Dramatis Personae

The Sustained:

Berilo Fisher—Head of House Fisher and Lord Ascendant of the Sustained Council

Gereho Weaver—Head of House Weaver and Sustained Councilor

Echio Tanner—Head of House Tanner and Sustained Councilor

Tenlor Fisher—Ascendant Commander and son of the Lord Ascendant

Hazra Fisher—Daughter of the Lord Ascendant

‘Gerit’—Clarion of Patchwork

The dwarves:

Recco Ulthos—Head of Clan Firebrand and Hauld of the Enclave

Chanul Ulthos—Hauld-Issuant of the Enclave

The stra’tchi:

Mayor Aldwith—Leader of Sakkas patch

Ta’anu Bladescar—Boss of Rennil patch

Drakos Bloodeye—Boss of the Deathwatchers

Sabra—well… Sabra

Endu—healer in Tellek patch

Durhu—farmer in Tellek patch

Arico—farmer in Tellek patch

Other:

Edon Cartwright—spymaster in Patchwork

Terres Huun—smuggler in Patchwork

Jaas Senneco—scholar from Satacha

Lexicon Arcana:

Aquun: (proper noun)—the guardian spirit of the waters. Worshipped by most as a god.

Shemra: ‘many hungers’—the counterpart to Aquun. A thousand evil spirits blamed for drought. Also known as the Many, or the Multitude

Stra’tchi: ‘dirty people’—the lowest caste of people. They have no direct access to water.

Sha’haln: ‘shared heart’—a vivid and disturbing form of dreaming, common to almost everyone.

Ta’sana: ‘lifeblood’—the highest oath anyone can swear. Requires as many witnesses as possible.

Mi’he: ‘starlight’—an affectionate nickname.

Ami’ha: ‘tough one’—a similar nickname usually meant for strangers.

B’rata: ‘shaggy dog’—usually used in reference to an actual dog.

Sha'thra: 'evil-worshipper'—a grave insult, meant for those who serve the Shemra

Part 1: Ripples in a Pond

Chapter 1

A light breeze whipped through the tall grass, rustling Jaas’ short-cut hair. She closed her eyes for just a moment, enjoying the sensation while she still could. Even though the last snows had melted over a month ago, the sun’s warmth still barely cut through the chill in the air. Jaas shivered as she looked around.

Half of the world seemed perfectly normal, even idyllic. A steady, quiet river flowed its inexorable way south. Plains spread out on both sides, covered with grass and dotted with the occasional tree. Mountains rose off to the east, and a dense forest grew to the west. But when she turned around to look at the other half, a jet-black barrier intersected the river, extending dozens of leagues to both east and west. The barrier remained completely opaque despite the noon-day sun, just as it had been for centuries now.

It looked like a hole in existence itself.

Jaas had studied this phenomenon for years now, and others had done the same for much longer than that. The time had done nothing to decrease its impressiveness, though. Each time she saw it, Jaas still felt overwhelmed by its sheer magnitude.

This wasn’t like any old brick wall, or the more powerful magic barriers she’d studied as part of her training. In fact, it wasn’t really a barrier at all, because objects didn’t bounce off of it. Anything that slid into that inky black abyss was just… gone.

Early on, Jaas had kept on instinctively trying to look *up* in an effort to see the top of the barrier, even though she knew there wasn’t one. People had tried going over it, and repeatedly failed. Just as the multiple attempts to dig under it had found the exact same result. It seemed to have no end, above or below. As for side-to-side, she knew that the barrier was roughly oval in shape, and that it encompassed an entire city. *The* city, if the histories were to be believed. Vasiriah had once been considered the most powerful city in the world.

A soft, high-pitched humming noise behind her signaled a new arrival. Jaas sighed and turned around. Speaking of holes in existence…

The hum was coming from a circular portal which had opened up just above the grass. As she watched, her assistant stepped out and waved a hand behind him to close it again.

“You’re late,” Jaas accused him, though she was careful to keep her voice mild. He’d always been a kind soul, with easily bruised feelings.

“I know. I would have come another way, but I just-” he looked down at his webbed feet briefly. “I just wanted to make sure no one was following me.”

Jaas grimaced and put a hand on his shoulder. “For the last time, Lem, you don’t need to worry. No one ever comes this close to the city anymore, and the next patrol that has even a chance of seeing us won’t pass by until early evening.”

Like most of his people, Inelem was tall, perhaps two heads taller than Jaas. Lem was a Pescah: a race of water-breathers from the other side of the nearby ocean. She’d read about others like him, but he was the only one she’d ever seen. From what she’d been able to learn about him over the past few years, Lem was an exception to his people in several ways. His mastery of portal magic was especially unusual for his kind.

Jaas had a working understanding of using magic for interdimensional travel—enough to pass muster at the Bresorian Academy they’d both attended—but Lem was a true prodigy. He could open a larger portal than anyone she knew, and could maintain it longer as well. Portals couldn’t be moved once opened up, but Lem could spin them, and even open them from great distances away, provided he knew the area well enough.

That skill alone would have guaranteed him a life of privilege and luxury back home, but Lem had wanted more out of life. He didn’t like to talk about it, but Jaas suspected he’d applied to the Academy against his family’s wishes. It had taken a while, but the school authorities had eventually—and reluctantly, from what Jaas had heard—admitted him. They weren’t exactly known for embracing outsiders.

It couldn’t have been an easy decision for him, either. For one thing, Pescah couldn’t breathe air. He’d needed magic treatments in order to survive out of water—long, painful and expensive treatments. She was sure that walking had been no picnic for him at first, either. As tall as he was now, this was *after* his spine had compressed under what most people considered to be normal gravity. She remembered her final year at the Academy, watching this… low-tier fishperson lurching across the grounds from class to class and feeling sorry for him.

Jaas was just grateful he’d stuck it out. Lem had graduated a few months ago, and agreed to be her assistant. He was quite good at it, too. Despite all his other obstacles, one of his biggest hurdles had been his own hesitancy. Lem had been nervous, first out of fear of disappointing his new employer. Recently, it was more because of the work they were doing together. It was forbidden, after all.

He’d brought her pack along, and she wasted no time going through it. Despite his fidgety nature, or perhaps because of it, Lem had an eye for details. He’d followed her instructions to the letter, bringing everything she’d asked.

“Thanks,” she said approvingly, as she rummaged through the bag. She gazed back up at the barrier, and then looked over at him. “We’re gonna make history, Lem. We’ll be known far and wide for this, just you wait.”

It was an important moment for both of them. Their first few weeks out here had been theoretical—working on ways to get into the city safely. Then they’d started making progress, based on Lem’s observations on the river itself. Now they were close to their goal—so close she could almost taste it!

Lem only stared over her shoulder at the pitch blackness. “I hope you’re right, but we still have a lot of work to do before we can even test your theory.”

“Then we shouldn’t waste time,” she said with a smile, sitting cross-legged and emptying her bag out on the grass between them. “Come on, let’s get it done.”

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Arico gave a short cry of pain and jumped up and down, holding his injured shin. His foot slipped in the dirt, and he fell unceremoniously on his rear. Tula trotted away, bleating in protest and favoring her own hurt leg. At least she was still penned in, unable to escape to the field.

Arico gingerly examined the skin under his torn pant leg. Tula’s horns weren’t particularly sharp, but she’d put a lot of effort into the thrust. Yup, he was bleeding all right. Fortunately the wound looked clean enough. With a resigned chuckle, he stood carefully and semi-hopped his way over to the nearby fence.

Shaking his head, Arico slipped through the gate and limped his way over to the wide barrel next to the barn. The next Ritual of Waters wasn’t for another week or so, but he still had enough to wash the wound. He grabbed a nearby cloth and wrapped his leg; he’d get some ointment for it back in the cabin, but first he had to see to Tula.

“Come on, girl,” he coaxed as he climbed over the fence again. Tula gave him a reproachful look and kept her distance. For a goat, she was pretty smart.

Arico took a deep breath and then darted at her. He was just fast enough to grab her leg—thankfully one of the good ones—and flipped her over in the dirt. She protested loudly, kicking at him, but he held his grip and kept her on her back. With his free hand he grabbed a rope from the fence post and tied her three good legs together so she couldn’t keep kicking. Then he finally took a look at her left rear hoof.

There was a thistle, lodged in deep just where the hoof ended and the flesh began. Wincing in sympathy, Arico took a breath, and then in one swift, smooth motion grabbed the end of the thistle and pulled it out. Tula bleated loudly again, but he held her tight so she couldn’t wriggle free. She calmed down after a few moments, once he’d cleaned and started wrapping her leg.

“You’d better stay off this foot for now,” he advised her casually, and wondered if he could pick her up and move her with his own injured leg. He knew from experience that if he just untied her, she’d rip that bandage off in no time and go running around again.

Looping the rope around her bandaged leg, he secured it and stood to go get the herbs to make her sleep. As he approached the fence post a hand reached out to him, gripping a bundle of hops wrapped in wheat.

Arico grinned slightly and took the bundle. “Thanks.”

His father watched as he carefully unwrapped and fed the bundle to Tula. Goats weren’t known for being too particular about what they ate, and Tula was no exception. The wheat was enough to disguise the bitter hops, and she took the whole dose. Granted, feeding farm animals one of the ingredients for making beer wasn’t a good idea in the long term, but it worked well as a painkiller. Soon she was relaxed enough that he felt safe untying her and putting her in one corner of the barn to rest.

Arico had forgotten how chilly it was outside; he shivered and rubbed his arms. Without hesitation, his father pulled the cloak from his own shoulders and wrapped it around Arico. They closed the barn doors together, and headed back to the cabin they’d shared since he was three.

His father was called Durhu. He had been both deaf and mute for as long as Arico could remember. It was something the villagers nearby had needed to adjust to, but to Arico this had always been normal. Durhu had been an exceptional father, teacher, mentor and friend. He’d taught Arico to read lips and then to read letters—though the latter had to be done in secret. Sadly even Durhu, who’d had a lifetime of practice lipreading, could only get so much of what was told to him. Arico had learned to understand his handtalk just as well, but he was one of only a handful of people who could.

Of course it came as no surprise that Arico had been a very quiet child. Durhu had owned a dog—specially trained to come and get him if Arico had been crying as a baby. That had been years ago, before they’d moved here. Arico didn’t even remember the dog.

As a youngster, Arico had grown accustomed to holding his tongue. When they’d eventually moved here, Durhu had encouraged him to meet a few others from this patch, and he’d learned to speak more clearly. He had friends from elsewhere as well, who’d helped him learn how to speak normally. Neither he nor Durhu ever mentioned them though, for their own safety.

Tellek patch was one of dozens on the edge of the city. With only a fraction of the patch taken up by the city wall, the rest of the land was arable—if not ideal—for farming. It was a pleasant enough place in which to grow up, if a little boring at times.

For his friends here in Tellek, anyway. Arico wasn’t bored. He was constantly leaving in secret for his training, and coming back just as covertly.

His father touched his arm to get his attention and signed, *I just got back from Endu’s. Hallo…* he hesitated briefly, a grim expression on his face. *Hallo has asked for the Ritual of Separation.*

Arico stared at him. “I… didn’t know it was that bad. I’m so sorry.” He gave his father a brief embrace.

Hallo was a farmer as well, but like most people in Tellek patch, he also had a secondary occupation. He made candles, and he seemed to enjoy it very much. He was much older than Arico, so they’d never gotten to know each other very well. Arico mostly thought of him as a sort of distant uncle, but Durhu was a different story. He and Hallo had been close friends for nearly twenty years now. Hallo’s wife had died over five years ago and he had no other living family, but nearly the entire village held him in high esteem.

Two weeks ago he’d been tending to one of his cows and she’d kicked him in the chest. Hallo had seemed fine at first, but in a great deal of pain. Endu had taken a look at him and determined that one of his ribs had been cracked open, letting bits of bone float free inside his chest. She’d performed a chirgury (she was the only person in Tellek who knew *how*) to remove them, but it seemed she’d missed some.

Hallo had only gotten worse since then. According to Durhu, his pain was now so severe that he’d soiled himself just trying to stand up. And another chirgury so soon after the first one would be no better than a death sentence: he’d probably die the moment she opened him up.

“When will it happen?” Arico asked softly, signing as well as speaking.

*Tonight, just after sundown,* Durhu answered. *The word has already gone out. They’re preparing a meal, and the penet has been told.*

He sighed, and pulled a bit of paper from his coat. *Still, life must go on. Endu made another list for you.* He handed it over.

Arico made a noise of protest. “But I’m just getting warm again,” he stretched, trying to get the ache out of his back and leg. “Can’t it wait?”

Durhu only gave him a wry look, and Arico shook his head. “I guess not.”

*Do you want to take Endu or the boys with you today?*

Arico looked over the list. “No, this is all pretty common stuff. I won’t need any of them for this.” He quirked a smile. “At least one of us should get the day off. And even if it does take longer than usual, I should be back in plenty of time… for the ritual.”

*Sounds good. Part of that fence looks ready to fall apart, so I should look at it before sundown. I’ll have some dinner ready for you by the time you get back.* He grimaced a little. *And we can’t forget the Ritual of Waters, either. It’s just over a week away, and we need to have our tithe ready.*

Thinking grimly of that as well, Arico got up and picked out one of his favorite winter coats. He paused to glance at his father’s increasingly lean form; he’d been losing weight again. “Just be careful not to overdo it again, mi’he,” he used the ancient term affectionately. “Perhaps I should talk to Widow Mirren first, and ask her to stop by and make sure you’re doing well.”

His father gave him a horrified glance. *You wouldn’t dare!*

Mrs. Mirren was a good, kindly woman, but she had a tendency to see men as collections of flaws that needed correcting. And she’d been giving more and more signs that Durhu was likely to be her next ‘project’.

Arico let a hint of a smile through his serious front, “Well, I won’t have to if you take it easy, will I?”

Durhu responded with an overly-dramatic look of woe, and slowly shook his head in protest. *Oh, what did I do to deserve such a manipulative child?*

“No more than I did, to be cursed with an overly stubborn father!” Arico responded as he backed out the door. “Don’t test me!”

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Chapter 2

Grey skies and still air seemed to permeate his skin as Arico slowly made his way south. From this side of the cabin, he could see the city walls about a league to the north, beyond the village. Beyond that was the illusion of open sky, and beyond that, the mountains. The aqueduct system ran through the village like the veins in some kind of massive beast, and Tellek’s ‘heart’ was exemplified by the large factory building right in the middle. Thankfully it wasn’t in use right now, and hopefully wouldn’t be ever again.

A few wisps of smoke rose from the nearby houses, including one on the southern edge of the village. His friends would be there. Balter and Veles were probably behind their house right now, honing their Ona skills. Endu was their mother, and she would no doubt find some chore or another for them when they came back inside.

He’d never planned on trusting any of them with his secret. Balter had seen Arico navigate once, and then spied on him for weeks as he came and went through the threads. Of course he told his brother, and it wasn’t long before their mother heard as well. Mercifully though, the news had never spread past the three of them. Well, them, D’tor and Durhu, that was. When Endu finally confronted him with what she knew, Arico had been terrified.

He’d grown up with them. What little time he’d had away from the farm, and his training, had been spent with them. He’d shared meals with them countless times; spent many a night at their house, and they at his. And still, if they had told the local magistrate or any of the other Sustained, he would have been taken away, probably to his death.

Arico remembered telling his father that they knew. The old man had shown his usual quiet resolve, and calmly told him that there was nothing they could do but wait and see. Still, Arico remembered the flash of fear in his old man’s eyes. Durhu had been afraid, and that was a rare thing to see.

Endu had taken him aside the very next day. “I’m giving you my trust, so that you can return it,” she’d said to him, and then explained what she meant. Learning that his ‘friends’ outside Tellek patch were her friends too, had been stunning, to say the least.

Nearly two years had gone by, and the three of them had remained true and loyal to Arico. Endu did ask him to pick up some medicines and herbs from other patches from time to time, but that was no problem. Sometimes he even took the boys along for the ride. It required careful planning to make sure the magistrate wouldn’t find out, but it did work. Today was nothing special, though. Arico shouldered his mostly empty pack and continued resolutely towards the nearest border.

Anyone who lived in Patchwork knew where each of the threads existed. A great many threads were marked with red paint on the ground as a warning to small children. Some had used markings in blood instead, especially the deep city patches. He did his best to steer clear of those. The doors and walls of buildings built on threadlines and marked with symbols in blood had often been used just after the Threading as human slaughterhouses or mass graves. When he caught a glimpse inside those structures, the images took a long time to pass from his mind.

Finally, he was at the border. By habit Arico looked to the west, down the edge of the threads. D’tor’s house was down there in the distance. He hesitated briefly, and turned towards her house. It only took a few minutes before he was at the fence surrounding D’tor’s farm. He climbed it easily, and then knocked on her door. He heard her faint voice answer—not from inside, but from the other side of the house—so he walked around to get a better look.

D’tor’s dark hair glistened in the sun as she looked up at him from her garden. It was small—mostly fenced in to keep it safe from the livestock. Wiping her brow, she stood up and let go of the hoe. “Hey.” She squinted up at him, and he realized the sunlight was right in her eyes.

“Hey yourself,” he replied, moving to block the sun. “Sorry to just drop in like this, but I wanted to see how your newest project was faring.” He glanced down at the uneven rows in the garden, complete with un-tilled sections of earth and lots of stones. “Yup. That’s pretty much what I expected to see.”

She gave him a mocking glare. “Don’t start with me, Arico. You know I’m not used to this gardening thing. Besides, you’re one to talk. You’ve got *one* animal on your farm, and she’s really more of a pet than livestock!”

Arico chuckled. “Fair enough.” Something caught his eye, and he turned to see a large white mark painted on the wall of her home. “This is new.”

D’tor grimaced. “One of the kids from the village painted it last night. I think it was supposed to be a warning, but I heard him moving around out here and got up to see what was going on. I scared him off mid-stroke, so now it just looks like a child’s scribbling.”

“I’m sorry.” Arico said softly. “I’m headed to market to pick up some supplies,” he put in casually. “D’you want me to bring back something to cover this up?”

She shook her head. “I’m good for now, thanks. Besides, I’m expecting company, and I don’t want the house smelling of paint on top of its usual smells.”

Arico grinned. “Well, greet him for me when he gets here.”

“I’ll be sure *not* to do that,” D’tor responded sarcastically. “Since neither of you is supposed to know about the other. I almost feel like I’m being unfaithful, actually,” she added with a thoughtful tone to her voice.

“Bah.” Arico waved a hand as he made his way back to the fence. “I’m no threat to him. Even though you do look ravishing, all covered in sweat and dirt like that.”

She grabbed a rake from the side of the house and leveled it at him. “Get going, or I’ll leave a few marks in your rump even you can’t laugh away!”

Chuckling, he raised his hands in surrender and headed back up the hill.

Arico had seen his fair share of malformed people, mostly from other patches around the city. Some had an extra finger, others a particularly large birthmark. One had even had a split along his face—not a scar from battle, but a cleft jaw that he’d carried from birth. The Shemra had done their work cruelly to many people, and especially to D’tor.

D’tor was a dwarf. Not a full dwarf like the others though; she’d been born to human parents. Because of her short stature, D’tor’s farm was right on one of this patch’s corners, where two threads met. It was an inhospitable place to grow crops, which was why she focused mostly on her livestock. It was dangerous, too. One slip on the edge of her farm, and D’tor would be gone forever. She was as far from the village as she could be, though not by choice. Her only interaction with her neighbors was at the Ritual of Waters, and that was because it was required by law. The graffiti on her house was unfortunately something to be expected.

He’d found D’tor to be a thoughtful and kind person despite being exiled to the edge of the patch. She was filled with wisdom and understanding, and that made her all the more impressive. In her place, Arico was sure he would have felt nothing but hatred and bitterness.

It was strange. D’tor was an outcast—a pariah. But it was that very status that freed her, too. Anyone who lived with the rest of the villagers would be subject to a great deal of scrutiny. Any suitors visiting them—such as D’tor’s mystery man—would have to introduce himself to lots of people, and be constantly living up to the community’s expectations. D’tor and her friend didn’t have to put up with any of that, and Arico found he sometimes envied her for that freedom.

It was also strange, even after all the time they’d known each other, that he could speak so openly with D’tor. The fact that he could leave Tellek patch whenever he wanted was a closely guarded secret, but he trusted her to keep her mouth shut. Besides, who would believe her if she told anyone? To them she was just a dwarf, after all. As far as most of the city was concerned, she *deserved* to be in exile.

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The deep red sun had just dipped past the wall, and the crowd was finally assembled. Arico’s shopping trip hadn’t taken long, and he’d returned home in plenty of time. Now he stood with his friends just outside Hallo’s house. Durhu was inside next to Hallo’s bed exchanging words. Hallo was one of the few people who understood handtalk, but no one seemed to mind. At least the magistrate wasn’t attending—no one liked having that overbearing windbag around.

A soft murmur rippled through the crowd, and Arico looked back to see newcomers approaching. It was Ta’anu and four others moving in step with him. He nodded to Arico, then stepped inside and embraced Durhu briefly. He shook hands with Hallo as well.

Arico didn’t know much about Ta’anu, really. Just that he’d been born here, in Tellek patch, and was now mayor of some other patch on the other side of the city. His father had died years ago, but he still came to Tellek from time to time to visit with his mother. Arico thought he would have really liked Ta’anu if he’d come around more often. As it was, he was just a distant figure—more like a silhouette than an actual friend.

Ta’anu was rich, though. He was possibly the wealthiest stra’tchi alive, which explained how he could afford five Transit Passes for himself and his friends, or more likely, his bodyguards. They stood a comfortable distance from him, but kept eyes on both him and the nearby houses. No, they were definitely not here to pay their respects. Most stra’tchi never knew their birth parents, because of the Ritual of Rejoining. Ta’anu had been able to bribe someone to find out that his mother was here in Tellek patch.

The people inside the house carefully lifted Hallo up and onto the litter, and then hoisted it up to shoulder height and maneuvered outside. The ritual was starting. Durhu and Ta’anu were among the four carrying him, though Ta’anu had to crouch a bit to keep Hallo level.

It was quiet for once in the village. Unlike most rituals in the city, this one had nothing to do with Aquun, the Sustained, or the magistrate. That made it a nearly silent affair from start to finish. No one spoke as the entire group, several dozen at least, moved slowly uphill following the aqueduct line. It was a gentle incline and they took their time, lest Hallo fall off of the litter. That would be a sight, Arico reflected with dark humor—their honored one rolling down the hill like a loose wheel, being chased by his friends and family.

And then it was finally time. Next to the threads, they lowered him into the oversized bathtub. He floated there, hands on both sides, and smiled up at everyone. His intent was clear: this was to be a beautiful moment, as well as a sorrowful one.

“I’m ready,” Hallo said softly, squeezing Durhu’s hand one last time, and closed his eyes.

As one, the four of them reached out and submerged Hallo, holding him under the Waters. He was peaceful for a few moments, and then the struggle started. Some in the crowd turned away in grief or horror, unable to witness it, but Arico stood firm. The struggling was instinct, and no matter how much Hallo wanted this, he couldn’t overcome his instincts completely.

At least it was over quickly. His struggles subsided, but his friends kept him under, just to be sure. It wasn’t just part of the ritual, but a common sense measure, as some people had recovered even after the ritual.

Over the distant wall, the last rays of sunlight had faded away.

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There. It was all in place.

Jaas leaned back on her heels and wiped at her forehead. At least she wouldn’t have to worry about being dirty or sweaty once she was underway; the river would take care of that. Night had fallen while they’d been setting up their monitoring devices, and the stars were just starting to peek out in the fading light.

“Are you sure you want to go ahead with this, Jaas?” Inelem’s voice betrayed a tremble as he eyed the massive black wall behind her. “It’s not too late to back out. No one knows what you’re planning, so no one will care if you don’t go through with it.”

Jaas gave him a reassuring smile. “I’ll be fine, Lem. I know what I’m doing.”

Grimacing at the temperature, she waded down into the river and let the cold waters flow past her. Lem followed without hesitation—he was used to getting wet, after all. “It’s a risk, to be sure, but one I’m willing to take.” She paused at that. “Besides, this is the only way I’ll be able to test my theory.”

Jaas closed her eyes again, enjoying the sound of insects chirping in the field, the feel of the cold water rushing past her. She breathed a sigh of contentment. Whatever came next, whatever hardships or trials she was about to face, at least she had moments like these to remember. “This’ll be worth it, Lem. Trust me.”

“Even if it kills you?” Lem objected harshly.

Jaas looked back at him. “Yes, even then.” She extended an arm to him, and he dutifully helped her with the pack. She staggered a bit under its weight at first, but adjusted quickly. Depending on how far she would have to go, it might be a problem to bring so much. It couldn’t be helped, though. She’d sooner cut off an arm and leave *that* behind before abandoning any of her materials.

“Remember, give me three days. If you don’t hear from me by dusk on the third day, I want you to leave, and don’t come back. I’ve made arrangements with my brother if that happens.”

Lem set his jaw in an almost funny attempt to show courage, and nodded. Jaas wrapped her arms around his midsection briefly, both as a reassurance and a farewell. Blinking back tears—and feeling a bit of surprise at that—she turned away from him and began wading deeper.

The cold permeated her light clothing, seeming to sink right into her bones, but she clenched her teeth and kept on until she was treading water. She wasn’t the best swimmer, but this trip hopefully wouldn’t require much skill in the water.

“The spell only lasts for a few seconds. It’s important that you don’t resist it,” Lem said as he waded his way back onto the shore.

“I haven’t forgotten,” she answered wryly. Slowly, she turned to face the blackness again. Even at night, it stood out from the starlight. A void that not even the stars could shine through.

Jaas took a deep breath. “All right. Go ahead.”

Inelem spoke a word, and she felt herself sinking into the river as her mind went blank.

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Chapter 3

The ritual was over. A navigator from the city had arrived to take care of Hallo’s body, according to stra’tchi precepts. The assembled crowd had watched as he carried Hallo away and they both vanished into the threads. Endu had then invited them to a late meal where they could share memories of him. Arico wasn’t sure he should attend at first, but decided to anyway. Durhu could probably use him, both for moral support and as a translator.

They had just reached the edge of the village when the ground heaved underneath them, as if a great beast deep underground was trying to shake them off its back!

There had been no warning. Arico crouched down on the ground, stretching trembling arms out to both sides to steady himself. He was dimly aware of others doing the same in the darkness, some screaming in fear as they reached for the nearest walls or posts to hold onto.

Mercifully, the tremors stopped after only a few seconds, but they were echoed by continued cries of dismay from all around him. The wooden frames of nearby windows and doors were still rattling, even after it ended.

What in the Multitude had *that* been? He’d heard of… what was the word? Earthquakes? Yes, earthquakes, happening in the distant past, but that had been before the Threading! The ground had never shaken like that before, not in his lifetime.

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In the dim alleys and hard streets, Sabra reached out to the walls as if to steady them. A few bricks fell on his back and he grunted as he shook them off.

In her bed at the manor, Hazra sat bolt upright, her dreams instantly forgotten. The crashes of glass breaking in the dining room below echoed up to her, and she ran to the window to look outside.

The quake was felt all over the city, from hovels sheltering the very poorest to the tapestried halls of the Councilors themselves. The penets in their temple felt it, as did the soldiers in their barracks. Deathwatchers, dwarves, stra’tchi, Sustained, or otherwise, a universal fear swept the city as the earth shivered beneath them.

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Pain shot through her shoulder, and her lungs burned. Kicking frantically, Jaas forced her way to the surface and took a ragged breath. Cold metal was digging into her left shoulder and arm, and she twisted away from it, coughing as she did so.

She blinked away the last of the water as she held onto the metal bars and took a look around. Inelem was nowhere to be seen. The river was grated off—that was the metal she was pressed up against—and both sides of the river were bordered by stone walkways. She’d made it inside!

She laughed aloud and looked around excitedly. She couldn’t see anyone, but that meant very little. She paused for a moment in shock, realizing that she could actually *see*! Starlight filtered down on her from above, apparently unimpeded by the barrier itself!

First things first: she had to get out of the water before she caught her death. The grate looked old but sturdy, and she used it to climb up out of the water and pull herself onto one of the walkways.

With a surge of panic Jaas realized her pack was missing, but then spotted it lodged in the grate and retrieved it. Carefully, she opened it and examined the contents. Her scrollcases were supposed to be waterproof, and she’d tested them before, but she just wanted to make sure. Of course her clothes were thoroughly soaked.

Despite those distractions, Jaas kept her focus on the goal. She retrieved a small metal sphere from her pack and slipped it into the specially sewn holder on her tunic, right next to her collarbone. She carefully pressed both ends of it.

“Field notes, the 15th of Martus, 1571. I did it! I made it through the barrier!”

She tried to keep excitement out of her voice for the recording, but knew she was only partially successful. Part of her actually had expected the barrier to kill her, so she still felt the rush of relief even just being here.

“My theory about breaching the barrier appears to have been proven correct,” she continued more calmly, looking up past the city wall at the sky. “However, the interior of the barrier is *not* what I expected. Starlight is shining right through it, which suggests that the opacity is one-way only.”

Belatedly, Jaas remembered a flaw in her own note-taking, one which had been pointed out to her several times over the years. “There’s no sign of the inhabitants of the city, not that I can see very far here.” She slapped a hand to her head. She’d forgotten to prepare an illumination spell! “Regretfully, I’ll have to work with starlight for now. Still, it’s a good sign. That means sunlight will get through as well, which is more than I expected.”

The grate was only a few spans from the edge of the city wall. There was a stone walkway carved into the inside of the wall, so she took off her wet shoes and used it to climb up to the top. From her research, she knew that the barrier was just outside the wall, but no further.

“From the inside, the barrier appears to be invisible.” She looked up suddenly. “However, before I entered the barrier, the sky was mostly overcast. Now there’s plenty of starlight, and the moon is just rising. I can also see no sign of Ine—of… my companion,” she amended quickly.

Jaas had decided to take this risk a long time ago, and to accept the results, good and bad alike. Lem had needed some convincing though. She didn’t want to implicate him through her recordings, in case he chose to… feign ignorance of what she was doing. She couldn’t blame him if he did.

Taking a deep breath, Jaas continued recording. “Either I was underwater for a lot longer than I planned, or I’m looking at some kind of illusion. In addition,” she leaned forward, “I can feel a slight breeze coming from the inside of the barrier. The exterior had no such effect.”

It wasn’t hard to find loose rocks lying around. She snagged one and then carefully and slowly pushed it into the barrier’s edge. It vanished as she did so, and when she pulled it back, it was partly gone.

That made sense. “Functionally, the inside of the barrier seems the same as the outside. Whatever I push into it is disintegrated, leaving a perfectly straight edge behind.”

She stopped as something else occurred to her. “This is strange, though. From what I’ve read, Vasiriah’s structures were made invulnerable by special rituals. The city walls in particular would have been reinforced with this magic. But I can see signs of disrepair here. The walls aren’t supposed to fall apart, *ever*, but they appear to be suffering from age and the elements.”

She peered back into the city, faintly making out collapsed roofs and shingles spilling into apparently empty houses. “As do the nearby buildings. Clearly, whatever rituals the Vasiri used to protect this place have failed over the last few hundred years. I’m continuing to look around.” She pressed both sides of the sphere again to stop the recording as she made her way back to the stairs.

This side of the river was covered with buildings, but the opposite had a few dozen spans between the water and the nearest structure. The buildings all matched what she’d seen of early Vasiri architecture. The stonework looked old, but still mostly functional.

There was a strange kind of wooden tower built right next to the wall on the other side of the river. It was tall, rising higher than the city wall. Jaas studied it more from where she stood. It looked like this tower had been designed to hold water or some other kind of liquid, and a lot of it. She couldn’t tell if it was empty or not, but it looked old. Perhaps a hundred years or so?

Jaas could see a line of red paint marking the walls and doors of several houses in a line, parallel to the river. After spreading the clothes from her pack out to dry, she took a closer look and found that the spaces between those buildings had been bricked off. A wall between every house that had been marked in red paint. Clearly, it was a warning of some kind not to pass.

Ignoring the still-wet clothes sticking to her back and arms, Jaas tried to focus on casting a spell. A simple divination should be able to illuminate any magic effects, dangerous or otherwise, beyond the red line on the door.

Nothing showed up, so Jaas proceeded carefully into the nearest house with an open roof—it would be too dark to see inside one that was still intact. In the middle of the living room was another line running through the floor and walls. It was more of a crack, actually, where the ground just stopped and started up again on the other side.

By reflex, she activated the sphere again. “I’ve come across something I can’t identify. A warning line of red paint has been drawn on some of the buildings. It appears to extend out of sight to the south. My divination spell didn’t reveal anything dangerous, so I’m taking a closer look.” She grabbed another stone from outside and slowly extended it forward across the crack in the ground. As she pushed it forward, the end vanished just like the one on the city wall.

“This is amazing. It appears there is a second barrier *inside* the city!” She removed the stone and studied the end. Just as before, it was shorn in half with a perfectly straight edge.

“I… think I can explain why my divination didn’t pick anything up,” she said more to herself than to the sphere. “If my theory is right, and the barrier was put in place by the Blessed, then no magic I know, or have ever heard of even, will be able to affect it. This is further proof that the Blessed are responsible, though of course this is just a preliminary search.”

Jaas felt short of breath. Not only had she made it into the city, there was another barrier inside, and this one was invisible. If it hadn’t been for the red paint, she might have walked into it and died! Neither she nor Lem had predicted anything like this.

“This barrier seems to function just as the other one does,” she described it as professionally as she could manage. “I can feel a slight breeze coming from this one as well. It seems to be projecting an image of the other side, just like the barrier outside the wall. Obviously there were survivors inside the city, and they painted the red line as a warning for people not to get too close.”

Feeling a fresh surge of excitement, she left the building and looked around. “I’m investigating the dimensions of this second barrier.”

It didn’t take her long to find one of the river’s many bridges and cross it, looking for more red paint. Something downstream caught her eye, and she paused.

According to her map, this entire city district was supposed to be filled with structures, on both sides of the river. Yet from here, she could definitely see the glint of sand next to the river. Sand which shouldn’t be there. Jaas made her way south to investigate, keeping an eye out for more red paint on the way.

Sure enough, the buildings had been removed. Probably brick by brick over a long period of time. In place of the flat paving stones was a length of sand at the edge of the water. But why? What had been the point of removing those buildings?

It was a mystery. Clearly no one was living here now, but the flat space suggested that people visited here from time to time. There were regular holes in the sand, too. Spaced just far enough apart to be tent peg holes. A seasonal dwelling? Had the survivors become nomadic after all this time? Jaas made a note of it into her recorder before continuing her search for the red paint.

Walking further east she found another warning line. This one seemed to be exactly the same, marking another barrier. She pulled out the map and tried to get her bearings. The two barriers seemed to run parallel to each other. On a hunch, Jaas headed south, and soon found another one.

“If I’m right,” she recorded as she flattened the map on the ground and began drawing a line on it, “there are multiple barriers inside the city. They seem to form a square, about one league on a side. That would cover…” She did some quick calculations in her head, “about two hundred acres.” She paused for a moment, thinking about the gravity of that as she knelt next to the map.

“The barrier outside covers the city’s dimensions exactly. It’s not a straight line. These internal barriers are different, though. From what I can tell they’re perfectly parallel and perfectly straight, going north-south and east-west.” She sat back on her heels and looked up. “The precise geographical shape suggests that the barriers extend the length of the city. I’m in one small square. If these dimensions hold true, there could be hundreds of squares in the city, each identical in shape to this one!”

For the first time she noticed that there didn’t seem to be any wind inside the city. Aside from the faint breeze coming from the barriers themselves, the air was completely dead. And she still hadn’t seen any animals aside from fish in the river. As she made a note of that into her sphere, she realized something else. “I used the flow of the river to find a way through the outer barrier, but I only brought two polymorphic scrolls with me. Each time I pass through a barrier, the spell will be removed. If I’m right and there are dozens of barriers between me and the river’s mouth… I’m stuck in here.”

Jaas realized she was short of breath again, though for a different reason this time. Unless she could find another way out, she would die, probably of starvation, and no one would hear this recording. No one would know what she’d discovered!

She shook her head. No, that was defeatist thinking. At the very least she could fish up a meal from the river, though she’d always found cleaning fish to be disgusting.

She’d barely even begun to explore this place, and she had supplies for a few days at least. It was much too soon to be concerned about basic sustenance. Besides, *someone* had cleared out those buildings and painted those lines, and they might still be around.

“Historians always assumed that the barrier went up as a defense against some kind of attack,” she continued recording, feeling her heartbeat slow down a bit. “The fact that there are subsections within the city, that there are even more barriers inside it, suggests that the city itself has been incapacitated by them. These barriers may actually *be* the attack on Vasiriah. Although… why the Blessed would want to attack the Vasiri is a much bigger mystery.”

Jaas gave a smile as she started up the street again. Her curiosity and apprehension had overcome her giddiness for a while, but now the euphoria was surging back again.

She’d done it! For three hundred years the mages and scholars had studied, bickered over, or just plain ignored this magic phenomenon, and she’d beaten them all! She’d done what none of them could do. She’d solved the puzzle, or at least part of it.

Still riding on that feeling, Jaas returned to her search, tracing the path of the barrier south.

She didn’t notice the two figures emerge from the river behind her.

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Chapter 4

They sloshed their way to shore, standing up as soon as possible, and followed a discreet distance behind her. Both were the same height, although one of them stood tall while the other looked around with clear apprehension. He glanced back at his companion. “Sir, this is a *very* bad idea. We really shouldn’t be here!”

Though heavily layered in cloth, they could see each other perfectly well. The other turned back to him briefly and wrapped an arm around him comfortingly. “It’s all right, Untos. I linked with her the moment she arrived. She won’t see us, I promise you.”

Untos shook his head, and shrugged off Halseus’ arm. “If you linked with her, sir, then why are we even here? You know people come here from time to time. Even if she doesn’t spot us, someone else could!”

Halseus nodded. “It’s a risk, yes, but one I’m willing to take. This could be the most important development in this city’s history, Untos! The first visitor we’ve ever had, right in front of us! I couldn’t pass that up. I had to see her for myself. We’re just lucky she showed up using the river. Otherwise we wouldn’t have been able to get anywhere near her in time.” He chuckled softly to himself. “Whoever she is, she certainly threw off *my* plans just by coming here,” he added.

Untos didn’t respond at first, and Halseus looked back at him, tilting his head slightly. “If you want, you can go back home and wait for me there.”

His tone was light and his features, obscured though they were, betrayed a mild expression of humor. Untos grunted in response. “You know I can’t do that, sir. I’m here to protect you, and that’s what I’m going to do.”

“Then quit whining and come on. We’re witnessing momentous history here, and I don’t want to miss anything.”

He hurried after the newcomer. Untos reluctantly followed.

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It took most of the night, but Jaas finally confirmed her original speculation. The barriers formed a square, about a league on a side. As the sun’s light slowly rose over the wall, Jaas studied one of the corners, perplexed.

All the houses Jaas had seen so far were of Vasiri architecture. Despite the economic differences throughout the ancient city, the Vasiri Empire maintained that its people were superior, and presented that image to visitors in the capital.

Apparently that stance hadn’t changed over the past few hundred years. Those who had painted the red lines had either kept true to the original architecture, or hadn’t lived here at all since painting the lines. A subtle feeling of menace seemed to radiate from the buildings, although she was sure they were all abandoned.

She continued dictating her notes into the sphere, documenting as much as she could. Just after dawn, she was leaning close to the barriers once more, when a man appeared in front of her, stepping right out of the barrier!

Jaas felt like her heart leapt into her throat as she jumped back away from him. As she stopped and tried to calm herself, two more men stepped out of the barrier behind him, one on each side.

Jaas was no stranger to shock and surprise. As part of her training at the Academy, she’d gone through rigorous testing under extreme circumstances. At times she’d even started to lose track of what was reality, and what was just another test. That had been years ago, though.

All three men were big and heavily muscled. They had bald heads except for tight topknots. The middle one was wearing leather boots, a strange metal club on his belt, and armor emblazoned with what looked like a wheel in gold and red on his chest. The other two wore simple red robes and sandals. They glanced at each other and the middle one said something she didn’t understand.

“I’m Jaas Senneco,” she said clearly as they slowly approached. Hesitantly, she reached into her bag and pulled out her sigil, showing it to them. “I’m a scholar from Satacha.”

They didn’t stop; not that she’d expected them to. It was doubtful they even knew where Satacha was. It was possible they didn’t even understand her. Who knew what kind of language changes had happened here in the past few centuries?

“Ne hasta Satachalishe,” she tried again in Patali.

“Szaaha sahn’vs izesha ulas?” This time in Vasaro, as she backed away from them, still getting no response.

Enough was enough. “I’m warning you. Stay back!”

Jaas realized that she sounded pathetic, no matter what language they spoke. Regardless, her power was real enough. She put away the sigil and pulled out her arcane focus. She took a deep breath and pointed the carved twig at them. Symbols had been carved across its surface, and she concentrated on calling forth its power.

Nothing happened.

Jaas felt her jaw drop in surprise. She quickly tried again, but still nothing happened! It was impossible. Nothing could negate a focus like that!

The two in robes lunged forward and grabbed her by the arms. The third gave her a curious look before eyeing the twig in her hands. Then he moved quick as thinking—his fist struck her cheekbone, and Jaas’ world went black.

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When the men carried her away with them, Halseus finally gave into Untos’ ever-more-insistent demands, and regretfully made his way back to the river. He would have to use the links to observe her from now on.

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Arico took a quick look around, right at the edge of the threads. He was hesitant to take another trip so soon after his visit to the market, but no one here knew anything about the quake that had struck last night. Even Durhu was in the dark as to what it meant. It hadn’t taken much for Arico to convince him that they needed more information.

