper and the reed mats that made up the floor, dripping from several vicious slashes across his face, neck, and chest. Novia had never particularly liked Brother Tensai, and he certainly hadn't warmed to her, but she'd never have wished this upon him.

Beyond him lay a larger, softer form with a long, thick plait that was still more dark than gray. Sister Amelie. It looked as if Brother Tensai had attempted to defend her, for all the good it had done either of them. *Too late. We were too late and we didn't even know it.* Novia remembered how concerned Sister Amelie had been after the fight with Dacar, and how she'd tried to hide her delight when Course swept her up into a hug his first day.

Novia sank to her knees. She wasn't new to loss. Jobs had gone sideways before, and in her line of work that meant good people died and her enemies

triumphed. She'd always taken the defeat dispassionately, dusted herself off and kept going. So why did this one hurt so much?

We could have saved them. They'd still be alive, if we'd only put the pieces together sooner.

If only I'd put the pieces together sooner.

The crunch of heavy boots ground shattered wood into the floor as Course knelt beside her. He reached out with one big hand and laid it ever so gently across Brother Tensai's chest. Then he shifted to check Sister Amelie. Novia was surprised to see that, while his face was certainly grim, it was not as grief-stricken as she would have expected. After all, these men and women had taken him in. They were fellow devotees of Hushanti. In a sense, they were his family.

Then he spoke. "Help me carry them into the main hall," he asked softly.

Novia nodded. Course moved over to Sister Amelie, lifting her in his arms like she was a sleeping babe and carefully maneuvering through the battered hallway with her. Novia did the same with Brother Tensai. Course had been busy while she had stared at the pair, because the rest of the priests were already laid out in front of Hushanti's image and altar. Father Kai joined them there, staring down at his fallen brethren.

"We must pray," Course suggested, and the head priest nodded.

"Yes, of course." He held out one wizened hand to Course and the other to Novia. Even though she was not a follower of Hushanti, Novia could hardly refuse. Linked together, the three of them faced the fallen priests.

"Oh great Lady," Father Kai intoned, "our Pearlescent Mistress, O Hushanti, hear our plea. Send your aid to these, your children, who have devoted their lives to you. Let their deaths not be in vain, or their sacrifices forgotten."

But then Course interrupted. "Great Lady, noble Mistress, hear your champion." He directed his words to her statue behind the altar. "Let your healing waters wash over your children and take away their pain and their wounds, that they might once again rise up and perform your good works."

Startled, Novia studied the priests — and gasped aloud when she saw the faintest hint of movement from Brother Tensai's chest, at Sister Amelie's throat. They were still alive!

This revelation had clearly surprised Father Kai as well, but he quickly adjusted his own prayer. "Yes, great Lady, heal them," he agreed, falling to his knees and holding his hands out toward the statue and over his brothers and sisters. "Please heal them."

Course also sank down, and Novia did the same. Together all three of them extended their arms toward the goddess, their shadows stretching across the bodies before them.

Behind her, Novia heard the gurgle of water approaching.

A steady stream appeared by her side and flowed forward. A similar stream was on Course's far side, and the two rivulets converged, spreading under and across and over the injured priests. As the water covered them, it began to glow.

Within that glow, their wounds begin to fade and close.

After a moment, the priests were all fully immersed, and their injuries were gone. Then the water began to recede, as quickly as it had come, sliding back from the hall and out the door behind them and back into the river.

Brother Tensai stirred. So did Sister Amelie, Brother Po, and all the rest. Their eyelids fluttered, their bodies shifted, they groaned and sighed. One by one, they sat up and looked around.

Course grinned and laughed, Father Kai cried out in relief, and Novia felt tears streaming down her cheeks. That had been incredible! She had seen some amazing things in her life, and experienced a few directly as well. But what Course had just done — there was no doubt in her mind that he, and not Father Kai, had summoned those healing waters — had outdone them all.

The priests clambered slowly to their feet and began asking questions. They all cried and laughed and cheered when they realized Father Kai had returned to them, Novia took a step back, seeking her customary refuge in the shadows at the edges of the room. The priests were asking what had happened — to Father Kai, to Course, to themselves — and thus far none of them had noticed her at all. She was happiest that way.