Taking a deep breath, he stepped into the threads and let them carry him along.

Navigating the threads was very different than simply walking through them. Any navigator could pass from one patch into its neighbor without any effort at all, but moving farther than that could be tricky. Arico smiled as he remembered his first time actually trying to choose exactly where he arrived. When he’d begun training himself it had been scary in the beginning; the vast emptiness inside the threads was a terrifying sight to be sure. Plus, it had been perhaps the one thing Durhu couldn’t teach him.

Eventually, once Arico learned how to exert his will on the threads, and then to move along them, it had gotten easier. At first navigating had been like tumbling, weightless, through an endless empty void with no escape in sight. Now it was somewhat comforting to enter the private silence of the threads. Years of practice had made navigating almost second nature.

Durhu had told him that people could adjust to almost anything, given time.

The white lines that made up the edge of the threads moved through and around him in an infinite, ever-changing pattern. They were harmless, but mesmerizing to look at. Arico paid them no mind. Here in the threads, movement was more a matter of thought than of physical effort, so he concentrated on his destination alone.

Familiarity made it much easier, of course. Arico had been here many times before, so it only took a few seconds for him to find the right patch and check for any onlookers. No one was looking in his direction, so he stepped out of the threads and immediately felt his own weight again, as though a load of bricks had suddenly appeared on his back.

He quickly removed his farmer’s clothing, revealing the fancy outfit underneath. Prikkin was a high-class patch for a market. He had to blend in if he didn’t want to get caught. During his first visit, he’d come very close to being discovered, and the memory still caused his chest to tighten in fear.

Speaking of blending in, Arico reached to his left shoulder and began to peel away at the mark there. The fake marks that he and Durhu wore were absolutely essential for life in Tellek patch, but here it could only get him in trouble. With a little bit of effort, he managed to remove the ‘scar’ from his arm, and dropped it into his pack.

There, that was better. He had to remove and reapply the mark several times a week, usually, but it never got any easier. At least Durhu could just leave his on.

Glues that could stick to the skin for long periods of time like that were rare at best, certainly impossible for any normal stra’tchi to get their hands on. Thankfully they had some powerful people backing them, so Arico and Durhu always had what they needed to maintain their disguises. Arico was especially grateful for that; he didn’t want to think of what his life would be like if he’d been raised somewhere else.

Despite the isolated nature of the patches, the local Sustained House guards, and the Ascendants who watched over them all, there were simply too many people in this patch to keep track of all at once. That made Prikkin patch perfect for his use. Any tradesmen or vendors who saw him simply assumed he was just another citizen, and treated him as they would any other customer.

Naturally, he kept a set of papers with him at all times. They were forgeries, but good ones; enough to stand up to some scrutiny. The Sustained guards did periodic checks on travelers; more for show than necessity. Arico suspected it was just a way for them to pass the time. As far as they were concerned, he was Timot Brower from Exxos patch. The only son of the now-retired craftsman and builder, Qintos Brower.

It was important that Arico have a chance to learn how the Sustained lived. Not just so that he could blend in with them, but so he could eventually influence them as well. That was why the Hauld had insisted Arico come up with a fake identity in the first place, and why he had provided the documentation to back up that identity.

Together, Arico and Durhu had puzzled out the details that Timot had experienced during his life. And then made sure none of those details were in conflict with any others. Timot was fond of drinking and gambling most evenings, but had never been in serious trouble over it. He had even loved a young woman from a neighboring patch, but had ended up losing her to his own foolishness.

Arico paused and squinted up at the sun through the open roof of this abandoned building. It wasn’t yet midday, and no one was expecting him anywhere for at least a few hours. Slipping back into the threads, he made his way to the east side of Barros patch, to another location he was all-too-familiar with.

It took only a few moments to reach the clerk’s office in Barros patch. Arico’s merchant disguise was just as suitable in both locations, thankfully. Arico asked for the report he’d requested several weeks ago, and slipped a few coins across the desk as was customary. After a minute or two of perusing in the back, the clerk returned and placed a single, folded page on the table.

Confused, Arico picked it up. “Is that it? The report is supposed to be several pages at least.”

The clerk only shrugged. “That’s what I was given. If you have a problem with it, I suggest you talk to the issuer.” At that he turned away, clearly unwilling to talk any further.

Arico had to smile at that. The hallmark of any society that had grown big enough was apathy. Patchwork had plenty of bureaucrats and functionaries after all this time, and this guy was a clear example of indifference to anything outside his assigned function in society. Arico opened the page, and written in clear black ink was a simple sentence.

*You and I need to have a conversation.*

It was signed with only the letter C, but even that was unnecessary. Arico knew the handwriting quite well. Arico grimaced as he read it again. He really didn’t want to have the conversation, especially about this, but it wasn’t like he had a choice. Chanul was not someone you could easily ignore. Sighing, he made his way back to the threads and navigated to the other side of the city.

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Visiting the dwarves unannounced always required some special security precautions, but they were second nature to him by now. At this time of day, Chanul was most likely in the Enclave’s core, just underneath the keep. The tunnels were bustling with dwarves, but they barely gave him a second glance. Arico was well-known here.

Chanul was a creature of habit. If he’d been born to a different father, he no doubt would have a strict daily routine which was almost never changed. Unfortunately for him, the duties of a ruler’s son required more… flexibility. He was actually in the keep’s storeroom when Arico found him, talking to the quartermaster over bags of potatoes. His eyebrows raised fractionally when he caught sight of Arico, and he waved a hand, dismissing the older dwarf.

Arico didn’t bother with the pleasantries he might have used with any other dwarf. He merely raised the parchment as he approached. “What exactly do we need to discuss?” He asked nonchalantly, hoping against hope that Chanul hadn’t discovered the full truth.

His friend gave him a sad smile in response. He sat on one of the squat chairs along the wall, and gestured for Arico to do the same. Though he always had to look up at Arico, somehow Chanul had always felt like the larger person. Even though they were basically the same age.

“When I heard that you were investigating Lord Hooper, it rang a few bells for me, you know,” he said softly. From the bag next to his chair, he drew out a vellum container, marked with the sign of the Barros Clerk’s office. That must have been the report.

Arico reached for it, but Chanul held it back. “It took a while, but I eventually remembered you doing this before, years ago. This isn’t the first time you used my father’s money to investigate this man. Back then, I assumed you were scouting him for a possible alliance. You did that with a lot of minor nobles, if I recall.”

His stomach turning sour, Arico nodded. “But I didn’t contact him. I only reached out to three of those nobles, and none of them were receptive. If you’ve read that, you know that Hooper recently set up some business dealings with Lord Weaver. Given Weaver’s history, and his position on the Council, I felt it necessary to investigate Hooper again.”

Chanul only stared at him for a few seconds. “Well, the details of his business dealings are in here,” he finally said, flipping through the pages. “As well as his holdings and property around the city, details of how long he’s had his title, and how he got it,” he paused briefly, “and the details of his family.”

Arico let out a breath. So that was it. He knew the whole story.

“Did you think I wouldn’t recognize the name, Arico?” Chanul went on, a little more intensely. “Nouma?” He sighed raggedly. “It wasn’t Hooper’s business dealings you cared about, or even the man himself. You were just using them as an excuse to investigate *his wife!*”

“I had to be sure she was safe.” Arico said stubbornly. “She married a Sustained Lord. You know how much risk there is in that!”

“You didn’t have to do anything, Arico,” Chanul said wearily. “You’re using our resources for personal reasons. To keep tabs on your former lover! Do you have any idea how inappropriate that is?”

“Just because I ended things doesn’t mean I stopped caring for her,” Arico said defensively. “You of all people should understand. When Sath’randa broke things off with you, did you suddenly stop thinking about her, overnight? No—you were devastated for weeks! You were inconsolable, remember?”

“There’s a difference between caring for someone and *stalking* them, though!” Chanul said, with that same intensity from before. “I went to Hooper’s house on the edge of Barros patch. I saw that chair you set up overlooking the place. You were watching her. Spying on her! Or are you going to claim that it was someone else doing that?”

Beneath his defensiveness, Arico knew that Chanul was right. Traditionally, men and dwarves had always treated their women differently. Human families—especially Sustained noble families—had viewed women as prizes to be won, or property to be traded. That was simply the way it had always been.

For the dwarves though, it was very different. Power passed from dwarf to dwarf based on heredity, not gender. The Hauld could have very easily been born female, and still be in charge of the entire Enclave regardless. And if anything were to happen to Chanul, his little sister would become Hauld-Issuant in his place.

“Have you told your father about any of this?” Arico asked, after they’d both taken a moment.

Chanul shook his head. “I thought about it, but I wanted to talk to you first. If there is any good news in this sorry business, it’s that the chair you were using in that abandoned house in Barros patch was covered with dust. Clearly you haven’t been back there in a long time. But this isn’t finished either.” He leveled a finger at Arico. “You chose to leave Nouma behind, Arico. She’s moved on, and you need to respect that. Besides, very soon now we’ll all be extremely busy. We won’t have time for any of this personal nonsense if we’re going to survive. The movement will need you focused, with your mind—*all* of your mind—on task.” He sighed, and leaned back again in his chair. “I won’t tell Father about this, provided that this ends here and now. If I hear even a rumor that you’ve started up again-”

“You won’t,” Arico said hastily. “I promise that.”

Chanul sounded angry, but Arico could tell there was sympathy there too. Chanul had been in a similar situation after all.

“How’s Durhu?” He asked after a moment.

Grateful for the reprieve, Arico relaxed a bit. “He’s well enough. No one at home was hurt in the quake. Were you all right here?”

Chanul nodded. “A few bruises here and there. One youngster broke an arm. There was no structural damage, though. We know how to reinforce tunnels,” he added proudly.

That was something of an understatement. If the histories were true, dwarves had been tunnel-dwellers for thousands of years, all over the world. “Any idea what caused it, though?”

“No,” Chanul said grimly. “Even the goti priests are in the dark about it. For once I hope the Sustained know more than we do.”

They continued small-talk for a while afterwards, both of them bleeding tension after their earlier conversation. Arico felt gratitude though, and not just because he’d been raised with such a steadfast people. He was grateful that Chanul—and any other dwarf he’d met, really—would never hesitate to call him out on his wrongdoings. As a race they were gruff, stubborn, unforgiving and quite often overly calculating. But one thing they were *not* was afraid to confront evil, regardless of what shape it took.

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The market in Prikkin patch was bustling with activity when he returned. Making sure he could still pass for a local, Arico slipped out of the building and looked around. The various stalls and shops were open as usual, but Arico could sense a… disquiet in the crowd itself. Even the Sustained guards seemed uneasy, whispering to each other.

Arico had some friends he could go to, friends who might know what was going on, but he couldn’t just drop in on them without warning. Besides, if they wanted to contact him, they’d use proper channels. For his safety, and for theirs.

He asked around casually, but none of the vendors he spoke to seemed to know anything more about the earthquake than Chanul had. An ill omen, some of them called it, while others laughed at them. Most agreed, though, that the Sustained Council would know what to do about it.

Most people believed that all navigators were magic beings, blessed by Aquun, and that the Council were the most learned and wise among the navigators. Arico knew better. Aquun herself was divine of course, and Arico certainly couldn’t explain why the navigators could do what they could do. Still, Arico had seen what else the Council had done, and how they behaved like bickering, mule-headed children. The Councilors were just people; no greater or more intelligent than anyone else, and soon enough he would help prove it to everyone.

“Timot! Over here!” The cheerful voice cut through his thoughts.

Arico looked over and grinned. Sitting on one end of an apple cart, Trania was waving excitedly at him. She was young—only six, but already had a keen insight into bargaining, no doubt gained from watching her uncle at work.

With exaggerated slowness, he plodded towards her and leaned on the cart with both elbows, looking up at her. “Your highness-ness.” The motion was only partly for her benefit. It wasn’t always easy for him to talk without also using his hands to make signs at her. Arico spoke in both ways out of habit, but his fake identity Timot did not.

Trania gave him a grave look, before nodding. “You may rise, my lord.”

She giggled as he kissed her hand. Trania had always been a good-tempered child. Arico fished out a coin and laid it on the table before looking over her selection of apples. Most of them were a bit too green for his liking, but he finally picked one out and bit into it. “Sho.” He mumbled over the mouthful. “Any big newsh today? About the quake, I mean.”

Trania jumped down off the cart. “I wasn’t afraid when it started,” she said with just a little too much emphasis in her voice to be truthful, “but Caddic was.” She looked across the street at another fruit vendor stall, where a boy about her age was glaring sullenly back at her. “He screamed when it started.”

“Did he now?” Arico shook his head. “Well, you shouldn’t hold that against him. After all, not all of us can be as brave as Queen Trania, can we?”

Trania took his hand and led him to the large building behind the fruit stand where she lived with her uncle. She traced her hand across a crack in the door’s frame. “What does it mean, Timot? Even Uncle Daril looked scared when he saw this.”

“I don’t know, highness-ness. But your uncle’s a good man. You should trust him when stuff like this happens.” He shook his head. “I noticed the Sustained guards talking about something up the street. Do you know what that was about?”

Trania shook her head. “Not really. I heard something about Krellik patch. But that was hours ago.”

Now that was interesting. Krellik was one of the northernmost patches in the city. The patch belonged to House Miller, one of the most powerful families in the city, but most people here didn’t know much about it. Krellik patch was on the outskirts of Miller territory—not particularly valuable land to them, and therefore not that heavily guarded. He’d been there a few times over the years, and had seen the metal grate protecting the sacred Waters.

Daril would know more about this, Arico surmised. He was a well-connected merchant, respected by his peers and rivals alike.

About half an hour later, Daril came around the corner. “Now what’s this?”

Arico was supporting Trania over his head with both hands. She had her arms out, a bit unsteadily, and was giggling as he moved her back and forth. It wasn’t that easy. She was getting a bit big for this kind of playtime.

“I’m a Sky Rider!” Trania announced proudly, as she ‘swerved’ to the side and back again.

“Oh? Where are you flying to, then?” Daril smiled openly.

“All the way up to the Twin Suns,” she said confidently.

“Well you’re a bit early for that, highness-ness. Or should I say *low*ness-ness!” Arico grunted with some effort, as he lowered her back to the ground. He stood back up and stretched briefly, before shaking Daril’s hand.

Daril eyed his niece critically. “You’re all dirty, aren’t you? Go inside and wash up. And put a pot over the fire. I’ll be in to make lunch in a few minutes.”

Arico maintained his smile as she waved goodbye and sprinted inside, despite the sour feeling in his gut. It was such a shame. Like any child, Trania had grand dreams about what she would be and do when she grew up. Her particular goal of being a Sky Rider depended on her being a navigator, though. She’d been tested at age three like any other child, but Arico had never asked Daril what the results were. Only one in ten Sustained was born a navigator, and even if she had beaten the odds, it was unlikely that a woman would ever be allowed up there painting with the others.

Daril seemed to sense his mood. “Shall we talk business, Timot?”

Arico nodded, grateful for the distraction, and opened his coin purse. “I’ll need a dozen for now. I’ll probably be back tomorrow, too.” Of course he’d already done his shopping, but it only made sense that Daril would share information more easily if he was selling something in the process. Apples were as good an icebreaker as any.

“Suits me,” Daril said easily.

Arico perused the selection quickly, and picked out the best-looking ones before haggling over price. He wasn’t a merchant himself, but he knew a thing or two about quality assurance. That was why he’d started buying from Daril in the first place.

“Oh, your cousin wanted to talk to you.” Daril added offhandedly, after they’d reached a price. “She found me this morning and said you should meet her as soon as you can.”

Arico hesitated briefly. Daril and Trania knew nothing about his true family, and for good reason. They knew all about Timot’s family, though. Or at least the people who would claim they were his family for a price. Here in Prikkin patch, that would be Terres Huun. A smuggler, of sorts. Arico paid for the apples, thanked Daril, and headed back into the market.

Because almost every navigator in the city was loyal to one of the Sustained Houses, or was a member of the Ascendant Guard, independent smuggling across patches was a practical impossibility. Just the same, a kind of subculture of smugglers and information dealers had sprung up inside many of them. They greased the palms of various navigators in exchange for discreet transportation of goods. They sometimes transported people as well, if those people didn’t have the money for a Transit Pass, or didn’t want to leave a paper trail.

Of course the Council claimed that such ‘degenerates’ were routinely hunted down and imprisoned for breaking the laws, but in practice they often looked the other way. After all, the Houses themselves sometimes wanted things taken care of quietly, and so found these people to be useful.

Terres didn’t know who he really was or where he came from, but she knew enough truth about him to grossly overcharge him for information. Aside from Cartwright himself, she was basically the only independent spymaster in the entire city, and as such she was quite careful to stay *out* of the conflicts between the Houses. Arico trusted that she wouldn’t reach out to him unless she had information she knew he’d want.

The meager coins he’d brought with him certainly wouldn’t be enough for her, and there was no way the Hauld would be willing to pay for a wild goose chase like this one. For this, Arico would have to dip into his savings. He slipped out of the crowd behind one of the red-lined structures, checked to make sure no one was looking, and then stepped into the threads. With practiced ease he navigated past the roiling chaotic streams of light, found his destination, and then stepped back out next to a pile of rubble. Arico had been here so often he was able to make the trip in just a few seconds.

A dozen or so buildings lined the streets; all of them collapsed from age or the elements. The air was dead quiet here. This patch had no name that Arico had heard, as it had been abandoned shortly after the Threading. Any and all valuables had been taken away, but some skeletons could still be seen on the road. There had been a great deal of confusion back then, and many people had died of thirst or starvation… and other causes. Most likely the descendants of the escapees had come back when they could, found no survivors, and just moved on. They’d left the remains here, but it was dry enough that the bones were still here even after hundreds of years.

Arico simply called this place the Hideaway. He’d been here many times before with Durhu, tunneling and moving debris. It was kind of a pet project they’d been working on for the past few years, during what spare time they could find.

He took a moment to look around for anyone else, and then headed to his stash. Back before the Threading, Patchwork had been home to so many people that the streets had actually been made to go *over* each other, much as they went over the Waters themselves. Such bridges had been common in this patch. Durhu had taught him that the keystone, or just underneath it, was the safest place on a bridge. Arico climbed up the side of the rubble next to the larger of these two bridges and carefully removed a loose brick from just under the keystone.

Reaching in, he felt around for a moment and then pulled out a bag of gemstones. They weren’t very large, but they had been precisely polished by a master jeweler, most likely before the Threading had even happened. Since Patchwork had no gem mines within the city, the only precious stones here were the ones that had started here, which made them even more precious. Arico had lifted these from a Sustained nobleman’s house, years before. He gingerly separated two from the others and put the bag back inside. For a moment he hesitated, looking down at them.

On one hand, they were nothing but rocks. Completely worthless to anyone who’d ever had to till the ground or raise animals for a living. On the other hand… these two emeralds were worth more than his father’s farm. Possibly all the Tellek farms put together. He’d taken a big gamble by stealing them. Most of the Sustained would have been caught immediately, but he’d been able to get into the threads before anyone saw him. A big risk for him to take, given that these things only had value because people said they had value. It hadn’t been exactly… moral of him. Durhu had taught him not to steal. Still, before long he would have to do a lot worse things than stealing.

Arico had to admit they were pretty to look at. He’d taken one back to show to Balter and Veles once, and now he could understand why people would fight and kill over something so small. Patchwork had many people who were struggling to live, starving and freezing their way through the harshest months. But to kill for something that you couldn’t eat or use to keep warm? Initially, that had seemed very strange to him.

Shrugging, he headed back towards the nearest thread. Time to buy some information.

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Chapter 5

Pain shot through her head as Jaas slowly woke up. She groaned and rolled over on the hard surface before opening her eyes. She immediately regretted it. Sunlight shot through the window and into her head like a spear, and she quickly raised a hand against it. She heard a harsh chuckle to her left. Squinting, Jaas took in her surroundings. She was in the corner of a small stone and brick room. A prison cell from the looks of it; there were bars around her and in the other corners.

And she wasn’t alone. One of the men who’d grabbed her was there as well, grinning menacingly at her. He rapped his metal club against the bars and laughed as she shrank back away from him. He was still laughing as he wrenched the solitary door open and went outside. Gingerly, Jaas stood up and tried to move a bit. Nothing seemed broken, but she could feel a bruise forming on her cheekbone. Judging by the light from outside, she’d been out for at least a few hours.

With a start, she noticed another person in one of the cells. Or what had been a person, anyway. The old man was hanging from shackles on the wall, obviously dead. Lash marks and blood covered most of his body. He’d been beaten and whipped. His arms and chest were muscular and tanned; apparently he’d been some kind of laborer. Jaas decided then and there: the same thing wouldn’t happen to her. She’d make it out of here somehow.

With a start, she realized her bag was nowhere in sight! All of her notes and scrolls were gone! Hopefully, she felt near her neck for her recording sphere, but that was gone too. So was her arcane focus.

What had happened back there, anyway? With her focus, she could have propelled those men backwards, knocking them clear off their feet. But when she’d tried, nothing had happened. It had behaved like an ordinary twig and nothing more. Jaas tried to call on her bond with the focus, to see where it had been taken, but again… nothing. She couldn’t sense it at all!

Another thought occurred to her. She took a pinch of dust from the corner of her cell and began rubbing it between her hands. The friction combined with her own magical power should be able to start a controllable flame. One which, in theory, could burn hot enough to melt the lock on her cell, and burn anyone who tried to stop her from escaping.

Jaas wasn’t used to this primitive method of magic, but until she could recover her focus and find out why it hadn’t worked, this would have to do. That is, if she could get the flame going. For some reason it wasn’t working either. She rubbed her hands together, back and forth; but *still* nothing happened!

“Field notes, the 16th of Martus,” she muttered to herself out of habit, despite not having her recording sphere. “At least I think it’s still the 16th. For some reason I can’t explain, my magic is gone. I didn’t notice earlier because I thought it was only affected by the barriers, but something beyond my understanding is suppressing my abilities. Because of that, I was attacked and kidnapped by… I don’t really know who they are. They locked me up somewhere, and I can’t seem to communicate with them in any way. Something tells me I’m in for a rough time here.” She looked back at what was left of the other prisoner, and winced.

“As for the magic,” she hypothesized to herself, “I’m trying to figure it out. It’s not an anti-magic zone, that’s for sure. I can *cast* spells easily enough, but as soon as I do the energy is drained away somehow. I thought my divination spell wasn’t picking up anything dangerous, but I guess it wasn’t picking up anything at all. In addition… it seems that whatever this effect is, it’s powerful enough to suppress even the magic items I brought with me!”

That was a troubling thought. Her recording sphere was magic. It was possible none of her earlier comments had even been recorded. There was ink and parchment in her pack, but she doubted her captors would let her write anything down.

This was starting to make sense though, at least from an historical perspective. The ancient Vasiri had been accomplished mages, but if this suppression effect had suddenly hit them, it could explain why they’d never been able to remove the barriers themselves, or escape them. If the Blessed were responsible, it certainly could explain this strange dampening effect she was experiencing. Depending on how wide the field was, the Vasiri mages would have been helpless against it!

Jaas gave a frustrated grunt. Whatever had happened to Vasiriah, whatever horrors had visited its people, she’d have to figure it out without one of her greatest tools. She sighed, and wondered what the gods had in store for her next.

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With a sigh, Arico knocked on the door. This probably wouldn’t be pleasant. The eye slot opened and a pair of brown eyes looked out at him briefly before the slot closed again. There was a clinking noise, and the door opened for him.

He knew most of Terres’ guards by sight, and they knew him. Most likely she’d told them to expect his visit. Still, they only took him up one floor before stopping him. The big one turned to him, expressionless. “Raise your arms.”

Arico gave him a pained look. “Seriously? We do this every time.”

“Do it, pretty boy. Or I break them.”

Punek wasn’t known for being a joker, nor for making idle threats. Arico obligingly lifted his arms and submitted to a search. He wasn’t stupid enough to bring weapons in here, but they never did take chances. Arico supposed if he were running this show, he wouldn’t either. When Punek was done, he knocked twice on the inner door and then opened it. Arico slipped inside before the big man could change his mind.

This building had been a clerk’s office once, long before Arico had ever been here. The second floor had been used to store all the ledgers the clerk had recorded for the Tanners during his career. When Terres had taken over, she’d moved all that out and furnished it in her own lavish style. Tapestries on two walls, a massive map of the city on a third, complete with threadlines running the length and width of it. A fireplace, with a fire even this late in the morning, on the last. Of course there were no windows in this room. Even the fireplace was grated off, above the flames. Terres liked her luxury, but she wasn’t stupid.

Almost as an afterthought, there was a cot in the corner. Terres slept here from time to time, rather than risk being seen by the Sustained guards she didn’t have in her pocket. Or in her bedchamber, if Arico believed some of the rumors about her.

“Ah, Timot.” She rose from behind the desk by the window. “How good of you to come and see me!”

Though more than a head shorter than him, she moved with a confidence and poise that said a lot about who she was, deep down. Before Arico knew what was happening, she’d gripped him in a firm hug and released him already. He was careful to keep a tight grip on the gems in his pocket; he’d heard that Terres had started out her career as a pickpocket. “How have you been, ‘cousin’?” She teased him with a kiss on the nose.

Stiffly, he gave her a cool glance. “I heard you have information for me?”

She laughed. “Yup. That’s definitely my Timot. All business, all the time. *Never* any time for fun, never any time for… play. Don’t you ever get bored with it?”

Wordlessly, Arico fished out one of the emeralds and placed it on the desk. Terres glanced at it with a brief expression of greed. “So serious.” She mock-pouted up at him, before examining the gem in the firelight. “Well, at least you can always pay,” she admitted. “That’s more than I can say for some of my clients.”

Arico just stood silently. He’d found that if he did nothing, she would eventually talk herself out and get to business. And she was a businesswoman, first and foremost. She didn’t ramble on this time, though. She sat down behind her desk, looking up at him seriously for a change. “A few hours ago, I heard a rumor from up north. It seemed like a tall tale, but I had a hunch, so I had one of my friends do some checking. The Millers picked up a woman wandering around Krellik patch. She apparently came from beyond the guard perimeter.”

“So? That’s not so unusual.” Arico shrugged. “She’s probably just a reveler who had one too many drinks and wandered off the Retreat.” In addition to being the northernmost patch on the Waters, Krellik was also the site of a vacation Retreat frequented by some of the Sustained lords and ladies. The Millers charged a lot for anyone who wanted to use it, but they made sure it was worth it.

Terres shook her head. “The Retreat isn’t open yet. It’s too early in the year.”

“Well, she must be one of the Millers, then. Squaresick, probably.”

Because most Sustained weren’t navigators, they relied on each family’s navigator guards to move them from patch to patch. Those who couldn’t leave their patches, for whatever reason, often fell victim to… troubled thoughts. Women especially, since most Sustained women lived a sharply restricted life. Unlike the farmers Arico had known growing up, Sustained ladies were expected to marry and bear children first and foremost, and to think for themselves *last*, if at all. No wonder some of them lost their minds and got squaresick. Even D’tor had a better life in that respect.

“That’s what they thought as well, at first,” Terres nodded slowly. “The trouble is, my sources tell me she’s not part of House Miller. She’s not on the Registry at all, and she has no shoulder mark, so she can’t be a stra’tchi. That leaves only the dwarves, and I don’t think she has enough facial hair to be one of them,” she added dryly.

That caught Arico’s attention. “Could she be an agent for one of the other Houses? Some kind of spy?”

“None of the families have claimed her yet, though that’s not surprising. The Millers would come down on them hard if they did. She did speak to the men who took her, though. Some language none of them understood. And then there was her gear.” Terres pulled a parchment from one of the desk drawers and flattened it out on the table. “My friend slipped this out of her pack before they locked it up.”

It was a tangle of lines and curves, covering almost every inch on the parchment. What was obviously a language interspersed the images, joining each one of them to the rest, but Arico couldn’t read it. He could see numerals as well, mixed in with the language. Arico shook his head. “Could mean anything.”

“Not really, my dear.” She winked at him. “You never studied Patali, did you?”

He paused, looking at her in surprise. Patali was one of the old languages, from back before the Threading. A few people still spoke it, but they were mostly scholars and historians working for the Sustained Council. Some of their oldest terms, such as stra’tchi, originated from that tongue. “This is written in Patali?”

Terres nodded. “I don’t have anyone who can translate it, but I’m sure of that much at least.”

Arico took a moment to consider. “No, it must be a mistake. Or a forgery. You know how the Houses like to mess with each other. This is probably just one of their tricks.”

Terres gave him an excited glance as she stood up and came around the table. “It’s no mistake, darling. She’s from the Outside!”

Arico gave her a disbelieving look. The Outside? There were stories about what would happen when the first visitor arrived. Durhu had told him tales about the Harbinger and the most recent prophecy. Arico had never believed them, though. Almost by reflex, he shook his head again. “No. We’ve never had a visitor from the Outside. Not once. This is a hoax; it has to be.”

“My friend told me she has dark skin and hair, just like the ancient Vasiri used to have.” She raised a hand before he could object. “I know; dark skin isn’t that unusual here, but there’s more. My source told me about the other stuff he saw in the pack, too. Bags of powders, gems and components he couldn’t even guess at. Cases upon cases of scrolls, all similar to this one. She was carrying a map of the city, without a single threadline drawn on it! From what he could tell, the map was of the city as it was *before* the Threading!

“And then there was the tremor last night, which I’m told was felt in every patch at the same time! What else could cause something like that, if not a breach in the threads? It may not be the prophecies coming true, but if this is a hoax, it’s the most detailed one yet.”

Arico grimaced. It made a certain amount of sense, and he certainly couldn’t explain the tremor either. “Regardless, she’s in some serious trouble. The Sustained Council will make her suffer for perpetrating this lie. And if it isn’t a lie—if by some crazy twist of fate she really is from the Outside, they’ll want to know *everything* she knows, and they won’t be gentle getting it out of her.”

“That’s why I asked for you, Timot.” She rolled up the parchment. “Lord Miller is currently occupied with territorial negotiations alongside House Tanner, and the rest of the Houses don’t know about her just yet. He ordered her stashed away, hidden until he has time to deal with her. And I know where they put her.”

“Where is she?”

“I knew you’d want to go after her.” Terres sighed, and glanced at the fire. “Such passion. Such devotion to rescue a woman you’ve never even met! All while you have someone right here, within arm’s reach, just waiting.” She sidled up to him.

Arico held up a hand, keeping her away this time. “As if you’ve ever needed rescuing in your life,” he noted sardonically. If anyone could take care of herself, it was Terres. “But you’re right,” he admitted after a few moments. “I am going after her. If only to find out the truth for myself.” He gave her his most earnest look. “Now. Where are they keeping her?”

She *tsked* at him. “Money first, my dear. I gave you a lot just now, but that’ll cost more. I know you brought more with you.”

Arico chuckled ruefully. She did have a certain attraction, in a mercenary kind of way. Perhaps that was the basis of her charms. She knew what she was, and wasn’t afraid to show it. She was possibly the first woman in Sustained history, *ever*, who was truly beholden to no one. Or perhaps not. Nouma had been independent enough, and D’tor was in her own way as well. He seemed to attract the rarer ones for some reason. Perhaps it was just his imagination, though.

He pulled out the other emerald, but held it back from her. “Her gear, too. Where are they keeping that?”

“Sorry, handsome.” She shook her head. “My friend only got a short look at it before they carted it off. By now the Millers have their hands on it.”

“I’ll take this, then,” he scooped up the parchment. “Oh, and I want a favor, too.”

A surprised look flashed across her face, soon replaced by a smile. “My, my. You have taken well to bargaining, haven’t you?” She studied his face for a few moments, almost as if searching for something. “Well, I’ve never been able to say no to you, have I? A favor it is.”

He opened his fist, and she took the gem, her hand lingering a bit too long touching his. “They stashed her in Shaggan patch. There’s a small outpost near the south end, just west of the Waters. It’s new, and lightly guarded. A skilled navigator like you should be able to get in and out without too much difficulty. From what I was told, she’s in a red brick building right by the Waters.”

“*Thank* you.” He said with a little bite to his tone, before turning away and heading back towards the door. “I’ll let you know what my favor is, once I decide.”

“And off he goes again, leaving me bereft and alone.” She spoke after him as he opened the door. “Do come back again soon, lover!” She called down the hall, most likely for the benefit of her guards. Arico tried to ignore his reddening cheeks as he left.

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Jaas blinked in the dimness, not sure at first what had woken her. There it was again. A tapping noise, like stone on stone, up by the window. First light was creeping into the air and heralding the dawn—she’d been asleep for several hours.

The entire previous day had been an exercise in futility. None of her attempts to call on any of her magic had succeeded. No one responded to her when she shouted out the window. One person had come in with a tray of food: a term that could only be applied loosely to the barely-cooked fish they brought.

Standing and trying to ignore the ache in her shoulders, Jaas stepped over to the window. A man’s face unexpectedly rose on the other side, and she backed away in fright. On impulse, she stayed as quiet as she could, getting a closer look at him.

“Belaka huan.” He whispered at her, holding a finger to his lips as if he’d read her mind. “Etscaara tuana felsos ench asrau.”

As with the snippets of guard chatter she’d been able to overhear, Jaas could understand the root sounds. It was very similar in form to the common tongue in this area, Vasrah, but frustratingly different enough that she couldn’t piece it together yet. What little she could see of his face was gentler than the guards outside, though. It seemed fairly obvious he wasn’t with them. Jaas shrugged, an ‘I don’t understand you’ gesture, and moved a bit closer.

She climbed up on the stone shelf to get a better look through the window. The stranger seemed tall, perhaps twenty hands in height, and had light brown hair. Like most of the city’s people she’d seen so far, he was fair-skinned but tan. His eyes were blue, and his frame was muscular and well-built. Either he worked a demanding job, or he did his best to stay fit. Jaas felt a bit jealous about that. As a scholar, she had a glimpse into the mysteries of the infinite universe, but there were very few of her colleagues who could be described as… physically fit. Or thin.

“Do you understand dwarven?” He asked suddenly, in that language.

Jaas almost gasped in shock, and covered her mouth with both hands. She felt faint with relief. *Finally, some progress!* His accent was a bit strange, but perfectly understandable. “Yes!” She responded when she could find her voice again. “Yes, I do.” She looked back at the door nervously. “Who are you?”

“It doesn’t matter who I am,” he said shortly, looking from side to side for a moment. “Now, quickly. Is it true you came from outside the city? Far outside?”

“Yes,” she responded a bit more cautiously. “I came to see if anyone was still alive in here, and maybe find a way to bring the barrier down.” She followed that with a grimace. So far, she hadn’t been showing much progress on that score.

“Prove it.” Despite his demand, his face showed more curiosity than suspicion.

Jaas gaped at him for a second. “I… I can’t. I don’t know how! My magic doesn’t work anymore.”

He gave her a strange look, almost disbelieving. “Magic doesn’t work anywhere in the city. How could you not know that?”

That confirmed it, explaining why she’d been unable to free herself. The effect did cover the whole city after all. The stranger hesitated for a moment, and then pulled up a parchment and unrolled it in front of the window. “What is this?”

“That’s one of my scrolls!” Jaas resisted the urge to grab at it through the window. “Do you have my pack? The rest of my things?”

He shook his head. “They took it away. Pretty soon they’ll take you as well, unless I get you out of here first.”

There was something in his voice she couldn’t quite identify. Uncertainty, or perhaps fear? “You aren’t sure you want to rescue me? Is that it?” She hazarded, trying to remember to keep her voice down.

“It’s a big risk,” he explained apologetically, “and not just for me.”

There it was again. He was definitely fearful about being here, but he seemed almost excited at the same time. They just stared at each other for a moment, as Jaas ran through the possibilities. Whoever this stranger was, he looked a lot nicer than the thugs outside. He had no weapons, and his clothes were brown traveling robes, nothing like what they wore.

“I could scream,” she threatened lightly. “The guards might speak dwarven. I could tell them you were here.”

“Trust me, you don’t want to speak dwarven to them,” he said darkly. “Besides. I’d be gone before they could get here,” he added confidently. “I’m very quick on my feet.”

He waited another handful of seconds, and then sighed. “All right. Try to keep quiet. I’ll get you out of there.” His hesitation gone, he moved confidently and quickly, slipping out of sight around the corner.

Jaas felt a chill and uneasily sat down on her stone bunk again. He still seemed ambivalent about his decision, but the fact that he was helping anyway suggested the alternative was far worse. Who *were* these people, who should scare her so much?” She was in a cage of ignorance, almost as much as one of iron bars.

There was a muffled *thump* against the door, and it opened a crack. Her new… friend—she guessed she could call him that—backed into the room, dragging an unconscious guard by the shoulders before closing the door. He gave the body a quick search before hissing something in his own language. Probably a curse. “He doesn’t have the keys.”

He reached down to his belt and opened a small purse. Removing two metal pins from it, he leaned down in front of the bars and began tinkering with the lock on the door. Jaas watched on in fascination. Of course she’d heard of lockpicking before, but most people she knew used magic for such things, making it something of a lost art. Her new friend was full of surprises.

“I’m Jaas,” she said belatedly. “Thank you for helping me.”

His hands twitched over the lock, and he looked up at her briefly. “It’s… better if you don’t know my name just yet,” he said softly. “In case this doesn’t work.”

Jaas had that cold feeling again. She could think of only one reason he was refusing to give his name. If they failed and were caught… she wouldn’t be able to identify him under torture. There was a faint grinding noise, and the lock clicked open. He slowly pulled the door open, as quietly as he could. Without wasting any motion, he rolled the unconscious guard over and pulled off his cloak. “Put this on,” he ordered quickly. “From a distance you might look like one of them. If they don’t look too closely, that is.”

He met her glance for just a moment, and then looked away. Suddenly Jaas considered that he might also be… shy? His curiosity at first, and now his professional attitude had certainly covered it so far.

As they left the building, Jaas’ eyes adjusted to the pre-dawn light coming over the distant city wall. She could see that her captors had moved her a good distance south, deeper into the city. It made sense that if they could pass through the barriers, they could take someone with them as well. They were still right next to the river, too. Perhaps that was what allowed them to move so freely. Her friend led her by the hand towards a gate on the south end of the compound. She could see two more unconscious guards, dragged up next to one of the walls where they couldn’t easily be seen. Apparently he’d taken a few risks just to speak to her.

Suddenly he raised a hand in warning and crouched down behind one of the low barriers. Jaas followed his example, a little more clumsily, before two guards in similar red-gold uniforms walked past them. After the guards made their way further west, her friend breathed a sigh of relief. “I’m Arico, by the way,” he said softly. “I… should have said that earlier.”

Jaas took in his stance, and his breathing. It could be a false name of course, but he did seem sincere. “I understand why you didn’t. Thank you for trusting me.”

“Can you swim?” He asked, surprising her with the change in topic.

“Uh, only a little,” she said with a sinking feeling in her stomach. The river was narrower here than it had been where she’d first arrived, so the current would be faster. If his plan was to escape downriver, she wasn’t at all confident she would be able to stay afloat.

He peeked through the gate. “They have patrols all over this patch. Our best bet is to the south. Don’t worry; all we need to do is get into the Waters. I’ll handle the rest.”

Jaas tried to hide her surprise as she nodded at him. There was something strange about how he’d said the word *waters*, but it was clear he meant the river itself. Arico started to move, but then paused. “Uh, this may sound strange, but you need to hold my hand the whole way. If I lose my grip, find me again, all right?”

Jaas didn’t know what he meant by that, but nodded again. This was clearly his show. They’d barely gotten out of the gate when a bell began ringing from inside the compound. “They know I’m missing!”

“Now we run,” he responded tersely. He hadn’t been kidding earlier. He really was fast. She could tell that he was slowing his pace so she could keep up.

Shouts rang out from both sides of the river, including what sounded like a command from behind her. It was too late, though. They were at the river. She took a deep breath as she jumped, hoping he knew what he was doing. Just before they hit the water, a loud *pop* rang out from behind them, and a spray of blood hit her side and face. Arico grunted in pain as they both went under.

Jaas had no idea what had just happened, but remembered to keep her grip on his hand as she kicked her way to the surface. The water around them had already begun turning red, as the current pulled them along and down. He was losing a lot of blood.

“Downstream. Quick!” Arico gasped at her, barely keeping his head above water. This time, she pulled him as they moved together. More shouts came at them from both sides, and then-

-the water was just gone! Jaas gasped and looked around. Instead of the river, or the brick buildings or the guards, there was just an empty whiteness extending out from her in every direction!

There was no sign of Arico, either. The only other creature she could see was a small bird: turquoise, with a long black beak, staring back at her. Even the ground itself was gone—both she and the bird were ‘standing’ on empty space!

Hundreds of white tendrils were in sight, moving around her seemingly at random. As Jaas stared at them, they seemed to *shift* and move away from her and the bird all at once. They began slowing down again, just before-

-she tumbled to the ground, soaking wet.

The white space was gone as well, and now she was on a grassy hillside. And Arico was on the ground next to her. Jaas looked around in amazement and saw a small village off in the distance, and the city wall beyond it.

Jaas knew all about teleportation magic; she’d practiced it quite a bit back at the Academy. This was something else entirely, though. Her spells were instantaneous: one moment there and then another moment here. Jaas couldn’t explain what she’d just seen. Or how they’d gotten here. Somehow Arico had teleported them here without casting any spells at all! Wherever ‘here’ was.

A faint whistling noise was emanating from behind them, and Jaas could see another thin line on the ground where they’d arrived. Arico seemed to have intentionally rolled them both away from the line when they’d hit the ground. Most likely, it was another of the invisible barriers she’d found.

Mercifully, it seemed that the guards had been left behind, but Arico was still bleeding and clutching his side. He tried to get up briefly, but then slumped back down with a soft moan of pain. “My home,” he grunted, pointing downhill at a small building a good distance from the village. “Get my father. Bring him here.”

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Chapter 6

The Ritual of Rejoining had come, again. Little Endu stood next to the tall man, wondering why Mommy and Daddy were crying. She couldn’t make out their faces, but her Mommy’s sobs carried clearly in the morning air. The tall man next to her—she couldn’t remember his name—reached down and took her hand. He was a navigator. One of the Sustained, and he was going to take her away. That much she knew for sure.

He also had a secret for her to keep. A secret she had to keep forever, even from her parents. Endu pulled at the tall man’s hand, trying to free herself. She had to go to Mommy. She had to make her feel better! The tall man took her by the shoulders and turned her to face the threads. “Everything changes now, child,” he said in that knowing voice of his. He reached into the threads and pulled out a sword.

Endu continued holding his hand trustingly, as he placed the blade at the back of her neck and stabbed downwards-

-Endu jerked awake, feeling a sharp pain in her neck.

It took a moment for her to remember where she was. In her armchair, at home. She’d sat down inside, and her head had tilted painfully to the left. That was right. Just a few moments to herself while the clothing dried on the line outside. She must have fallen asleep.

With a fatigued groan, Endu stood and went outside again, where the clothes were dry enough to fold up. Reaching over the aqueduct line, she took them down one by one. None of the Waters were wasted, naturally. Even as the clothes dried, it dripped into the line running past her house, and made its way into the village and eventually out to the fields.

Balter and Veles were sixteen and thirteen, and they definitely acted like it. Sometimes she felt as if she was cleaning up after them from sunup to sundown every day. And after a wrestling match like the one they’d had yesterday… it could only get worse on the clothing. *Knock, knock, knock.* Someone was at the front door.

Of *course* someone was at the door. She gave a rueful glance at the window as she put down the clothing to answer it. The knocking was repeated urgently, and when she opened it she saw Durhu, sweating and out of breath on her doorstep. “Durhu? What is it?”

*Arico’s been shot.* He signed at her frantically. *He’s up near the cabin. Please, help!*

As usual whenever a crisis arose, Endu moved purposefully and efficiently. There was no time for doubts or second-guessing, not when lives were at stake. Grabbing her medicine bag and some clean cloth hanging outside the porch, she snatched her sewing kit from its place by the door. Sadly, she’d had plenty of practice keeping her head during troubled times. She’d been through enough of them.

“Veles!” She called out as calmly as she could manage. “I’m heading out. I don’t know when I’ll be back, so you might have to make dinner, understood?”

Veles nodded back at her from the living room. A few of her neighbors outside gave her a look, but didn’t inquire. As the de facto healer in Tellek patch, she was often called away for some reason or other. Thankfully they usually didn’t look too closely into her movements. The last thing she wanted to do was draw the attention of the magistrate. That was the last thing Arico would want as well.

It took them a few minutes to get to the top of the hill. Durhu was panting again with the effort; he wasn’t as young as he used to be. Arico was lying on the ground, apparently unconscious, with blood staining the grass around him. Strangely, a young woman was with him; someone Endu had never seen before. Whoever she was, her dark face was ashen with worry and she was wringing her hands. She was sporting a nasty bruise on her face, as well. Endu was sure there was a story behind that.

A quick examination of Arico told Endu that it probably wasn’t as bad as it looked. The shot looked like it had missed his major organs and ribs, but the bullet was still inside. He’d lost a lot of blood as well. The stranger watched her intently as she examined Arico’s midsection.

No time to waste. Pulling out her metal pincers and a bottle, Endu sterilized her tools quickly. Then she knelt next to him and began digging around for the bullet. The young woman gasped and reached out as if to stop her, but Durhu grabbed her arm. Fortunately, it looked like the shot had been at a long range. The bullet was near the surface, and before long Endu had pulled it out. Blood was still oozing out after it, so she handed the cloth to Durhu and then placed his hands over the wound. “Hold this here, tightly.”

She checked Arico’s pulse and breathing, finding both had steadied slightly. Wiping sweat from her brow, Endu allowed herself a relieved breath and looked at the stranger again. “We can move him now. Help me with his legs.”

The young woman stared back at her, wordlessly. *She only seems to speak dwarven.* Durhu signed at Endu, keeping pressure on the wound with his forearm. *She told me my son had been hurt, and led me back to him.*

Endu shook her head. She’d never had much of a gift for languages, and she only had a basic grasp of the dwarven tongue. It had taken years for her to even pick up a few phrases of Durhu’s handtalk. “Help me with him!” She emphasized, pointing at his feet and grabbing his shoulders. The young woman nodded and grabbed his legs. It took them some effort, with Endu purposefully going slowly, but they got him down to Durhu’s home before long.

Once inside and out of the cold, she removed the cloth from his side and matter-of-factly pulled out her sewing kit. “Put these in boiling water, please,” she said to Durhu, handing him the sewing needles. She was careful to speak clearly. He was a good lipreader, but he couldn’t catch everything that was said to him. “I’m going to purify the wound and then stitch him up, but I don’t think there was any permanent harm. He will recover.”

The young woman looked puzzled. “He’s going to be fine,” Endu repeated slowly while smiling at the newcomer, and she finally nodded.

It took about half an hour to properly suture his side with catgut. The stranger gaped at her as she worked, apparently new to this kind of medicine. She watched intently right up until the last pull, still looking amazed. This girl had apparently lived a very sheltered life before this. Endu was strongly tempted to stay and get the young woman’s story, but she had to get home before people started asking too many questions. Reluctantly, she left instructions with Durhu on how to care for him over the next few days before showing herself out. She knew better than to ask how he’d gotten shot. Whatever Arico was up to was best kept a secret. She only hoped he’d be more careful in the future. A great deal depended on that young man.

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Gereho Weaver’s lips tightened as he opened the door. He’d had some idea of what to expect… but as always, seeing it with his own eyes was a shock.

The room was a nightmare. Blood had sprayed far and wide, marking virtually every surface. Turez’s body was sprawled by the cot on the wall, arms clutched at his chest as if in a last-ditch attempt to keep the blood from leaving his body. He’d clearly failed in that.

Weaver had fought battles before. During the last Tumult between the Houses, he’d killed his fair share of men in the field. It had changed him of course, as it changed everyone, but he had reminded himself it was for a good cause. His family’s prosperity had been at stake, and he had done what he had to do.

This brought those days flooding back into his mind. Shaking his head to clear it, he beckoned with his left hand. His dutiful adjutant Mehei was there in an instant. “Were there any other casualties?”

Mehei shook his head. “No deaths, my lord, but the scribe down the hall was knocked unconscious. I suspect he caught a glimpse of the assassin, and that’s why he was attacked.”

Weaver didn’t bother correcting him. Mehei was wrong of course, but given the mysteries surrounding the killer, there was no point in telling him otherwise. “Who was in command of the watch last night?”

“Barukha, my lord. Shall I fetch him?”

“No need. If he’d seen something, I’m sure he would have reported it by now. Have him removed from watch duty and reassigned to the House guard.”

“My lord?” Mehei hesitated. “I mean, after a failure of this magnitude, I would have suspected a more… punitive measure was called for.”

Weaver gave him a patient look. “None of the sentries saw anything either, Mehei. Barukha will never command again, of course, but he is still a navigator. We need every navigator we can get these days. Issue the order, and make sure that Barukha knows that it’s the *only* reason he’s still breathing.”

Even after centuries of navigators intermarrying and having kids, only about one in ten children could travel through the threads on their own. There were even some fortune-hunters: Sustained women who bedded navigators simply because they might bear a navigator child. Weaver had never met one, and officially had to disavow them for their ‘wicked’ ways. Still, from a practical standpoint he could understand why they did it.

The fact that Barukha was Gereho’s second cousin meant nothing, and they both knew it. Weaver hadn’t solidified his family as one of the ruling Houses in the city by being sentimental. He didn’t even think of himself by his first name, most of the time. All that mattered was House Weaver. In addition, no one was supposed to know that Turez had been here, much less had been murdered here. If he ordered Barukha’s death, he’d have to explain *why*, and he wasn’t prepared to do that just yet.

Weaver swept out of the room with Mehei in tow, and made his way to the records room. This outpost was fairly remote—one of the reasons he’d sent Turez here, in fact—but the documents he’d carried would have ended up being stored in this room. Here was another surprise. The documents were still here. Had Mehei been right after all? Why had the scribe been attacked, if not for this sensitive information?

At least the room afforded them some privacy. Weaver closed the door and then began pacing, trying to reason everything out. “The killer somehow made his way unseen into a fortified, heavily guarded outpost. He killed his target with a single stab to the heart, and then vanished without a trace. I can think of only one person who *might* have been able to do that.”

Mehei’s jaw dropped fractionally. “I… thought that was just a myth, my lord. I mean, the things he’s done seem almost legendary, if you believe the tales.”

“Tales do tend to grow as they’re told, but this is no myth,” Weaver assured him grimly. “I want you to arrange another search. Take two or three sentries you can trust to keep quiet, and check the exterior of the outpost. Look for…” He hesitated briefly. It sounded insane, but then it wasn’t the first time either. “Look for damage to the stonework that is almost invisible. You’ll need to run your hands across the wall sections to find any stones that shift when you press them.”

Mehei nodded, his expression still dubious, and then bowed and left. Weaver growled in his absence, at the inconvenience of it all. Turez—or rather the information he’d gathered—was supposed to be his golden bullet! What he could have revealed to the Council… would have put the final nail in Tanner’s proverbial coffin. So much for that plan.

Weaver was perfectly willing to admit that his quarrel with Lord Tanner was personal. Tanner had slighted him on many occasions, but there was more to it. Weaver had always tried to treat everyone in his lands with respect. From the servant girl who cleaned his room, to the paid guard at his gate, even to the stra’tchi slaves toiling away in their fields and factories—all of them knew that their Lord Weaver would always be fair with them.

Tanner was a different story. His servants lived in constant fear, a state he very much enjoyed inflicting on them. Even his most expensive Bonded were used to a brutal and unforgiving atmosphere. He had four wives, none of whom looked happy on the rare occasions they were spotted outside his territory. He had dozens of children who were known for competing, often violently, for their father’s approval. Years ago, Weaver had taken it upon himself to remove Tanner from power. At least then the people he’d been brutalizing would have a chance at a better life.

He shook his head. How in the Multitude had the assassin known that Turez was even *here*, much less in that room alone? As he pondered that in silence, Mehei finally came back with some news. He led Weaver to the southwest corner of the outpost, where the wall had been… compromised. A section of the corner had been carved out, as if by impossibly hard, impossibly thin tools. The killer had no doubt used the hole in the corner to slip in and out, and then had moved the brick and mortar back in place to hide his tracks.

So it was Heartbane after all. This attack and the damage to the wall fit with this particular assassin’s pattern. But why had Heartbane targeted Turez? He certainly didn’t work for Tanner. From what Weaver could tell, he had no loyalties to any specific house.

How he was doing it was another infuriating mystery. None of the sentries had heard a thing! What could cut stone like that, and make no noise at all? And why cut the *corner* of the wall? It would have been much easier to go for one of the flat segments. The cuts were so clean that another day or so and the stonework would have settled on its own, leaving no trace and further bolstering the killer’s already impressive reputation.

“Take the body out of here,” he ordered the sentries. “Drop it near the square in Barros patch, under some bushes. Try to make it look like he was killed there, if you can.” Turning to Mehei, he handed him the paperwork the assassin had apparently not known about. “Put this on the body. I can’t afford to keep it in my possession anymore, not if the Council orders a search.”

Mehei nodded and folded the parchment under one arm before pausing. “My lord… Turez bled a great deal in that room before he died. If we want to make it look like he died elsewhere…”

Weaver nodded. “You’re right, of course. Take a sheep with you to Barros patch. Slaughter it there and spread the blood around. Good thinking.”

He glimpsed up at the sky. A few hours, maybe, until sunrise. “Off you go now,” he urged them, and they set out immediately.

Grimacing, Weaver headed home to write his report for the Council. Another opportunity had been missed, it was true, but there would be more. One of these days, he *would* have what he needed to bring that arrogant bastard down. And that moment would be all the sweeter for the waiting.

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After the medicine woman left, Jaas stayed by Arico’s side, sitting quietly and worrying. The old man—she assumed he was Arico’s father—brought her a warm drink from the fire and sat with her, holding her hand. She knew he could understand her, but it was obvious he couldn’t use his own voice. His language was something she’d never seen before—using gestures to speak.

And then there was the healer herself. Jaas had been sure that Arico would die, but that woman had saved him. She’d poured something on the wounds—some kind of alcohol by the smell of it. And then she’d actually *sewn* his wounds closed, which would have never occurred to Jaas at all! Back home, wounds as serious as Arico’s could only be healed with magic. But then, Arico had told her that magic didn’t work anywhere in this city. Obviously, these people had developed other ways.

Jaas wasn’t even sure how he’d been hurt in the first place. She hadn’t seen anyone with a sling or a bow back near the river. Clearly the locals had found other ways with regards to weapons, as well.

It was fascinating, really. So many things here were new to her, and she suspected that this was only the beginning. Once again she wished for her quill and parchment. So many things to discover, and only her memory to store them! She smiled sardonically. And she’d thought she was so experienced and world-wise. Jaas the traveler, the scholar. Right now, it might as well have been Jaas the child, or Jaas the fool.

As she sat there, the old man stood and moved over to the fireplace. Soon she could detect the delicious smell of broth being stirred and heated on the fire. Her stomach grumbled loudly, and she realized it had been more than a day since she’d eaten anything. He didn’t seem to notice, though. Either he was deaf, or just very polite. Possibly both.

“I’m Jaas,” she introduced herself again. If he really was deaf, he’d probably missed it before. “You’re Durhu, aren’t you? I thought I heard that healer call you that.” His eyebrows raised in surprise, and then he smiled and nodded, making another series of motions with his hands.

“Wait. Slow down. Do you use your hands to form letters?”

He nodded again, and repeated the motion, this time slow enough for her to pick up. While the soup heated above the fire, he worked with her to demonstrate the dwarven alphabet, one letter after another. It was a fairly simple system, but she knew she was just scratching the surface. Obviously he used other motions to represent words or ideas, and only used the alphabet when he had to. Otherwise it would take him minutes to ‘say’ even simple phrases.

She was confident she could learn it in time, with his help. Whether she’d *have* that time… well, that was unclear. Those red-and-gold uniformed guards back there had been willing to kill them both, and their weapons were nothing to laugh at. Somehow she was pretty sure she’d see them again soon.

As for how they’d escaped, that was yet another mystery! The inside barriers seemed to be just as deadly as the outside one, but the guards could pass through them, as could Arico. And not only had he been able to take her along for the ride, he seemed to have teleported them here in the process, through that… white room! It was one of the first questions she intended to ask him when he woke up. Durhu handed her a clay bowl, interrupting her reverie, and she thanked him. The soup was a little too hot but otherwise excellent; it was certainly better than anything she could make. Cooking had never been her gift. More like a curse, in fact.

Every time the old man looked at Arico, his friendly smile slipped a little. Jaas kept in touch with her parents, but she hadn’t seen them in person for years now. The thought of what she would feel if her father was laying there like that tightened her stomach.

She tried to distract Durhu as best she could, getting him to demonstrate his hand language for her. She was starting to get a handle on it, how gestures could combine to make words that related to the original gestures, when the door swung open without warning. In walked a bald man, wearing a disturbingly familiar red and gold uniform.

He was huge, at least twenty-five hands in height, and built like an ox. He was wearing one of those short metal clubs she’d seen earlier, as well. Jaas backed away from him, looking for a weapon—or for another way out of the cabin—but before she could do anything, Durhu hurried over to her and put a hand on her shoulder.

*Friend*—he spelled out for her in dwarven.

The uniform was exactly the same as on the people who’d attacked her. Not entirely convinced she was safe, Jaas kept her distance and a wary eye on him as he entered the cabin. Durhu ‘spoke’ to him briefly, and he grunted before looking at her. “You are Jaas?” He asked in dwarven.

Just like Arico, his accented dwarven was heavy, but perfectly understandable. “I am,” she responded cautiously.

“We must leave, all of us,” he said calmly, looking around the room as if she wasn’t even there. “They are looking for you, and for him.” He glanced down at Arico.

Whoever he was, his voice was deep and steady. He might as well have been commenting on the weather for all the stress she could hear in his tone. Durhu nodded at her and hurried over to the pantry. He pulled out a small pack made of hides and started gathering food, enough for a few days at least. From what she could see, it was mostly dried fruit and hardtack jerky.

The big man moved towards Arico, but without even really thinking about it, Jaas quickly stepped between them. “You stay away from him!”

He blinked down at her in surprise for a second as if taking notice of her for the first time, and then chuckled. “Stay here if you wish, but I’m taking him. If you try to stop me, you’ll regret it.” At that he just shouldered his way past her, brushing her aside as if she weighed nothing, and carefully lifted Arico up off his bed.

Jaas grimaced, but at least it looked like the brute knew what he was doing as he carried Arico outside. He probably had plenty of experience moving injured people. He certainly looked like he had plenty of experience doing the *injuring*.

Durhu placed the pack in her hands and gestured towards the door. She hesitated only briefly before heading after the big man. After all, she didn’t really have much choice but to trust them.

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Chapter 7

The air was hot and heavy, thick with blood and sweat. The cries of the wounded—of the women and children who were stuck here, resonated in Tenlor’s ears. He sat on horseback with his squad, all eight of them wearing Ascendant colors. Their orders were strict: observe the conflict but do not get involved. None of the sides within this Tumult would dare attack an Ascendant patrol, not when they had each other to kill first.

Tenlor guided his horse forward into the streets, slowly and purposefully past the bodies. Despite the protected status of his people, he didn’t want anyone to think they were under attack. Even Ascendants could be killed by mistake in this fight. Lord Grover’s soldiers were trained to be brutal and unhesitating in combat, and Tenlor didn’t want to test their limited self-control. Tanner’s forces were no better, really, but they were on the defensive here. Lord Grover had ordered all Tanner loyalists in this patch to be hunted down and killed; what a waste.

Tenlor caught sight of movement out of the corner of his eye, and raised a fist to his men at first. He lowered it quickly enough when he could see them more clearly, though. There were half a dozen or so young men wearing simple brown robes and sandals. Each had close-cropped hair and were clean shaven. Initiates.

Like Tenlor’s Ascendants, the Clarion initiates were off limits to any and all sides in this Tumult. They were pathetic pacifists, known for tending the wounded and administering last rites to the fallen. Ever since the fighting broke out, Tenlor had seen them in at least a dozen patches throughout the city, always where the fighting was worst. Pacifists they were, maybe, but he had to admit they were brave.

These particular initiates were standing side by side, between a Grover patrol and four children huddled together in a corner. Tenlor smiled. No doubt the Grover Captain considered them to be sympathizers, but the initiates wouldn’t let him kill them. As far as standoffs were concerned, this was a predictable one. The Grovers would back down soon enough. Then the Captain pulled his blade in one swift motion and cut down the center initiate!

Tenlor gaped at him briefly, as the other Grovers set upon the remaining initiates. The kids screamed in fear as their protectors fell. Tenlor kicked his horse into motion, charging down the street as fast as he could. He didn’t particularly care if the initiates or the children died, but any breach of the peace was his to address, and Tenlor had standing orders to make sure these men paid for overstepping their bounds.

Even as they approached, it was already too late. All five initiates were down, and the children were running away as fast as their little legs could carry them. The Grover Captain looked up in surprise just in time to be trampled under Tenlor’s horse. The other Grovers—those who weren’t similarly crushed—tried to flee, and Tenlor quickly ordered his troops after them.

Tenlor dismounted, drove his sword through the throat of the still-struggling Captain, and then turned to the initiate corpses. The Council would require proof of this violation, which meant he needed to bring back all the bodies, Grover and initiate alike.

But one of the initiates was still moving. The one the Captain had cut down, in fact. His right arm and chest had been slashed open, but it had been the impact that had felled him, not the wounds themselves. Tenlor reached down to pull him to his feet. As they clasped hands, their eyes met, and Tenlor felt a shiver run down his spine.

Of course there was pain in the man’s eyes—not even initiate training could block that completely. But there was also no trace of fear or anger. Tenlor knew right then and there that this man didn’t care if he lived or died. He might as well have tripped and fallen for all the concern in his expression.

Tenlor knew a little about Clarion training—about how children were selected for their kindness, empathy, and courage. But this man was different. This one was also dangerous. He looked around briefly. His men might object, but they were still distracted with hunting down the rest of the Grover patrol. Confident that he was doing the right thing, Tenlor pulled the dagger from his belt and stabbed swiftly and surely.

The initiate’s expression didn’t change at all, and they both looked down together, at the dagger sticking out of Tenlor’s belly-

-With a shuddering gasp, Tenlor woke up, clutching at his gut. He was covered in a cold sweat, just as he had been that day during the Tumult. Of course there was no dagger sticking out of him, but he could still *feel* it: a foreign object sliding into his intestines. He could taste the blood in the air, even if it was just the product of a dream.

Grunting in frustration, Tenlor rolled out of bed and to his feet. One look outside told him that it was almost time. He was probably already late, in fact. At least he was dressed for the meeting, and his wife wasn’t here to nag him about it. The dream stuck with him, though. As first meetings could go, it was… memorable. He couldn’t help thinking of the old saying: In war, events of importance are the results of trivial causes.

It took him a few minutes to get over to the Spire, and even longer to climb the long circular staircase up to them. Even this far down though, Tenlor could hear a lot of noise. The angry voices of the bickering delegates echoed up and down the stairwell like a buzzing beehive. Tenlor sighed as he made his way up the final steps and opened the Council Chamber door. He hated these meetings. As his father’s only son, he wasn’t required to attend any of the Council meetings. As the commander of the Ascendant Guard though, his attendance was mandatory.

His father, the Lord Ascendant Berilo, head of House Fisher, First Navigator of the Sustained, etcetera, etcetera, and so on and so forth was in there with them. No doubt keeping calm amidst the constant crossfire of insults from House to House. Each meeting was basically the same.

Resisting the urge to just keep climbing the Spire stairs and bypass the meeting entirely, Tenlor slipped into the room as quietly as he could manage. Though based on the tone of the man currently speaking, Tenlor doubted anyone would notice even if he slammed the door behind him.

“This is unacceptable, my liege!” That was Echio, head of House Tanner, a man known as much for his bluster and exaggeration as he was for his expanding waistline. “My family has obviously been slandered in this matter, and I demand recompense and retaliation! House Weaver has clearly set this… rabid dog on us intentionally. I ask that you do the only reasonable thing and see to it they’re punished!”

“That’s a lie!” Gereho Weaver, the aging patriarch of his rather small family, responded vehemently. “You’re blaming us for your troubles as you always do. There is no proof that we were involved, except that which you obviously created yourself!”

“Why, you little—I should have your head for even saying that!” Echio sputtered out.

“Enough.”

The word wasn’t shouted, or even spoken loudly, but it seemed to resound through the Council chamber. Both of the idiots shut up. At least it had only been the two of them this time. The Lord Ascendant shook his head slowly. Tenlor’s father had always been able to cut through the bickering, and he often wondered how.

“Peace, my friends,” another, softer voice spoke up from the opposite side of the table. A young man in simple brown robes rose from his seat and extended both hands to the room. “It’s been barely a year since the latest Tumult ended. Since blood and violence stained virtually every street in our fair city. Are we so willing to dive right back into that conflict? Over something as trivial as a rumor?”

“A rumor that has caused harm to me and mine!” Tanner objected, standing up suddenly. “My honor has been besmirched, and I will make sure the guilty party is punished accordingly!”

The Clarion smiled at him softly. “Come now, my lord. You say that as if no one in this room knows you have spread similar rumors about your rivals for years. Surely you can admit that regardless of who did this, they were likely provoked?”

Tenlor had heard some of those rumors himself. There was a soft murmur of assent throughout the room, and Tanner glowered briefly before retaking his seat. Tenlor grimaced privately, turning his face away from the table. If his father had a gift for ending arguments, the Clarion had the complementary gift of glossing over the harm they caused. That didn’t stop Tenlor’s skin from crawling every time he looked at the Clarion, though.

Yes, it was the very same man Tenlor had remembered in his dream. Though the sha’haln got a few details wrong, as usual. Tenlor hadn’t stabbed anyone that day. The young man, known to the other initiates only as ‘Gerit’, had given a full report of how the Grovers had attacked them, and how Tenlor had saved him. Technically true, if repulsive.

Gerit had been named Clarion and inducted into the Sustained Council barely two months later, just after the Tumult had ended. Now he was one of the most respected men in the city—both because of his title and the works he and the others had undertaken during the fighting.

The title was a unique one, to be sure. In order to even be considered for the post, a man needed to have been raised a strict ascetic. Only the simplest clothing and food. Intensive training from childhood to consider the morality of every decision they made, and every decision they observed, too. And worst of all, the complete stripping of all identity. The Clarion was just that: a title. Gerit may have been his birth name or just a nickname, but now he had neither, and no recorded history either. No land or titles other than his position advising the Council.

Tenlor couldn’t live like that. What was the point of dedicating your life to something, if you couldn’t at least enjoy the perks of it? The Clarion had never even killed a man! Still, Tenlor had to admit the Clarion was brave enough. He’d seen the proof with his own eyes. Even after his actions during the last conflict, inducting him as Clarion had still been a controversial decision on the Lord Ascendant’s part. And it was clear why. What group of leaders could tolerate having this… sanctimonious, self-righteous peasant looking over their decisions and watch-dogging their meetings? This Council was certainly no exception.

His father had insisted on it, though. He’d sold the idea to the Council by convincing them of the necessity of having a Clarion publicly aligned with them. The First Council, hundreds of years ago, had a Clarion advising them as well, and that extra voice had given them legitimacy in the eyes of the people. A legitimacy that this Council desperately needed right now, he’d argued. Especially with the Tumult still fresh in everyone’s minds.

Tenlor still wasn’t convinced though, even after a year of relative peace. People didn’t need to love their rulers, or even respect them. Obedience and fear were the only things needed, no matter what the current Lord Ascendant believed. As if spurred on by Tenlor’s thoughts, his father rose from his chair to address the room. “I hear your concerns, Lord Tanner, and as it happens,” he nodded to one of the servants at the service door, “I’ve already acted upon them.”

Two servants entered quietly, keeping their gaze down and carrying a man on a stretcher between them. Tenlor gave a slow smile as he recognized the man. Turez Glasser, a cousin of the Lord Weaver.

Glasser was clearly dead; his body was white and unnaturally still. Though the cause of his death was not evident, its ramifications were clear. A solemn silence pervaded the room, as each of the Councilors looked at the body. The Clarion left his seat as well, and approached the body with a quiet reverence.

“Here is your traitor, Lord Tanner,” his father said quietly. “My agents found his body in the square in Barros patch a few hours after you told me. There was no indication of who killed him, but the papers he was carrying tell a very interesting story.”

His father accepted a parchment from the servants and unrolled it before his lords. “This document will be made available to all of you, after it has been authenticated. It clearly details Glasser’s plans to sabotage Tanner facilities, and includes his method of payment. Gold, as it happens, with Mason printing on it.”

There was a collective rustle of surprise through the group. All eyes quickly shifted to Aron Mason, the uncle of the infant Lord Mason and current guardian of their family. As the Head of House Mason, Aron had a place here in the Council, but he wasn’t a navigator. As such he would be replaced as soon as his nephew came of age.

“Preposterous,” he sniffed in an admirable display of disdain. “A forgery, no doubt, meant to implicate my House. It’s clear the perpetrators are seeking to take advantage of us after my brother’s death.”

There was another rustle through the room, this time more amusement than expectation. It was funny to hear Aron Mason speak as the leader of his family, because everyone here knew he wasn’t just a substitute for his brother, but also a figurehead for the true leader of House Mason. Not that anyone here would publicly admit a woman was leading a Sustained House, but it was common knowledge that Aron’s mother, the Lady Kunesa, was calling the shots for him. Despite his embarrassing situation, Tenlor admired how well he could cover it up.

“We will see.” The Lord Ascendant rolled up the parchment. “My scribes will examine the document in detail. I believe that addresses your concerns, my Lord?” He looked mildly over at Tanner.

“Of course, my liege.” Tanner looked a little pale. “As always your skill in these matters is beyond compare.” The others all nodded their agreement in turn.

There was an awkward pause before Weaver spoke up. “As he is one of mine, my liege, the shame is upon me. With your permission, I will take his body and have it burned as all traitors deserve.”

“No.” The Clarion interjected, his voice as close to harshness as it could get. “Whatever else Glasser was, he was a member of a noble Sustained House. His remains will be returned to the threads with honor, in the eyes of Aquun and the people themselves. The people need to see a unified front among the Council, and burning the body of one of your own would hardly show that, would it?” He looked around at them, one by one.

Again, Tenlor felt the hair rise on his skin. He’d always considered himself religious—at least he followed Aquun’s teachings well enough to fit in among the nobility—but the Clarion was something else indeed.

True zealotry—true *belief*—were his, and everyone in the room knew it. There was no artifice, no pretense in the Clarion’s eyes. He had no use for lying, and no tolerance for it either. No matter how annoyed they were with him, and no matter how much they wished they’d never brought him into the Council, each and every lord here recognized what he was. A man who couldn’t be bought, influenced, or dismissed. He was the Council’s very conscience made flesh, and he was empowered to remind them that they weren’t here to just lead, but to serve their people as well.

Even worse, the Clarion was also an investigator. Since everyone knew that he was incorruptible, he had near absolute authority to root out whatever dirty little secrets he caught wind of. No doubt everyone here had things they were desperate to keep out of the Clarion’s sight, for fear he would relentlessly and ruthlessly expose them for everyone to see. Tenlor would have found that amusing, especially in Tanner’s case, but he was subject to this self-righteous… non-person as well.

In deference to the Clarion’s statements, the Lord Ascendant adopted a more caring appearance as he changed the subject. “I know we’re all concerned about the quake that happened two days ago. We’ve confirmed that it did happen throughout the city, apparently even in the dwarven Enclave, from what the Hauld has told me. I’ve also been in contact with the High Penet, and he assures me there’s no cause for alarm. It was a message, he said, one of good fortune from Aquun.”

There was a rustle of conversation among the Councilors. Some seemed encouraged by this, while others didn’t look convinced. Tenlor knew how they felt. As members of the Council, they were all obligated to listen to the High Penet and his gaggle of religion-spouting morons, or at least they were in public. The relationship between the Aquunites and the Council was a long and complicated one. They both relied on each other to maintain control of the city, but Tenlor knew that they were little more than glorified demagogues, pandering to the fears and hopes of the stra’tchi, and any Sustained foolish enough to listen to them. The real power was in blood, and in that regard the Aquunites were quite powerless.

Naturally, the High Penet had lodged an official protest after the Clarion was inducted. After all, how could he pretend to follow his religion if he was always bumping into a true believer? “Very well,” the Lord Ascendant continued briskly. “I am sure I will see you all at the Laentana celebration, if not before. Until then, health and happiness to you all.” His father tapped a small bell to signal the end of the session, and the Councilors, a score or so in total, began filing out of the room. Tenlor started to follow them, but his father raised a hand at him, bidding him to stay.

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The room was a stark contrast to its usual state once they’d gone. So quiet and peaceful, a few floors up from the base of the Spire. His father had even dismissed the servants as well. One of them had been moving a bit too slowly, so Tenlor kicked him through the door before closing it.

“That was undignified,” his father commented, a little dryly.

Tenlor only shrugged. “Sometimes you have to kick a dog to make it learn.” He peered down at Glasser’s body, still on its stretcher by the door. “I don’t see any wounds. How did he die?”

His father answered by lifting the breastplate. Glasser wasn’t wearing anything beneath it. Clearly evident, on the left side of his chest, was a single stab wound. There was very little blood, and no other injuries that Tenlor could see. The body had probably been cleaned up a bit, but the wound itself meant only one person was likely responsible.

Tenlor gave his father a slow smile. “Someday you’ll have to tell me who Heartbane is, and how you got him to work for you.”

His father only shook his head. “Even now, I’m not sure myself. He’s been very careful to protect his identity, and if I forced the issue I’d most certainly lose his services.”

About a year ago, just after the Tumult had ended, this assassin had started making his mark. He’d started with criminals mostly, dispatching them quickly with a single stab to the heart, hence his nickname. It hadn’t taken long for him to branch out, though. Before long he was targeting soldiers and agents from the Sustained Houses: people who had done terrible things but whose money and family connections had protected them.

He was good at it, too. No one had ever survived an encounter with Heartbane. No one had even gotten a good look at him. The best description Tenlor had heard was of a short figure wearing a skull mask and carrying a pair of daggers. He could move quickly and quietly where needed, and was apparently a navigator as well, or at least was friends with one. Tenlor also suspected that he’d been active even longer than a year. It would have been easy for Heartbane to kill people during the Tumult, taking advantage of the chaos and death to hone his skills.

Just about the same time the Clarion had been inducted into the Council, Tenlor had also gained command of the Ascendant Guard. Upon gaining his new title, Tenlor had taken it upon himself to track down Heartbane, using the Ascendants as a search force. He’d even caught a glimpse of the assassin himself once, fleeing the scene of yet another murder he’d committed.

Then for some unknown reason, Heartbane had just… stopped. About six months after the Tumult ended, the bodies stopped dropping. At first Tenlor had assumed Heartbane was picking targets more carefully now that he didn’t have a large war covering his tracks. But then nearly two months passed without a single kill, and Tenlor seriously doubted it was because of his Ascendants. A man as cocky and skilled as Heartbane must have had another reason for putting up his daggers. It had been only recently that he’d finally resurfaced, with Glasser being the eighth target since.

Eventually, Tenlor had put it all together. Whoever this Heartbane was, he worked for the Lord Ascendant. The only way the killer could have evaded capture so many times was with inside help, and only members of this very Council had known exactly where Tenlor had been sending his forces each time. Since every House but their own had been hit… it was becoming more and more obvious that Heartbane was on his father’s side.

In addition, his father had forbidden Tenlor from leaning on the local black market. Terres Huun probably knew who the assassin was, or at least she knew how to find out, but his father had been quite adamant that Tenlor leave her alone. At first he’d assumed it was because the other Houses didn’t want to lose access to Huun’s little network of smugglers. Asking for help from the various spymasters in the city wouldn’t work either, as most were in the pockets of rival Houses. As for Cartwright, his father had straight-up forbidden him from asking the old man. Probably because he didn’t want to owe another favor. Cartwright’s favors were often difficult to repay.

And finally, Glasser hadn’t been a murderer or rapist like most of Heartbane’s early victims. He wasn’t violent or hateful. He’d just been a pawn in the many games between the Houses, and now he was dead. Displayed like a trophy by House Fisher as further proof of their right to rule. No doubt that was why his father hadn’t objected when the Clarion insisted on having the body threaded, despite Glasser’s apparent status as a traitor. If House Weaver examined the body, they would find the stab wound and know exactly who had killed him.

In one quick motion, his father pulled the knife from Tenlor’s belt and put the tip down on the table. “He always uses a blade like this one. One thrust, right to the heart, and nothing else. In some of the previous murders he used other weapons—once even a gun—but only when it was clear the victim was putting up a fight. If Heartbane has the upper hand, he uses his daggers. I suspect…” he trailed off, spinning the knife and digging the tip into the table, “I suspect he’s one of the Councilors, actually.”

Tenlor sniffed in disbelief. “I seriously doubt that. Have you taken a good look at any of your *faithful* Councilors recently, father? Half of them have one foot in the grave already! I doubt Lord Mason could sneeze without his chest collapsing, and the rest of them are almost as frail.”

In the blink of an eye his father grabbed his left hand, slammed it down on the table, and plunged the knife straight down into it. Tenlor flinched away, but his father held him there with an iron grip, keeping his hand on the table.

There was no pain, though. He looked down and saw that knife was expertly positioned between two fingers—fingers which were still touching each other. The knife was still quivering slightly after the old man had let go of it.

His father finally let go and Tenlor pulled his hand away gingerly, looking for any cuts. “What was that for?” He demanded.

“These people are expert liars, Tenlor!” His father’s voice was intense and ragged, unlike his usual careful moderation. “Old and fragile mean nothing in this room, do you hear me? I’m an old man, and you’re a seasoned warrior in your prime, but I still could have easily pinned you to this table, with your own knife! They’re no different than anyone else in the city: the great ones eat up the little ones. Do *not* make the same mistake with them. Don’t *ever* make that mistake, understood?”

“Yes, father,” Tenlor answered cautiously, still tentatively holding one hand with the other.

He knew his father had been an expert with knives in his youth. Tenlor had assumed he’d lost those skills with age, but clearly he hadn’t. But what had possessed him to just stab away like that? If he’d missed, even by a hair… “The killer knows things,” his father continued conversationally, the fire of his previous words completely gone again. It was as if it had never happened. “Things only discussed in this room. Either Heartbane is one of the Councilors, or he works for one.”

His brief tantrum seemed to have passed. Very well. If he wanted to pretend things were all normal again, Tenlor could play along. “If you don’t know who he is, how can you trust him?” Still, Tenlor moved to the other side of the table. There was no point in tempting fate.

“I don’t,” his father’s voice was direct and blunt, unlike his usual tone with the Council. “All the same, I don’t need to trust him to use him. I make requests through Huun’s network, under an assumed name of course, and Heartbane takes care of it quickly and efficiently. I only know that he’s loyal to me because the ones I *don’t* request have all been enemies of mine, and because he’s never charged me for his work. Inquiring further would just be a waste of time.”

From his tone, it was clear his father would say no more on the subject, so Tenlor decided to change topics. “So Glasser was working for you in secret, then?”

“Actually no. Surprisingly, for once I didn’t need to fake anything. The document is real, and Lord Mason will have some explaining to do when it’s verified. Unless he makes it worth my while, of course.”

“Of course.” Tenlor smiled.

“So what *did* the High Penet tell you about the quake?” Tenlor asked again after a moment, trying to change the subject to something less murderous. “Did he have any idea what caused it?”

His father waved a hand dismissively. “He filled my ears with the usual platitudes and religious language, but I got the distinct impression he was rattled. I don’t think he knows any more than we do.” He looked up, and Tenlor thought he could see traces of concern in that lined face. “Despite that, we know there was no damage, and no Sustained deaths we know of. The Laentana celebration should help even the stra’tchi forget about it. Only time will tell if it happens again, though.”

So no one knew anything. If Tenlor believed in omens, he might be concerned right now. “Oh, I nearly forgot. I heard back from House Miller. Officially they’re denying everything, but according to my sources they really did suffer some kind of attack yesterday, somewhere in Shaggan patch.

He traced his fingers over the stab wound on Glasser’s body. “No one was killed, strangely, so I know you didn’t order it. I did hear that they were holding someone, though. Someone who they aren’t holding anymore.”

His father turned to face the open window, staring down at the rest of Sevvas patch. The view was truly spectacular, by design. The Spire had been built right into the middle of the patch, both as a symbol of the enduring power of the Sustained, and to serve as chambers for the Council to meet every so often. From this room alone, they could see all the way to the threads on the north and west edges of Sevvas.

“Hm. Keep digging on this. There’s more going on here than the Millers are letting on. Don’t hesitate to put some pressure on them. That is your area of expertise, isn’t it?”

Tenlor gave a cool look at his back. “Yes, father.” It was clearly a dismissal, and after that knife incident Tenlor wasn’t inclined to push his luck trying to get more information. He snatched the knife from the table and gave a brief bow to his military superior before heading out.

He was very different from his father, and they both knew it. His father could have very easily drawn blood back there just to make a point, but he didn’t. Tenlor wouldn’t use the word *afraid*, but his father disliked using force.

The man had been a visionary during his time. A genius when it came to dealing with the other Houses. He’d taken House Fisher from the edge of ruin to the most powerful position in the city, in just a few years. Tenlor would always admire his father for that, even though he’d been too young to remember it happening himself.

Still, his father’s diplomatic and political skills were needed less and less these days. The Patchwork of this era needed someone who wasn’t afraid to use dominance displays and harsh actions. To twist arms, or break them if the need arose.

*When father dies,* Tenlor promised himself, *there won’t be a Choosing. No Sustained Council, no High Penet, and definitely no Clarion meddling in our affairs. I’ll make sure of it. This city will be ruled by one family, forever. My family.*

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Chapter 8

It was a lovely day on the open fields. The sun was shining down brightly on them from above, and there was no sign of frost anywhere. Grass surrounded them on all sides, stretching out for leagues in every direction. Arico sat on the blanket and looked across the game board at his friend.

Odjes wasn’t looking back. His brooding brow was furrowed as he looked down at the board and contemplated his next move. The noise of children playing behind them beckoned at Arico’s ears, and he glanced in that direction. A little boy and girl, both of them less than three years old, were playing tag on the grass. Laughing, running, rolling and wrestling, while their mother looked on from far away.

“Your move.” Odjes tapped him on the shoulder.

Arico returned his attention to the game, but the pieces were… unfocused. Difficult to see, much less move. He sat back up and crossed his legs on the blanket. “Haven’t we played this game before?”

“Of course we have,” Odjes answered easily. “Almost every day for years now. Don’t you remember?”

Now that he mentioned it, Arico *could* vaguely recall this experience. Sometimes in a palace, surrounded by servants. Sometimes by the Waters, or on a boat anchored in the Waters. Sometimes atop the city walls, surrounded by silent armed guards obsessed with their protection. Sometimes at Durhu’s farm, while the children played with Tula and D’tor’s cows instead of just each other. In each case the people were mostly the same. Arico, Odjes, the two children, and their distant mother. Sometimes he knew what it meant, and sometimes he didn’t.

Odjes pointed down to the blanket. “That looks like it hurts.”