Course was explaining about the Dragon-Blooded and their plan to capture him, and she saw the priests go from furious to thoughtful to outraged all over again. She had a feeling Course would not have any need to hide his past any longer. If anything, the fact that he had been this notorious Wavefront and had been reborn as a new and better person only made him more impressive. He'd risen above his former nature and truly become Hushanti's champion.

A few things still gnawed at Novia, however. This whole plan of the Dragon-Blooded's, for example Tana had warned the others that they had to stick to the plan, but whose plan was it, really? How had their contact even known Course would be here in Nexus? and what was it he'd counted on Course doing?

Father Kai's disappearance definitely played a part in all this. Whoever had abducted him had not killed him, which meant they'd had an intended use for him. But what? Who, if anyone, benefitted from Course and the Wyld Hunt potentially killing each other?

She closed her eyes for a moment to shut out any distractions. How had all of this started? She had stumbled upon Karal Dacar skulking around the temple after having just killed one of the priests. But if he'd already done the job, why had he still been there afterward? And why send him in the first place, when it was clear that Tana had been far subtler? It was almost as if Novia had been meant to spot Dacar and confront him. But, again, who benefitted from that?

Thinking back, she shivered as she realized something that sent a chill down her spine. She had been here on the docks because someone had tipped her off about the murders. Had she been played somehow? If so, to what end?

Which made her think of something else. All of this had started right here at the temple. What if drawing her here had been his goal all along?

But if they had hoped to distract and incapacitate River's Right and Proper Course, why would bringing Novia here matter? And if that had not been his goal, what was it?

A part of her — the smarter part, undistracted by other questions — suggested that the contact had sent the Dragon-Blooded to Nexus to distract Course, and to keep anyone else from spotting what he was up to. To keep everyone focused here on the south dock. While over on the north dock, Novia had been instrumental in promoting various dock officials — so that they might not have very many competent, experienced professional there now as a result.

Which would make it far easier to pull something — something big — without anyone getting in the way.

Novia stepped back out of the shadows beside Course, and grabbed his arm. "I need your help," she told him urgently. "There's something we need to look into."

He didn't argue, just nodded. "Lead on."

They left the temple, Novia filled with the dread that something was horribly wrong on the north docks.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Hurrying, the two of them headed away from the river, sprinting northward across that collection of warehouses and shops and taverns and offices that stood between the two sets of docks. When the north river came into view, Novia slowed to a halt, scanning the docks before them.

Almost immediately, she spotted something that did not belong.

“You!” she shouted, racing toward a man who leaned against a heavy pylon not far from the water’s edge. “Who let that boat dock there?”

The man — who was barely more than a boy, she realized as she approached at a run — startled, staring first at her and then at the hulking figure of River’s Right and Proper Course charging alongside her. “Uh, what, huh?” he stammered. He had been drinking from a wineskin, and it fell at his feet now. Watery, sour-smelling ale spilled from it to wash across the planks and across his boots. “Who’re you?”

“Don’t worry about that,” Novia snapped, skidding to a stop just before barreling into him. She pointed. “What can you tell me about that boat?”

There in one of the slips sat a boat she hadn’t seen before, although it was very similar to one she *had*. It was filthy, for one thing — coated and encrusted to the point that the original wood and canvas and rope were completely hidden. Just like the one that had appeared on the city’s other side, and that had proven the conveyance of that two-headed monster Course had slain. Now here was a similar boat, but on the north side.

Unlike the first boat, this one was already floating along the dock. No circle or ring of fire blocked its path.

“Has that boat been inspected?” Novia demanded.

“What? I don’t know — it looked okay,” the boy croaked, his face flushing. “Why, what do you mean?”

“Inspected,” Course ground out from behind her. “Checked. Made safe and secure.” He made a sound somewhere between a sigh and a growl. “Who is in charge of checking the boats that pull into this dock?”

The boy tried to stand and puff out his chest, neither of which worked because Novia was too close for him to hop down from the pylon, and because his lanky frame was clearly no match for Course’s big, muscular one. “I am,”

he squeaked nonetheless. “I’m the dock inspector.” He gulped before confiding in a lower tone, “This is only my second night on the job, though. Was there something I was supposed to do?”