Arico followed his gaze. Blood was soaking his side, seeping down through his clothes and into the cloth below. The little boy was bleeding as well, though he didn’t seem to notice it. Concerned, Arico put a hand to his side and stabbing pain shot through his midsection-

-With a gasp, Arico sat up in bed.

He nearly cried out in pain, clutching at his side. Only long years of training and practice kept him silent (and he still had to bite down on his tongue) as he instinctively tried to figure out where he was. It was dark, mostly. He could see candlelight flickering from across the room. With a breath of relief, he realized he was in the Hideaway.

The pain in his side was fading. It looked like one of Endu’s dressings, which was a comforting thought. At least he wasn’t bleeding in real life. His sha’haln dream was fading, though. *We are such stuff as our dreams are made of*, Durhu had once told him, which meant that Odjes was probably just a version of himself. No wonder they got along so well.

Arico could hear breathing to his left, slow and steady. Further to the left, the faint whistling noise that his mi’he made when he snored. Arico laid back in bed with some relief. At least Durhu was all right. He remembered… passing out on the grass, right next to the threads. The woman—Jaas—must have gotten help. If they were here though, it meant that Tellek patch wasn’t safe anymore.

Arico groaned. That was his fault. The Sustained guards had seen him navigate! If they were searching Tellek, they were probably searching every other patch as well. The Hauld would definitely *not* like this.

“Are you all right?” A voice softly asked in dwarven. The candlelight across the room seemed to split in two, and the other candle was carried over to him by Jaas. She must have heard him wake up.

Her normally curly hair was a bit disheveled from sleep, but she looked otherwise unhurt. At least she hadn’t been shot as well. Arico gave her a curt nod. “How did we get here?”

She grimaced. “A big bald man wearing a red uniform brought us.” From her tone, she didn’t think well of him, but her expression changed back to curiosity quickly enough. “I want to talk to you about that, actually. About that white… emptiness I keep on seeing when I pass through the barriers.”

Arico hesitated. Everyone in the city had at least a basic idea of what the inside of the threads looked like, so either this woman was really, *really* committed to her cover story of being from the Outside, or she… actually was.

He shook his head. “That’s, uh, very complicated to explain. But don’t worry. Now that we’re somewhere safe, I can take the time to tell you everything. As for the man who brought us here, his name is Alzhi. He’s strong, loyal, and reliable, but he’s not the most personable of people. Try not to hold it against him.”

Jaas gave a derisive sniff. “I’ll do my best,” she said with just a touch of sarcasm. “Anyway, it’s good to see you awake again. I was afraid for a while. Durhu kept me company, catching me up on some of the things that have happened in Vasiriah over the past few hundred years.”

Arico stared at her. “Wait, you can understand him?”

“Well, not at first. Now I can, mostly.”

“How long was I out?” Arico wondered aloud.

“About a day and a half. That Alzhi person picked you up and brought us all here just before dusk.”

“You learned a new language in *one day*??”

Jaas gave a brief shrug. “I’m not conversational yet, if that’s what you mean. The fact that he could understand me was a big help, too.” She leaned back in the small chair, looking contemplative. “When it comes down to it, languages are really just patterns with a little memorization here and there to fill in the gaps. I’ve always had a gift with recognizing patterns, so languages come easily to me.”

“I’ll say.” Arico shook his head in wonderment. “You really are from the Outside, aren’t you?”

“You mean you *still* don’t believe me?” She gave him a wry smile.

He raised his hands in protest. “It’s… not an easy thing to wrap my brain around. I am sorry, but in my defense, no one’s ever come from the Outside before! Some people have told stories over the years, spread rumors that they’d seen someone from the Outside, but nothing ever came of it.”

They sat in silence for a few moments, listening to Durhu’s quiet snore and the faint flickering of the candles. Arico still felt weak, and not just from the blood loss. It… had happened! Terres had been right. For the first time since the Threading, someone had actually come here from the Outside. The Harbinger was actually here!

He’d never really believed in the prophecies, and he was still having difficulty with it, even when she was right here staring him in the face. A great many others would believe it, though. He sat up in the makeshift bed and immediately regretted it as the muscles in his midsection protested. “Careful!” Jaas admonished. “That healer woman said you need to take it easy or those… stitches in your side may come loose. Or that’s what Durhu told me, anyway.”

Arico grimaced. “For once I’m not arguing,” he said through gritted teeth as he tried to find a more comfortable seat.

“So how do you get through the barriers—uh, I mean the threads?” Jaas asked quietly into the darkness. “How does that Alzhi person? How do you bring people with you, and what *is* that white space with all those streams of light?” She peppered him with questions, and leaned forward as she spoke. Her breathing had quickened, and she licked her lips with excitement. Apparently this information was particularly important to her.

“I could ask you the same thing,” he countered, stalling for time. He was finding it a bit strange to talk like this with a living legend. “How about we alternate questions? You asked first, so I’ll start answering first.”

He waited for her to nod and then took a deep breath, trying to arrange his thoughts. “For as long as the threads have existed, there have been a small number of people who can navigate them. It’s been more than three hundred years since the threads first appeared, but no one’s exactly sure how long. No one could tell time very well back then; it was before the New Day cycle began.”

Arico bit his tongue slightly. She hadn’t asked for a history lesson! “Anyway, some of us are born different. We’re called navigators, and if we’re close enough we can see the threads when we close our eyes. We’re the only people who can pass through the threads safely or take people with us. As far as I know, the Waters are the only exception.”

It felt strange to explain this to her. After all, everyone in Patchwork knew all of this from childhood. And most of them had been lied to about it, too. The Council had gone to great lengths to make sure they were in control of as many navigators as possible.

Jaas pulled out a roll of parchment and a quill from the pack by her bed. It took Arico a moment to recognize his own quill, from his days learning to read and write. Durhu must have let her bring them. She dutifully started taking notes on what he was saying with practiced ease… and excellent penmanship despite the dim candlelight, he noticed with a bit of jealousy.

“All right. It’s actually been three hundred and four years, now. I did a lot of research on this place before coming here.” She sounded particularly proud of that. “Let’s see here… so you and Alzhi are called navigators?”

“He is.” Arico clarified hastily. “He’s working undercover for House Miller right now, hence the haircut and uniform. Very few people know I’m a navigator.” He paused at that. “Well, very few people *knew*. Now I guess everybody does. I pulled you into the threads in broad daylight. My secret’s out now,” he realized aloud. It was frightening, to suddenly be so exposed.

Jaas seemed to catch onto his tone and glanced down at his bandaged midsection. “Thank you for breaking me out. You said it was a risk, and you were right. I still don’t know exactly what you gave up to save me, but I won’t forget it.”

He smiled tightly. “Glad to help.”

“Anyway,” she said, suddenly back to business, “so what exactly makes someone a navigator?”

It was his turn to ask, but he let it slide. She was the one with more to learn, after all. “We’re not actually sure. What we do know is that it’s a family trait. If your parents are navigators, then you’re much more likely to be one, but it’s never a sure thing.”

She glanced back at Durhu. “So your father can navigate as well?”

Arico hesitated. Some secrets were greater than others. Durhu probably wouldn’t care if he told her, but the Hauld certainly would. Still, she’d been open with him so far. She deserved the same treatment from him.

“Durhu… isn’t my father, actually,” he said aloud for the first time ever. “I mean, he *is* my father. He raised me, and when I think of my father, I always think of him. But we don’t share any blood. He can’t navigate any more than you can.”

He cocked his head to the side, “or at least I assume you can’t navigate. It’s my turn to ask you something. How did you get into the city in the first place? The threads on the outer edges of the wall don’t have any exit points. I’m a very powerful navigator, and even I can’t get out, so how did you get *in*?”

Now it was Jaas’ turn to hesitate. Her hand dropped to her left side down by the floor, for apparently no reason. Just like his, though, her hesitation didn’t last long. “I… took a risk. I really wish I had my pack so I could show you my research, but basically my assistant and I studied the barriers for a long time. We saw that fish could swim in and out of it, so I figured the river was the key. Water is a universal conductor, after all.”

Arico found himself leaning back away from her. This conversation had suddenly gotten uncomfortable. “You used the Waters to get here?”

“Well, yes.” She looked at him curiously. “Is something wrong?”

“Sort of,” he said evasively. “Tell me, have you heard of Aquun… or the Shemra?”

She sat back, apparently thinking hard. “Shemra doesn’t sound familiar, but Aquun does. The name’s from Old Vasiri, I think. Some kind of water spirit?”

“Not anymore,” he clarified slowly. This was dangerous ground; he’d have to explain it very carefully so she wouldn’t get into trouble. “From what the penets tell us, she’s the guardian spirit of Patchwork. She protected us and kept us alive after the gods themselves cursed us. She still does, or so the people believe.”

Jaas scribbled down what he was saying, quickly and easily. Arico wondered briefly if they had enough parchment here. “So these penets, they’re your priesthood?”

He nodded. “They preside over all the rituals in the city. The Ritual of Rejoining, the Ritual of Waters. All bondings are performed by them, and all funerals. The Plague Test, as well,” he added with a sour note. Rituals, like people, could be good or bad.

Jaas only smiled. “I look forward to learning all about this… new religion. I’d bet it’s nothing at all like the ones I’ve studied elsewhere.”

“You have to be careful, though,” he urged her. “People all over this city have a great respect for the Waters. If you ask about them, or talk about them without the proper reverence…” he trailed off.

“Of course,” she answered quietly. “Don’t worry; I’ll watch what I say.”

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Eventually Arico could see cracks of light just starting to show through the makeshift door to the Hideaway. He was surprised; they’d been talking most of the night. She had a remarkable gift for organization and a relentless ear for details. “Did Alzhi say if he’d told anyone about my injury?”

“No. He just transported us through the threads to the ruin above, helped us open that rolling door of yours, and then left. Charming, really.”

Arico gave a rueful chuckle. “It’s his way.”

“So,” Jaas moved to a new line on her parchment. “Durhu said that this place was your Hideaway. You dug it out yourselves?”

“Mostly.” He could faintly make out the edges of the bridge now. “All we really had to do was clear out the stones from beneath the collapsed bridge. The rest of the weight above us is evenly distributed. Durhu sealed the cracks here and there with pitch and gum rubber, so it keeps air in as well. During winter a single fire can heat this whole place.”

Jaas gave him an amused look. “So,” she held up a hand and started ticking off fingers one by one. “You’re hiding your status as a navigator, you have combat training and a friend who’s acting as a spy when he’s not busy helping you, and you have a super-secret reinforced hiding spot. You’re just full of surprises, aren’t you?”

Arico didn’t know what to say to that. “I… try to live an interesting life,” he said evasively. He spread his hands in a placating gesture. “Look, I’d explain everything to you, but I’m not sure how much I should share yet. I want to talk to… some other people first.” The Hauld would definitely want to talk to him before giving her any information about the movement. The very fact that she knew Alzhi was a spy was already a huge deal, and the Hauld wouldn’t like it at all.

She gave him an evaluating glance in the dim light before eventually nodding, if still a little suspiciously. “Of course, whatever makes you comfortable.”

Only wincing slightly, Arico slid his legs off the bed and slowly stood up. Thankfully Jaas didn’t protest but she did stand up next to him, probably thinking he might keel over. “Come on. We’re going outside.”

“Aren’t they looking for us? Will it be safe?”

He shook his head at that. “They always search the empty patches first, and then move on to the more populated ones. By now they’ve already been here and gone.” Arico had a sudden idea and pointed to the wall by the door. “Grab that rope, would you?”

Jaas retrieved the rope without question, and then helped him up the inside stairs. “You sound as if you’ve been through this before. The city-wide search thing, I mean.”

She was kind enough to roll the door aside for him. From the inside it was gum rubber and stone. From the outside it looked like a broken paving stone. It made perfect camouflage for the Hideaway. “Once or twice a year, usually,” Arico grunted as he rolled the paving stone back in place. “They do a census every once in a while to make sure that no new children are left unregistered. Sometimes they do an unscheduled search, like now.”

The sun was rising over the ruined bridge behind them. They were in a long shadow, but all around them blue skies spread out. Or at least the image of blue skies did. He pointed to the south. “The nearest threads are that way. Follow me.”

It felt good to be up and about again. Endu’s herbs were helping with the pain and his muscles were still sore, but at least he was able to maintain a reasonable pace. As far as gunshot wounds went, it seemed he’d been quite lucky. Jaas followed, trying and failing to hide the concerned look on her face.

Before long they arrived at the threads, and Arico held out an arm to stop her. There was no redline here, because this patch had been abandoned so long ago. “Close your eyes. Can you see anything?”

She shook her head, eyes scrunched tight. Arico took a deep breath and closed his eyes as well. “I see a wall in front of me, filled with tendrils of white light. They’re the same tendrils you saw after I was injured, and again when you were brought here. They spread out to both sides, out of sight, and they’re all moving, intertwining and twirling around each other. They’re always in motion, but they never come any closer. I’ve been able to see them like this ever since I was little. Here, keep your eyes closed and lean just a little bit closer. Do you feel that breeze?”

Jaas nodded. “Yes, I wondered about that. The exterior barrier doesn’t do anything like that. No wind, nothing.”

“Nearly everything that enters the threads, even dirt that slides into them from underground, is threaded. Powdered, I guess you could say, into pieces so small you can barely see them.”

“Disintegrated,” she breathed, opening her eyes in amazement.

He’d never heard that particular word before, so he just shrugged. “That powder is then transported randomly to the other threads, all across the city.”

Jaas thought about it for a few seconds. “So, that breeze is actually air being pushed into the other threads, and randomly coming out here? And if… a person were to step through, they would be shredded and bits of them would end up coming out of all the threads in the city?” Her voice fluttered a little while saying that. This kind of danger was nothing new to him, but he tried to remember how Balter and Veles had reacted when they were told as children. No wonder she sounded afraid.

“Sort of.” He tried to find a way of explaining that wouldn’t scare her but would include all the facts. “Let’s say… an animal was forced into the threads. All of the Waters in its body would arrive on the other side, and just splash onto the ground. The rest of it would be threaded, though. The animal would die instantly.”

Jaas nodded, obviously trying not to let her fear show. “But you and I made it.”

“Navigators can pass through, along with any objects they’re touching. Well, sort of. I’ll show you.” He extended a hand into the threads briefly, and from their perspective it seemed to vanish completely before he pulled it back. He grabbed the rope and looped one end of it around his waist before tying it off. “Every navigator who’s been properly trained can take objects along with him, but there are limits. Here. Hold one end of this rope until I stop moving, would you?”

Jaas took the other end and held onto it, as Arico moved into the threads again—this time his whole body and not just a hand. He kept walking for a few more seconds on the other side, until the rope went slack and started trailing behind him. Without bothering to pick it up, Arico just turned around and walked back to her, dragging the rope as he did so.

“Do you understand it now?” He asked once he was back in the same patch she was. The rope had been cut at about twice his height in distance, and the other bit was still in her hands.

Jaas paused, apparently thinking about it as she picked up the length of rope still tied to him. “So… as long as you’re touching an object you can bring it with you, but if it’s bigger than say, the size of a wagon, part of it gets left behind?”

“That’s right,” he nodded encouragingly as he untied the rope. “But the distance changes from person to person. Some navigators, even with training, can only bring items that are barely within arm’s reach.”

“And others can bring more than you?” She persisted.

Arico shrugged, a bit uncomfortably. “I… don’t know anyone stronger at navigating than I am. Alzhi comes close, though.”

Jaas smiled slightly, and he looked down at his feet. He’d never been particularly comfortable talking about his navigating strength, nor at accepting praise. Thankfully she seemed to sense that, and changed the subject. “What about bringing people through the threads? Do the same rules apply?”

He shook his head. “People are the exception. No one knows exactly why, but as long as a person is touching a navigator’s skin—an arm, a foot, a hand, it doesn’t matter—they come along for the ride. And anyone touching their skin comes along too. And anyone touching *theirs*, and so on and so forth.”

“Magical current,” Jaas responded automatically. He gave her a confused look, so she explained. “One of the first things I learned in the Academy was that every living being has a faint form of magic running through our bodies. The threads must tap into that for navigators and anyone they’re moving. Or at least that’s my theory,” she amended quickly. “I’d have to do more studies to confirm it. So… that white emptiness I saw… that’s the inside of the threads?”

Arico nodded again. “Think of it like stepping over a crack in the ground. I can step from one side to the other through the threads without any effort at all. But if I want to, I can fall *into* the crack—the threads—and move side to side, or even up and down. With enough practice, navigators can even exit the threads somewhere else in the city. Just as if I’d jumped into the Waters and used the current to swim somewhere else.

“Because of that, any navigator can go to any patch in the city, just as long as they end up next to one of the threads. It’s even possible to be in two patches at once through the threads, but that takes a *lot* of practice.”

“So that’s how we ended up on that hill!” Her right hand twitched, as he’d seen several times before. Arico realized that she must be wanting to write all of this down, but they’d left the parchment and ink back inside the Hideaway. “In the outside world, we call that teleportation. I’m impressed: only a handful of people in a thousand have learned how to teleport out there, but in here, you can just use the threads to get around!”

Arico shook his head. “I don’t know anything about… teleportation, but navigating through the threads isn’t as easy as you make it sound. It takes months to train new navigators how to do anything more than just walk through the threads, and even longer for them to learn how to bring anyone or anything else with them.”

Part of him wanted to ask more about her magic. Could she really just disappear somewhere and appear somewhere else? He decided against it for now, though. She was fascinated with all of this, and he didn’t want to interrupt her thoughts. He’d have plenty of time to ask about Outside magic later on.

She nodded, still looking intently at the thread. “What about this illusion, though? I know that what I’m looking at is not real, but how long does it take for an image of the other patch to appear? I didn’t see your hand on the other side, and I didn’t see you when you stepped completely through.”

Now it was Arico’s turn to be impressed. She was seeing all of this for the first time, and understanding it almost immediately. Children in her position often took years to grasp that what they were seeing through the threads wasn’t real. “What you see in the threads is what the neighboring patch *used* to look like. In this case, about two and a half months ago. It changes—updates itself, really—every three months at the next New Day.”

He sat on a pile of bricks nearby to rest his side. “Before the New Day cycle began, everyone here—all our ancestors—lived in complete darkness. No one knows how or why the threads started showing us the sunlight again, but we would probably all have died a very long time ago if they hadn’t. That’s what makes the New Days so special. For a whole day everything happening around us is recorded, and then repeated again and again every day for the next three months.”

She stood in silence for a while, absorbing that. Arico decided on a different tactic and propped himself up with some effort. He held out a hand to her. “Here. It’s better if I just show you.”

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When Arico reached out to her, Jaas thought about refusing. She’d already been bombarded with so much information that her first instinct was to ask for time. Time to absorb it all, and to write it all down. But there was something in his expression she couldn’t quantify. Somehow she knew she could trust him. He was still a little pale from his mysterious injury, but he smiled, apparently confident that they would be in no danger. Hesitantly, she took his hand and he reached out for the nearby barriers—or ‘threads’ as he called them.

Instantly everything changed again, just as it had back in the river, and again when the big lug had transported them to that hiding place. But this time, instead of a tiny bird next to her, or the boar that she’d seen during Alzhi’s trip, Arico was there holding her hand. “It’s all right,” he assured her, as he looked around. “This is second nature to me.”

He was standing tall now, and there was no sign of his injury. He smiled as she examined his side curiously. “Take your time, Jaas. We’re perfectly safe in here.” His smile slipped a bit. “Well, as long as I stay awake, anyway.”

Now that there was no hurry, Jaas took the time to study this new environment. She couldn’t see the ground, and yet she wasn’t falling. She couldn’t feel any air around her, yet she could breathe just fine. It was clearly some kind of dimensional pocket, but unlike any that she’d studied before. Those, in contrast, at least followed the basic laws of the universe.

“The threads are a realm of pure thought,” Arico explained, uncannily matching her own observations as he looked around as well. “Most non-navigators have a hard time understanding this, but I think you can figure it out quickly enough.”

“Pure thought…” she repeated slowly. “You mean our bodies aren’t actually here?”

“Exactly,” he nodded at her. “As long as we’re inside the threads, we will never get hungry or thirsty. We don’t need to eat or drink anything, or even breathe. Your lungs are filling themselves right now only because of habit. And I can let go of your hand here,” he let go immediately, “because it’s not really your hand. Or mine.”

“It’s just what our minds tell us our hands look like,” Jaas completed the thought for him. “Amazing!” Arico laughed easily as she studied her… thought-body… for a moment. It certainly looked like hers. But if her body wasn’t real inside the threads, could she alter it?

A memory suddenly clicked. “That little bird I saw earlier. That was you, wasn’t it? And the boar… that was Alzhi?”

Arico nodded again. “That’s how we look here when we’re not trying to look normal. It’s my natural appearance inside the threads.” As he spoke, his body dissipated into an intangible mist, and then coalesced into the turquoise bird. “See?” The bird’s beak opened slightly as he spoke, and it cocked its head to the side, looking up at her. Shape-changing from the mind’s eye only, apparently.

Jaas closed her eyes and tried to do something similar. When she looked down again, though, her feet were still there. Come to think of it, Durhu had still looked like himself when they’d gone into the threads together.

“Don’t worry about it,” Arico said encouragingly. “It takes time to get a handle on just what you can do when you’re in here.”

“What if someone sees us in here, though?” Jaas realized aloud, looking around in concern. “We’re… a little exposed out here.”

“You don’t need to worry about that either,” Arico responded confidently, his voice just as loud coming from a tiny bird as it had from his human form. “It’s another little quirk of the threads. No one can see or hear us in here. Unless someone’s touching you when you enter the threads, you’re completely invisible to them. In fact, you could even pass through someone and not even know it. Remember, it’s a realm of thought. And I guess thoughts move like this.”

Jaas gave him a wry glance, and the bird fluttered up and down before ‘landing’ again. She guessed it was his form of shrugging. “Unless you have a better explanation,” he said lightly.

She didn’t, but she wasn’t about to tell him that. “Show me how you move in here,” she said, if only to change the subject.

In answer, Arico ‘shifted’ them forward in the empty space, past the white streams of light. After only a few seconds, a circular window of sorts appeared right in front of them, showing the view from the edge of the Hideaway. She could see the buildings on the other side, and Arico continued to move them to the left, so the view changed accordingly.

Based on what she saw, movement inside the threads was similar to walking, at least in speed. That made sense, actually. Moving normally also depended on how fast you could process what your eyes and ears were telling you. Moving by thought would follow similar rules. If you lost sight of where you were, it would become necessary to stop and regain your bearings.

But then the window changed views entirely, and instantly. It was much higher up now, and showed a tower looking over the city. “I’ve been here many times,” Arico explained as Jaas tried to figure out where they’d gone. “That makes it very easy for me to just zip up here on a whim.” Without warning, they rushed forward into the image, and gravity took hold of Jaas again as they stepped out onto the tower.

Jaas gasped at the sudden change, and tried to get better footing on the tower’s roof shingles. She swayed a bit with the sudden change in view, but Arico kept a steady grip on her hand until she got used to it. Thankfully she was still holding his hand, despite having let go of it inside the threads. This whole ‘thought travel’ method would take a lot of getting used to, it seemed.

“It’s all right,” he assured her quietly, as she tentatively looked over the edge. “This tower is old but still sturdy. We won’t fall.” He waited until she slowly let go of his hand before continuing. “This is where I like to sit and watch. It’s the tallest point on the walls, so it gives the best view. Other than the view inside the threads, of course.”

That was something of an understatement. From here, Jaas could see for leagues in every direction. She’d studied pictures and maps in the Academy archives, but none of them really did it justice. This time she could see almost clear across the entire city! Right in the middle, though, a multicolored mess caught her eye. Right… where the Crystal Palace was supposed to be. Instead of a massive angular structure like the one she’d seen in drawings, though, it just looked like a pile of crystal shards. Huge ones, to be seen from this distance, but still just pieces.

“That’s where the Emperor used to live,” she pointed it out. “I read about the palace when I was at the Academy.”

Arico nodded. “But it wasn’t just him. From what Durhu taught me, the entire Imperial family lived there, as well as his generals, advisors, court lords and ladies, and a host of servants. Hundreds of people in all.”

Jaas could only shake her head at the hubris of it all. “Was it destroyed during the, uh, Threading?” She had to remember the unfamiliar word. It was their term for the disaster that had started all of this, three hundred and four years ago.

Arico took a somber breath. “It and a great many other buildings, yes.”

She’d suspected as much. “The Vasiri used unique rituals to make their buildings invulnerable and infinitely load-bearing. As soon as the magic disappeared, a structure like that would have just come apart under its own weight.”

“Durhu thought so as well,” he agreed quietly. “When the gods abandoned us, they took their magic with them. The city has never been the same since.”

Jaas wished she had a spyglass. She could see everything, but none of it very clearly. From up here though, she could make out red brick walls lining many of the patches, always facing east or west. She remembered the red brick walls right on the edges of the threads that she’d seen just after arriving. And the brick cell they’d thrown her in. “Did the Sustained… wall off the river?”

“Their ancestors did,” Arico’s voice took on a grim quality. “They didn’t want anyone who wasn’t born in Sustained territory to see what it was like, so they put up walls on the east and west edges of nearly every patch that touches the Waters. Virtually no one outside the Sustained has ever seen the Waters for themselves.”

So they couldn’t know what they were missing, she realized. Something else caught her eye, less than a league north of the ruined palace. “That wasn’t on the maps I looked at,” she said, pointing out the absurdly large tower near the wrecked palace. It was hard to tell at this distance, but it looked like the structure was right in the middle of its own patch.

Arico grimaced. “That’s the Spire. It’s a symbol of the Sustained Council’s power. The first Lord Ascendant started building it hundreds of years ago, and it was finished long before I was born.”

“It seems a bit extravagant,” she commented, as diplomatically as she could. Obscenely overstated might be another way to describe the Spire.

“Well, Sevvas patch is like the capital of Patchwork. The leaders of the Sustained Houses have formed a special Council that meets inside the Spire, and the Lord Ascendant lives in his own manor nearby. It’s where the Aquunites built their temple as well. But that’s not what I brought you here to see,” he gently took her by the shoulders and turned her around.

The sight outside the city was equally impressive. The Endreach mountain chain to the north, with Wyvern’s Claw peak at its summit. And down below were the vast Telius plains, once home to huge numbers of trade routes running in and out of the Vasiri capital. To the west and running south of the city: the Sea of Storms, covered in mist and gathering rain.

“We can’t see outside the city from the threads,” he said softly. “There are no endpoints to look out from. That’s why I come here: so I can see what it used to look like.” Jaas could see why.

“Down there,” he pointed to the tallgrass outside the city. “Wait just a few moments.” For some reason he closed his eyes and kept his arm stretched out. As she watched, a slow ripple of wind pushed the grass to the side, sweeping across the plains. As if painting on a canvas, he moved his hand along with the ripple, keeping his eyes closed.

“And there.” His eyes still closed, he pointed out a bird in the sky—the first animal she’d ever seen through the threads. His hand followed it precisely as it flew north, out of sight. Jaas felt her jaw drop.

“And last, over there.” He swept his arm out to the sea, and after a few seconds, jabbed a finger, just as lightning arced between two of the clouds.

He sighed and opened his eyes. “Most people can’t see it that clearly, Jaas. They don’t have the same view as I get from up here. But everyone can predict at least some things from the day. This is what we’ve become in here.”

“Because you’ve seen it again and again for months,” she whispered, and he nodded.

Jaas felt a little intimidated. How many times had he sat up here and watched the outside world, in order to gain such a deep understanding of what was going to happen in the images he was seeing? There were no clocks in sight of the city, certainly. The fact that he was able to predict natural phenomena so accurately was either impressive to the extreme, or deeply depressing, as she glanced back at him.

He looked so, well, sad wasn’t really the right word. Resigned, perhaps. Jaas grabbed his arm and pointed it up to the mountain. “On the north side of that peak, Wyvern’s Claw, there’s a monastery. They call themselves the Circle of Peace. I only spent a little time there with my father, but they’re wonderful people. They spend all day in prayer and meditation, contemplating what it is to be alive, to breathe and exist.”

She pointed his arm back to the plains. “About twenty leagues to the north right near that fork in the riv—uh, in the Waters, there’s a trade post with an inn called the Rusted Blade. The innkeeper is named Pelios A’zal, and he makes his own wine from a vineyard behind the inn. His little girls, Ani and Tupo, play with dolls they made themselves.” She slowly let go of his arm. “I can tell you much, much more about the Outside, if you wish.”

“Can you tell me what it feels like?” Arico asked slowly. He was looking down at the plains, but Jaas could now see anger in his features. “What it’s like to stand in a city where you know *no one*? To walk in one direction for days on end and never run into the threads *once*?

“What is it like to stand on that peak up there, and feel the rush of the wind? I see trees out there, bending in the wind, but all I ever feel is the faint breeze from the threads. Can you tell me how it feels to stand on the deck of a ship in the middle of a storm? To feel rain all around you, the ship moving beneath you? All I’ve ever felt is the rocking of a small boat floating on the Waters. Because of the threads we don’t get rain either, because clouds can’t gather above the city.”

His voice continued to gain intensity. “Can you tell me what it’s like to walk through fresh-fallen snow? We don’t get anything more than frost on the grass in the winters. From up here, I once saw a deer do that. How does it feel to leave a trail behind you as you step? Can you pick snow up? Is it soft? What about a blizzard? Have you ever been unable to see more than an arm’s reach in front of you as the wind howls and blows snow all around your face? I didn’t even know that the wind howled until I *read* about it in a book! *Can you tell me what it feels like?*”

Despite his words, there was no tone of accusation in Arico’s voice, just resignation. When he glanced back at her, he hastily wiped at his eyes for a moment. With a grunt, he took her hand again, “We should get back.” She didn’t have any words for him as he reached out into the threads again.

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Chapter 9

Once they were back in the Hideaway, with light filtering down from glass surfaces that Arico and Durhu had strategically placed above, Jaas could see the entire cave clearly now. It looked very rough, but they’d obviously put a great deal of effort into it. The cave was bigger than she’d first thought. It occurred to her that this emergency shelter was meant for more than just them. In a pinch, it could probably hold dozens of people.

They spent the rest of the day inside, exchanging information. Jaas reveled in just how much she’d learned in so short a time. Her colleagues would be overwhelmed, if she ever found a way to contact them. Arico’s brief display of deep emotions seemed to have passed. He made no mention of it, and Jaas didn’t want to press the issue. She could only imagine what life would be like in his situation: like some kind of specimen in a glass case. Able to see out, but never able to leave. In a way it would have been less cruel if the barriers had just stayed opaque, as they’d apparently started out. At least that way the people inside wouldn’t have known what they were missing.

Jaas decided then and there to do whatever she could to get them out of here—or at least the people who wanted to go. She’d just have to figure out *how*. The Blessed had set up this whole place to suppress magic, so Jaas would have to find another way out.

As it turned out, it was possible to send messages between patches without a navigator. All that was required was that the message be entirely encapsulated in water as it hit the threads. It was a bit of a stretch, but Jaas assumed that she could send a message out of the city the same way. After all, she’d been completely encapsulated in water when she’d arrived.

It would require a waterproof case of course. Her own waterproof scroll cases had been taken away, but Arico told her how people in the city had done it for years. A well-blown glass bottle would work for the people on the river, but poorer folks would have to be more inventive. A sheep’s stomach, properly cured, could serve just as well as a bottle. Arico promised that if she wrote a letter, he’d take it to the south end of the city and send it through the barrier to the Outside.

The timing was very fortunate. It was already the third day since she’d arrived, and Inelem was unlikely to wait around after dusk. She wrote her message quickly, trying to condense all she’d learned into a few pages. It wasn’t easy—there was so much to tell!

After Arico took off to deliver the letter, Jaas pulled out another parchment and started another section of notes, aided here and there by Durhu. She was able to make out some of his handtalk, but didn’t have enough of a grasp of it to get everything.

*Field notes, Martus 18, 1571.*

*My situation has improved markedly. I’ve now met friendly locals who are not only willing to share information, but have detailed histories on the city. See my enclosed notes for specifics. With luck, I’ll be able to send out parchments containing a great deal of information on the city on a regular basis, provided I survive. Apparently there are dangerous political complications here.*

*As I suspected after I got into the city, there are hundreds of sections within the barriers (six hundred and thirty-seven to be exact). They’re known here as ‘patches’, and most are inhabited. Nearly all of them are identically sized squares, except for the ones on the edges of the city. All told, Arico (one of my local contacts) thinks there are about eighty thousand people living here.*

*I continue to be troubled by this apparent religion that has ‘sprung up’ around the river (no pun intended). Even Arico, who seems rational and logical, is obviously influenced by it, and others are probably fanatical. There was no mention of ‘sacred Waters’ in any of the Vasiri histories I studied. That means this Aquunite religion was only founded after the Threading, and possibly as a result of it.*

*It seems the water spirit Aquun has a counterpart of sorts, just like most religious icons I studied back at the Academy. The Shemra figure Arico mentioned is also known as the Many, or the Multitude. It represents exactly one thousand evil spirits, who are said to be everywhere in the city. Apparently they’re spirits of thirst, so of course they’re blamed if there is a drought. However over the years, it seems the Many have also become responsible for bad luck, disease, aging—just about every bad thing there is, really.*

*The Sustained families also sound like they’re going to be trouble. At first there were only two such powerful families in here: the Smiths and the Masons. Named after their original professions of course. But as it turns out, having only two groups ruling the city makes for a very bad system of government. Because they were roughly equal in power and almost always on opposite sides, pretty much nothing got done. The city’s government had nearly shut down before long. Businesses ground to a halt, and the citizens themselves were in danger of starvation because of bickering leaders who had neither the power to overrule each other, nor the wisdom to cooperate.*

*Thankfully, more families eventually found that they had navigators as well and rose to power. Before long there were over a hundred different noble families in Sustained territory, and nearly all of them were named after the professions their ancestors had practiced just before the Threading: Miller, Grover, Tanner, Scrivener (which apparently means scribe), and so on.*

*About twenty of those families now work together to rule the city collectively. Each is led by a navigator (that’s apparently a requirement) and together those leaders choose the city’s ruler, the Lord Ascendant, from among their own Sustained Council. Arico seemed a little distracted while explaining that last bit. Obviously he has strong feelings about them.*

*Also, while each Sustained family has its own guards and soldiers, the Council itself uses a group of professional soldiers called the Ascendant Guard. Almost all of the Ascendants are required to keep their heads completely shaven, so I assume the thugs who grabbed me when I arrived were just local guards working for a single family. It’s not unlike many of the histories I studied back at the Academy, but without magic this particular history has taken a few turns along the way.*

*I was quite surprised when I first heard the name Sustained. From my studies, I knew all about the ancient Sustained mages: how they used magic to ‘sustain’ their lives, sometimes to three or four times what others lived. Obviously some of them were trapped here in the city when the threads appeared. They wouldn’t have lasted long, not without their magic, but apparently just after the Threading, the early navigators decided to take the name Sustained for themselves. Probably as a way of justifying their ‘magic’ navigation powers to a frightened and superstitious populace.*

*Clearly, none of the locals here know that my superiors at the Bresorian Academy are themselves descendants of the original Sustained mages. Of course they’re all called Imbued now, but in a strange roundabout way, I am working for the very people Arico fears so much.*

*No doubt that’ll make an amusing footnote for any of my colleagues to read, if they ever get the chance.*

Jaas tapped the feather on her nose a few times, before dipping the quill and adding one final section.

*I’ve taken notes on the threads, and navigators, as well as the basics of the people who live here, but there is one physiological change that I feel the need to describe to anyone who ends up reading this. Arico told me all about it, though I’ve yet to experience it myself. It’s called the sha’haln.*

*Apparently, people living here have much more intense dreams than those outside. These sha’haln dreams are so immersive that people often have a hard time distinguishing them from real life. They usually take the form of memories, at least at first. Vivid, intense memories that have some special meaning to the person in question. However, just as our own memories are clouded by our emotions and intent, so too is the sha’haln. It seems that when one of these people dreams up a memory, it always ends differently than the real life version did. Usually in some significant way subconsciously important to the dreamer.*

*In addition, some people have claimed that they can communicate with each other* through *the sha’haln. They say they share a dream identically, experiencing it together, even if they didn’t actually experience the event itself together. Arico is understandably skeptical of these claims, but then he did mention a ‘dream-friend’ of his own named Odjes. Apparently, there’s no one by that name living here in Vasiriah, so he assumes this Odjes is just part of his own mind. Further study is needed, of course.*

*For now, I myself am ‘sustained’ by recent events, and am more optimistic about my future.*

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They were just settling down to eat when there was a rough knock at the door. Jaas gave Arico a concerned look, but he nodded reassuringly and limped up the short staircase. Afraid he’d hurt himself trying to move the door, Jaas hurried over to help him.

The big bald man, Alzhi, was waiting for them on the other side. Surprisingly, his face split into a wide grin upon seeing Arico, and he grabbed the younger man up in a bear hug. Arico grunted in pain, and Alzhi put him down in a hurry, apologizing in his own language.

By now Jaas had a pretty firm grip on their dialect of Vasrah. It really wasn’t that different from her own language; it was just the root sounds that needed practicing. “You’re wanted in the Enclave.” Alzhi gave a serious look down at Arico, and then glanced over at her. “Both of you, right now.”

Arico nodded slowly. “I’m ready.”

Whoever this person was who had summoned them, he seemed to be very important to both Arico and Alzhi. They waited just long enough to let her grab a quill and parchment, and then headed off to the nearest threads. When they reached it, Arico extended a hand to her, and Jaas took it without hesitation. Whatever was coming next, she trusted Arico.

That in itself was strange. She’d never really had to put her trust in anyone except for Lem and her own family, but for some reason she did trust him. She’d have to figure out exactly why later on, when she had time to puzzle it out.

Jaas was starting to get used to these trips through the threads. This time around, Alzhi was his usual boar, and Arico was the kingfisher bird he liked so much. That was particularly strange, given that kingfishers were not native to this part of the world, and Arico had only ever seen one in a book. Still, it apparently made no difference to him, and Jaas had to admit he made a pretty convincing one. She didn’t have time to study it—him—too closely, though. The trip only took a few seconds, suggesting that they’d both been here many times before.

They arrived in complete darkness. Jaas couldn’t see even a mote of light anywhere, but Arico immediately spoke up. “We’re all right. Just step forward with us, all right?” Jaas let them pull her forward by the hand, before she could hear a door opening nearby, and then closing behind them. There was a soft cracking noise of a tinder twig being lit, and then the spark lit up a tunnel. Alzhi used it to light a torch, and then slowly moved it around so she could get a look.

The tunnel was low hanging—her hair brushed the top of it—but sturdy from the looks of things. Apparently they’d exited the threads into the tunnel, moved past the door and then closed it, blocking the tunnel behind them. “It’s a security precaution,” Arico explained before she could ask. “The Sustained watch this area very closely. The only way to come and go without being spotted is to do so in complete darkness.”

“So anyone floating in the threads doesn’t see where you arrived,” Jaas finished for him, nodding. It was a natural conclusion to make, but it would have taken her some time to reach it. “But if you can’t see where you’re going, how could you get here?”

Arico exchanged a brief look with Alzhi, who as usual was stone-faced and silent. “The first few times I came here, it was someone else who brought me. Once you know the way, you can just zip back here whenever, remember?”

It made some sense, but Jaas got the feeling there was more to it. Either way, now wasn’t the time to question further. Apparently they were in a hurry, so Jaas left it at that and followed them up the tunnel. It extended a few dozen spans in a straight line before turning into a stone staircase leading up. At the top of the stairs, Jaas could make out sunlight peeking through the building above them. When they exited, it was safely behind a stout wall and out of sight of the threads, and by extension anyone watching from them.

Once Jaas got a look at it from the surface, she could tell this patch was clearly a dwarven settlement. Of course! When Alzhi had mentioned the Enclave Jaas hadn’t put the pieces together, but dwarven towns were often called Enclaves, and there had been dwarves living in Vasiriah when the city had been cut off from the rest of the world.

It was clear in the construction, too. The buildings were shorter and sturdier. The colors were more earthen, brown rather than gray, green rather than blue, and so on. Dwarves were renowned throughout the world for stonework and metalwork, so she wasn’t surprised to hear the sound of bellows blowing and hammers ringing at a nearby forge.

There was a manned and particularly impressive metal gate just to their left, but the dwarven guards didn’t challenge them in any way. They seemed to know Arico and Alzhi on sight, but they did give her a few strange looks as two of them led their human guests further into the patch.

From the fortifications behind them, and the reinforced underground entrance ahead, it was clear this wasn’t just any dwarven patch. This was a keep, in every sense of the word. The guards kept a close eye on both their visitors and the defenses in place. The gates looked thick enough to handle a siege if it came to that. The walls appeared to run the length of the patch, and were thicker than she was tall! And ahead, it looked like the majority of the keep was built *into* the ground, rather than above it. That made sense, too. Dwarven cities were often built underground, both for protection and the preferences of the dwarves living there. Arico paused ahead, touching Alzhi’s shoulder briefly, and the bigger man paused as well. They stepped apart, glancing at her, and Jaas felt a certain anticipation as she moved up between them. She gasped as she looked up and down.

There was a massive vertical tunnel in front of them, extending up to an ornate ceiling about fifty spans above, and down out of sight below! From her vantage point near the sunlit summit of this gargantuan cylinder, she could make out horizontal walkways on the other side. Smaller tunnels connected to this one at regular intervals, as if she was merely on the branch of a tree that grew down instead of up.

The architecture inside the side tunnels was fascinating. Aside from the obvious dwarven traits, it seemed that the building design had also been influenced by the threads themselves. On one of the descending staircases she could see actual paintings of the threads, just as she remembered from her trips around the city. Intertwining streams of light, which themselves seemed to actually *move* in the flickering torchlight. It made for an almost mesmerizing effect, and she nearly lost her step before Arico caught her arm.