And that was why, Novia realized. Why she’d been hired for that project to promote Jiro Hatan. Why he’d been so confused every time she had spoken to him. Why the assignment had demanded he move up the ranks so very quickly. Doing so had meant clearing a path for him, and not worrying about subtlety. As he’d risen, Novia had pushed all those above him out of the way to make room. The spaces behind him had then been filled in by new recruits — none of whom knew what they were doing. None of whom had anyone experienced left to advise them. Which was how this boat had been able to pull right up to the docks, whereas on the south dock Inspector T’lee had known to keep the boat at a distance.

What Novia wouldn’t give to have Daniella T’Lee here right now. She considered sending the boy as a runner to go rouse the other woman and have her bring her troops here, but something told her there wasn’t enough time. Whatever was going to happen, it was taking place *now*.

“We need to check that boat,” she told Course, but he was already moving toward it, his trident once more in his hand. Novia spared only enough time to glare at the boy once more before hurrying after him.

As she ran toward it, she studied the boat more carefully. In addition to the filth, and the utter lack of anything indicating origin or contents, it had a very frayed look about it. More than just weathered, its planks, sails, and ropes looked worn almost beyond endurance. The entire structure seemed ready to crumble away or to burst apart, as if it were being held together by only the thinnest of hopes now, and would fail at any moment.

Course had already reached its prow and leaped across, his boots thudding loudly against the deck as he landed, when the strange boat did exactly that.

Novia had seen fantastic confections of spun sugar, cunningly linked by candy floss so when you tugged the floss free the entire structure fell open to reveal the additional treats inside. This boat was like a larger, uglier version of that. The sides of its hull began to split and splinter apart, gaps appearing between them and the decks—

And out of those gaps poured dark figures who swarmed across to the dock itself. Figures clad in vests and loose pants and kerchiefs, meant to blot the sun and mop the brow.

Pirates!

Course was already stabbing at the first pirate, the tines of his trident piercing the man’s chest and throat simultaneously. He drew the weapon back, turning to the next man.

The first one swiveled around to attack, clawing at him like a wild beast!

“Look out!” Novia shouted. She had a dagger in her hand even before she thought about it, and hurled the weapon flawlessly, its blade flashing as it sailed across wood and water to imbed itself deep into the pirate’s right eye.

It swiveled about to stare at her before seeking Course once more.

Novia stared. How was that even possible? He had a dagger through his right eye, its blade buried deep in his brain. How was he still fighting?

It was Course who offered an answer. “They are zombies!” he shouted, using the shaft of his trident to sweep both of his attackers aside. “Don’t let them bite you. Their mouths are riddled with disease!”

“I wasn’t planning on it!” One of them had shoved past Course and was now clambering onto the docks. She hurried to put herself in its path.

Up close there was no mistaking these creatures for pirates.

At least, not for living ones. The woman Novia found herself staring at was nearly a foot taller than her. Her vest was fastened in front, but the flesh behind it was peeling loose. So was the skin of her cheeks, which had large tears in them, exposing the muscle beneath. Her hair had once been long and thick and black, Novia guessed, but now it was thin and straggly and falling out in clumps. She was unarmed, at least, but had her hands out, curled into claws tipped by cracked yellow fingernails, which she swiped at Novia with as she approached. It was horrifying, and between that and the stench of fresh death, it was all Novia could do to keep her last meal from resurfacing. Novia drew a knife. She knocked the woman’s claws aside with the flat of the blade, then had to bring it up again quickly as her unnerving opponent swiped at her again. She fainted with her empty hand. The woman took the bait, following the quick movement, while Novia hid her knife in shadow. She drove forward, and imbedded it in the woman’s left eye.

It should have killed her, but the woman just kept coming.

Great, Novia thought with a shudder, skipping back to avoid being disemboweled by a vicious backhand swipe. *Apparently zombies don’t care if you stick them, or where, or how often.*

The zombie lunged at her, but Novia twisted out of the way. She could at least keep from getting eaten herself, but if the zombies got past her into Nexus proper, a lot of people would die. She wasn’t about to let that happen.

The only question was, what exactly could she do about it?