The wall paintings looked old. Far older than either Alzhi or Arico. Obviously the dwarves had navigators of their own, who had painted what they’d seen in the barriers. Two more sets of doors and at least two dozen guards later, they seemed to have reached their destination: the great hall at the center of any dwarven Enclave.

It was roomy by comparison to the rest, and thankfully tall enough for them to stand comfortably. Ornate pillars lined the room and intricate pieces of metalwork and artistry could be seen on pedestals along the wall. At the end, from a large stone throne, a dwarf rose to approach them.

His brown beard, starting to go gray, was immaculately braided all the way down to his belly. It partially obscured the dwarven rune emblazoned on his chest plate: one she hadn’t seen before. He wore a thin metal circlet on his head and chain mail on his arms and legs, and moved towards them with the confident stride of a seasoned warrior. From her experience, even dwarven merchants and commoners were almost always trained in combat. They were a very hardy race.

Arico slipped past his friend and bowed respectfully. “We have come as called, Hauld,” he said gravely in dwarven.

Jaas had heard that word before. A Hauld was the lord of a castle or keep, specifically one built in human lands. Almost all dwarven societies were rigidly hierarchical in nature, and this dwarf certainly looked like the patriarch. The Hauld gave him a grave nod, and turned to face her. Arico took the cue. “May I present Lady Jaas Senneco of Satacha. My lady, this is Hauld Recco Ulthos, Head of Clan Firebrand and leader of the dwarves here in Patchwork.”

Jaas gave him a surprised look at his uses of the word *lady* but her old behavior patterns kicked in quickly, and she gave a passable curtsy to the dwarf. Suddenly she wished she’d paid more attention in the Academy’s class on foreign social settings.

“So ye’re the pebble in the pond, eh?” He gave her an appraising glance. “Ye’ve been causin’ a lot o’ ripples, te be sure. I hope ye’re as interestin’ in person as ye are in rumor.”

“I hope so too, my lord,” she answered diplomatically.

“Ach. Call me Recco, lass, or Hauld if yeh wanna be formal,” he said with a chuckle. “Tall-folk are always usin’ titles and bows and fancy words like they’re grown on trees. Arico, lad!” He suddenly turned away from her, peering at Arico’s midsection. “How’re yeh feelin, now?”

“Better, thank you, sir.” Arico gingerly held a hand to his side. “I’ll be back to fighting form in a few days. I’m glad you called us here, sir. There’s a lot you need to hear.”

The Hauld gave her another brief look. “Aye, tha’s true enough.”

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Arico felt a nervous chill as the Hauld and Jaas spoke quietly with each other. He had great respect for his dwarven lord, who’d provided so much for him and Durhu over the years, but the Hauld could be stubborn and irascible. Arico had given him a quick rundown of everything he knew about Jaas, which wasn’t much.

“How’s it going?” Chanul said from behind him, causing Arico to jump in surprise.

“Don’t *do* that!” Arico responded, glaring back at his friend. He tried to compose himself as Alzhi chuckled softly beside them both.

Chanul kept a straight face as he eyed Jaas and the Hauld from a distance. He wore armor just like the Hauld, but more comfortably. More sociably. He had the annoying habit of sneaking up on people, and he thought it was funny. Which it was sometimes, Arico had to admit.

Chanul didn’t seem bothered by seeing Arico again, which actually fit with dwarven norms. Once an indiscretion had been dealt with, it was as if it had never happened. Chanul wouldn’t forget about Arico’s actions, nor his threats if Arico slipped up again, but they would also have no effect on how Chanul behaved in the future. Total forgiveness was important here in the Enclave.

Jaas’ arrival had provided a big distraction, as did Chanul’s duty here in dwarven territory. As the Hauld’s eldest child, he was destined to inherit all of this someday, but unlike most of his kin he was much more comfortable around humans. Arico sometimes thought of him as the son of the future. That was, if they were successful and the movement led to better dwarven-human relations.

“It’s fine so far,” Arico said softly, trying not to interrupt them. “What are you doing down here anyway?”

“Oh, I couldn’t resist the chance to see the legendary Harbinger for myself,” Chanul said snidely. “I kinda expected her to be, I don’t know… glowing or something.”

Arico ignored that. Chanul was just being sarcastic, as most dwarves were when it came to human religion. But there was something Arico had been meaning to ask. “Could you do me a favor and arrange some room for her in the Fishbowl? She might be staying here for a while.”

Chanul shrugged. “There’s no need. Your old place is empty for now; she can stay there. Who knows? It might even save some time in the long run. For both of you.” Alzhi made another noise of amusement, and Arico glowered up at him.

“Come on,” Chanul continued. “You broke her out of prison, right? And you took a bullet for her. You gotta take advantage of that while you have the chance. You know, before she finds out you’re not really that interesting.”

“They were shooting at me, not her,” Arico protested. “Besides, she’s the Harbinger! Even if I was interested—which I’m not—she’s important to the movement just for who she is. There’s no way I’m gonna risk that, ok?”

“If you say so,” Chanul said unconvincingly. “I better get back to training, but I’ll take care of your Fishbowl thing after. Good luck with my father, whatever it is you need to ask him.”

“Thanks,” Arico answered, and Chanul headed out through the north door. For a moment, Arico was worried, but it seemed Jaas knew what she was doing as he and Alzhi quietly approached.

“Actually, Satacha has a small Enclave of its own,” she described easily. “I went there often during my studies. No one keeps records like the dwarves.”

“Too true, lass,” the Hauld smiled. “An’ here in Patchwork, that’ll be all tha more importan’, dinnae ye say?”

He was speaking of genealogies, recording the bloodlines of all the dwarven families stretching back to the Threading itself. Arico had heard there were similar records kept by the Sustained Council as well. In addition to the Registry itself, of course. Jaas seemed to catch on to that, as well. “From what I’ve heard, yes. So much has been lost over the years, my lor—uh, Recco.”

The Hauld chuckled. “Tell me, lass. Tha Enclave in yer hometown… wha’ clan lives there?”

“Clan Stonefoot, though I haven’t been there since I was a child.”

“An’ tha rune above tha hearth in Stonefoot’s Enclave?” He said appraisingly.

She hesitated just a moment. “That would be Toris, the golden hound.”

“Aye,” he said, chuckling. “Ye’re in the right, o’ course. Ye really are from Satacha.”

“Have you been there, yourself, sir?”

He shook his head. “Nay, lass. Ye know even dwarves dinnae live as long as all tha’. Me great-grandfather told me stories, though.” After a long moment apparently lost in thought, the Hauld gave her a slight smile. “Arico told me yeh used the Waters ta get here, but he dinnae say how, exactly. Care ta share, lass?”

Jaas smiled in return, a bit tentatively, Arico thought. “I know the riv—the, uh, Waters are a touchy subject with him, and with a lot of people in Patchwork, but somehow I knew the dwarves would be different.”

Arico grimaced. It wasn’t his fault that the Sustained used the faith as a weapon. It was just one more obstacle they would have to overcome. He kept quiet, though—the Hauld had very little tolerance for interruptions.

“When the barriers first went up, there was chaos on the Outside,” she continued, her voice taking on that teacher’s tone she did so well. “The Vasiri Empire collapsed in a matter of days, and thousands died in battles across the continent over the next few months as warlords and governors and self-styled kings tried to fill the power void. A few scholars from the Imperial court studied the barriers as best they could during the turmoil, but eventually the entire area was declared off-limits. Too many people had died studying them.

“I compiled as much research as I could before coming here myself, but I and a friend still had to spend months running our own tests on the barriers. Water could pass through them; we knew that. Both ends of the river were unaffected, but objects pushed into it were always destroyed. Living beings that touched it just vanished before our eyes. Except fish, apparently. For some reason, all aquatic creatures could swim in and out of the barriers safely.

The Hauld nodded. “Aye, from wha’ Alzhi’s told me, tha Sustained know tha same. They even send messages downstream from time ta time.”

Jaas nodded and accepted a mug offered by a dwarven attendant. She took a sip from it, and immediately put a hand to her mouth. She made a truly heroic effort not to cough, but failed in the end. Arico had to hide his smile at that, and the Hauld politely pretended not to notice. She hurried to continue, even though her voice was still a little off. “Eventually, I knew someone would have to take the risk and try to make it through. It didn’t make sense to risk anyone else, so I did it myself. My friend cast a spell on me, to turn me into a fish for a few moments so I could swim into the city.”

Despite his long experience as a statesman and leader, the Hauld’s mouth dropped open. Arico knew exactly how he felt, as he was hearing this for the first time. “Ye turned into a *fish??* Ye can do that?”

“Of course.” She again reached for her side, in her usual reflexive manner. “If I had my bag, I could show you some of the magic scrolls I brought, but of course, magic doesn’t work in this city. It’s a pity, really. Shape-changing is just the tip of the iceberg.”

Arico had seen more different kinds of animals than just about anyone else in the city. Farm animals of course, in Tellek patch. Dogs, cats, rats, and horses just about everywhere. Fish in the Waters, naturally. There was even a Menagerie inside Mason territory, with exotic birds in cages, descended from the initial birds kept there before the Threading. Monkeys too, climbing the bars on the inside of the Menagerie.

In fact, one of the previous Lord Ascendants had set aside an entire patch planted with wildflowers for the use of the beehives in the center. The bees, like most other animals, instinctively avoided the threads. Only a few animals like horses and dogs had been trained to go through them while touching a navigator master.

But the idea of *becoming* an animal, even if only for a few seconds, that was just plain incredible. Even more so was *how* she’d done it! “What… did it feel like—being a fish?” He asked, immediately wincing for speaking out of turn. The Hauld didn’t seem to mind this once, though. He seemed just as interested in hearing the answer.

She shook her head. “I don’t really remember. The spell doesn’t just turn your body into a fish, it changes your mind as well. In fact, that’s why we used that particular spell. Animals can get through the barriers, but people can’t, so I suspected the barriers were built specifically to keep out anything that can think for itself. The spell made me think I was a fish as well, so I was able to fool the barriers into thinking I *was* just a fish.” The tone in her voice was about as close to smug as Arico had ever heard Jaas get.

“Anyway, as soon as I swam into the city, the magic must have drained away, and I turned back into me again. That’s when I found myself pressed up against that metal grate.”

“Tha Sustained put tha grate there, years ago,” the Hauld said softly, apparently still thinking about her trip. “There’s another at tha other end o’ the Waters, too. Ta keep things from floatin’ out o’ tha city.”

“So they isolated this city on purpose?” She said excitedly. “That’s why none of my messages into the city got a response! But it must have been that way since the Threading itself, though. No messages into the city have ever gotten any response!”

“Aye, tha’ was tha Sustained plan a’ first. They’ve been in charge fer centuries now, an’ they’re very careful abou’ tha’ sorta stuff.” He paused for a moment. “Now, can ye give me a momen’ with Arico, lass?”

“Oh, of course my lor—uh, Recco,” she said softly, withdrawing and politely pretending to examine the artwork on the walls. Alzhi stayed close, naturally.

“Wha’ were ye thinkin’, lad?” The Hauld said severely, in a voice Arico was sure would carry across the room. “Ye know we’re na ready ta take on tha Council, nor tha Ascendants!”

“I know, sir. And I’m sorry.” Arico took a deep breath and tried to speak respectfully. “But think about what this could mean for the movement! She’s from the *Outside*, sir! And there can be no doubt about that: the quake happened exactly when she got here. The prophecy says-”

The Hauld cut him off irritably. “Gah, ye know we dinnae believe in yer fool prophecy here, lad!”

Arico took a deep breath and tried to even out his tone. “I know that sir, but a lot of humans do believe it. If she really is the Harbinger, even the Sustained Council will have to take her seriously. And even if she isn’t, think about what she could teach us, and not just about our past! If she can get into the city, others can as well. Contact with the Outside for the first time, sir! It might even be possible to evacuate the city!”

“Tha Lord Ascendan’ himself dropped by ta question me abou’ tha quake, lad.” The Hauld grunted irritably. “He wasn’ inna good mood, I can tell ye. I dinnae know if he knew abou’ yer little break-out, but either way…”

He sighed. “It dinnae be yer place te make tha’ call fer all o’ us! Sustained guards up-ended half tha city yesterday lookin’ for her! We had a plan, ye and me, a good plan, an’ now we’ll have te move much faster than either o’ us wanted! Are ye prepared for tha’?”

“Yes, Hauld.” Arico spoke with certainty. The Hauld stared at him in surprise for a moment. Arico briefly wondered if he’d overstepped his bounds.

By dwarven standards, all humans were impulsive and reckless. That was why Arico had taken such pains during his training to be calm and deliberate. They’d invested a great deal in him, and he didn’t want to disappoint anyone. Unfortunately, sometimes careful thought took too long, as Jaas’ breakout had proven.

Still, breaking her out had caused problems. The Hauld was right; they weren’t ready yet. Because of his actions, they would have to use the Laentana instead of the Ramachi, cutting their timetable by a full three months! Arico wasn’t so sure they’d have all the paper ready in time, but he was certain the delivery system would be ready. At least they didn’t have to worry about that.

“I realize we don’t have enough sparkpowder yet, but if I could use the barrels stored here in the Enclave, that should make up the difference.” Arico paused, with raised hopes for a moment.

The Hauld was already shaking his head, though. “Tha’s na gonna happen, lad. Tha sparkpowder says here, in case Ascendan’s come a knockin’.” Arico had never been fully comfortable with those barrels being here in the first place. The fact that the Hauld could turn the whole keep into a pile of rubble with a single spark was terrifying, but apparently it had been that way for decades—long before Arico had been born.

“Then I’ll find another source before the Laentana begins. I’m ready for this, sir,” he went on implacably. “This is exactly what you’ve been training me for! I know it’s a bit earlier than we planned, but I’m willing to take the risk. And she can be useful. She knows a great deal, and has friends on the Outside who may be willing to help. I’ve only begun to scratch the surface of what she knows—what she could teach us!”

“She’s frail, sir.” Alzhi stepped up next to them, breaking his silent vigil. “Soft. When the fighting begins, or the next winter comes, she’ll most certainly die.”

Arico resisted the urge to give his friend a nasty look. “I’ll make sure that doesn’t happen. I’ll train her myself.”

Though technically Arico was Alzhi’s superior, they’d always been pretty close. Alzhi had helped train Arico how to fight—with one unfortunate mishap—and they’d known each other for more than four years. Alzhi kept a respectful tone, but as usual he didn’t mince his words. “She can’t even speak the common tongue, sir! How could she possibly help us?”

“She does now,” Arico responded hotly. “She learned it *overnight*! She’s learning more every moment she’s here. She may not be a fighter, but the movement is going to need more than just fighters if we ever hope to succeed!”

“You’re being naïve, sir. We can afford to have some dead weight for now, but when the fighting starts, she could get you killed!”

Arico gave his longtime friend a surprised look. “Since when is looking out for the movement being na-”

“Shut it, both of ye!” The Hauld cut them off, quietly but harshly. He glared at them both for a few moments.

Arico held his breath. The Hauld needed him, to be sure. Without Arico this planned revolution of theirs didn’t even stand a chance. Still he hated forcing the Hauld’s hand like this, even if it was necessary.

Apparently the Hauld was thinking the same thing. “Ye’re both too importan’. I cannae tie either o’ ye down with this! Ye put me in a hard place here, lad.”

“Yes, sir, I know. I’d keep her with Durhu, in Tellek patch, but that’s no longer safe. And the Hideaway won’t stay safe forever either. The Fishbowl should have room for her, though. If you assigned a dwarven navigator to keep an eye on her-”

“Nay, lad,” the Hauld cut him off again. “That’d be too big a risk. If any o’ the Sustained caught a whiff o’ our involvement, they’d kick us in the stones faster than ye can say ‘broken treaty’. The Sustained didn’t find ye yesterday, so they’ll be lookin’ at each other fer a time. Ach,” he decided suddenly. “I’ll have one o’ me lads train ‘er fer a few days, an’ then she’ll be in yer hands.”

“Thank you, sir.” Arico said with some relief, as Alzhi grimaced and looked away. “You won’t regret this.’

The Hauld grunted. “What the lass knows an’ can do could help a great deal, but she’ll be in yer charge, lad. If she dies, it’ll be on ye.”

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Chapter 10

Hazra’s heels echoed through the marble halls of the Spire’s lower levels. She tried to hurry without making it look like a run. She was a lady, after all.

For as long as she could remember, Hazra had been lady of House Fisher. Even as a child she’d carried that title and its accompanying burdens. She had friends from other Sustained Houses: ladies of station and power in their own right. In the end though, her peers would go home, and she would be alone with her responsibilities again. Such was the life of the Lord Ascendant’s only daughter, with a mother who’d died in childbirth and a father who jealously kept her extended family away from his seat of power.

She’d heard stories about her mother Ethelle. How she had practically carried her House through difficult times, when the men around her had utterly failed to do so. How Ethelle had come here and married the Lord Ascendant himself! Hazra hoped her mother would have been proud, almost as much as she wished she’d known the woman.

Servants bowed or curtsied as she passed, as always, and then scurried on with their work. Some of them were pretty sharp, actually. Unlike her peers, Hazra had learned that the servants within a great House often had a deeper understanding of what was going on than the masters did.

There it was. Even though she was running late, Hazra came to a stop at the door and bowed her head in reverence. Appearances had to be maintained for anyone watching. She’d be a fool if she didn’t assume someone was watching.

The inside of the room was just as she’d requested. It was small: barely larger than a broom closet, actually. On the floor in the middle was a small pedestal for her elbows to lean on, and a cushion on the floor in front of it for her knees and feet. On the wall across from the door hung a portrait of her mother.

The church of Aquun was technically Patchwork’s state religion, but there were still some people in the city who followed spiritism. Over the years the church’s penets had tried to integrate the two, absorbing those who prayed to the spirits of their ancestors into the church with everyone else. They claimed that the spirits were now one with Aquun, and that they spoke through her. It hadn’t worked at all, though. Spiritists were a small but stubborn group.

Her mother’s family had also been part of that group. Hazra had eventually insisted on this room being added to the Spire's ground floor so that she could have a place to worship as well. Before construction, she’d been quite clear: it had to be *this spot* exactly, where her mother could reach through the veil and commune with her. All of that was complete stupidity, of course. Hazra didn’t believe in the spirits of the dead any more than she believed in the mythic goddess of the Waters watching over them all. She’d chosen this particular spot for a much more faithless reason.

A faint crack of light from underneath the door was all she could see, but she didn’t need much. Striking the tinder twig on the pedestal, she ignited the candles mounted on the walls and knelt on the cushion in front of the portrait. Even though she would never be devout, she did have to admit to herself, it was good to look at her mother’s face now and then.

The meeting had already begun, so Hazra wasted no time finding the knothole in the wall and removing it so she could listen in. Voices filtered in through the hole from the Council chamber upstairs. The sound was amplified by copper pipes in the walls, enough to reach her even down here. Ironically, those pipes had been mandated by the very Council she was now spying on.

Of course spying on anyone, much less the Sustained Council itself, was unconscionable for a lady of her status. Perhaps that was why no one had ever suspected her. At first Hazra had done so only tentatively, curiously. But her mother had done much worse during her own time, and nowadays Hazra didn’t let a single meeting pass without listening in. The manor’s guards had tell-tale signs in shift changes and patrols that signaled such a meeting, usually giving her enough time to get to the Spire so she could listen in. It was just a matter of knowing what to look for.

Thankfully, it seemed Hazra hadn’t missed much so far. She slid the cushion up against the wall to hear better and sat on it so she could massage her feet. It was never easy walking in those narrow pointed shoes, and she often longed for the soft-soled shoes she could wear in private. Lord Weaver had just finished his report on the recent census, and her father started speaking.

“Very well. Lord Miller, I believe you have some explaining to do before this Council.” Her father’s voice was even, but she could tell he was disappointed. She’d heard that tone often enough before.

“Y-yes, my liege.” The voice carried a tremble to it. Adelar Miller was not a brave man, but he was clever enough in his own way. As his surname suggested, his family controlled the various mills on the north end of the city, powered by the Waters themselves. Without those mills, flour, lumber, paper, even cloth production across the entire city would ‘grind’ to a stop.

“I first wish to thank this Council for your patience and understanding during this census. Your generosity continues to impress me, as I’m sure it impresses the common people as-”

“Get to the point, my lord!” A harsh voice cut in. That was her half-brother, Tenlor. “Tell everyone what you told me this morning.”

Tenlor had only been a child when his mother died of illness. His father had remarried almost immediately (a common thing among the Sustained Houses) and she’d been born a year later. Despite growing up together, the two of them had never been close. Even if women could be allowed on the Council, Hazra probably would have considered spying anyway, just so she wouldn’t have to share a room with him.

Hazra knew she was supposed to love her brother, but that had never been easy. He had bullied her often as a child, and then had taken to ignoring her. He had very little respect for women, even family members. She did have sha’haln dreams about them as children from time to time. In the dreams, though, they were the same age as they played together.

“As most of you know,” Miller continued nervously, “I requested the unscheduled census in order to find a pair of fugitives from Krellik patch. It was urgent because at least one of these fugitives is a navigator.”

There was a soft murmur from the group, barely audible to her. “And?” Tenlor insisted, probably giving one of his usual glares.

“And the other is possibly from… the Outside.”

Hazra flinched away from the knothole as the room on the other side erupted in noise. The entire room seemed to have responded at once, in either disbelief or anger, and Hazra knew how they felt. Someone from the Outside? The Harbinger was here? That couldn’t be right. A rogue navigator was one thing, but this was just ludicrous.

She abruptly yawned, and covered her mouth. She’d been tired for weeks on end, now, despite getting ample sleep. Hazra had figured it was the cold weather at first, but that was finally waning. Perhaps she’d have more energy soon. And she’d been intermittently sore across her back and arms, as well.

“Peace, everyone,” her father’s voice cut through the group, and the voices quieted as Hazra leaned close again. “Lord Miller, what makes you think your fugitive could be from the Outside?”

She heard the rustle of paper. “At first my people thought she was a Sustained citizen, but she didn’t seem to speak any Vasrah. She had no stra’tchi mark, and she is *definitely* not in the Registry. In addition, she was carrying stacks of papers like this one, describing a multitude of subjects in a dozen different languages. My people have examined them thoroughly and only been able to read a few so far, but even those make no sense. I suspect they’re written in code.”

Hazra heard a snort from further away in the room. “How do you know this isn’t a hoax, my lord? An elaborate prank perhaps, honoring your long history of falling victim to such jokes?”

There was a rustle of laughter from the room, which cut off immediately. No doubt her father had raised a hand to quiet them all. “Do you have anything else to add, Lord Miller?” His deep, steady voice echoed through the pipes.

“Yes, my liege. Three of my guards were there when she was apprehended, and all of them clearly heard the word ‘Satacha’.”

There was a long pause, during which more undertones filtered down through the pipes. Hazra had to think back to her lessons as a child. Satacha… yes. It was a city to the south, across the ocean. Only a few people were still trained in Outside geography. It certainly had no use to the stra’tchi, or even to the Sustained population in general.

Apparently that fact was sinking in on the Council as well. “Only a handful of people would know what Satacha is, my liege,” Miller continued, a note of self-satisfaction entering his voice. “I don’t know if she is from the Outside or not, but I think it would be in all of our best interests to find out. Don’t you?”

Another moment of silence inundated the room. Such quiet was rare in these meetings. Apparently they were starting to take this matter seriously. “Lord Miller,” her father finally continued in a stern tone, “there are specific rules in place to govern a possible Outside contact. Those rules apply even to this Council. Under the circumstances, I’m willing to give you the benefit of the doubt and assume you were planning on informing us of these developments. However, if I discover you’ve held anything *else* back, there will be unpleasant consequences. As for the census, what are the results? Did you find your fugitives?” So that was why her father had ordered an unscheduled census the other day. It was a significant drain on resources, but this explained it.

Hazra could barely make out Miller’s sigh. “No, my liege. We detained five men with wounds similar to the one my men inflicted, and more than a dozen women matching her description, but I’m reasonably certain none of them are the fugitives. I plan on investigating my own people next,” he said hastily into the silence. “To find out how this navigator knew she was even there.”

“I think not,” another voice cut in, and Hazra felt herself smile involuntarily. That was the Clarion.

By tradition, the Clarion was connected to the Lord Ascendant’s family. Not through marriage of course, because the Clarion had no property, no possessions, or even a name. A nameless man couldn’t get married, naturally. No, the Clarion was traditionally the consort of a family member. Specifically, the eldest daughter of the reigning Lord Ascendant.

At first Hazra had been terrified when she’d heard there was a new Clarion about to be inducted into the Council. She’d wondered what kind of man he would be, and how she would cope. After all, she had a very limited understanding of men in the city. Aside from the guards and servants, who were naturally very reserved around her, the only men she’d even known were her brother and father. Tenlor was an arrogant and selfish brat who’d never really grown up as far as she was concerned. As for her father, she loved him deeply, but she’d never been able to earn his respect. Or even his notice, really. It was something she’d learned to live with.

However when the Clarion had been made her consort, he was nothing at all like she feared. He dressed like a servant, ate like them, and even talked like them, but he treated her like a queen. He was gentle and kind in almost everything he did. His thoughts were always on the people of the city—when they weren’t on her.

In retrospect, such behavior shouldn’t have been a surprise. He was raised to love everyone else more than he loved himself, and to inspire people with his actions and words. Even his darker side, the training he’d received to investigate and punish evildoers, was itself meant to better everyone. But to her, the Clarion had been a gift such that she hadn’t even dreamed possible.

Hazra had always known she would end up with some noble or other. She’d seen her friends married off one by one. Most of them claimed to be content in their new lives, and Hazra believed that they were, to a degree. Some of them even said they loved their husbands after a while. But none of them loved their husbands as Hazra had fallen for the Clarion—almost from the first moment she’d seen him! None of them felt their cheeks warming just at the sound of his voice, as hers were right now.

It was *so strange*! Hazra had wanted to be like her mother for as long as she could remember. A strong, capable woman who could handle anything thrown her way. Married, of course, but not dependent on her husband. She hadn’t expected to turn into some kind of lovesick girl over something as commonplace as a man! And yet, she was happy. Even now, after everything, she was still happy just thinking about him.

Unfortunately, the Clarion himself was a bit harder to read. Perhaps it was because of his training, but Hazra kept on feeling like a child in his presence. He had a focus of sorts: a kind of self-awareness and calm that she’d never seen in anyone else. Unfortunately, she’d never seen any real passion in his face, or heard it in his voice. As such, sometimes she couldn’t be sure if he loved her back.

He cared for her deeply—that much was clear in his actions. He always put her needs above his own, and he *listened* to her when she had advice he could use on how to handle the Council. Recently though, he’d seemed concerned about her, without reason. As if she were suddenly made of glass and might break. No, that wasn’t quite right. It was more like he was afraid of her for some reason.

“You will do no such thing,” the Clarion continued, cutting through her reverie. “The Ascendants will handle the investigation, to make sure that it is carried out *impartially*. I assume you can make the arrangements for that, Commander?”

“I’d be thrilled to,” her brother responded, his tone just a hair short of being openly insulting. He’d always disliked the Clarion, though Hazra had never been able to figure out why.

Her father spoke up again. If he was upset at being cut off by the Clarion, it certainly didn’t show in his voice. “As for this navigator and alleged new arrival, I am hereby posting a bounty on them. Spread the word throughout your patches: any man who can bring them to us, or lead us to them, will be given ten thousand gold as well as a permanent Transit Pass. And this Council’s lasting gratitude, of course. Oh, and any information as to who these people are will be worth an additional five thousand, should it prove to be true. I’ll have it put in writing and posted in Sustained territory. Inform the magistrates to read it in each of the stra’tchi patches as well.”

Hazra let out a low whistle. That was a tidy sum for anyone living inside Sustained territory, and a fortune for the stra’tchi outside. The Transit Pass was a nice touch, too. If the stra’tchi knew they could go to other patches to spend their reward money, they were much more likely to try to earn it. Once the word got out, these fugitives would have a very hard time hiding.

As for the Outsider, Hazra didn’t know what to think of her. The prophecy said the Harbinger would bring an end to Patchwork itself, or so most people believed. It had been years since the prophecy had been dug up, though, and the words had been translated and re-translated many times. The original crystal fragment was stored in the Library in Penntu patch, accessible only by the Lord Ascendant himself, and select scribes who lived there. Her father certainly wasn’t about to take it out and show it to people, though.

Her father dismissed the Councilors and the Clarion, and as usual had a few words with Tenlor afterwards. She couldn’t quite make out what they were saying, but he was probably giving his oh-so-favorite child more instructions on how to keep the other Houses in line.

Hazra sat in the darkness for a few moments, considering. Obviously her father was taking this threat seriously, so she probably should as well. With some effort, she pulled herself up and winced as a spasm of pain shot through her left shoulder. Hazra massaged it slowly with her right hand. There was a bruise there, which she didn’t remember getting. According to the Clarion, she’d fallen out of bed last night and landed on that shoulder. Hazra was just grateful it was in a location she could easily hide.

Carefully plugging up the knothole again, she put her torture-shoes back on and slid the cushion back to its place before leaving the shrine. “Milady.” Toria curtsied briefly, from right beside her.

Hazra nearly jumped out of her skin, and then glared daggers. “Toria! What are you doing here?”

The older woman respectfully took a step back. “Attending my lady, of course. If I had known you were going to prayers, I would have been here sooner.” She glanced past Hazra for a moment, at the portrait on the wall and the still-lit candles.

Feeling a moment of awkwardness, Hazra leaned back into the shrine for a moment and blew them out. It wouldn’t be very ladylike of her to bite someone’s head off, just for covering for her. “Carry on, then.”

“Yes milady.” Toria curtsied again and quietly left.

As she walked away, Hazra shook her head. Toria was partially deaf, like many of the servants on her mother’s side of the family, not that it showed in her voice. The poor woman must have spent years practicing speech with the other servants so she could sound more ‘normal’.

Toria was a potential complication to Hazra’s plans. She trusted the servant completely, of course. Toria had been there at Hazra’s birth, and had watched over her ever since. But she was bright, too. It was possible she knew about the shrine’s usefulness for spying on the Council meetings—Hazra still wasn’t sure. Regardless, if she did know anything, she could be trusted to keep it a secret. Hazra made her way out of the Spire and back to her chambers in the manor. She had a lot of thinking to do.

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Chapter 11

Something hard poked into her shoulder, “Time ta get up, lass.”

Jaas slowly came out of possibly the deepest sleep she’d ever had, and moaned in pain. Her entire body hurt; every muscle screamed in protest at even the slightest move. “Get up, now!” The voice gained a hard edge, but the poking stopped.

Her brief moment of respite was interrupted as her cot rattled and then lifted up underneath her. She let out a yelp as she was rolled unceremoniously onto the ground, blanket and all. Glaring down at her in the torchlight, Otrul reached for his water skin.

“I’m up! I’m *up*!” She hurriedly exclaimed, scrambling to her feet. The last thing she needed was another skin of cold water poured on her head like yesterday. She’d only known her dwarven trainer for a day or so, but he’d never made a threat he didn’t follow up on. Otrul grabbed her by the shoulder and practically threw her out the door.

A dense fog hung in the air of whatever patch she’d been brought to, and her nightclothes clung to her back in the chill. She felt nauseous at first but didn’t have time to stop, as Otrul prodded her into a jogging pace. It was criminal! He hadn’t even let her put on shoes!

Thankfully she wasn’t running on paving stones here, or even grass, but packed dirt under her feet. Wherever this jogging track was, it was deep underground. Probably a place where dwarves themselves trained from time to time. There was definitely an opening far up above her, because she could faintly see the sky from all the way down here, but not enough to make do. Apparently it was just before dawn, as the starlight was starting to fade.

All dwarves could see in the dark without difficulty, but Otrul had apparently lit and positioned several torches around the track so Jaas could see where she was going. Well, at least she was out of the way of prying eyes. There was no way her would-be captors could see her all the way down here.

As she got some momentum going, Jaas’ mind flashed back to her long conversation with the Hauld. A lot of things about Arico and Alzhi and their work here made much more sense now. Jaas had been too tired to write it down the night before, but she resolved to do so tonight before she went to bed. *If* she survived today’s training sessions.

Apparently, she’d stumbled into a city-wide insurgency. Arico and Alzhi—and most likely other humans as well—looked like they were intent on overthrowing this city’s current government, using dwarven support. That was why she was here, safe in the dwarven Enclave and out of reach of the Sustained. Jaas couldn’t blame them, really. From what little she knew about the Sustained Council and their Lord Ascendant, it seemed this city was basically being held in a choke-collar. Still, there was no such thing as a bloodless revolution. Freedom fighters and loyalists alike were usually killed in droves, along with the innocent. Jaas felt a pit in her stomach that had nothing to do with continuing to jog through the mist.

That reminded her. There was no rain in Patchwork, but apparently fog still showed up from time to time. Enough to filter its way all the way underground down to her. Were the particles of mist just small enough to make it through the threads, or did they form inside each patch individually? She hadn’t seen any mist before, so she resolved to pay attention. And to take notes when she could again. Based on her initial observations, the barriers surrounding the city prevented storm clouds from forming in a wide radius around it.

Otrul stopped prodding her mercilessly as she kept up the jog. She was a good head taller than him but somehow he was always able to keep up right behind her. As they passed the torch that marked the ‘start’ of the track, Jaas had a sinking feeling. If yesterday had been any indication, they were both in for a long run. Strangely, the persistent ache faded as she kept running.

Out of nowhere, a barefoot Arico came into pace right beside her. He too was dressed in nightclothes, and his hair was a mess. He gave her a sidelong glance and a minuscule smile she could barely make out in the darkness. Otrul looked surprised for a moment, but didn’t do anything to stop it.

They ran for what seemed like hours, but was probably closer to ten minutes, before Otrul relented and they came to a stop. Jaas gasped for air, leaning down on her knees. With a mixture of gratitude and hatred she accepted the water skin he offered, and gulped down as much as she could handle. She still felt like she was about to throw up.

“Sorry I wasn’t here yesterday,” Arico murmured at her, after taking a swig himself. “I had some business in another patch.”

She only nodded at him, unwilling to trust her voice just now. Suddenly she realized she must look a complete mess, but didn’t have the time to feel embarrassed. At least it was too dark for Arico to see her clearly. And their dwarven slave-master was already pushing them to start running again. Jaas had been raised the daughter of a clerk and a teacher. She’d been able to read almost before she could walk. By the time she was five, she was already helping her mother with historical research. She wasn’t built for this kind of exertion!

Otrul seemed determined to push her to the breaking point and keep her there. After the run would be other tests of endurance and strength. Lifting weights, pushing and pulling them. Taking a punch, which he thankfully delivered at only a fraction of his strength. Throwing punches too, not that she’d been any good at it. He’d even mentioned weapon training eventually. It was all the basic combat training that young dwarves received here, or so she’d been told.

Today was a little different, though. Arico insisted on handling the unarmed combat himself, and silenced Otrul when he objected. That was interesting. She’d known Arico had a position of some authority here in the Enclave, but dwarves rarely took orders from anyone not of their own kin. She’d had a chance to look over some of the written history recorded here in the Enclave. It was just one side’s perspective of course, but it gave her a lot of insight into just how much hatred existed between dwarves and humans here in Patchwork. That made Arico’s position here even more unique.

He was just as hard on her as the dwarf, knocking her down on the dirt again and again. At least he was encouraging though. When she felt like she couldn’t get up again, he didn’t shout at her. All he did was kneel down next to her and calmly talk to her until she tried again.

Intellectually, she knew they were toughening her up. It made sense, given her history. The worst challenges she’d faced so far had been linguistic, historical, and magical. They were making sure she could handle the physical as well. It didn’t stop her from hating them, though. Both of them.

She was grateful that Arico was there with her. Contradictory feelings again. He was trying to let her know that she didn’t have to go through this alone. Some hours later, Otrul *finally* said she could go, and she wearily made her way up the long stairs to one of the other underground dwellings they’d made available for her. Limping through the door, she started stripping off sweat-stained clothing as she headed to the shower outside the back door.

Though her body was in a sorry state, her mind was still active. For some reason the dwarves had water for a shower. Given that the river was in Sustained territory, it had to be from a well dug nearby. She hadn’t seen one yesterday after speaking with the Hauld, but she had seen a bricked-off area right on the edge of the patch where the threads came together, with a single closed door. Jaas would have bet anything that the river, or at least its edge, could be found on the other side of that wall. Part of her was tempted to go back and see if she could get a peek through that door to be sure, but she had to admit she’d rather fall through all nine hells than go without a shower right now.

There were two half-full barrels of water outside, each suspended over a perforated bucket. Crude, but better than nothing. At the Academy, she had used a spell to create water in an even pattern over herself while showering. This was a barely acceptable substitute.

She pulled one of the ropes attached to a barrel, and winced as cold water cascaded over her, washing away the grime and sweat. The shock of it wore off quickly though. As she washed, she mentally recited what she was going to put down in her notes. It always helped her keep them short and concise, but detailed at the same time. It took her a minute to realize that the other barrel and bucket were now in use as well. By Arico.

She shrieked and backed away, trying to cover herself. “What are you doing? Turn around!”

Arico jumped in surprise and hastily complied, looking around. “What? What’s going on?”

The fog had mostly lifted by now, and there was torchlight from just around the corner. He’d no doubt gotten a *very* good look. Hurriedly grabbing a towel and wrapping herself up, she scurried inside the dwelling. He was still outside, looking around as if for danger.

“What were you thinking?” She demanded from inside.

“I… was thinking I wanted a shower!” He sounded bewildered. “Jaas, what’s the matter?”

She took a deep breath, trying to stay calm. *It must be a cultural trait,* she told herself. *That must be it*. “Do you often shower with… other women?” She asked tentatively through the door.

“Sometimes,” he responded slowly. “The stra’tchi work together, eat together, shower together. In winter we often sleep together for warmth. So do the dwarves, sometimes. What’s wrong?” Of course. It was a survival thing. Jaas tried to slow her breathing and calm herself.

It made sense that in extreme circumstances, modesty would be the first thing to go. No doubt they’d had to shed a lot of cultural civilities over the centuries. She exhaled, at least a little relieved. “Nothing’s wrong,” she assured him. “I was just a little surprised, that’s all. And I don’t want to shower with anyone else, is that clear?”

“I understand.” He sounded as if he didn’t. “Wait, I think Durhu taught me about this; about how the Sustained House ladies behave. I didn’t think you’d be like *them*, though.” She could hear a note of scorn in his voice.

“Like them, how?” She asked suspiciously.

There was a moment of hesitation. “You know, trading gossip with each other. Pandering and simpering for the men around them. Obsessed with appearance, and mostly unable to do things for themselves?”

Jaas felt a flash of indignation, “I’m not like that!”

“Are you ashamed of your body, then? You shouldn’t be. You’re well formed.”

“Don’t say that!” She felt as if she could die from humiliation. “Just don’t talk about how I look, all right?”

“Very well,” he said quietly. “I didn’t mean any offense. I’ll leave you alone now.” He grabbed a pile of clean clothing from the bench and took off back up the tunnel, dressing as he went.

Jaas leaned against the wall, fighting the urge to laugh at how ridiculous all of this had been. Of all the things that had happened to her in the past few days, it was just too strange!

He wasn't too badly formed himself.

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For some reason, Otrul had only a few hours of combat training for her in the afternoon, giving her some free time to herself. Perhaps the slave-master was developing a conscience, but Jaas seriously doubted it. Another dwarf had showed up just as she was freed, though. One who looked a little familiar.

“Lady Senneco?” The dwarf asked tentatively, extending a hand in greeting. Strangely, his Vasrah was not accented at all.

“Please, just call me Jaas,” she responded, shaking it.

He smiled. “I’m Chanul, the Hauld-Issuant. Please, come with me.” He gestured towards the long staircase leading up to the surface, and then led the way himself. He grabbed one of the lit torches from the track first, though.

Jaas examined this newcomer with interest. Now she knew why he looked familiar. She’d seen him the other day in the Hauld’s audience chamber. And his title, that meant- “You’re Recco’s oldest son?”

“His only son, actually,” Chanul said easily, and chuckled slightly. “I don’t often hear people call him by his first name, though. Especially humans. It’s good to hear.”

“Forgive my saying this,” Jaas began slowly, “but you don’t exactly sound like the rest of your people.”

“You mean my accent, of course,” he confirmed casually. “You’re right, I don’t, but I think you’ll find that’s more of an age thing. Older dwarves like my father and Otrul have their own way of speaking, but I was raised around both dwarves and humans. I can speak my ancestral tongue,” he said, abruptly shifting to dwarven for a moment, “but Vasrah is more comfortable to me.”

Jaas smiled in response. He certainly did seem more like the ‘personable youth’ type not usually associated with dwarves. But other humans? Aside from Alzhi and Arico, she hadn’t seen anyone here who wasn’t a dwarf. Of course, it had been quite late when she was brought down here to the underground… cottage of sorts. There was a lot of this place she hadn’t seen.

Chanul seemed to sense her question, so he continued his explanation. “Last night you stayed in an empty dwelling down here because your new quarters weren’t quite available yet. Your things have already been moved up to the new place. All that’s left is to introduce you to your neighbors. Arico ran off on business—again-” he added in a sarcastic tone, “leaving me to handle it.”

Jaas suddenly realized they were still climbing the long staircase, instead of taking one of the tunnels off to the side. “We aren’t going to a different patch, then?”

Chanul shook his head in the torchlight. “Not this time. This patch was pretty much completely set aside for our human friends. What few of them there are,” he added in a dark tone.

“So I don’t get to see what animal you become when you enter the threads?” Jaas asked, trying to lighten the mood a little.