She ducked another swipe, then kicked the zombie hard enough in the leg to shatter bone. The blow had no effect. Of course — zombies did not care about broken bones, either. As long as it was still attached, they could use it.

Novia shuddered at the idea of having to hack this woman — and any others behind her — to pieces. In sheer frustration she punched the female zombie full in the nose as hard as she could. The woman’s decaying head burst apart like an overripe fruit that had just been smashed with a mallet.

The zombie immediately dropped to the docks, twitching for a second before going mercifully still.

Spinning about, Novia quickly spotted Course. He was battling several of the zombies at once, stabbing them repeatedly but not having much effect. "Club and bash, not stab!" Novia shouted to him. "Think melon!" He nodded to indicate he had heard her, and quickly changed tactics, picking up an old barrel from off the deck and using it to crush the nearest zombie between that and the main mast. The undead pirate struggled, its limbs flailing, then went limp as its torso tore from the pressure, deflating like a squeezed wineskin.

Glancing around her, Novia saw a heavy oar laying nearby and rushed over to scoop that up. Swinging it like a large, flat club, she battered two more zombies into lifeless heaps, but there were still more pouring out of that ship. She and Course couldn't hold them much longer.

"We need to get the ship away from the dock!" she shouted. Sweeping his barrel in a wide circle to clear a moment's space, Course closed his eyes and concentrated. An instant later, in response to his summons, the water below the ship began to rise. They were on the Yellow River, but it seemed Shunanto, the god of those waters, was willing to accede to the requests of his sister's champion. The water swelled and swelled, billowing into a wave that carried the ship away from the docks and out onto the open water. At least now more zombies wouldn't be able to make it ashore!

Except that, Novia realized, zombies no longer needed to breathe. There was nothing to prevent them from spilling out into the river and walking across its bed, back up into the city along its southern bank. No, they had to destroy the creatures once and for all.

"Smash the ship!" she screamed.

Out on the water Course frowned but nodded. He had heard her. Bowing his head, he held out both arms and the wave grew again, this time lifting the boat straight up into the air before sending it hurtling toward the docks... Which were lined with heavy stone to keep the river from eroding them.

It was a wise move. The impact would shatter the boat and all the creatures on it into pulp.

Including a certain River's Right and Proper Course.

"Jump!" Novia screamed, and he did not even hesitate. Crouching down for an instant, Course launched himself forward, his feet leaving the boat's deck only seconds before it smashed full force into the dock, sending a shock-wave that almost knocked Novia from her feet as the boat and the zombies were crushed completely.

Course was still hurtling through the air, arcing high above her. Novia was an expert at throwing, and could read trajectories at a glance. One look was all it took for her to see that he was about to smash into the side of a warehouse.

At the speed he was traveling, even he wouldn't survive that impact.

She had no way to grab him, no way to stop him — but one utterly insane idea did come to mind. Novia hunched down and sprang upward — throwing herself directly at Course. She was using herself as a weapon.

Her aim was impeccable. She crashed into him mid-air, wrapping her arms around his chest so they wouldn't fly apart, and held on as the collision forced him off his previous course, sending both of them tumbling back and to the side.

They landed with a heavy thump and a white-hot burst of pain on the roof of another, slightly shorter warehouse one building over.

Course struck the roof first, and lay there, groaning. Novia hadn't taken as hard a hit, since Course broke her fall, but it still took her a minute before she could breathe well enough to roll off him. She felt every bruise Leyal had walloped into her, and was fairly sure the slice from Tana's fan had torn open again.

But the pain meant she was alive.

They both stared up at the night sky.

"We did it," she said finally, her breathing almost back under control.

"We did," he agreed. He shifted his head, very gingerly, to grin at her. "Thank you."

"For what?" she asked.

His smile widened, becoming boyish, and a little embarrassed. "For not giving up on me," he answered.

She laughed. "My pleasure."

"Good. There's just one thing."

"What's that?"

He glanced around them, his eyes a little wide and a little. "How, uh..." he asked slowly, fixing his gaze on her face and nowhere else, "do you get down from up here?"