Apparently it worked. Chanul gave her a sidelong glance as they climbed, with a hint of a smile. “Animals are a human thing. Dwarves are all clan first and self second,” he responded. “All dwarven navigators are represented by our clan symbol—the same one you saw on my father’s breastplate the other day.”

The stairwell ended abruptly, but not at the surface like Jaas expected. Instead she could see sunlight streaming in off to the right, from what looked like another underground structure. “Welcome to the Fishbowl,” Chanul said softly.

It did indeed look like a fishbowl, at least in its general shape. The opening above them was circular, and smaller than the base of this open-air structure. However, tunnels branched off in multiple directions, not just from the base but from higher levels as well. Earthen stairs connected the various levels, and Jaas could see another underground track beneath them. Above were more underground structures on each level. And people.

There were about a dozen of them there already, all humans, gathering at the base of the Bowl and looking at her with smiles on their faces. More were approaching from the nearby tunnels. Jaas looked at Chanul, who nodded encouragingly. “Go introduce yourself. They won’t mind.”

A tall man stepped out to meet her as she approached. He was wearing simple work clothes, and his hands had been stained with some kind of blue-green dye. “Lady Senneco.” He gave an abbreviated bow, much to Jaas’ discomfort, and the others around him did the same. “I’m Nemith Taylor. Welcome to the Fishbowl, my lady.”

“Please, just call me Jaas,” she said almost by habit by now, and extended a hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

There was some hesitancy at first, but they seemed to overcome it quickly as they shook her hand one by one, and she was soon surrounded by friendly faces. Jaas dimly noticed Chanul disappearing back down the tunnel. She hoped he was merely busy, and not uncomfortable around these people.

Taylor introduced his young son Tarith, and his wife Ansanah. Other names came at her too fast to keep track of, and Jaas yet again wished for her recording sphere. At least that way she could take down their names later on. The introductions cut off briefly, however, as a shorter man with dark skin and calloused hands approached carrying an engraved metal box.

“Codi Farrier,” he introduced himself in a deep voice. “This, I suppose, is now yours.” He handed it to her. It was a cube in shape, barely longer on a side than one of her hands. It looked like it was made entirely of metal, but was surprisingly light. Carved into multiple squares on each side was a different symbol. Jaas lifted it to take a look at the other sides and found a similar pattern on each one.

“Thank you,” she said hesitantly. “What is it?”

There was a rustle of amusement from the group. “It’s a puzzle box,” Codi explained with a smile. “You will see you can shift the squares around on each side. If you find the right combination, the box opens and you can claim what’s inside. If not,” he shrugged, “then the next person tries, I guess.”

Nemith demonstrated for her by rotating one side of the box so that the shape remained a cube, but with different symbols on four of the sides. “This gift is traditionally given to the newest member of our community. It’s theirs until someone else shows up, at which point you’ll be expected to pass it along. Codi has been here for several months now. There was a wager going as to when he’d have to give it up.” He looked around at the others. “I was way off. Did anyone guess the right day?”

“I was the closest one,” Ansanah spoke up modestly. “But I was still four days off.”

The group of them laughed about that, and soon broke up into smaller conversations under the sunlight coming into the Fishbowl. Jaas had accepted the box with as much grace as she could muster, but her mind was still spinning. She *lived* here now? These people seemed friendly enough, but Jaas hadn’t expected to suddenly have them as neighbors. She hoped that the Hauld and Arico knew what they were doing. For now though, it seemed all she could do was play along.

Codi and a few others stayed near her, explaining more about this community of theirs. Apparently people had been coming to the Fishbowl steadily for years now, while a few of them had left. Jaas didn’t ask how they did so without getting in trouble, but she did remind herself to ask Arico for more details later on. If he was still willing to speak to her, that was. Jaas found herself wondering if the earlier incident was why she was here in the Fishbowl, and why Chanul had been the one to bring her here.

“My niece Alya wanted to be here,” Codi said apologetically, “but she’s handling one of the forges on the other side of the Enclave right now. I think you’ll like her when you get the chance to meet her. She also has a passion for traveling and seeing new things. Sometimes it’s all I can do to keep up with her.”

“I’m sure I’ll enjoy her company,” Jaas said diplomatically.

Apparently, his niece lived with him here in the Fishbowl, but he’d arrived two days after she did, meaning he’d ended up with the puzzle box. He went on talking about her for some time, before little Tarith eventually volunteered to show Jaas to her new dwelling. He was very enthusiastic, as Jaas had come to expect from children his age. She allowed herself to be led around by the hand, to see the various tunnels, each leading to dwellings on the various levels of the Fishbowl. His mother went along with them; Jaas suspected as a means of keeping Tarith in check.

Come to think of it, none of them had asked her anything about the outside world. Clearly, they had no idea she wasn’t from around here. It seemed Arico had arranged for her to live here, and Chanul had overheard her discussion with his father, so he knew. Why were neither of them sharing that information? Was it dangerous? Jaas tried to put that out of her mind as the tour continued. She would consider it later.

The ‘house’ was much like the other dwarven dwellings she’d seen—carved out of earth and stone. As such it was small but cozy. The fireplace was near the door, with a special vent that apparently led out to the Fishbowl itself, so as not to smoke up the place. After giving her a brief tour, Ansanah and Tarith bid her farewell and headed back up the tunnel to the others. Nemith had probably given instructions for them not to overwhelm her. He seemed like the man in charge, at least down here. Jaas briefly wondered what it had taken for him to be put in charge. Did the Hauld have final say on the humans living here?

Jaas turned the puzzle box over and over in her hands, and then noticed her things sitting in a corner. At least they’d brought her parchment here with the rest of her belongings. Her neighbors seemed the considerate sort. Smiling slightly, Jaas spread out one of the parchments and reached for her quill and inkwell. It seemed this was her home now. She’d have to get used to it.

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Chapter 12

The moment they arrived at the Deathwatch patch, Arico let go of Jaas’ hand. He tried not to be too obvious about it, but could see that he’d failed from the awkward look she gave him. He’d avoided Jaas for the past few days, after she moved into the Fishbowl with Nemith and the others. Yesterday he’d had a chance to speak to Durhu about her, and his father had clarified a few things. Apparently Jaas was like the Sustained House ladies in at least one way: she needed privacy, and defended that privacy fiercely. Arico had felt like a fool. In all other respects, of course she wouldn’t be like the Sustained ladies in this city. She wasn’t *from* this city!

Now that he thought about it, he remembered even Nouma had behaved that way when they’d been together. He’d just never noticed because there was no shortage of the Waters in Sustained territory. No shortage of anything really. It was an entirely different way of life, and at the time he’d been pretending to be an entirely different kind of person.

Still, Jaas had agreed to join him on this trip. Apparently she could get over her embarrassment, so he should as well. It wasn’t until they were already *here* that he realized it might not be safe for her. Thankfully she seemed to know that already. Though she was still walking gingerly, no doubt sore from her training schedule, she stayed near him and kept a wary eye on their surroundings.

Arico was sore as well, but not from the training. It had been more than a week since he’d woken up wearing those bandages on his side. The dwarven healers had examined him yesterday and proclaimed he was recovering well. Arico just hoped he had healed enough for what he had to do here.

“The Deathwatchers live in one of the inner city patches,” he explained quietly. “The stone buildings and alleyways in this part of the city are too deep to remove easily, and there are too many roads, so you can’t really plant anything here.”

“So how do they feed themselves?”

“Every patch has a recurring ritual—an exchange of sorts, where they’re given everything they can’t get themselves. In exchange each patch gives a portion of what it has, to honor the House that rules them. Many of the Sustained think that most stra’tchi don’t deserve such a ration, but no one says that about the Deathwatchers. Even the Sustained recognize how powerful the Deathwatchers can be. That’s why they’re careful to treat them as equals, when they come here to trade.”

“I meant to ask you about the Fishbowl,” Jaas continued, her tone changing from academic curiosity to something different. Personal interest, perhaps? Arico couldn’t tell. “The people there. Are they refugees?”

Arico hesitated. “Not really. They did start out that way, at first. There was a long Tumult that ended about forty years ago, before I was born. Nemith gathered together a bunch of survivors and took them to the Enclave, where he asked the Hauld for sanctuary. I’m told it took a long time, but eventually the Hauld agreed. Some of the Fishbowlers have returned to Sustained territory since then, and other people have been brought in as well. Like you. As of now, there are about fifty of them living in the Fishbowl. They have jobs, teach their children, trade with the dwarves. They live normal lives, except that they have to live underground for safety. That’s why the dwarves cut them that hole at the top of the Fishbowl. So that they can see the sun and stars at least some of the time. That training ground you and I were running around was dug out later, underneath the Fishbowl. It’s usually used by dwarven trainees, because they can see in the dark.”

Jaas seemed to ponder that for a moment. “So this ‘movement’ of yours, that you, Alzhi, and the Hauld have started. It really is a revolution?” Arico stopped at once, and raised a finger to his lips.

He looked around nervously. No one seemed to be in sight, much less earshot, but there were a lot of buildings around them. Someone could be hiding inside any one of them. He lowered his voice. “Hopefully, it won’t come to that,” he tried to assure her softly. “We don’t want to shed any blood at all if we can help it. The goal that Alzhi and I have set for ourselves is to break everyone free of the Sustained Council. Once they no longer control the city, then everyone’s lives will be better—the dwarves included. The Hauld is helping us now, and if we succeed, the dwarves will help keep the city intact after the Council has been disbanded.”

Jaas nodded unexpectedly. Arico was surprised at her reaction at first, but then remembered her quick adjustment to the facts about the threads. Most likely, she’d already reasoned most of this out on her own, and was just asking him for confirmation. “How do you know the Hauld will be any better than the Council, though?” She asked pointedly. “How do you know all of this won’t end up just replacing one group of tyrants with another?”

Arico sighed with some exasperation. “I love the Hauld like I do my own father, but I’m not blind. I know he has his own reasons for wanting to overthrow the Council and the Lord Ascendant, and I’m not sure what all of them are. But I also know he’s not like them at all: he actually *listens* to the people who serve him. Alzhi and I, the Fishbowlers, Chanul and the others, we can influence him, and he doesn’t make policy decisions without input from us. Aquun knows that’s a lot better than most of the leaders the city has right now. *That’s* why we’re doing all of this, and that’s why it’s so important that we succeed.”

She didn’t look entirely convinced, so Arico decided to change tactics. “Think about it this way. The Hauld has a saying he once told me: Love all, trust a few, and do wrong to none. He’s ruled the Enclave for more than eighty years with that saying in mind. He raised his son to it, and looked after the rest of us in the same way. In the end, it’s a matter of trust. I think he’ll make a good ruler for the city, and I’m asking you to trust him as well.”

Off to the south, Arico suddenly heard the distant sound of metal ringing on metal. Jaas looked off that way as well. She seemed content with what she’d heard, or at least she stopped asking questions, so together they headed in that direction. Before long, he could hear the shouting of a fight as well. They came to the lip of the improvised arena, and Jaas looked down into it with wonder.

Two men were in the middle, both armed with swords and lightly armored. They circled around each other, glistening with sweat in the sun and each looking for an opportunity to lunge in. Dozens of people surrounded them in a wide oval, some watching with interest and others looking bored.

At its full capacity, the arena could seat every Deathwatcher with room to spare. Arico had even been there for one such fight, brief though it had been. “That’s the Boss of the Deathwatch patch,” he pointed out the tall, gray-haired man sitting on an ornate chair overlooking the north end of the arena. “Drakos Bloodeye. He’s the one who negotiates with the Ascendants, hiring out his people in exchange for the supplies and some gold.” He paused, a little troubled. “Well, hiring isn’t really the right word. Selling may be more accurate. Once a Deathwatcher is Bonded, he never returns here. Regardless, everyone in this patch works for Boss Bloodeye in one way or another. That woman behind him is Velya, one of his advisors.”

“Does every patch have a Boss?” Jaas asked quietly, still looking down at the fighters.

Arico shook his head. “Not all of them. Some are uninhabited, as you saw, and the dwarves in the Enclave all answer to the Hauld. Almost every patch that touches the Waters is in Sustained territory, so they all answer to their own Sustained lord. The Sustained also control other patches not touching the Waters as well, like my home patch. In places like that, there’s usually a Mayor or Boss who works alongside a Sustained magistrate. The Ritual of the Waters is how the Sustained give us what we need, and how we give them our tax in return. This patch is a partial exception to that rule, but it’s the only one.” Arico wanted to say more (especially since Jaas always pressed him for details), but he didn’t have the time right now. He would explain it to her later. How the arrangement here and elsewhere was just another example of exploitation at its finest.

Down below, the fight ended abruptly. One of the combatants overreached with a swing, and the other slammed a fist, hilt and all, into his jaw. He collapsed onto the stones, and the circle of spectators clapped and cheered. In one smooth motion, the victorious combatant leaned down and slit his throat. The crowd’s cheering didn’t increase at all; they were quite used to executions in the ring.

Jaas gasped beside him, and Arico immediately stepped right in front of her, blocking the sight of her from most of the crowd. “Quiet! Don’t let them hear you, unless you’re cheering along with them!”

In an instant she’d gone as pale as her complexion allowed. “Why did he do that?” She demanded, though she did keep her voice down. “He’d already won! Why kill him??”

Behind him, in the pit, two younger fighters were dragging the corpse out of the ring to make room for the next fight. The blood would dry quickly in the morning air—it wouldn’t be a problem for anyone else.

“Listen to me,” Arico said softly but severely, keeping eye contact with her. “This is how Deathwatch society works! Only the very strongest—the very best fighters—get to live in order to be Bonded to whichever Sustained family buys them. Everyone else is a drain on resources. If someone here can’t pull their weight, they end up being cut down so the others will live longer. I know it’s not what you’re used to, but you must *not* object, at least not openly. All right?”

She still looked shaky, but now her face was bordering on anger. She nodded tightly to him, and Arico relaxed a bit. Jaas had told him a bit about life in the Outside world, and he’d gotten the impression that most cities and civilizations out there were lawful and mostly conflict-free. And slaves weren’t very common out there either. This kind of blood sport and selling people as fighters was bound to shock her, but they had little choice in here. Population control was rarely a kind or gentle business, no matter how it was done. At least the Deathwatchers did it themselves, though. All the other stra’tchi patches had to use the Ritual of Rejoining to keep their numbers low.

The crowd had quieted behind Arico. This was their chance. “Stay close to me. I don’t want them to pay too much attention to you. Not until *after* I’ve had a chance to speak to them all.” He stood and strode purposefully down the steps into the pit, peripherally aware of her following in his wake.

Durhu had told him that long ago, before the Threading, this arena had been a theater. People had performed here, not to spill blood but to entertain and enlighten others. There were still theater troupes that moved from patch to patch to entertain people, but the Deathwatchers had no patience for that sort of thing.

If their movement was successful, many things would change. Perhaps the arena would be used for its original purpose again, someday. He walked confidently in and faced the Boss. “I claim the right to be heard as an equal!”

The crowd quieted and looked at him with curiosity. Drakos let the silence hang in the air for a few seconds before letting out a short laugh. “You’ve visited us many times, Timot, but you’ve never made that claim before. Why now, I wonder?”

Arico kept his gaze steady. “Test me, and find out. I call for an Earth Match,” he said loudly out to the crowd.

There was a rustle of surprise from the Deathwatchers in the arena. As far as they knew, Arico was just another Sustained lord from some noble house. A fancy, preening noble who’d never had to work a day in his life, much less fight for a thing he had. No wonder they looked interested at the prospect of seeing him compete in the arena.

Drakos examined him a bit longer, before chuckling again and looking back to the crowd. He nodded to them, and Arico caught a glimpse of several runners leaving the group in different directions. Probably spreading the word there’d been a challenger, and who it was. With some effort—he wasn’t as young as he’d used to be—Drakos stood up from his de facto throne and took a few steps down towards the arena.

“Deathwatchers!” He called out, projecting his voice surprisingly well. Below him, the entire crowd came to attention. “Our long-time visitor Timot has called for an Earth Match. He seeks to speak to us as an equal. He will get his chance, but only after he proves himself to us.” He paused and took a deep breath. “What are we?” He shouted below.

“Deathwatchers!” They shouted back in unison. The noise was impressive, even from just a few dozen people.

“Do we care what someone looks like?” Drakos continued.

“No!”

“Do we care where they are from?”

“No!”

“What do we care about?”

“Strength!”

“And where does our strength come from?”

“Difference!” They concluded, and he joined in with them for that last word.

“That’s right,” Drakos lowered his voice from a shout to a speech again, “our differences are what make us strong. We’re all bastards and orphans here—all Deathwatchers. We know the simple truths of life. We know that purity is just another word for weakness. That’s why we have no Rituals here. No magistrate, no penets, and no Aquun or Shemra!”

Arico bristled at that. This was a common ceremony for these people, which was why they were able to respond so easily. Still, their beliefs were a little skewed. He knew better than most how corrupt the church of Aquun had become, but faith was faith. Aquun watched over everyone despite all that. Now, ignorance of her could be excused, but these people knew all about her and still refused to accept her. He shook his head. Perhaps if the movement was successful, they might reconsider their position—perhaps recognize that faith wasn’t weakness or frailty. That would have to wait, though. Arico needed their help anyway, faithless though they were.

“Step forward, Timot. Prove that you’re more than just your origins!” Drakos challenged.

Arico smiled openly. It was clearly a dig at the Sustained themselves, spoken just for ‘Timot’s’ benefit. Most Deathwatchers had an obvious contempt for the Sustained, despite the fact that they depended on the Sustained to survive. Apparently satisfied with his speech’s effect on the crowd, Drakos gestured to the arena again and returned to his chair.

There was a brief conversation among the fighters in the pit for a few moments. Then, as tradition demanded, five men stepped out to face him. Of course they were all young and strong. Older mercenaries could still fight, but they rarely volunteered for traditional combat anymore, preferring to fight more experienced people like each other.

“Deathwatchers only listen to people who’ve proven themselves,” Arico explained quietly, before Jaas could ask. “I have to fight one of them, alone. You’d better stay here. If you interfere, my claim will be denied.”

She grabbed his shoulder. “Is this fight to the death as well?” Her voice was still thick with anger, but he could see more in her expression. Suddenly he realized she was very right to be concerned. If he died, she’d be stuck here—among possibly the most violent group of people in Patchwork!

“Don’t worry,” he gave her a reassuring smile. “I called for an Earth Match. That means the first of us who’s put to the Earth—who’s knocked to the ground and can’t get back up—loses. For a Water Match, it’s the first person who loses Water—that is blood, and an Air Match is the first person who loses Air—stops breathing. But I’ll be alright; they can’t risk killing a Sustained lord. That would cause them way too many problems down the road. At worst, I’ll get maimed or something,” he teased her lightly, and then turned away before she could glare at him.

Arico felt a sense of relief at that as well, though he kept it well hidden. He’d never taken a life, and he hoped it would never be necessary. That hope was a slim one, though. When the fighting inevitably started he would no doubt have to kill again and again. For someone like Alzhi, who had been a soldier for most of his life, that wasn’t particularly daunting. For Arico, it was terrifying. What would such an act do to him? Who would he *be* if and when he had to kill someone?

Dimly, he was aware that the crowd was growing. The runners had spread the word quickly, and people were arriving to see what was going on. That was good. Hopefully the entire patch would be watching by the time he was done. Out of the corner of his eye, Arico could also see another figure watching him from the shadows on the far end of the arena. He was well concealed, whoever he was; all Arico could see was the large outline of a shadow near Drakos and his advisor.

Putting that out of his head for the moment, Arico stepped away from Jaas and pointed to the man in the middle of the five. “Choose your weapons, Prekim,” Drakos commanded from his seat behind them. The young man unsheathed a pair of wicked-looking daggers from his belt and held them with practiced ease as the other four split off and rejoined the crowd.

Arico only held up his hands, palms outward to the crowd and heard a few gasps in response. It wasn’t necessary to fight unarmed; they would listen to what he had to say regardless of which weapons he used. This way, though, he hoped they’d be more impressed with him.

Prekim gave a predatory grin as he started to move. Keeping his weight evenly distributed, Arico began to circle with him as they got closer. For a moment, Arico allowed himself a sliver of doubt and fear. Prekim was an experienced fighter, and Arico was still recovering from getting shot. And while the fight was supposed to be nonlethal, accidents did happen. His concerns were quickly overwhelmed by the excitement of the fight.

Every time Arico thought he saw an opening he could use, his opponent seemed to close it up again. After a few seconds though, Arico charged anyway. Dwarves had trained him in fighting from a young age, but their style was different because of their height. Thankfully Alzhi and Nemith had shown him a few tricks more suited to fighting humans.

Prekim swiped viciously with the smaller dagger, keeping him back at first. Barely dodging it, Arico collided with him hard, knocking them both to the ground. Prekim twisted away from him, almost making it before Arico was able to grab his wrist and twist. Tendons popped as he cried out in pain and swung a kick that thudded into Arico’s ribs, thankfully on the opposite side of his still-not-quite-healed injury.

Prekim was a good knife-fighter, but he didn’t know much about wrestling. The dwarves had made sure to cover *all* forms of combat with their training. With growing confidence, Arico twisted again and pushed Prekim back down, pinning him to the ground and forcing him to drop his daggers. Then he inexorably leveraged the smaller man’s arm up, turning it until he yelled in pain. From there, Arico forced him up and took hold of Prekim by the throat. Arico held him that way, just long enough for him to pass out and slump to the ground.

The crowd clapped appreciatively as Arico let him go and rose, massaging his ribs. Jaas stood tight-lipped on the edge of the crowd. Probably afraid of what was coming next. There was no time to wait and catch his breath. Arico couldn’t risk losing the crowd’s attention, so he started immediately.

“Deathwatchers!” he called out as loudly as he dared. “Some of you know me as just a tradesman. You’ve seen me come and go as I please. Naturally you assumed that I was one of the Sustained, but I’m not. My name is not Timot, and I have nothing to do with the Sustained Council, nor with the Ascendants!”

There was a ripple of surprise through the crowd at that, but he didn’t give them time to ponder it for too long. “I have never been one of them. I am free. I go where I please, and I don’t answer to them for anything.” That should grab their attention. If anyone could appreciate an independent streak, it was the Deathwatchers.

He paused at that point, giving a knowing smile. “Some of you are no doubt thinking I’m insane. You’re wondering if I’ve been stricken with some kind of madness, and have lost my senses. You’re possibly considering telling the Sustained about me as soon as you can.

“Is it madness to speak up against oppression? To openly oppose tyrants like the Sustained Council and their Lord Ascendant? To challenge the corruption of men like the High Penet? I hope you do tell them about me. I want them to know that I stand against them. I’m not afraid, because even if they do kill me, at least I will have *lived* before I died!”

Arico let that sink in for a handful of seconds as he turned a slow circle to look at them all. “The Deathwatch patch is filled with the strong. Each of you has faced your own death many times over. They come here and Bond you because they know this. They’ve yoked you like cattle, like slaves! And like so many others under their sway, they’ve convinced you that it is their *right* to do so!”

There was a rustle of discontent and anger from the crowd, and he raised a hand to forestall objections. “I know, you claim otherwise. You say that you are their equals, and that the Bonding is a noble service—that it brings honor to all Deathwatchers. It’s a comforting thought, but deep down you all know the truth. Despite all your strength, your skill in combat, your warrior code—despite all of that, you are still at their mercy. Still just tools to them!” The Deathwatchers had always been a proud bunch, and Arico’s incendiary statements were triggering more and more anger from the crowd. Time to wrap things up.

He slowly turned his gaze back to Drakos. “I’m going to beat them. I’m going to tear down the Council and give everyone in Patchwork the chance to be free, just as I am! When they come to you next, it won’t be out of convenience. They won’t be just negotiating with you so they can continue fighting each other. They will come to you out of panic. And it will be because of me.

“When that day comes you will all have a choice. To support them and die with the old ways, or to rise up against them, and live for the new!”

At that, Arico turned and headed up the steps again. He was sure to keep his steps measured and even, despite how out of breath he felt. Jaas fell into step right next to him, presenting the picture of confidence as well. Though she did look back briefly as they left the arena. Angry voices from the crowd shouted out at him, but Arico didn’t change his pace. He wasn’t concerned anyway; none of them would try to harm him, not without permission from Drakos.

“Not bad for an inspirational speech. I’m impressed.” Jaas said once they were out of sight. Wincing a bit, she took a moment to rub her shoulders. “You’ve stirred up a hornets’ nest now. I hope you’re ready to get stung.”

“They won’t tell the Sustained right away,” he said confidently. “They’re too proud for that. Still, eventually the Council will find out, and the threats I made here might be motivation enough to make them act. The Deathwatchers are stubborn, though. That’s why I had to tell them first. They’ll take the longest to decide one way or the other.”

“But why did you bring me along, if you weren’t going to have me speak to them? I thought that’s why I was here.”

“This time you were just here to be seen,” he explained slowly. He and the Hauld had agreed on this plan, but he still wasn’t sure it would work. “Once enough people have seen you, then you’ll get your chance to explain how and why you came here. Right now though, it’s more important that the Sustained hear about you. They have to know that the… Outsider is alive and well, and standing with me against them.”

She gave him a sidelong glance as they walked. He’d wanted to call her by her true title: the Harbinger. The Hauld had convinced him to hold off though, at least until she was more acclimated to the city. There was no telling how she’d react to the news, or even if she’d believe it.

Still, Jaas had proven several times now how quickly she could catch on. Arico was willing to bet she suspected some of this already. And she could have undermined him back there, just by speaking out against him. She’d held her tongue instead. Arico smiled. He’d gambled, and won. Sure, there was a great deal more to do, but for now at least, things were good.

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Just before they reached the redline, Jaas reached out to stop him. “Wait, did you hear that?”

Arico went still. Sure enough he could hear faint footfalls behind them, fading quickly. They both turned around, but no one was in sight. Like most inner city patches, anywhere this close to the redline was usually uninhabited. All he could see were the empty stone buildings and abandoned streets that had once been a thriving market back before the Threading.

“You can show yourself!” Jaas called out, apparently to no one. “We know you’re here.”

With a prickling sensation on the back of his neck, Arico slipped into one of his fighting stances and wished he’d brought his weapons along. He caught a glimpse of movement out of the corner of his eye, just before something slammed into the ground right next to them. The impact was staggering: enough to put cracks in the flagstone street. On instinct Arico backed away, pulling Jaas with him. A massive figure was rising from the middle of the cracks.

It slowly unfolded arms and legs and soon it towered over them, a misshapen but truly impressive figure of a man. Easily a head taller than even Alzhi, the man before them had yellow eyes, a misshapen mouth, and a face that looked like it had been spawned from nightmares. Cuts and scars dominated every inch of his features, layered atop his twisted nose and cheekbones. Some of them looked self-inflicted, as if he’d been using his own flesh as a paint canvas. Arico resisted the urge to flinch away. The… giant, for lack of a better word, locked his gaze on Arico, holding his attention for a few moments before speaking.

“Little man is not afraid. Good.” He swung his gaze towards Jaas as well, who also stood firm and unflinching, though her hands trembled a bit behind her back. “Pretty lady is the same. Sabra sees fear too often.”

A memory clicked in Arico’s mind. That figure behind the stands back at the arena. The size and shape were just about right. And he’d definitely heard rumors about this person before. Despite the situation and the obvious danger, Arico was fascinated. He held his palms open towards the giant, trying to buy time and gather his wits. “I’ve heard about you, Sabra. Never thought I’d get the chance to meet you, though.” That was actually only partially true. Arico had heard about this creature, but had never heard his name.

“Oh? And what has little man heard, Sabra wonders?” A twisted smile ran over his features, ruined as they were.

Arico started walking a half-circle around the giant, getting a better look. His legs were powerfully built, and his arms and chest much more so. He was big enough in fact, that he looked like he could move with his knuckles to the ground, as a monkey would. His hands were covered with calluses, too. That explained how he’d been able to jump and land next to them with such shattering force. He could probably spread such impacts across his heels, legs and fists at the same time. Strangely, his thick black hair was elaborately compiled into a massive braid that extended all the way to the ground. In effect, it looked like a fifth limb.

“There’s a story told around Patchwork.” Arico said slowly, glancing back at Jaas. She still looked frightened, but it seemed she was just as curious about this creature. “The story of the Deathwatch Monster.”

Sabra grunted a laugh and waved a massive hand. “Tell the story, little man.”

Giving a slight smile in return, Arico complied as best he could remember. “It’s said that some thirty-five years ago, a Sustained noblewoman gave birth to a monster. A misshapen demon that had the form of a great ape, but the cunning and malice of a man.” Something crossed Sabra’s face for a fleeting instant. Was it a grimace?

“It’s said that the child’s father couldn’t even bear the sight of his son. He took the baby to the threads and laid him down on the ground. He didn’t want to kill his own son, but he knew the child would never know a normal life among the Sustained. But when he took up a rock and tried to bring it down on the baby’s head,” Arico paused for effect. “The baby grabbed the rock as it came down, and broke it in two with his bare hands. The nobleman took it as a sign, and instead banished the boy to the threads, where he ended up in the Deathwatch patch. There the ‘monster’ survived on rats at first, and then on the flesh of the Deathwatchers themselves. To this day, the monster wanders the Deathwatch patch, killing and eating the fighters in order to survive. A bit grisly and obvious I think, for a child’s tale.”

“But mostly true.” Sabra stretched his arms up to an alarming height, triggering tendons that started popping up and down his back. Now that he was finally standing fully upright, Arico could see that his braid was exactly as tall as he was. He probably kept it that way on purpose. “Sabra was banished here, but Sabra has never had any taste for man-flesh. Sabra eats what the Deathwatchers eat, and they give Sabra his due out of fear. Or Sabra beats them until they start showing pretty colors.” He chuckled at his own joke.

Arico noticed something else that was out of place. Given his filthy clothes and hair, Sabra should have smelled terrible, but Arico couldn’t pick up any smell from him at all. Perhaps like any other predator, he took steps to stay unobtrusive until he was attacking.

“And just what do you want with us, Sabra?” Jaas spoke up to him, still inspecting his massive form.

“Sabra is curious.” He shied away from Jaas as she tried to touch his arm, and shuffled back. He could move surprisingly quickly for someone his size. “Those things little man said, about breaking the Sustained. About giving everyone a choice. Did little man mean them?”

“I meant every word, Sabra,” Arico said without hesitation. “I have the means and the will to beat them, but it will take time. Less time, though,” he added casually, “if I had the help of, say, an experienced fighter with a reputation of his own, who’s feared even among the Deathwatchers.”

Sabra only glanced back with those yellow eyes, evaluating them. Then, he slowly withdrew a parchment from a fold in his dirty cloak and showed it to them. Jaas gasped. It was a reward poster, with a pretty good likeness of each of them. Promising ten thousand gold pieces for their capture. Arico actually felt a little flattered. Ten thousand, just for breaking Jaas out of a holding cell?

“Deathwatchers didn’t recognize little man and pretty lady at first, but Sabra did. Little man and pretty lady already causing trouble, eh?”

“You could say that,” Arico admitted. “But really, it’s more for what we know than what we’ve done.”

“Are you here to collect on us?” Jaas asked bluntly. Arico gave her an amused look. Anyone else might take offense at her tone, but Arico got the distinct impression the giant didn’t mind. It was clear he didn’t have many people to talk to, here or in other patches. He probably couldn’t leave this patch anyway—even if he was a navigator, he’d never be accepted in Sustained territory.

The giant stared at them both for a few seconds. “Sabra has very little future here,” he said as if reading Arico’s mind. “Sustained will never Bond the Deathwatch Monster, not even in secret. Most Deathwatchers envy Sabra’s strength. Not that Sabra cares,” he added contemptuously.

He paused again, before slowly extending a hand to Arico. “If little man is willing, Sabra will help. Sabra has grown too big for this cage.”

Arico didn’t know how to respond. He hadn’t expected to bring back any recruits, especially not this early. But that was part of the Hauld’s eventual plan, and if Sabra was asking, who was he to say no? Arico shook his head ruefully, thinking about the Hauld’s reaction. It might be worth bringing Sabra along just to see the look on the old man’s face. Wordlessly he took them both by the hands, one slim and soft, the other gnarled and massive, and led them into the threads.

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Chapter 13

Very early the next morning, Jaas sat down just outside one of the Enclave’s larger wooden halls. It was still dark outside, but the dwarves had lit candles for their human guests in the big building, and were using it as a training hall for some of their soldiers. The light was strong enough for her to read and write, at least.

Jaas had seen a few human deformities during her studies. Usually they were the result of magical experimentation before or during pregnancy, but it was rare that children born from such experiments survived. That kind of trial-and-error life magic was illegal in most nations across the world. The magic of shaping life was known as necromancy, and it had always carried a negative stigma, whether it was warranted or not. She’d never seen anything like this, though. Somehow these changes had come about without any magic at all!

*The subject appears to have dramatically enhanced musculature in the upper body and torso,* she wrote in her informal journal. *Like most giants in the outside world, he has a clear spinal curve, which has either been adjusted to over time or causes him no pain. He appears to have much greater than average leg strength as well. At my request he performed a standing vertical jump that would have carried him straight over my head. It was an impressive display.*

Jaas absentmindedly stroked the tip of her nose with the quill-feather as she thought.

*Human generations take approximately twenty years each. That means the people here have lived this way for at least fifteen generations. Even if the subject did have pureblood giant ancestry, it’s been diluted significantly. He must be some kind of throwback to his heritage. It’s the only explanation that makes sense, given his physical characteristics.*

As she watched, Sabra put the dwarven trainees through their paces. For the wrestling matches, Sabra had wrapped his braid around his neck and out of reach of his short opponents. Pretty soon she’d have to get back to her own training as well, but she didn’t want to miss the chance to see him in action.

She’d only ever seen pictures of giants before, but she’d heard almost apocryphal stories about their strength and agility. Not to mention their rather terrific bouts of rage. So far, Sabra had kept his temper, though that could also be by design.

*I asked Arico how he knows Sabra isn’t actually working for the Sustained Council, and he seemed quite confident that Sabra’s no spy. Apparently the Council would never employ Sabra, not even in secret, because of his appearance. I guess it makes sense that a society founded on purity of blood would have no tolerance for a half-breed giant. I hope that means we can trust him, but at this point only time will tell.*

Jaas paused for a moment, remembering another detail from her brief trip to the Deathwatchers.

*When I first saw Durhu, he had a mark on his left shoulder that looked like a brand. Apparently it’s commonplace in some parts of the city to wear such a mark, but I saw nothing like that among the Deathwatchers. The people living in the Fishbowl don’t have any such marks either, that I could see. I’ll have to ask Arico for more details about it at some point.*

She smiled slightly as she remembered that she hadn’t noticed any such mark on Arico during the shower incident. As she watched, four of the dwarven trainees charged in at the same time and tried to topple Sabra’s giant form. He managed to swat one of them away, knocking him backwards onto the ground, but the other three grabbed him by the legs and began pushing. Grunting with effort, he tried to pry them free as he slowly but surely lost his balance. He was *almost* about to fall over when a shrill whistle cut through the air and the dwarves disengaged instantly.

Otrul, her own personal torturer, trotted through the north entrance and had them stand at attention. He spoke with them briefly and then appraised Sabra for a moment. The twisted giant only looked back down with some amusement. The way Sabra was built, he didn’t seem to fear *anything.*

She couldn’t hear what Otrul said, not at this distance, but he actually smiled at the trainees before heading back up to town. Jaas felt a little jealous at that. He was still training her hard every morning and evening for a few hours each. He was stern and rough with her during combat training, but he never smiled at her. She could sense a certain tension underneath all his military training and civility.

*There appears to be a fair amount of hostility towards humans in this patch, despite the humans who’ve lived in the Fishbowl for years now,* she concluded in writing. *From what Arico has told me, the Sustained and the dwarves in Vasiriah, or Patchwork as they call it, have enjoyed a fragile peace for over a century now. Still, both sides protect their borders fiercely. Dwarves found outside Enclave patches are killed on sight, and with the exception of the people living in the Fishbowl, humans found here aren’t treated much better.*

*If Arico is going to mount a successful rebellion against the Sustained, he may have more problems getting the patches to accept dwarven support than he’s willing to admit.*

For a moment, Jaas realized the gravity of what she was writing. She was writing in Patali, but if the Sustained had any way of reading it, this document might be dangerous to Arico. Reluctantly, she inked over the last two paragraphs and wrote them again in Uatoni script. There. If anyone here could translate *that*, she’d eat the whole parchment.

Jaas felt rather than heard the heavy footfalls approaching. With an audible *thump*, Sabra sat down on the grass next to her. “Pretty lady doesn’t like what she wrote?”

She gave him a questioning look, and he pointed one twisted finger at the part she’d inked out. “Oh. No, I liked it well enough. I just had to write it in a different language.”

Sabra grunted. “Sabra thinks pretty lady wrote about him. Covered it up to hide it, eh?” He gave her a sideways glance. Jaas sat still for a moment. It was unlikely at best that he could read Patali, which meant that he was reading *her*. And doing it pretty well, too. There was more to Sabra than it seemed.

She opened her mouth to respond but he continued before she got the chance. “Sabra thinks the dwarves could be good fighters. Tough, and low to the ground.” He began absently scratching at the ground with a stick. “Sustained guards are used to fighting humans. Same size. Sabra is too tall, and dwarves too short. Ascendants won’t know how to fight us.”

“I’m no expert in war, Sabra, but I think you’re right. Still, there are a lot more of them than there are of us.”

“Us?” Sabra’s lip twitched. “Pretty lady wants to fight too? Maybe cut open a few soldiers, write down what she sees inside?”

She gave him a wry look. “I’m a scholar, not a butcher.” Despite his simplistic language and hulking form, he was easy to talk to. Dimly Jaas remembered lessons she’d been taught as a child about not judging people by their appearances.

Sabra just laughed and shrugged. “Sabra scared the whole Deathwatch patch, all alone. Scares dwarves, too. Numbers mean little.” He paused, still scratching at the ground between his feet. “Fear means a lot more.”

Jaas was about to ask more about that, but her eyes caught on the ground first. “Sabra, what’s that?”

He had drawn a symbol into the ground: a spiral shape that wrapped around itself as it got bigger. It took her a moment to recognize what it was, through the crude drawing. A thorn branch.

Her surprise must have shown because Sabra gave her a curious look. “Pretty lady knows this mark?”

“It’s the mark of Bregos Thorne,” she said quietly. “And of his followers.”

He only shook his head. “Sabra doesn’t know anything about that. It’s just something Sabra saw on a wall, years ago. What does it mean?”

Jaas had to think back to her attainment lessons as a child. “Back before the Threading, Bregos Thorne was a popular minister here in Vasiriah. He spoke out against one of the Emperors—Selvos the Fourth, I think it was. The grandfather of the Emperor who died during the Threading.

“Selvos couldn’t publicly denounce Bregos because he was loved by the common people. He couldn’t risk turning him into a martyr. It’s rumored that the Emperor tried to have him discredited in several ways, with false witnesses and trumped-up charges. As an official punishment for these invented crimes, he had Thorne and his entire family exiled.

“That mark you drew,” she pointed at the ground, “was his mark. It came to be a symbol of freedom and justice, and of opposition to authority.”

“Sabra never knew,” he said quietly, smoothing the dirt out and erasing the mark. Before long though, he shook his head and looked back up. “But Sabra doesn’t care, either. It’s just a mark, and it means nothing.”

Jaas gave him a curious glance. He was looking back at the sparring dwarves again, his eyes following their movements intently. She decided he was trying to avoid the subject. Clearly he knew more about Bregos and his followers (who had come to call themselves Thornes) than he was letting on. Normally confrontation would be one of the last things on her mind, but Jaas had been direct with him back in the Deathwatch patch, and he hadn’t crushed her like a grape in response. “If you tell me where you first saw that Thorne mark, I promise I’ll write more about you.”

Sabra only smirked at that. “Pretty lady has honey-tongue. Sabra likes that, but Sabra knows better.” He wiped sweat from his nose. “Pretty lady only has eyes for little man.”

Little man? Right, that was Sabra’s name for Arico. “No I don’t,” she protested. “We work together, that’s all.” Belatedly, she realized he’d succeeded in changing the subject on her.

Sabra’s disturbing chuckle came back a little louder. “Little man is good man. Sees far ahead. Sabra hopes he can fight like he can talk. Or pretty lady won’t have him around to stare at for much longer.”

Jaas shook her head. Of course he was wrong, but maybe he had other insights to share. “And what else does the ever-observant Sabra have to say about ‘little man’? Does he ‘have eyes’ for anyone?”

“Sabra is sorry. Little man sees everyone at once, not pretty lady alone. Sabra saw only duty and worry in little man’s eyes.” His tone suddenly quieted down. “And Sabra hears little man coming this way right now.”

She heard more footsteps from behind them, and a hand brushed against Jaas’ shoulder. “There’s something you need to see,” Arico told her with a strange tone in his voice.

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Jaas recognized Tellek patch almost immediately on arrival. They weren’t far away from where Arico had lain not too long ago, bleeding and dying on the grass. She couldn’t tell it from looking at his face though. There was no anger or even pain. It was as if it had never happened.

Except for the bloodstains on the grass, of course. Suddenly she realized that without rain here in Patchwork, evidence of violent crimes was probably much harder to cover up. Arico silently led the way to his old home, abandoned now for about a week. Once inside, he peered out the window intently. Obviously waiting for something or someone.

Sure enough, before long they could see people gathering in the village downhill. All of them were dressed in white, and they surrounded a large cart with cattle yoked to it. If anyone was speaking, it was far too quiet to hear at this distance. As one, it seemed the entire town began moving uphill towards the threads near where they’d arrived. Or rather towards the corner where two threads would meet.