For some reason, Novia found that hysterically funny. And, after a minute, so did Course.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Eventually their hysterical relief eased and their aches protested enough that Novia and River's Right and Proper Course agreed it might be time to quit the roof for lower ground. She wracked her brain, trying to think of some way to help her companion down, but in the end he simply gritted his teeth, ran quickly toward the edge, and threw himself off.

"What?" Startled by the unexpected maneuver, Novia raced after him, but she had not even reached his launch point when she was treated to the sound of a loud splash. Looking out, she saw water rippling just beyond the dock, and a few seconds later a silvery head emerged from the depths. She sagged with relief.

That did not prevent her from snapping at him after she had jumped down to the docks and he had hauled himself back up out of the water. "That was sheer stupidity!" she railed, poking him in the chest. "If you hadn't cleared the dock, you'd have smashed yourself to bits!"

Course shrugged, the gesture spraying water about him. "If I'd stopped to think I wouldn't have done it," he admitted sheepishly. "But then I'd still be stuck up there." He glanced past her, at the building they had been atop, and shuddered. "Now I'm down here, and so are you."

After a moment, Novia laughed, and Course joined in. She took him by the arm and led him back toward the temple. Midnight was long since gone, and in a few hours it would be dawn. The start of a brand new day.

Right now, however, she was exhausted and she suspected Course felt the same. His feet were dragging with every step, and his head hung low. It was no wonder he was wiped out — between the two battles and healing the priests, he'd exerted a tremendous amount of energy. By the time they reached the temple, he was staggering, bleary-eyed, and barely able to speak.

The priests had been busy in their absence. The bodies of the Drag-on-Blooded had been cleared away, their weapons removed from the courtyard. Someone had made an attempt at washing the blood away with buckets of river water, though Novia suspected there'd be a passel of acolytes out here in the morning prying up broken tiles and scrubbing at those still intact. She made a mental note to approach Father Kai in the morning and offer to introduce him to someone who'd pay good money for Melik's daiklave and Tana's

fans. The proceeds would put them well on the way to restoring the temple to its former glory.

But that could all wait until tomorrow. Course rallied just enough at those tall double doors to turn and fix Novia with those glittering black eyes. “Will I see you tomorrow?”

She smiled. “If you’re lucky.” She leaned up to kiss him quickly on the cheek. “Best get some rest now.” Then she turned and walked away as he pulled one of the doors open and slid inside.

Novia knew she should head home herself, but she couldn’t. Not just yet. There was still a piece of the puzzle missing — but with all the other pieces in place, that one was beginning to come clear from the shape of the others around it. It was a person, that much she was sure of. A person who had orchestrated much, if not all, of this.

That was what she had come to realize, as all the recent events began to come into focus. The situation with that boat had finally clued her in. Someone had arranged for her to help Jiro Hatan rise through the ranks as a way to make sure no one competent was left overseeing the northern docks — as good as she was, even Saria Lenko had to balance learning the ropes of her new position while handling all the chaos in the ranks below her. The same person who’d commissioned Novia for that job had presumably arranged for the boat itself, with its cargo of zombie warriors. And the boat on the other side, the one with that two-headed creature onboard? This person must have set that up as well. It had drawn all their attention to the southern dock, away from the real danger — if Novia had not felt that something was wrong and dragged Course along to investigate, those zombies would have spilled out onto the docks and into the city.

That took careful planning. As she walked away from the temple, not bothering to take to the rooftops for once, Novia began to wonder just how far that planning extended. Had the Dragon-Blooded been part of it, too? Tana had mentioned following the plan — not “my plan” or “our plan,” just “the plan,” which suggested that she had not been involved in creating it. Who had? This same mystery person? Had the entire situation with them just been another gambit to keep everyone guessing and off-balance? To throw her off so that she couldn’t stop whatever else they had planned?

All the more reason to find this stranger and ask them.

But of course Novia had no idea who this shadowy mastermind might be. Something occurred to her, however.

She might not know this person’s name, or occupation, or intentions. But she had a good idea where they might be found. The only place besides the docks to have featured in not one but two different incidents.

The Crane’s Wayward Daughters.

Novia considered banging on the tavern door until Nalak answered, but she was too tired and frustrated to be subtle or polite. She went for a different way in. Circling around to the back of the inn, she jumped straight up to the roof. The room where Father Kai had been held was at the far end, so she paced silently across the slanted roof until she was standing directly above it.

It was almost amusing that after she'd been sent to investigate a break-in at the Crane, Novia was now the one breaking in. *I'll laugh about it later, if this doesn't get me killed.* Then, crouching down and grasping the roof's edge with her hands, she flipped off the edge, twisting as she simultaneously flew and fell so that she was now swinging feet-first toward the window into that room.

A window that had conveniently been left open wide, she saw now, an instant before her feet passed through that empty space and into the room proper. She glided in through the window and landed on her feet just beyond the single bed.

Something shifted in the shadows by the far corner, and Novia spun, a dagger ready in her hand.

"Hello, Novia Claro." The voice was strangely clear and high, like a child's whisper, but at the same time dark and leaden and devoid of life, love, and laughter. "I wondered how long it would take for you to figure this part out. I am pleased that you finally did."

"Who the hell are you?" Novia demanded. The room was as sparsely furnished as the last time she'd been here. There was nothing about the place to give any indication as to its owner's personality or plans. Nor could she see the owner of that voice.

Then the shadows moved again — and a small, slight figure emerged from them, taking shape in the gloom like someone pushing through a curtain onto a dimly lit stage. "I am Lament of the Soul Rent by Adversity," the stranger declared, closing the distance between them without any noise or any sign of motion. Now Novia could see that it was a young man, with chalk-white skin and ink-black hair and big dark eyes — and a very familiar cast to his features.

A second later, it clicked. "You were Jiro's courier!"

"I was," he agreed with a dry, raspy chuckle. "It seemed the simplest method."

Of course, Novia thought. He'd approached her as a simple messenger and produced a letter, purportedly from Jiro Hatan, looking to hire her. She'd never even thought to question if the missive might be from someone else instead. Let alone that the messenger she had seen so many times was in reality the one who had orchestrated all of this. Over and over again these last couple of weeks, she'd spotted him at the Northern Dock Station and assumed he was there carrying out Jiro's business. She'd even seen him on the street the day Course ducked away from Rasira Iresh — had he been keeping tabs on her? On Course? On both of them?

"How?" she asked, very aware that she still had her knife in hand.

He grinned, revealing surprisingly even, white teeth. His laugh had a strange, eerie echo to it, as if it rang out of a hollow bell. She shivered from the sound of it.

Ignoring his obvious entertainment at her surprise, Novia continued, "You were behind all of this?"

"All of it," Lament confirmed. "And you did not notice, not even once." He smirked at her from under the long, floppy spikes of his hair. "Did you not wonder at all? Or think it too much a coincidence, the way events unfolded?"

"The docks . . ." she started, but he waved a narrow, long-fingered hand.

"That, yes," he stated, "but so much more. The priests in the temple? Father Kai? Did you not wonder at how you should happen to notice the perfect image outside the temple that night? The one that looked so completely like your friend River's Right and Proper Course?" Novia remembered how a stray moonbeam had struck the stained glass at just the right moment, calling her attention to it. "Or how he should happen to return right when that group of Dragon-Blooded came to town? Or the way you could not locate them, even though you searched all across this wretched city of yours?"

"You hid them," Novia accused.

"I did! Under your very nose, until I felt the time was right for you to 'happen' across them." His grin took up most of his narrow face as he crowed, "You never saw anything until I wanted you to see it! The day you came here to ask Father Kai about the disturbances, you never even suspected I was on the other side of the door, keeping him from asking you for help."

She remembered the confusion on Father Kai's face, and how she'd seen a similar struggle on Ortez Fangohl's — had Fangohl perhaps opened the door to his room and witnessed the fight the night before? Had he seen Lament dragging the head priest back upstairs, and had Lament then commanded him to forget? She'd seen that odd confusion on others in the last couple of weeks, including... "Karal Dacar," she said. "You did something like that to him? Tricked him into killing the priests for you?"

Lament snorted. "I made the suggestion, but it took very little convincing for him to start picking them off. If only you hadn't killed him so early, I wouldn't have had to dispatch all those dockworkers myself. Did you like my little sculpture, by the way?"

Novia shuddered. "What purpose did it serve? The dockworkers did nothing to you. The priests did nothing."