Suddenly she was aware that Arico wasn’t at her side. He was rifling through drawers, looking for clothes. “You’re about the same height as Durhu.” He tossed a white cloak to her. “Put that on. We need to go with them.”

Jaas complied, and could see him doing the same with a slightly longer cloak and hood. Come to think of it, she hadn’t seen Durhu since before her trip to the Deathwatchers. He was definitely around here somewhere, though. Chanul had mentioned that Durhu and Arico shared a house in the Fishbowl, but that they were almost never there. Between the Fishbowl, this cabin, and their little Hideaway, it was really no wonder.

They exited the cabin together and quietly joined with the crowd, as they kept moving towards where two of the threads would meet. Uphill, as she realized. The crowd seemed to be following a sort of aqueduct system that climbed the gentle slope away from the village. There was a familiar-looking tower at the tallest point of the village, right at the south end. It took Jaas a moment to recognize it: it was virtually identical to the strange wooden tower she’d seen just after arriving in the city. Whatever it was for, the aqueduct line went right through it before branching out into many smaller aqueducts. The stone rows passed right by nearly every house before spreading out into the farmland that covered most of the patch.

Jaas had seen similar infrastructure in the dwarven patches, but it hadn’t been nearly so elaborate. Obviously this had been a major undertaking. She wondered if other patches were set up the same way.

Also upon closer inspection, she could see that most of the people in the crowd didn’t look well. There were tell-tale signs of illness and malnutrition. From skin stretched tight over peoples’ bones, to sunken facial features, to the occasional coughing fit. Jaas tried to keep her face hidden as she observed the others. In a village this small, she’d be recognized pretty easily as being an outsider.

Jaas allowed herself a brief moment of doubt. What was Arico thinking, bringing her along? It was a significant risk, with no reward she could discern. At least it was still mostly dark out. The sky in the east had just started to get lighter, so she had that much helping her stay hidden.

Before long the crowd came to a stop along with the cart. It was loaded—overloaded, really—with food. Jaas was no farmer, but she could identify mostly greens—lettuce, beans, peas, por’hesh peppers, and a few bags of peanuts. More cattle and goats were being led behind the cart as well. And still more carts were also approaching from the village: all of them full to the brim with crops. It must have taken them months to grow and harvest it all. They seemed to have plenty of food. Why were they apparently on the edge of starvation?

At the corner of the threads, built right up against both sides, was a small brick building with one closed door. Everyone waited in silence for a few moments, keeping a respectful distance from the threads. Despite that Jaas could see two young men, perhaps in their teens, eyeing Arico. He gave them a brief nod and they looked back at the brick structure, whispering to each other. An older woman standing behind them put her hands on their shoulders, quieting them. It was Endu, the healer who had put needle and thread to Arico’s side.

There was another figure in a white cloak who gave them a curious glance as well. A woman by her build, but a very short one: dwarf-short in fact. Jaas was careful to keep her face hidden just to be safe.

That made no sense. From what Jaas had heard back in the Enclave, dwarves were killed on sight if they were found outside their own territory. And while these people did seem uncomfortable with this woman, they at least tolerated her. She stayed on the periphery of the group, but kept quiet just like everyone else.

Jaas could hear the crowd parting behind her. She and Arico followed their example, bowing their heads like the rest, as another figure in white hobbled his way uphill. Unlike everyone else this man wore no hood, and his clothes were highlighted with blue tones on the seams. He was walking with a cane, occasionally supported by a younger man wearing leather armor and one of those strange metal clubs on his belt.

The elderly man (she assumed he was this patch’s magistrate) moved up to the threads before turning around to face the crowd. His leather-clad guard stepped back a respectful distance and bowed his head.

Jaas had learned that the magistrate in each patch was a Sustained, put there to relay news from the other patches, preach to the people in his patch every week, and settle minor disputes. He was also the only person in most patches who knew how to read and write. Yet another skill that was denied these people.

From what Durhu had told her, a magistrate position was a lifetime appointment: something of a dubious honor for any Sustained unfortunate enough to merit it. As such, the magistrate was almost never a navigator. His guard was supposed to be one, though, in case he ever needed to call for help. Apparently the Sustained had originally posted navigators in every patch not under their direct control, but had eventually decided it was not worth it to tie up over four hundred navigators with keeping track of the peasants they cared so little about. As a result this guard was almost certainly not a navigator either.

Almost as if summoned by her thoughts, a navigator suddenly stepped out of the threads to the left of the red brick building. Jaas opened her mouth in surprise. It was Alzhi!

He was wearing red and gold, like his earlier Sustained outfit. Instead of a wheel insignia on his chest, though, this time he wore a fish with golden scales. It seemed that the Sustained Houses used their navigators and guards interchangeably. Or perhaps the Lord Ascendant decided who went where.

Another man followed Alzhi, holding his hand, and more followed. They were five in all, before they let go of each other’s hands. Everyone but him wore white just like the villagers, but with blue undertones on their cloaks and insignia matching the magistrate’s robes. The last newcomer was just a little girl, only a few years old. She wore pure white and looked terrified, still gripping the hand of the priest next to her.

“Tellek’s penet, and his acolytes,” Arico identified them with a whisper, and Jaas nodded. She wondered what the girl’s role was, though.

One of the priests (the penet, she supposed) shared a nod with the magistrate before he stepped out in front of the crowd. “Blessings of Aquun be upon you,” he said in a loud but somber tone. “Be this day rewarded for the faith and service you do unto the Guardian Spirit. Be this day uplifted by the sacred bond you share. And be this day sanctified by prayer and devotion to Her. Let us pray.”

Simultaneously, Arico and everyone else all lowered their heads and began speaking. Jaas hastily followed their example. “Aquun’s grace is within us,” they all said together. “Aquun’s might protects us. Aquun’s wisdom inspires us. Glory be to the Guardian Spirit.”

Almost before the prayer was complete, two of the villagers were already unhitching the first cart, and then pushing it up towards the thread. Once it was at the edge, they hastily backed away and returned to the crowd. With a bored expression on his face, Alzhi stepped close to the cart and extended his head and left arm into the threads. From her perspective they just disappeared, as if he was now just a headless man with a stump for an arm.

Jaas suspected he was looking for the other side—some exit point at some other barrier within Sustained territory. Sure enough before long he pulled his head back out and looked to the cart, but he kept his arm inside. With his other hand, Alzhi began touching the food objects one at a time. Each one vanished as soon as he touched it: a wrapped bundle of celery here, a bag of green beans there. Soon the entire cart was empty and the villagers were removing it, replacing it with the next one.

This must be ‘tribute’ that Tellek patch offered to the Sustained. The Deathwatchers sold their fighters, and this patch gave crops instead. Each offered what it had in exchange for what it needed. It made sense in theory, but not if people were starving! How much of their harvest did these people have to give? And how often?

Jaas glanced over at Arico, and could see the bitterness in his expression. He was a believer in this ‘Aquun’—Jaas could tell that much from their interactions, but Arico was definitely unhappy with this taxation. He’d been raised with these people. It explained a lot about why he was willing to risk so much for them. They were being exploited in a cruel and calculated way, and he saw it clearly.

Once all of the carts had been emptied and hauled away, and the livestock had been transported through the threads as well, Alzhi moved over to the aqueduct line. Once again he extended his head inside for a few seconds, looking for another exit point. When he’d found it, he reached down to where the stone met the threads and water began gushing out from where his hand touched them.

It was a lot of water, too, sloshing its way loudly and chaotically downhill towards the village. The aqueduct itself seemed to have been designed to take in a lot of water at once, especially here at the top of the hill. Jaas imagined the river’s water level lowering slightly, wherever Alzhi’s other hand was. Some of the villagers even knelt by the aqueduct to get a drink immediately, not waiting for later. They must have been parched as well. But then, rain never fell here. That meant they had to irrigate their crops themselves. No wonder they had such an extensive aqueduct system!

Once the flow of water reached the village, it stopped. At first, Jaas thought there was some kind of blockage in the aqueduct itself, but no one seemed all that concerned. Then she realized the water was pouring into the strange building she’d seen earlier. Apparently it was some kind of reservoir, which made sense. She assumed this ritual didn’t take place too often: perhaps once every two or three months. If that was true, they’d need to store a lot of water at once. After a few minutes the building seemed to fill up completely and the water continued on into the village and towards the fields.

It seemed that navigators, once they were connected to two different points in two different patches, could transfer matter from one point to the other with just a thought. There seemed to be limits to how much they could transport, though. Jaas thought back to the lesson Arico had given her outside the Hideaway. Alzhi could only move a certain volume through the threads at a time, based on how strong a navigator he was. Weight apparently wasn’t a factor, because water was very heavy, and he was basically a massive hose at the moment.

That meant the magic of the threads must be conductive, from touch. Just as a spark jumping from a carpet to a hand, or lightning passing between clouds. Jaas again wished she had ink and parchment to take all of this down while it was still fresh in her mind.

She shivered at the implications. Such power was virtually unassailable within Patchwork. And having a monopoly on navigators meant that the Sustained were practically invincible. If any patch rebelled against them, the Sustained Council could merely deny them water, and before long they would all be dead. Arico and the dwarves must have come up with one hell of a plan, to think they could overthrow *that*.

Alzhi eventually moved away from the threads, ending the torrent of water downhill. For some reason the crowd didn’t leave, though. They all moved back into position in front of the penet, and stayed quiet. Jaas was careful to move with them, following Arico’s example.

Another of the blue and white-robed priests, the one holding the little girl’s hand, stepped forward and began speaking. “On this day we commit a daughter of Aquun, Pelo, to her new home. May her new family protect her from the Shemra’s many voices, and give her the love and compassion she will need to rise into Aquun’s eternal grace.”

He looked down at the crowd. “Who stands before us with open arms and love in their hearts?”

Two of the crowd stepped forward: a man and a woman. “Grent and Yela,” the man said solemnly. “We stand in willingness.” The priest looked back at Alzhi and nodded. Belatedly, Jaas noticed that Alzhi had his arm inside the threads again. Arico gripped her hand briefly in warning.

Suddenly Alzhi pulled a red-hot branding iron out of the threads and pressed its end against the girl’s left shoulder. She shrieked in pain, almost covering the sound of sizzling flesh, and Jaas gasped. She started forward, but Arico tightened his grip on her arm and held her back. “You can’t help her!” He whispered harshly into her ear. A few others had made noises as well, throughout the crowd, but no one moved to stop it.

The girl was still screaming and struggled for a few seconds, held in place by the priest. By now the crowd stood perfectly still, unmoving. From their faces, some of them could have been watching the grass grow!

By the time Alzhi pulled the iron away, there was an ugly black-and-red welt on the girl’s skin. She kept screaming after it was gone, before suddenly going limp in the priest’s arms. For a moment Jaas thought she was dead, but could faintly hear the child’s ragged breathing.

“Accept into your hearts this child and be blessed in turn,” the priest concluded his speech, and placed the child in Yela’s arms. As one all the priests joined hands again and Alzhi reached back into the threads, disappearing along with them.

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Chapter 14

Arico stood in Endu’s house, looking down as she bandaged the girl’s shoulder with herbs that could lessen the pain. Jaas stood next to him, visibly trembling. Whether from fear or rage he couldn’t really tell. He doubted she could, either.

They were on the second floor—out of sight of the villagers outside. For once Arico was grateful that Endu had inherited such a large house from her father. It made hiding Jaas that much easier. The boys knew that she was here too, so they were staying clear of the second floor. They didn’t know much about Jaas, but they were smart enough to keep her presence a secret.

“How could he *do* that?” She whispered viciously. “He’s a monster!”

“Alzhi was following orders,” Arico responded in an undertone. “If he’d refused, they would have just sent another navigator to do it.”

“And that makes it right? He mutilated that poor girl!” Jaas had apparently forgotten her calm, scholarly way of doing things. Despite the situation Arico felt the urge to smile. For all her training and experience, it seemed Jaas was just a human being after all.

“It was necessary for her to start her new life here. That brand marks her as a member of Tellek patch, now and forever. Everyone here carries one, and most other patches have their own mark as well.”

“You don’t,” she accused. “Neither does Durhu! What, did your dwarven friends pull some strings to spare you that?”

Arico grimaced and pulled her back away from the railing. “Shh! Careful what you say!” He looked around hurriedly. Grent and Yela were still looking through the window at Endu and Pelo, waiting to take their new daughter home.

They seemed to be out of earshot for now, though. “I can trust Endu and her sons,” he explained as they sat down and waited for Endu to be done, “but there’s no telling how anyone else would react. For both our sakes, please be careful.”

She still looked angry, but took a deep breath and nodded. “All right. But I still don’t understand *why* he did it. Why brand that little girl? Why is she even here in the first place? Is she being punished for something? What could any child have possibly done to deserve *that*?”

“No, it’s not anything she did. As I said, everyone here carries that mark.” Arico tried to streamline his explanation; he knew that she appreciated clarity. “Every child in Patchwork is tested at age three. I was too, in dwarven territory. Their names are put on the Registry, and the stra’tchi children are branded and given to new parents in another patch entirely. They’re also given new names by their new parents, in the hopes that they’ll accept the transition more easily. The patch is chosen at random, except for the particularly strong children. They’re sent to the Deathwatch patch to train as fighters.”

Jaas’ face contorted briefly. She was still obviously upset at what she’d seen back in the Deathwatch patch, and now Arico had piled this new batch of atrocities on her. Unfortunately, there was still more to come.

“What gives them the right, though? How do they justify separating children from their parents, just because of some line on a map? And why move the children at all? Is it some kind of sick dominance display by the Sustained? As if these people don’t already know they’re at the mercy of whoever has the water?”

Arico shook his head. “I know it looks horrible, but there is a method to this madness. It’s far more complicated than you know. I’ll explain it all, but it will take some time.”

He sighed and gestured to a seat near the window, as he sat down himself. Her face was still twisted with disbelief and anger, but Jaas reluctantly sat across from him. “All right. Explain it to me. Tell me how this-” she pointed a finger downstairs, “became what is *normal*!”

Arico ran his hands through his hair, trying to arrange his thoughts. “Of course it all started with the Threading itself. It’s basically Year Zero for us. Before this city was cut off from the rest of the world, there were almost a million people living here. There were vast tracts of farmland outside the city on both sides of the Waters, and fishermen would cart huge numbers of fish from the docks up into the city every day. The old Emperors kept several underground chambers filled with food as well, in case of a siege. When the threads appeared though, everything changed.

“There are no records of exactly what happened here in Tellek patch. No surprise there—the Council made it illegal for stra’tchi to know how to read or write. But the dwarves kept their own records, and so did some of the earliest navigators. The truth survived, in one form or another.”

Arico glanced out the window at the sky beyond the wall. “When the threads first appeared, they were pitch-black. A featureless obsidian wall that killed anyone who tried to pass through it. I told you that no one knows exactly why they became invisible, or why the image is updated every three months like clockwork. But at first, it was a dark nightmare for everyone who lived here. It’s really something of a miracle anyone survived at all, but before long the first navigators realized they could see the threads when their eyes were closed. When they found out they could move through the threads safely, and even take people with them, at least there was some hope for once. But even so, no one could leave the city. The threads on the outside of the city were still impenetrable to everyone, just as they are today.

“It didn’t take long for the survivors to realize they were in trouble. Thanks to the navigators, they could make sure everyone had drinking water, but food would be a problem. Not every plant needs light to grow, so it would still be possible to plant a crop (though they had no way of knowing how effective that would be). But they had to clear flagstones and rocks away first, and then find seeds to plant. Even with the emergency food stores, the navigators knew the entire city would starve long before the first crops could be harvested. So about a hundred of them banded together, armed themselves, and… solved the problem.” He stopped there, waiting for her to absorb it all.

“Solved it?” She responded after a few moments, and then the puzzlement in her face was replaced with horror. “You mean they killed them??”

“Yes,” he said softly. “They moved as one into each patch, killed everyone there, and then moved on. The victims never even had a chance. There was nowhere they could run, even if they did somehow find out about the attack before it came. After the third or fourth slaughter, the navigators were getting pretty good at it, too. Some of the histories mention them bragging about being able to kill silently and near-instantly. And all the histories agree that they viewed their work as a mercy to people that they couldn’t save. There’s no record of exactly how many they killed, but it was in the tens of thousands. The rest either died of thirst or starved before they could be put down.

“As fate would have it, the threads became transparent just as they were finishing up,” Arico continued, partly so she wouldn’t have to say anything. Her face had gone a slightly ashen color, and he was glad there was a bucket nearby just in case. “Pretty much everyone who was still alive took that as a sign, not just that the navigators had done the right thing, but that they were the natural rulers of the city, blessed with wisdom as well as magical powers. It was those navigators who then founded the first Council.”

They were silent for a long time, listening to the sounds below. The girl had woken up, and started crying again, despite the pain-deadening herbs Endu had wrapped around her shoulder. Her new parents were tending to her, trying courageously to get her mind off of the brand.

“You almost sound like you agree with those first navigators, Arico,” Jaas finally said with an undertone. “Like you even admire them for what they did.”

Arico couldn’t answer that, partially because he wasn’t even sure himself. “Have you ever known hardship, Jaas? Have you ever been seriously injured—felt the sting of a wound so deep you know you won’t recover on your own, but also known that there is no one who could help you? Endu wasn’t always a world-class healer, you know.

“What about disease? Have you ever seen people you know and love—people you’ve known since childhood—coughing up blood, and known for certain that many of them simply won’t recover? Or worse yet, hunger and thirst. When your lips are cracked and bleeding from the very air, and your throat is so dry you can barely swallow. You know you need the Waters, but you can’t risk drinking more than perhaps a mouthful a day, for fear of running out before you can get more. You feel the slow burn of hunger, twisting your gut every day, getting worse and worse, despite rationing what food you have. Peoples’ eyes get sunken, if they go without food for a long time. Their skin becomes thin and stretches over their bones, and their bellies, strangely, can even swell outward.”

He looked at her sadly. “Worst of all is the effect on children. Even if they survive to when food is plentiful again, good luck getting one of them to smile, let alone laugh. They’re… dampened. Muted, from the experience. Sometimes permanently. I’d rather die myself, on the end of a sword, than just fade away like that.”

Jaas didn’t seem to have any response to that.

“If that makes me a monster, then so be it,” he concluded. “At least the original navigators were able to make the hard call. The Deathwatchers feel the same way, even to this day. If their children aren’t strong enough to stay and learn to fight, they just kill them. It’s horrible, I know.”

He just sat there for long moments, staring down at the floor. “I can’t say that what those first navigators did was right or not. I wasn’t alive back then—I didn’t see what they saw. I just hope I never have to make a decision like that—that I’ll never need to choose who lives and who dies.”

“I’m sorry,” Jaas said, looking down. “I didn’t mean to imply anything like that. And it’s true that I don’t know what you’ve been through. All my needs have been provided for, since before I was even born! I don’t think you’re a monster, even if you do agree with what they did.”

“It’s easy to do nothing,” Arico recited, remembering what Durhu had told him years ago. “That’s why no one tried to stop them. There’s bravery in taking action, even if it’s the wrong action. And those navigators were brave in another way, too. They let their names go into the histories. Right or wrong, they *wanted* people to know what they’d done, and why.”

Down below, Grent and Yela were leaving with their new daughter. Endu bid them farewell, along with some parting instructions, and closed the door.

“Hang on,” Jaas looked back at Arico. “You’re the Hauld’s Golden Boy. You’re important to his plans—whatever they are. And I know dwarves: when they make an investment, they *protect* that investment! Why would he risk you starving?”

Arico gave her a tight smile. As usual, her mind was working double-time, coming to conclusions in minutes that others might take days or weeks to reach. “I didn’t give him a choice, that’s why. When he found out about the shortage, he tried to intervene. He had food smuggled in at night so no one would know. He even made sure it was the same kind of food we grow here. I just didn’t eat it, and neither did Durhu.”

“Why not, though? If he was trying to help you-”

“I don’t fault the Hauld’s intentions,” Arico cut her off, “but he’s not from Tellek patch. If I had eaten that food, I would have been benefiting from who I am. From who the Hauld wanted me to be. I’m not one of these people either, but the very least I can do is try to understand them. To suffer when they suffer, so I can represent them when the time comes.”

Arico bit down on his tongue and grimaced again. Everything he’d said was true, but he’d said a bit too much. Thankfully Jaas seemed more interested in the details than in his accidental admission about the Hauld’s plans for the future. “So you shared the food with the rest of the patch?”

Arico nodded. “It had to be in secret, though. Endu, the boys and I carefully snuck around the village and spread it out to as many people as possible.” At her surprised look, he smiled. “No one noticed, or no one *claimed* to notice anyway. You don’t question good fortune, not if it’s keeping you alive.”

“You really do love these people, don’t you?”

Arico paused. He’d never really thought about it. “There are a hundred and twenty-two people living here. I know all their names. I know where they live, and with whom. I know when they were brought here. I know who’s outspoken and who’s timid. Only Endu and the boys know that I’m a navigator, but yes, everyone here is important to me.”

He stood slowly and arched his back to stretch a little. “Come on. We have to get back to the cabin before nightfall. Remember to keep your cloak up. This is a small town, and we can’t have anyone seeing you’re not from around here.”

On the way back, Jaas caught sight of the factory building near the middle of the village, and asked about it. It was kind of hard to miss, but then she hadn’t really had a chance to see the whole patch before today—not in daylight anyway.

Arico explained that it was used only during Tumults, when the demand for weapons and armor was actually greater than the demand for food. Most patches in the city had them, even those that were too remote to be in danger from the Tumults. During war, everyone had to do their part, even if the war was pointless and ridiculous. The word ‘factory’ was foreign to her, and she kept on calling it a smithy. Which was what a factory really was, he supposed: just a much larger version of a smithy. Apparently there were no assembly lines in the Outside.

They had been talking most of the day at Endu’s place, and it was fully dark by the time they got back to the cabin. Arico started the fire in the fireplace and used it to light a few candles around the common room he shared with Durhu. He was careful to keep the shutters closed, though. People in Tellek patch weren’t really known for snooping on each other, but it was better safe than sorry.

Jaas unrolled the parchment she’d been working on since that first conversation in the Hideaway. Only a small part of it had writing on it, but that in itself was deceptive. Her writing was so small that she could cram entire paragraphs into small sections of paper. As usual, she immediately got out his old quill and began summarizing everything she’d learned at the Ritual and afterwards.

Arico could only marvel at her diligence. He knew how to write of course—that much the Hauld had insisted on—and Durhu had taught him a good deal about how the city worked, especially when it came to history. But to write down everything she learned must be exhausting. In her place, Arico doubted he would remember even a fraction of all that. But then, he might be in her place soon enough. With her help, he might be able to leave the city before long, and then there would be an entire *world* to experience!

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Eventually, Jaas looked up from her parchment. Her voice was more controlled now. It seemed writing was also a calming exercise for her. “So this Ritual of Rejoining we just saw: moving children to a different patch and branding them like cattle. That’s some kind of… population control?”

Arico thought about it. “I suppose that is the main reason for the Rejoining. I mean if you conceived a child, gave birth, and then three years later had to watch that child be taken away…” He paused. “How likely would you be to have another child after that? The alternative is much worse. I’d rather have the Ritual of Rejoining than another series of purges like the original navigators did. At least this way no one dies.”

She thought about it for a moment, before nodding slowly.

“There are other reasons for the Rejoining, though,” he continued. “Most patches only have a hundred or so people. Moving the children around keeps family lines apart. But it’s only done here in stra’tchi patches. The Sustained have no Ritual of Rejoining. They can go wherever they please because they have enough navigators to move around freely.”

Jaas put down the quill and gazed at the fire for a few moments. “So it’s also to avoid inbreeding. I guess that makes sense, in a barbaric kind of way. I’ve heard you use that word, stra’tchi, before, but I don’t know what it means. It sounds like Patali, but the language has changed here. Is it people of the fields?”

Arico sighed. “It actually means ‘dirty people’. It was something of a cruel joke at first, played by the Sustained Council and other top officials who could speak Patali. They knew what it really meant, but to everyone out here, it was just a name for who they are. By now every Sustained knows that it’s actually an insult.”

“Wow. I’ve heard some nasty pejorative names before, but ‘dirty people’ is a pretty low blow. I suppose they call them that because they don’t have enough water to shower and bathe regularly?”

Arico nodded again. “But after all this time, it runs even deeper than that. ‘Dirty people’ means dirty on the inside as well. As if they could never be anything more than that. I think that’s part of why it’s so easy for the Sustained to treat them like animals. If you can think of someone as less than human, you can treat them that way.” He couldn’t quite filter out the bitterness from his voice while saying that. Even though he technically wasn’t a stra’tchi, he still felt like one. He had been raised in a stra’tchi patch, surrounded by stra’tchi friends. It was how he thought of himself, to this very day, even if he didn’t have a brand to prove it.

“So who decides where newcomers end up?” Jaas changed the subject, looking down at the parchment again. “Did the magistrate say that Grent and Yela should have first pick?”

Arico tried to follow her handwriting as she wrote. “Their own son turned three last week. He was tested and taken away. That means they had priority on the next child delivered here, if they wanted. If they didn’t, there are others who would have taken her in. From what Alzhi’s told me, the Sustained find it’s easier to place children with families who have just had a child taken away.”

“But how can people live like this? Doesn’t anyone try to hide their children? To keep them at home?”

He shrugged uncomfortably. “People have tried. Every once in a while, a patch is found to be hiding unregistered children and the entire patch is punished. The child and parents are killed, and one in ten of the rest are killed at random. The Rite of Decimation, it’s called. It hasn’t happened in decades, though. Most people force parents to go through with it now, for fear of their own safety.”

Jaas gaped at him. “And that would happen here, if you were found out? Are you registered?”

“I am. Tellek patch is safe. Before we moved here, Durhu added both our names to the Registry in Penntu patch. He forged himself a Transit Pass, and we moved here over twenty years ago. I barely remember, but it was very different than the dwarven patches I was used to. It took some time for me to adjust.”

She gave him a curious look. “If Durhu’s not a navigator, how did he manage to alter the Sustained records? Did the dwarves help with that, too?”

Arico smiled. “Actually I was the one who brought him to Penntu patch. I was very young but he knew exactly where to go, so he drew a picture of the patch for me so I could find it. My first mission against the Sustained, at age three, and it was a complete success. I don’t even remember doing it!”

He waved a hand back in the direction of the village. “Anyway, this is how people have lived for hundreds of years now,” he continued in a grim voice. “The people have come to trust that the Sustained and the penets know what’s best for them. It’s become… tradition by now. I’m sure you know how hard it can be to break a tradition. And if you lived here, can you honestly say that you wouldn’t want to care for that girl? After seeing what was done to her back there?”

Jaas set her jaw, but he could tell it was only a reflexive motion. Eventually, she shook her head. “I see your point.”

Briefly, Arico felt a surge of shame. He’d never been branded like that. It was important for his mission that he be able to attach whatever brand he needed to his arm, hence his bag full of fake brands. Still, he wasn’t one of these people and never would be. He didn’t know that pain. How could he lead anyone from these patches if he’d never experienced that pain?

“After those first navigators slaughtered so many people and the Sustained took over the city, the Registry was all they needed to keep people in line.” He spoke mostly to fill the silence, but it was partially for his own benefit as well. “There were a lot of empty patches back then, and the Sustained began relocating people to them. Eventually though, there were too many of us for the Sustained to track. That’s when they started branding people.”

“But there was more to it, wasn’t there?” Jaas said slowly. “The Sustained wanted to control population growth, and prevent inbreeding in these… stra’tchi patches, but why create a whole ritual around it if it’s just a matter of control? What else were they after?”

Arico chuckled. As usual, Jaas was a few steps ahead when it came to understanding this society. “Well, there was… one other reason. It’s not relevant anymore, but people have long memories when it comes to sickness. Just after the Threading happened, a lot of people who weren’t being systematically killed off or left to die of thirst, just ended up dying of disease all on their own. The worst disease that made it into the histories was called the Blood Plague, or the Blood Fever, because it caused its victims’ blood to heat up, and come out of their eyes, noses, mouths and ears. Even their fingernails in some cases.”

He shook his head. It was another thing he would never truly understand about his own past, because he hadn’t lived through it. “No one knows even to this day which was deadlier: the purges just after the Threading or the Blood Fever itself. The Sustained forbade anyone from going to a diseased patch, for fear they would spread the Plague even further. And now, even though the Fever has been gone for centuries, the Council still uses it as an excuse to move children around. Most of the children are just shuffled off to some random patch and given to random families. Any child who can see the threads though… is taken to Sustained territory and raised by one of their families as a navigator. That’s how they maintain control.”

“And how they hide it from the people,” she reasoned aloud. “If no one can check on how their children are being raised, no one can protest. I guess it makes sense, in a sick kind of way.”

Shaking her head, Jaas finally returned to her earlier line of questions. “So, if you were to have a child with one of these women, you’d only have three years with him before they took him to another patch and branded him? And if he turned out to be a navigator, he wouldn’t even end up in a stra’tchi patch?”

Arico nodded again, but then shrugged. “Well, that’s what *would* happen. For me, it’ll never be an issue.”

“Why is that?”

Arico hesitated, looking away for a moment. This was challenging for him to even think about, much less say. Not even Durhu knew the whole story, and Arico was sure that if he told Jaas, she’d press him for every detail. Perhaps that was a good thing, though. Maybe he’d kept it under wraps for long enough.

He took a deep breath. “I… I don’t believe I can father children.”

Jaas lifted the quill again, and looked up at him. Her expression was one of curiosity mixed with sympathy. Too late he remembered her reaction to the shared shower. Perhaps this was also too intimate for her. It was too late to back out now, though.

“I take it you’ve tried?” She asked matter-of-factly. There was no hesitation at all, just a tone of businesslike curiosity in her voice.

Arico felt a little uncomfortable with his decision, but he pushed the feeling to the back of his mind. “I was with a Sustained lady for almost a year, about…” He paused again, “fifteen years ago, now? I think it’s been that long. It got pretty serious actually, before it fell apart.”

“What happened?”

He gave her a searching look, but her expression hadn’t changed. She still looked curious, but open. He couldn’t detect any artifice or deception in her voice or expression.

Arico tried to compose the story in his mind. “I guess it was my version of teenage rebellion. I’d been training with the Hauld’s soldiers, and learning history and politics from Durhu my whole life. When I started moving around the city freely, it was terrifying at first. I’d been told about the dangers. About what would happen if the Sustained ever found out where I was from. After a few trips though, I started to enjoy being around them. Life near the Waters was *so completely* different from everything I’d known! Because they could come and go so freely, there was a community in Sustained territory that I’d never even imagined. It was tempting to stay.

“Eventually I convinced myself that my responsibilities to the Hauld were foolish, and that I should just do what I wanted.” He looked down sheepishly. “Of course I made that decision right *after* I met Nouma. I know, big surprise there.”

Jaas grinned. “You fell in love with her?”

“Head over heels. She was all I could think about, day in and day out! It was crazy, to be so out of control, but I just couldn’t bring myself to care. I turned my back on all of my responsibilities, on Durhu, on the Hauld, on the city itself, just so that I could be with her.”

He sighed and looked down at his feet. “When I think back on what I felt, and what I did, it scares me. I came within a hair’s breadth of losing everything I was! When I finally came to my senses, the Hauld was understandably furious with me. Durhu never judged me, though. Unconditional love and all that.”

“She sounds like a pretty special woman.” Jaas said quietly as her hand started moving over the parchment again. Arico thought he’d heard a touch of jealousy in her voice, but quickly admonished himself. And he claimed the *Council* was arrogant!

“I certainly thought so at the time,” he admitted, trying to clear his head. “I told you about the fake identity I used while in Sustained patches, right? A merchant named Timot Brower? Well that’s how I introduced myself to her. Before long I was so taken with her that I almost convinced myself I could *be* Timot Brower, for her. I told her that my ‘father’ had disowned me for refusing to marry some heiress or other, and she said she was in love with me too. It worked great, for a while. I didn’t have a job, so I spent my time repairing her family’s manor. It was pretty old, so it took me a while.”

“Didn’t she have other suitors, though? I mean a Sustained lady like the one you’re describing probably had men knocking on her door day and night. Either that, or an arrangement set up by her family, if I understand Sustained society correctly.”

“Well, that’s part of what made Nouma so special.” Arico’s mind wandered back to that time; living with Nouma in her house. “She’s an only child, and her parents left her a sizable fortune when they died. Under the law, her family’s wealth would go to one of her male cousins, but she found a way around that. She convinced the arbiter to rule her independent, somehow, and kept control of most of her parents’ money. It’s exceedingly rare to find an unmarried Sustained noblewoman, but she pulled it off. That meant she could see any suitors she wanted to, and didn’t have to marry anyone if she didn’t. For some reason, she chose me.”

“But that’s when things went wrong?”

“Very, very wrong,” Arico grabbed the poker next to the fire and moved a log closer to the middle of the flames. “She was a victim of her own good nature. She tried to contact my ‘father’, Quintos, to mend our relationship. When she found out that my supposed home was nothing but an empty warehouse, she confronted me.”

“That’s when you told her the truth?”

Arico spread his hands helplessly. “I couldn’t! If I’d been lying to her about me alone, it might have been possible. But it wasn’t just about me. It was about the dwarves, and the Sustained, and the stra’tchi everywhere. To tell her the truth would have put her in terrible danger, and I couldn’t do that to her either.”

He poked at the fire again, as if reviving the dying embers could somehow fix his past as well. “In the end I just lied again. I told her that I had a woman just like her in each of a dozen other patches all over the city. It cut her deep, but it worked. She broke things off, and we haven’t spoken since.”

“That’s terrible! Do you know what happened to her?”

Arico searched her face for any signs of deception. Jaas was being remarkably understanding with this whole story—more understanding than he suspected most people would be. Come to think of it, she wasn’t writing any of this down anymore, either. “I did look her up eventually. Nouma ended up marrying some minor functionary in House Hooper. They have a child of their own, now.”

He was uncomfortably aware of what Chanul might say about just how often he’d looked her up. “I’m grateful she was able to move on with her life,” he concluded. “Almost as grateful as I am to the Hauld for eventually letting me back into the fold.”

They sat in silence for a while longer, as Arico mulled his ‘confession’ over and over in his mind. Nouma was undoubtedly better off now, as was Arico himself. Living a lie like that had been exciting, but it could hardly last. She was living the family life she wanted now.

Once, Arico’s only wish had been to help the movement succeed so that he could live a quiet life as well, perhaps back here on his father’s farm. Now that Jaas had arrived, Arico could dream bigger than that. Bigger than this one city, and this little life. Perhaps as big as the world itself!

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Chapter 15

Night had fallen on Tellek patch. Crickets chirped a little chorus of their own, and the moon rose high and bright over the city wall. Jaas barely remembered that the distant sky was just an illusion. The real moon could be anywhere, but this one had its own sort of beauty.

Pretty soon Arico would be leaving—he’d mentioned some kind of mission with Sabra, and it was no doubt a risky one if he was bringing the giant along. Jaas wondered just how many times her friends would end up risking their lives before this was all over.

Friends. Arico had been very forthcoming about his past, but now that she had a chance to think about it, it made sense. He certainly couldn’t talk to the Hauld or any of the dwarves about falling in love with a Sustained lady. Alzhi and Endu were probably the same story, and the Fishbowlers had left to *escape* the Sustained. Sabra was very new to the group, and given his coarse humor, might just mock him. That left her.

Trying not to think about that, she unfurled the parchment containing most of her notes on the kitchen table. They’d gotten a bit mixed up since she’d last put pen to paper. She resolved to rearrange everything, possibly in chronological order for once, whenever they finally took her back to the Fishbowl. Not that she was complaining at this vacation, though. Otrul couldn’t force her into those ungodly morning runs if she wasn’t there to be forced.

At her insistence, Arico sat down at the table. “Are you sure you want me to do this? I’ve never been very good at writing, and I have to get going soon.”

Jaas put the quill in his hand. “Trust me, this won’t take long. The Imbued will definitely want a description from someone who actually *lives* here in the city. And they’ll want more information on the threads as well. You’re perfect for this job.”

Arico sighed. “If they can read my writing, that is. Regardless, it’s your mistake to make.” He dipped the quill in the inkwell, and then got to it. Jaas read over his shoulder.

*I am Arico, of Tellek patch here in Patchwork. I’m a navigator, and Jaas has asked me to describe what that’s like to you. Whoever you are.*

Jaas gave him a wry look. His handwriting wasn’t as bad as he claimed, but he could do with a little less attitude. “Go on. Explain how it works.”

Arico was hesitant at first, but warmed up to the task pretty quickly. *Navigators have the ability to move through the threads separating the city as if they’re not there. What would kill anyone else has no effect on us. With training, we can even… the word Jaas used was ‘teleport’… to other places in the city. We can bring other people along, as long as we’re touching their skin at all times.*

*As for objects, each navigator can move things, too. This is what Jaas wants me to explain. Each of us has a bubble of sorts around our body. No one can see it, not even us, but it’s there. With training, navigators can learn to expand that bubble out from ourselves. Usually, about as far as we are tall. Any object we’re touching within that bubble, we can take with us. Anything outside is left behind or destroyed.*

*The bubble’s size depends on who’s making it. I tested my own strength years ago and found I could bring almost four spans of rope with me.* He hesitated, but then dipped the quill again and continued. *I’m told that’s particularly powerful for a navigator, but then I’ve never actually tested my ‘strength’ against anyone but Alzhi and a few others.*

As he wrote with his right hand, his left hand traced the list of topics she’d written for him to follow. *Oh, and weight means nothing in the threads. I could move an anvil as easily as I could a feather pillow.* He added that note which wasn’t on her list, but she didn’t complain. It was perfectly relevant.

*When I enter the threads alone, I vanish completely. No one can see or hear me, and I can’t be followed. I am perfectly safe until I choose to leave. In fact another navigator could even be in the exact same place at the same time, and neither of us would know it.*

*But if I’m touching another navigator when I enter, it’s a different story. If we choose to go to different places, then it becomes a battle. The stronger one always wins, unless they let go of each other. That’s why the Ascendant Guards are always trained the same way. If an Ascendant has to force another navigator to go somewhere, they either knock him out first or they make sure they’re the stronger one. Navigating with more than two at once gets very complicated. It doesn’t happen very often.*

Arico paused, and Jaas nodded as she read over his description. “That’s good. That’s exactly what they’ll want.”

“Good.” He rose with obvious relief. “Still, I think I’ll let you do all the chronicling from now on. I’ll stick to my strengths.”

“Don’t be so sure,” Jaas warned him. “I’ll be asking you to do this at least a few more times.”

Arico groaned at that, but Jaas continued. “It’s just as much for your benefit, you know. Your input is much more likely to be noticed than mine. If you really want to eventually evacuate the city—assuming I can find a way to do that—you’ll need the support of my superiors back at the Academy, and the Imbued will be much more likely to hear me out if I have input from you as well.” She paused. “I wonder if the Hauld would be willing to add-”

“*Don’t* ask him.” Arico said flatly. “He does *not* appreciate people from the Outside world. He feels they abandoned us intentionally after the Threading, and he won’t want their support. If you have to get a dwarven opinion, ask Chanul. He might actually be into it. Just make sure it doesn’t get back to his father.”

He put on one of his brown traveling robes—actually it looked like the same one he had worn when they first met—and left quietly. Jaas wished him luck through the door, before turning back to the parchment. She took the time to read over everything he’d written. Resisting the urge to apologize for his attitude, she tapped the quill-feathers on her nose for a moment before writing her own name and continuing.

*I can’t be sure, but everything I’ve learned about the city’s history gives me the impression that this has all been organized somehow. I mean, just the chances of anyone surviving the Threading at all were pretty low to begin with, but they haven’t just survived, they’ve made a functioning society here. A pretty hateful one, true, but it does work.*

She sighed. *The outside world has hundreds of nations and thousands of individual organizations, all interlocked and all constantly checking each other’s power. The people here have never had any of that. Those who started with power: these Sustained lords and ladies, just got more power. The stra’tchi outnumber the Sustained more than four to one, and outnumber the navigators themselves at least a hundred to one. But still, without navigators of their own, these people can’t stand up to the Sustained Council. They can’t even get a message through these damnable threads, so change seems unlikely at best.*

*There are tyrannies elsewhere in the world, but none of them are this well-organized. I suspect that the Sustained and their Council had some kind of help when they were first getting started. How else could they have so completely cornered the market on navigators, and therefore, power?*

That brought up another topic she’d almost forgotten. The Thornes would have been perfect for preventing this kind of tyranny. *Sabra reacted strongly when I first mentioned his drawing,* she scribbled, thinking back to their talk in the Enclave. *Obviously he knows what it means to at least some degree. Is it possible that there are still some Thornes inside the city, after all this time?*

*Sabra also left out some important details from his story, or rather the story Arico told about him. There’s no way a newborn child could survive all alone like that, no matter how strong he was. Either he was older than that when he was sent to the Deathwatchers, or some of them must have taken care of him.*

Thornes existed all across this continent as well. Each member of the organization had a tattoo, of the thorn branch Sabra had drawn. Only a few of them could trace their lineage back to Bregos Thorne himself, but that didn’t seem to matter. As a whole they existed to expose corruption and greed, and to stand for justice for all sentient beings. Understandably, they were often persecuted and hunted down by powerful men, sometimes for no other reason than just wearing the tattoo. After all, people in power rarely got that power without dirtying their hands, or bloodying them.

She’d never heard of a single Thorne giving an accusation without substantial proof. For that matter she’d never heard of one recanting an accusation, or giving in to torture or pressure. Whichever Thornes gave other people the right to bear the mark obviously chose only the very strongest in mind and body. As she put quill to parchment again, she wondered if the same standards were still true for the Thornes living here in Patchwork.

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With a start, Jaas jerked awake. Durhu was gently shaking her shoulder. She must have fallen asleep while writing. Shameful, really. She’d almost drooled on the parchment itself. Hastily wiping her mouth, Jaas capped the inkwell and looked up at him. “What is it?”