"Oh, the dockworkers were merely to frighten people. But the priests... They *did* do something. Their rituals grant Hushanti power. Instilling her essence into Atawe and making him her champion left her weak. The priests who were still there to perform the rituals were terrified. They rushed through their

prayers. They left parts out. And without Father Kai to lead them properly, she couldn't recover as quickly. It left the docks vulnerable, whether any of you realized it or not."

"But you kept Father Kai alive."

Lament shrugged. "As a final sacrifice, if it came to that. Which it didn't. Next time, perhaps."

Novia didn't rise to that bait. "What was the point?" she demanded. "Why go through all this?"

"Why?" His eyes grew enormous. "You don't know yet? Imagine what would have happened had you not stopped the Dragon-Blooded from capturing your friend."

She stopped to consider that. What would have happened? The zombies would have overrun the northern docks and spilled into the Cinnabar District. At that late hour, they'd have found easy victims asleep in their beds. Many would have died, still more would have become dangerously ill from their disease-ridden bites. Plague-panic would have spread through the city like wildfire, infecting all of Nexus with not just illness but, even more dangerously, with chaos and despair.

"Get out of my city," she warned. But he only laughed at her, the sound sending yet more shivers down her spine.

"I am enjoying my time here," he replied. "There is so much potential to this place." While he spoke, he idly ran his hands along the edge of the small table. As Novia watched, the table began to blacken along the edges, paint peeling away and metal rusting, all of its surfaces crumbling from sudden age. He turned toward her, and she backed away as much as the small room would allow, hands held high before his triumphant grin. "After all, the people here in Nexus deserve the chance to be bereft as well, to wallow in despair and fear and chaos and turmoil, to bow down and serve their true masters."

"Never," Novia insisted. She brandished the knife in her hand, waving the long, sharp edge mere inches from his nose. "I won't let you."

But he reached out and tapped the tip of his forefinger against her blade. It corroded at once, the blade darkening and dulling and warping before simply disintegrating, leaving her holding nothing but an empty handle.

On his forehead, a dark symbol bloomed: a circle with the top half shaded in. Where Novia's Caste Mark glowed as golden as the sun, Lament's was black as the darkest alleys of the Undercity.

"What are you?" she whispered.

"That, Novia Claro, is a discussion for another time," he replied. "I shall depart now," Lament acknowledged with a dip of his head that might have been a bow. He stepped over toward the open window, the same one Novia had used to enter. "But we shall see each other again. My master is not done with you yet."

“Yeah, well, tell him I’m far from through with him either,” she snapped back. Lament only grinned and then the darkness rose up and enveloped not only him but the window beside him, and the wall that window allowed passage through. A moment later the shadows dispersed — and he was nowhere to be found.

Novia grimaced at the empty hilt she still held, and quickly tossed it away. Despite her brave words, her heart was beating fast as the pound of rain upon a tin roof.

With a shake of her head that sent her red mane dancing about her in a cloud, Novia forcibly excised those dark thoughts. She and Course had defeated the Dragon-Blooded. They’d taken down not one, but two boatloads of creatures sent to sow chaos and death.

On top of which, she had found River’s Right and Proper Course. They worked well together and seemed well on their way toward becoming a permanent team. She knew she could count on him as a friend and an ally, should Lament return. *When* he returned.

For now, she was tired, so very tired. But a part of her was also energized. So much had occurred over the last two weeks, and she had survived it all. That called for celebration. If you could not celebrate an outright victory, Novia reasoned, you ought to celebrate each of the steps along the way. That was the recipe for a full and happy life, and she intended to live hers to the fullest.

Novia climbed through the window and up onto the Crane’s roof. Then she took off across the rooftops, leaping and soaring toward home as the sun rose over Nexus.

EXALTED

THIRD EDITION

FALSE IMAGES

Novia Claro made him up to cover her own tracks while she investigates the murders of Hushanti's priests in Nexus. He's a convenient ruse, a rumor to spark the people's imaginations, distract them from her actions, and nothing more... until the day he bursts forth from the river and offers Novia his help. Now he's hunted by several Dragon-Blooded, and Novia has to figure out whether she can trust him or if she'll end up as just another body left in his wake.