In answer, he unlatched the window and pulled it open. She followed his gaze down towards the village and could see torches just outside the northernmost buildings, near the aqueduct line. A surprising number of people were gathering there, erecting some kind of structure.

*It’s a play,* he signed. *I’ve seen it once or twice, but you might want to see it for yourself.*

Jaas had to admit she was curious. Aside from the amphitheater back in the Deathwatch patch (which they certainly didn’t use for its intended purpose), this was the first sign of any organized entertainment within the city. She had some concerns, though. “Would it be safe? I mean, this morning for the Ritual we were all wearing white robes and hoods. If your magistrate here was to find out…” she trailed off.

*It should be safe enough,* he assured her. *If we wait until the play begins and stay behind the crowd, we’ll be fine. Everyone will be looking at them, not us.*

“All right then,” she carefully rolled up her parchment and quill, and grabbed one of Arico’s traveling robes. “Let’s go.”

When they got down there, Jaas was surprised to see that the crowd was mostly children. They were clustered together in a group, all looking up at the newly-built stage. When the curtains slowly parted, they all cheered together.

A beautiful woman stepped out in front of them, wearing a dark green dress that trailed behind her. Her skin was fair, like most people in Patchwork, but her hair was red and orange—either a wig or an impressive mix of dyes. She knelt down in front of the children. “Tonight we tell the age-old story of Beled Straightbrow and the Goblin Prince. A story of adventure, courage, and evil overthrown!”

Jaas recognized that name right away. Beled Straightbrow had been a Vasiri commander hundreds of years ago. He’d been known for his skilled tactics and being able to inspire his men, but he’d died in the fighting after the capital had been cut off from the rest of the world. Judging by the play though, these people apparently thought he’d been trapped here by the Threading, along with their own ancestors.

As the actress gave the introduction, the other performers moved onto the stage. Beled was portrayed by a young man of perhaps twenty years, wearing a suit of scaled armor with an axe dangling from his belt. He moved easily with it, and it made far too much noise to be real armor.

“Beled Straightbrow lived in a manor on a far-away patch, many years ago,” the actress spoke into the crowd. “He was mischievous and daring, and paid little heed to his father’s orders, because he was *always* getting into trouble! He was always stealing kisses from fair maidens, and getting into fights over almost anything.”

The Beled actor wandered the stage, first saluting his ‘father’ before running off to the left, where he blew a kiss to the narrator and pulled his axe to swing at some unknown foe.

“Beled’s older brother Merlu was very different. Because one day he would rule the manor, he knew he had to keep his father’s law. He often had to bring his brother back to their father for punishment, but he never liked doing it.”

Merlu was played by a heavyset man a few years older, with a dour and serious expression. With exaggerated motions, he grabbed the other actor by the neck and dragged him back to their father’s throne. The children watched in rapt attention.

“One day their father had finally had enough, and he sent Beled away! He was sent to a patch much like this one, to learn humility and obedience. And there he stayed for years!”

The stage shifted, and Jaas could see a slight change in its construction. With only a little effort, the actors opened a seam on one side of it: a perfectly straight line through the stage. It was a pretty good imitation of the threads themselves, and Beled stayed on the other side of it, swinging a hoe and looking wistfully back across.

“When he was finally called back home, he was overjoyed,” the narrator continued. “He packed his things and hurried back as fast as the Sustained could take him!” She actually took on the role of the navigator herself, reaching out for Beled’s hand and then helping him across the crack in the stage.

“But when he got home, he found that things had changed. His father had passed away, and Merlu was now in charge of the manor. Merlu had changed, too. A wasting disease had struck him, making him short and weak. It looked as if his bones were always about to crack!”

Some of the children gasped as they looked over at the throne. A new actor was now playing Merlu. It was hard to tell from this distance, but Jaas could only guess that it was a younger man in the same attire. He was hunched over in the throne, with a fake black beard affixed to his face.

“Beled, my brother!” The actor called out in a croaky voice, the first line spoken by someone other than the narrator. “I am so glad to see you! The manor will need both of us, now that father is gone.”

“Beled could barely recognize his brother after all this time. Still, he knew his duty was to serve, and that meant obeying as well.”

Merlu was still hunched over, with long arms that could reach out to the ground from his chair. “I have made alliances, Beled, with people who will keep us strong! I need you to keep faith with these people, and give them whatever they want.”

The actor gestured to the left, and a swarm of people suddenly rushed onto the stage from behind the far curtain. They passed across it with bags, picking up all the props, from the furniture to the lamps to the pots and pans themselves. They were all either short or leaning close to the ground as they passed from one end to the other and out of sight, and they were laughing as they moved. The children stared at all of this, whispering to each other.

“Over time, the manor changed. With so much being taken away, the people started to whisper about their new king. The Goblin King, they called him in fear.”

Jaas was surprised to hear that. Goblins existed outside many cities on every continent. They were smaller than humans, and clever enough in their own way. Unfortunately they were also vicious, violent, and completely devoid of compassion. Unlike most other sub-races, goblins had enormous appetites and could breed faster than rabbits. Combined with their willingness to kill and eat just about anything that crossed their path, they’d become a pretty serious pest problem in a lot of places. This was the first she’d heard of them in Patchwork, though.

“One day the Goblin King called Beled to him and said that it was time to embrace their new friends.”

“I will start sending people to them, my brother. People who will serve them well, as they have served us!” Merlu pointed across the stage, where a woman in white stood. This actress was younger than the narrator, but she had a similar hair color. Hers seemed more natural, though. Most likely she was an actress in training.

“The first person the Goblin King had chosen was Saleena. Beled had grown up with her, and they were as close as any two people can be. Beled tried to talk him out of it, but the Goblin King refused to change his mind!”

“Help us, Beled!” The younger actress called out. “Your brother has changed. There is something dark inside him now, something many people are afraid of!”

“And so Beled confronted the Goblin King the very next day, challenging him to explain his actions!”

Merlu hopped off the chair, still keeping his posture—something Jaas could only guess was very uncomfortable. “Aha! So you have found me out, my ‘brother’!” He cast off his black and brown cloak, and beneath it was armor.

“For the Goblin King was not his brother after all,” the narrator explained. “He was an evil, stunted creature, who had taken the true Merlu’s place and pretended to be their rightful ruler. He was a dwarf, and his allies were all dwarves too!” The children all exclaimed in dismay.

“My father’s manor will not fall, not while I live!” Beled finally spoke, drawing his axe. With a powerful, if slightly over-dramatic swing, he ‘cut’ the dwarf across the chest. The dwarf let out frightful shriek as he fell over, and twitched morbidly a few times. There was a collective gasp from the crowd, which faded away.

The actors let the silence sink in for a few moments, before Beled finally took center stage. “My father and brother are gone. I must now rule, and rebuild after what the Goblin King did. We will make our manor great again, and we must always keep watch, lest the dwarves return!”

With his axe in one hand, and the fallen dwarf’s crown in the other, he held them both high as the curtains closed. The children all cheered and clapped loudly. Jaas felt sick to her stomach. None of these people had ever even seen a dwarf, and yet even the children were being taught to hate and fear them.

She and Durhu withdrew a little ways as the children were cleared out and sent to bed. The actors and stage people cleaned everything up remarkably quickly, but left the stage in place. They probably planned on more performances tomorrow.

“I take it those actors aren’t from this patch,” she said quietly as they headed back. She belatedly remembered to move her hands as well. In the darkness it would be very difficult for Durhu to read her lips.

Durhu nodded. *There are many performing groups in the city. They play for all of the patches, except the Deathwatchers of course. They don’t allow it.*

“Is the… message… always the same?”

*Usually. That play was written for the children. More mature plays show the dwarves as murderers, slavers, thieves, and rapists.* Her discomfort must have been showing, because he gave her a sympathetic look. *The Council is responsible.*

“I thought as much. They want to make sure people are terrified of the dwarves, so they make these performers do these plays. Is there…” she hesitated slightly. Arico didn’t mince words, so she assumed that Durhu appreciated direct honesty as well. “Is there any truth to these stories?”

Durhu shrugged. *Who knows? Any truth to these stories all happened long before I was born, and those histories were written by humans.* He shook his head sadly. *I* can *tell you that the dwarves don’t have any plays like this. They teach history, but don’t use it as entertainment.*

“So, the Sustained are just using them as a scapegoat? Just because they’re there?”

Durhu didn’t respond at first. They were almost back to the cabin. He waited until they’d gotten back inside, and then pointed to her roll of parchment with a smile. Jaas didn’t mind being predictable, at least not when it came to writing things down. She obligingly unrolled it and dipped the quill in the inkwell. Of course it would be harder to write if she had to see Durhu in order to understand him, but she’d make do.

*Dwarves and humans used to live together. After the Threading, everyone had to. They left the Enclave behind, and helped rebuild and plant crops along with anyone else. Everything was fine at first, but then the Blood Fever struck.*

“Yes, Arico told me about that. It killed thousands, right?”

Durhu nodded. *Thousands of humans, but no dwarves. They were immune to the plague, and people blamed them for that. They started accusing the dwarves of spreading the Fever on purpose. They were even blamed for the Threading itself. Of course being dwarves, they took it all in stride.*

He sat across from her and glanced down at her notes. *When the Fever was finally gone, the Council created the Ascendant Guard and ordered them to start testing children to see if they were navigators. As you know, they claimed to be testing for the disease. The dwarves went along with it at first, but soon got fed up with it.*

Jaas made a sour face. “Let me guess. When the dwarves spoke out against testing, people took that as a confirmation of their fears.”

*That’s right. I don’t know if the Council ordered it or not, but there was a lot of violence. Most of the dwarven adults were killed in the riots, and the rest were later executed by the Ascendants. Only the dwarven children survived, because they’d been sent back to the Enclave in secret.* Durhu sighed. *Killing is one skill we’ve practiced to perfection here in Patchwork.”*

“Obviously the children were left alone. Did the Sustained think they were all dead?” Jaas wanted to tell him it was the same in many other places, but she didn’t want him to get off topic. She didn’t want to depress him any further, either.

*At first. This was right when the Sustained Council was first consolidating its power. Their plan to take away navigators as children would only work if it stayed a secret. I think that’s why the Council arranged the riots and mass dwarf killings—as a distraction.*

*It was about seventy years later that they finally scouted the Enclave and found the survivors. By that time the Houses had started to fight amongst themselves, so they had less interest in wiping out the dwarves. Eventually both sides finally settled on a truce. Or at least an end to the fighting.*

Jaas shook her head. “Sounds like a lot of the histories from the Outside. Lots of unnecessary bloodshed because of pointless or trivial differences, followed by an uneasy peace.” She pored over her notes for a minute. “There is one thing that doesn’t make sense to me, though. The Houses took every patch on the river for themselves, and then started doling out that water to control everyone else. They created this Aquunite religion so that they could make people believe that the water was some kind of divine gift. But why didn’t the people in each patch just dig a well for themselves?”

Durhu gave her a curious look. *What is a well?*

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Chapter 16

Sevvas patch had been the belly of the beast for years now. It housed the Lord Ascendant’s manor, the Council meeting chamber inside the Spire, the courtyard for public audiences, the Aquunite temple grounds, and the military training academy. It was even adjacent to the multi-colored wreckage of the old Crystal Palace

That made it pretty much the perfect target.

Arico sat back on his heels behind the low wall, peering up at the lanterns twinkling from the upper floors of the Spire. Somewhere in there, the Lord Ascendant and his cronies spent their days plotting the oppression and manipulation of tens of thousands of innocent people. It’d be simpler if he had the option of just killing them, but hopefully they could do this without such a slaughter becoming necessary. Sabra sat next to him, surprisingly quiet.

Arico still wasn’t sure he’d done the right thing by inviting Sabra to join him on this mission. True, the Hauld would have probably offered the option as well, but Arico had hoped that Sabra would take some time to think about it before accepting. Apparently Sabra hadn’t needed any. He didn’t think Sabra would betray him, not intentionally. It was more a question of whether or not he could follow orders. Which was the main reason Arico had asked him to join this mission. This was just a preparatory mission, of low importance despite their target location. If Sabra had any issues, this was a good opportunity to find out.

It was just after dusk, and the nighttime patrols had begun in earnest. Arico navigated himself and Sabra to the edge of Sevvas patch and they took cover behind a wall near the threads. Thankfully Alzhi had given him their routes and times. They should be able to slip in and out undetected.

“Now,” Arico said quietly, and they both rose and stepped over the low wall. Well, Sabra did anyway—Arico had to climb a little. Fortunately Sevvas wasn’t heavily populated. It was mostly used for official business between the Sustained Houses, and then only during the day. It was still well guarded, though.

They both stayed as low as possible while making their way south for a few minutes, and then ducked underneath one of the short bridges while they waited for the next patrol to pass. Once upon a time the Waters had flowed through Sevvas patch, but now the bridges were just decorative, arching over dry stones.

Sabra leaned towards him. “Sabra doesn’t understand. If we need the crate from inside, why not just tell bald man to get it for us?”

“Bald man? You mean Alzhi?” Sabra nodded, and Arico sighed in response. “It doesn’t work that way, Sabra. Alzhi has to pretend to be one of them. That means he has to follow their orders, and right now he’s been ordered to another patch. It’s up to us to get this job done. Remember they already know what I look like. It doesn’t matter if they see me, but you can’t let them see you. They can’t know that you’re working with me, at least not yet.”

It took a few seconds before he noticed Sabra was staring at him with a slight curl to his lips. “What’s so funny?”

Sabra’s smile widened. “Sabra just noticed. Little man’s eye does a twitchy thing when he’s nervous.” Arico gave him a brief glare, resisting the urge to contradict that. It was probably true.

Distant laughter rose up from the stadium to the south, and both of them looked that way briefly. “It’s a play, held in Sevvas’ courtyard,” Arico explained in an undertone. “That’s why we picked this time to raid this place. Daerik’s Vagabonds are very, very popular in Sustained territory. Most of the people in the patch will be down there right now watching them.” Sabra looked curious, almost enough to head down there and see what the play was like, but he shook his head and turned back towards the Manor. Arico breathed a sigh of relief.

They only had to wait a minute or so before the next patrol passed. Sabra started to move again, but Arico reached out an arm to stop him. “Wait!” He hastily pulled them both behind the hedge again, and out of sight.

A figure was approaching them from the west. Well, not them exactly. As they watched, whoever it was maneuvered their way under the nearby bridge and then walked right past their hedge on the way to the Manor.

It definitely wasn’t one of the guards. Not only did they have distinctive red and gold uniforms, but they had set routes. This stranger was slender, possibly a woman. She was wearing simple dark robes and obviously trying to avoid being seen by anyone up on the walls.

Giving Sabra a warning look, Arico decided to stay put until whoever it was gone as well. Still, he couldn’t resist looking out as the figure stepped under one of the lamps, and caught a glimpse of her face in the firelight.

His surprise must have shown because Sabra glanced his way. “Little man knows her?” He asked quietly.

“I’ve never met her,” Arico admitted, “but I do know her face. That’s Hazra Fisher.” From her route, he guessed she was headed to the north end of the Manor. There was a servant’s entrance there, he knew. But what was she doing coming in from the threads alone, and at this hour? She was a navigator of course, but as a woman she was barred from joining the Ascendant Guard.

“Fisher?” Sabra said harshly. “As in-”

“The Lord Ascendant’s daughter, yes,” Arico cut him off. “I don’t know what she’s doing out here all alone at night, but right now it doesn’t matter. We’ve got a job to do.”

Sabra gave him an incredulous look. “Doesn’t matter? Why not kill Fisher-woman, or take her hostage? Lord Ass-end would pay a lot for her!”

Despite the situation, Arico smiled at Sabra’s wording. His way of saying things wasn’t always easy to understand, but his intent came through clearly. “We’re not harming her, Sabra,” he answered firmly. “That’s the kind of thing the Council would do. We have to be better than that.”

Sabra’s yellow eyes glittered at him in the darkness. With a prickly sensation on the back of his neck, Arico suddenly realized that there was very little he could do to *stop* Sabra, if the giant chose to go after her.

“We have to show people that we’re not the same as our enemy, Sabra,” he urged quietly. “How we fight is the best way to do that. Sneaking in there and stealing cargo is fine with me, but we aren’t going to steal *people*. If we do, we’re no different than they are. And if we become just as bad as they are, why should we even bother fighting them at all?”

Eventually, Sabra nodded curtly. Perhaps he agreed, or maybe he just knew that she was too far away to catch by now. “How does little man know what Fisher-woman looks like, anyway?”

“I’ve watched this patch from the threads often enough,” Arico answered quietly. “I know the entire Council by sight, as well as the Lord Ascendant’s family. She’s not involved with them, usually. They don’t let women have any real power in Sustained patches.”

Sabra didn’t seem to have any more questions, so they got moving again before the patrolling guard could get back in sight. Briefly, Arico considered why she was out here so late. She wasn’t married, but tradition had her attached for life to the city’s Clarion. Arico had studied the previous versions of the Clarions, and this one looked like he was living up to the reputation. Unfortunately, that probably meant the Clarion would be killed before long—probably by one of the many powerful people he was bound to piss off. Arico hoped the movement would get rid of the Council before that happened.

Perhaps Hazra was having an affair with someone in another patch. She clearly knew where the guards were, and how to avoid the patrols. In addition, she had moved with silence and confidence in the darkness. Obviously she’d done this before.

Arico tried to focus on the mission. Their target was up ahead: a side entrance to the manor used for deliveries, mostly. It was protected by an iron portcullis, but it was only lightly guarded. According to Alzhi, the guards only showed up when deliveries were scheduled to arrive. Which could be at any time now; they had to hurry. Arico nodded at Sabra, who rubbed his hands together in excitement. Sauntering out in front of the gate, he grabbed the iron bars down at the bottom and began to lift.

At first it looked like he was straining for nothing. His arms bulged with effort, and his malformed face twisted even further. Before long, though, there was a grinding of iron on stone and the grate slowly rose.

Arico was a little curious to see how long Sabra could hold it, but didn’t want to press the issue. He quickly placed a forked metal rod under one end, propping the grate up. With a grunt, Sabra let go and the portcullis settled down.

Arico felt a bit overwhelmed. He stared at Sabra for a few moments, but got only a gruesome smirk in response. “What, did little man not believe the story about baby Sabra breaking the stone?”

“Not really, no. But then I never really believed in the Deathwatch Monster either, so what do I know?” Arico shook his head. “Come on. We may not have much time.”

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“Ahh, but I know you *want* to!” M’abor said craftily to the crowd below. “You’re wondering if you can get away with it, aren’t you?”

The entire troupe was on stage; it was one of the few scenes where they could all be seen at once. M’abor stood behind Cynnik, projecting his lines as far as he could, considering he was supposed to be whispering in the story. That was a problem. M’abor had actually helped write this play, Cynnik’s Choice. He’d have to fix this logistical difficulty before the next performance.

Cynnik took a few tentative steps forward, and leaned in to kiss the leading lady, Wyren. As the script dictated, she seemed receptive at first, and then recoiled and slapped him hard. Wyren never pulled her punches. She claimed it would ruin her artistic integrity. As such, Cynnik had been forced to become something of a make-up artist himself, to hide the near-bruises she gave him almost every night on stage, and the hickeys she sometimes gave him as well. Despite her being five months pregnant and having to wear increasingly elaborate clothing to hide that fact, their love life seemed none the worse for wear.

Some of the crowd—those who hadn’t seen this recitation yet—gasped in surprise as Wyren drew herself up to her full, if lacking, height. “You may be some kind of champion on the Ona field, *my lord*, but your manners leave a lot to be desired!” With an admirably timed sniff of disdain, she spun on her heels and exited stage left.

It was nearing the end of the play, but some of the crowd started clapping a little early. The women, mostly. The curtains closed briefly, long enough for the stagehands to clear away most of the set before the next scene.

About half an hour later the curtains opened again, with all of them onstage facing the crowd. Cynnik was in the middle, with Wyren to his left and M’abor to his right. The other dozen or so spread out on either side of them for the bow, as the crowd applauded them all. M’abor drank it in as much as he could, but it was over before he knew it. Already the curtains had closed again, and the hands were out moving new set pieces into position.

M’abor sighed. All the city’s a stage, he told himself, and the show must go on.

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The loading bay was mostly empty with a few carts against the walls here and there. When the morning came, people would be arriving with horses to load them up and roll them out of here. For now though, it was still quiet. They would have to wait until the crate they wanted was brought in. Arico stood next to Sabra on one side of the interior door.

“Little man looks troubled,” Sabra whispered to him.

Arico thought he’d been hiding his expressions. Perhaps it was something in his stance. Arico had gained a decent understanding of body language from being raised by Durhu, and he could tell that Sabra had similar skills. “I am,” he admitted. “I know we need that cargo, but I don’t want to kill anyone to get it.”

Sabra’s eyes narrowed in contempt. “No one here deserves little man’s worry. All Sustained deserve death.”

Now *that* was a dangerous attitude. Arico touched him on the shoulder to get his attention. “We can’t afford to think like that, Sabra! Maybe some of these people do deserve death, but just some. Not all of them are navigators, and not all navigators are bad either. The people coming to load up that cart, they’re just servants. They were trained and raised to obey the Sustained. In some ways they’re victims too.”

Sabra shook his head. “The Council uses that service to control and harm. Servants know this. That makes them just as bad.”

Arico tried to figure out how best to put it. “Sabra, we’re not just here to overthrow the Council. If we do beat them, we’ll have to replace them with something better. Something more worthy than they are. *How* we beat them will end up being just as important as *if* we do.” Sabra opened his mouth to respond, but the sound of footsteps cut him off. The guards were coming to load up the cart. With a faint noise of frustration, Sabra slipped through the inside door.

What was he doing? They were supposed to wait out *here* for the guards to show up! Arico bit back a few curses and followed as quietly as he could. He rounded the corner just in time to see the guard come into view. As the unfortunate guard’s eyes centered on Arico, Sabra struck.

The blow to the guard’s head was precise, almost like Endu’s skills opening people up. He collapsed immediately, and Sabra caught him before he hit the ground and dragged him out of sight. It had all happened almost completely silently, and based on the conversation around the corner, the others hadn’t heard it. Sabra put a finger to his lips and took up position again, waiting for the others. Knowing he had no choice now, Arico took a place opposite him.

There were two men this time. Sabra again waited for them to see Arico before he moved. Sidling up behind one of them, he wrapped his braid around the man’s neck with both hands and lifted him clear off the ground. At the same time Arico struck the other with an open hand, right in the throat. It wouldn’t be enough to crush his windpipe and kill him, but it was enough to silence him. While the poor man wheezed and grabbed at his throat, Arico seized his head and bounced it off the wall. He fell like a sack of grain, while Sabra still held onto his own struggling charge. It took the poor man another minute or so to pass out.

With a grimace, Arico dragged his guard back into the loading bay. Sabra took each of his two by a hand and followed. “What were you *thinking*?” Arico hissed at him as soon as they were back in relative safety. “You could have gotten us both killed!”

At first Sabra didn’t respond. With unsettling ease, he propped the three men against the wall and out of sight behind one of the carts. “Little man didn’t want them killed. Sabra was making sure they lived.”

Arico was tempted to throw up his hands in frustration. “That’s not what I meant. Why did you just leave like that, without telling me? If one of them had gotten away, we’d have the whole manor up in arms by now! How many people would have died then? Including *us*, of course!”

Sabra only gave him an uncomprehending look, and Arico let out a breath. So much for his earlier optimism about Sabra’s impulse control. “All right. We can discuss this later. Go and get the cargo out here while I set this up.”

As Sabra left, Arico carefully pulled the tinder twig from his pack and set it down inside the cart. Painstakingly spooling out a length of oil-soaked cloth underneath the cart, he connected the two. As he worked, he thought back over what Sabra had done. Or rather, the impressive way he’d done it. The results of a lifetime spent in near-constant combat, no doubt.

*Bang!*

Arico spun around, the cloth temporarily forgotten. The gunshot had been close, just around the corner where Sabra had gone. The sound had been followed by a grunt of pain, and now by a repeated *cracking* noise. Arico dropped the cloth and ran around the corner, only to come to an abrupt stop on the other side. Sabra was there with another guard, smashing his head into the brick wall again and again. The spent gun was on the ground next to them, as was the crate Sabra had retrieved.

The guard was clearly dead; the back of his skull had caved in under the multiple impacts. As Arico watched, Sabra finally let go of him and turned around. Arico held his ground despite a powerful urge to step backwards.

Blood had spattered all over Sabra’s face and tunic. A gunshot wound on his left shoulder still oozed black blood of his own, which had gotten mixed into his braid. Despite all that Sabra seemed perfectly calm. Without a word he stooped to pick up the crate and slipped past Arico, back into the loading bay. He left behind a mess of a hallway, with blood and brain matter all over the wall and the ground.

Arico had seen his fair share of injuries during training. Once while practicing with swords he’d even cut Alzhi’s leg open to the bone by accident, but that was nothing compared to this. His stomach heaved, and he lurched after Sabra.

Arico cursed himself. For once his emotional detachment had failed him. It was just blood and gore back there—nothing he shouldn’t have been able to handle. But for some reason he couldn’t get that sight to leave his eyes.

Sabra seemed to sense that Arico was in no shape to think clearly. Reaching into the cart, he struck the tinder twig and left it on top of the oilcloth. The fire sprung up, sure to destroy the cart and any evidence of what they were stealing. “Come on,” he urged softly. “Guards are coming.”

Arico had a flashback of his earlier escape with Jaas. Minus the brained guard though. “What happened to keeping people alive?” he finally managed, as they approached the portcullis to squeeze under it again.

Sabra shrugged as he got down on all fours. “The guard saw Sabra. Little man said-”

“I know what I said!” Arico snapped. He took a deep breath, trying not to vomit. “Let’s… let’s just get out of here.”

-.-

The second play of the night was over, and it would be their last one here in Sevvas patch, at least for a while. M’abor laughed with the others as they made their way northwest. The sky was mostly overcast and the moonlight barely peeked its way through the clouds, but the moderately-sized crowd had no trouble finding their way. Sevvas was well lit at all times, which was one of the reasons M’abor liked performing here. Everything was so high-class!

This was the first time they’d been invited to the Lord Ascendant’s Manor, however. Daerik’s Vagabonds were well-known, having performed all over Sustained territory for years. Still, Lord Ascendant Fisher had little or no interest in the performing arts. His daughter the Lady Fisher was ill as well, which meant that their host for the evening would be the Lord Ascendant’s cousin, Lady Sahena Fisher from across town.

The crowd entered the foyer together, and then slowly trailed into the dining room in preparation for the party. M’abor stayed with the others in the foyer for a while, listening to them regale each other, and berate each other, over the previous performance. Cynnik and Wyren stood to one side, arms around each other. She whispered something in his ear, and he let out a belly laugh and nodded heartily.

They weren’t married, but made no secret that her child was his. Ordinarily that would have meant social stigma for both of them, and anyone who willingly associated with them, but Daerik’s Vagabonds had earned a somewhat rebellious reputation over the years. That and their rising popularity around town had ultimately led to them being here. Daerik had founded this group over forty years ago, and brought in most of them before his own death. Cynnik had inherited control, and had done his best to uphold his mentor’s ideals and thirst for excellence on stage.

Wyren actually had a guest room in the manor itself. Due to the dangers of navigating while pregnant, the Lord Ascendant had offered it to her as soon as she was sure she was carrying. She’d be stuck here in Sevvas for another few months as a result. If it was a cage, it was certainly a beautiful one, as M’abor was seeing for the first time now.

As for the other performers, Preno and Parno were twin brothers, particularly well-built. They usually played the muscle in the various productions, although more recently they had taken over intermissions as comic relief. Preno was the speaker, and Parno the performer in these comedic interludes. M’abor sighed. Sometimes the Vagabonds felt more like a circus act than a legitimate performing troupe, but he was grateful for them.

That reminded him. One of the secondary actresses named Ezzena had a particular diet she had to uphold, and M’abor seriously doubted the chefs inside were aware of her needs. Making his excuses, he departed the group and went for what he assumed was the direction of the kitchen.

He barely made it two steps into the next room before almost bumping into a guard. The man had moved right in front of him, expressionless, and stood blocking his path. “Excuse me,” M’abor said, discomfited, and tried to make his way around the man. The guard extended his arms down, again blocking M’abor’s path.

“Back in there,” he said tonelessly, indicating the foyer with a jerk of his chin.

“I have to talk to the chef,” M’abor protested. “It’s important!”

“Get back in the foyer,” the guard repeated, his voice noticeably more turbulent now. “Stunties don’t belong here.”

M’abor felt a sick wave rising in his gut. He was Cynnik’s right hand! He’d entertained and inspired people all over the damn city! For years now! But in the end, he was just a dwarf to them. Squaring his shoulders and trying to maintain at least some dignity, M’abor started to turn around when a hand landed on his shoulder from behind.

“Is there a problem here?” Cynnik’s calm, measured voice spoke over his head. M’abor stole a glance behind him and saw Wyren standing there too, a confused expression on her face. The rest of the troupe was gathering as well, whispering to each other in the other room.

“The dwarf isn’t allowed inside,” the guard said once more. His voice had calmed, though. Apparently he was acutely aware of how popular the Vagabonds were, and that he was talking to their leader.

“I see,” Cynnik said softly. “And who exactly made that determination?”

“I did.” The guard said stubbornly. “As the current watch commander, I have decided that the dwarf represents a threat to the safety of the partygoers. As such, he will stay *here*, where I can keep an eye on him.”

“A threat?” Wyren said disbelievingly. “Him??”

M’abor might have disagreed with her just for his own ego’s sake, but she was right. He couldn’t think of anyone less threatening than himself, except perhaps a child. Cynnik kept the guard’s gaze for a few seconds, and then turned to look at the others. Their expression was uniform. Confusion had mutated into anger and determination. “Very well then,” he said in that same measured voice. “Kindly inform Lady Sahena that we’ll be on our way. Thank her for the generous invitation while you’re at it.” He turned away, his hand still on M’abor’s shoulder, and led the group back towards the Manor’s entrance.

M’abor couldn’t help himself. He looked back to see the guard staring open-mouthed after them. “Wait! What are you doing?” The guard sputtered out.

Cynnik slowed his pace and turned again. “Since you’re clearly not aware, I’ll explain it to you. Daerik selected each and every one of us. He *saw* something in us: something not all of us could see in ourselves. He taught us, and loved us, and treated us as equals—both to each other and to him! And if one of us isn’t welcome in there, then none of us are.” The entire troupe nodded and made noises of agreement behind him.

This kind of confrontation had happened before, though never with this much on the line. Still, M’abor had never quite gotten used to the feeling. They were his family. And he was theirs. To these people, he wasn’t a dwarf at all. He was a person, and he was *their* person!

Apparently the guard was starting to realize just how grave his error had been. His face a slightly paler shade, he summoned another guard to take his place while he went in back, presumably to talk to Lady Sahena. Two minutes later the entire troupe was seated and eating, alongside the rest of the guests.

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The soft *tik* noise against the window jolted the Clarion awake. Not that he’d been that deeply under, just dozing off a bit. As usual he had a fit of coughing just after waking up. They seemed to be getting worse and worse; he’d have to see the manor’s physicians when he got the chance. Wiping his mouth, he got up and made his way over to the window. Just within sight on the ground outside the manor, a dark-clad shape waved up at him.

The Clarion moved over to the bookshelf on the wall and pulled a bunch of them out of the way onto the floor. Behind where they’d been, he reached back *into* the wall and grabbed hold of a rope. The secret hiding space was necessary—maids cleaned this room often, and if they found anything out of the ordinary it would no doubt reach the Lord Ascendant’s ears in a matter of minutes. Opening the window, he rolled the knotted rope down to the ground and braced himself. His consort weighed less than he did, but a lot of that was muscle.

Sure enough, holding onto his end wasn’t easy. The rope tightened as she started climbing. It was a good thing this was a rare event. She would have returned the easy way—via the servants’ north door—but that was impossible right now. Manor guards were all over that area and she wouldn’t be able to get in without being noticed.

Briefly he wondered which woman he was pulling up here. Most likely the less pleasant one.

Hazra finally made it up to the threshold, and slipped in while letting go of the rope. The Clarion was careful not to fall back as the pressure on the rope vanished. Strangely though, she slumped to the floor and just sat there, breathing heavily.

Her bag fell to the floor next to her, and the skull mask rolled out of it. The Clarion hastily snatched it up and stuffed it back in the bag. If a servant were to open the door and see her, the armor would be hard enough to explain. The mask, nigh impossible. Sometimes, he could hardly believe it himself. He was consort to Heartbane. The legendary assassin.

She hadn’t lost consciousness, but he could tell she was in pain. Gingerly helping her remove her armor, he caught sight of several bruises on her arms. And then he saw the gash on her back. It was deep, almost cutting into her spine, and he bit his lip as he examined it.

He would have offered her sympathy, but experience had taught him that she didn’t want any. The last thing Heartbane wanted was a shoulder to cry on. What she *would* want would be stitches. He rose again and returned to the bookshelf hiding place to retrieve his needle and catgut for sewing. As well as some strong spirits to cleanse the wound. The moment he was in reach, she grabbed the bottle from his hand and took a long swig.

“Get to it,” she said harshly, handing the bottle back and lying down on her stomach.

This wasn’t the first time his consort had returned to their bedchamber in this kind of state. She was Heartbane right now, not Hazra. The killer, not the lover. The Clarion couldn’t help but find it ironic. Neither he nor any of the other Clarion initiates were celibate. He was currently in bed with a beautiful, topless, heavily breathing woman, and all he was doing was stitching up her wounds. If his old comrades could see him now, most would be torn between admiration and confusion.

Hazra hadn’t always been this way. When they’d first met she’d been a vibrant soul. Nervous, of course, upon meeting the man she was to spend the rest of her life with. He’d felt some trepidation himself, despite his training. But from almost the first moment, he knew he’d loved her. She was wonderful in so many ways he couldn’t even describe them all.

Even from the start there had been problems. His training was one of them. He’d been raised to be the calm, still pond next to the raging Waters nearby. He was to be the quiet, composed, *rational* being in a city gone mad. That calm had served him well in the Council chambers, or in individual negotiations with the various Councilors in private. Unfortunately, it wasn’t what Hazra needed. She was passion and fire. The kind of person who flared brightly in people’s memory, and burned out quickly too. She needed someone more like her. More able to be an equal to her. He’d tried to accommodate her, to be more compatible. Maybe if he’d been better at it, he wouldn’t be stitching up a mass murderer right now.

Other than his service to the Council, the Clarion knew that his only real value to his ‘adoptive’ family was to further the line. He had no family of his own to interfere with the Lord Ascendant’s plans. That meant any children he had with Hazra would be Fisher children only, tying up any inheritance concerns with a nice, neat bow. Children were the real purpose of this union, and the real downfall. For despite months and months of trying, they’d consistently failed to conceive.

Hazra had kept a brave face over that time. Even her closest friends wouldn’t have been able to tell how disappointed she was, nor how frustrated. He could tell, though. The Clarion had watched as her joy had slowly faded away, replaced by a dour resignation. Her spontaneous nature had no place in a world without children of their own. Still, he knew that the real disappointment she felt was in herself. After all the pressure her father, the *Lord Ascendant*, had put on her to have children and to further the line, it wasn’t much of a surprise.

Then, lo and behold, a miracle! A pregnancy, when all hope had nearly faded! For nearly two months the old Hazra had been back, singing to herself as she arranged a room for the baby. Laughing and joking with her friends again. Two months before she’d lost the baby.

The loss was devastating to her, but she insisted that they keep trying. Upon the second loss, though…

The results had been predictable to everyone else. But again, the Clarion had seen something else entirely. Hazra had given birth after all. Not to a baby, but to another version of herself. At first he hadn’t even noticed. He’d thought she was just mourning, and mourned along with her. Before long though it became clear that now there were two Hazras.

The first one eventually recovered. Before long she was telling jokes again, playing the occasional prank. She regained her interest in the House as well, advising him on how to increase his standing and influence with the Council. Not that either of them could make much headway there—her father cast a *very* long shadow.

But now he had a second consort as well. A hard, emotionless woman who gave him the chills. At first they didn’t even seem to be aware of each other. Eventually, when the second woman took a name, everything started to change for him.

Once as part of what was supposed to be a romantic surprise, the Clarion had waited for her in secret, and from his hiding place, saw her covered in blood and carrying a dripping dagger. That was when he’d found out who she really was, and what she’d done as Heartbane. She told him about the people she’d killed, and about how she’d enjoyed it. The thrill, the risk, the power.

Of course he’d been stunned. Hazra, a killer? It seemed ludicrous to even consider, but she was in earnest. The other Hazra started showing up more often after that. Once she’d even made an appearance during sex. Now *that* had been a disturbing experience.

Since finding out the truth, the Clarion had been constantly worried about what might happen if Hazra were to become pregnant again. He could handle Heartbane popping up at random, but what effect would that have on their children? Not that there was much chance of that, anymore.

Even so, none of what she had done really mattered. Hazra, Heartbane, whoever she was, he still loved her. Not wisely, for sure, but well. She could have drowned Patchwork in blood and he would still love her—still support her. If she had to kill to keep her sanity—such as it was—then so be it!

So here they were. The Clarion silently stitched her back wound shut while she gritted her teeth and gave the occasional hiss of pain. “So, why were there guards at the north door?” She asked suddenly. Probably to help distract herself.

“There was a break-in at the Spire just a few minutes ago,” he said softly. “Someone got into the loading bay and destroyed a shipment of your father’s sparkpowder. One guard was killed, from what I heard.”

“Really.” She craned her neck to look at him. “That’s reckless. Sabotage, you think? Tanner’s had a bee up his ass about our family running the Laentana for years now. Maybe he finally decided to do something about it.”

The Clarion chuckled. Whatever else he could say about Heartbane, she certainly didn’t moderate her words. Maybe it was an assassin thing. “Probably.” He pulled the final thread and cut it. “All set.”

Heartbane rose and moved over to the mirror to look at her back. “Not bad,” she complimented, craning her neck.

She would never love him like her other self did, but at least she respected how useful he could be. Whether he was covering for her with Hazra’s lady friends, or distracting the guards so she could come home in secret, or patching up her wounds. The only stitches he’d done before becoming her consort had been in battle, trying to save the lives of wounded soldiers. “What happened to you out there, anyway?” He asked, trying to distract himself from that thought.

She gave him a sharp look. It was clear he wasn’t her equal, and she didn’t like being questioned. She was the real power here, and the Clarion was just her support system. Her look faded quickly, though. Heartbane knew that even a killer of her caliber *needed* such a support system.

“They were waiting for me,” she admitted grumpily, turning away again. Professional pride was one of the few emotions she ever showed, and hers had obviously been wounded tonight. “They must have known I’d come after him, so they set a trap for me. It was nothing serious.”

Bracing himself, the Clarion darted his hand to her back. She flinched away in pain, and in an instant had a dagger at his throat. “Don’t touch me!”

Carefully, he spread his hands, palms out. “Nothing serious? That cut was a hair’s breadth from your spine, *my love*. If your spine gets cut, so does hers, and neither of us wants that.”

It had taken months of observation, but he was quite certain that Hazra was unaware of her other self. Heartbane had adopted a somewhat protective attitude over her, but Hazra knew nothing of it all. How that was possible was anyone’s guess. The Clarion could hardly ask anyone about it, after all.

After all this observation, the Clarion was also sure she wouldn’t hesitate to cut his throat if she believed him to be a real threat. If it came to that she would just sit there, dispassionately watching as he bled to death on their own bed. But he did have a point, and he could see her reaching the same conclusion as she sheathed the dagger again. “Very well.”

With a sigh, she laid down on the bed. The Clarion followed suit, keeping eye contact with her. “But you dealt with it?”

“Damn right I did,” she said proudly. “Five men, plus that little Forester spy. You should have seen me out there!”

“Perhaps one day I will,” he said with a weary smile, patiently waiting for his Hazra to come home.

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Chapter 17

The Enclave was still dark by the time they got back, but a few glimmers of approaching sunlight filtered down on the courtyard from the east. To Arico’s surprise, Durhu was right there waiting for them. *The Hauld wants to see you, Arico, right now.* He looked excitedly at the two of them. *Alzhi is already back, and he’s waiting down there too.* Durhu finally got a good look at Sabra in the torchlight and his eyes widened. *What in the Many happened to-*

*I’ll explain later*, Arico signed quickly, cutting him off. He still felt nauseous over what he’d seen back there. Shaking his head, he tried to focus. Whatever was going on here was more important than a breakdown of discipline by the giant.

Putting it out of his head for the moment, Arico pulled his father to the side behind one of the brick walls near the threads. “Did the Hauld say what this was all about?”

Durhu paused. *It’s hard to explain. The Hauld wanted to tell you in person. Come on.*

That didn’t sound good. Arico reached out and hesitantly took the crate from Sabra. “You go on ahead and get that shoulder looked at, Sabra. I’ll finish this up on my own.”

Sabra wiped some more blood from his face and shrugged. “Sabra could use a shower anyway.”

Arico waited until he had sauntered off before turning back to Durhu. “All right, let’s go.”

As usual the guards put up their pikes as he and Durhu passed; they’d all seen him come and go many times. Durhu led him to the Hauld’s side chambers, just off the main audience room. Arico could see the Hauld inside pacing back and forth in front of Alzhi. As they entered, he stopped and gave Arico a quick smile. “Ah, lad, there ye are. There’s some news ye should hear fer yerself.”

Alzhi stepped forward with an uncharacteristic look of excitement on his face. “We may have a way to give each and every stra’tchi patch their own permanent supply of the Waters! They’d have no more need for navigators to cart water in for them.”

A kind of empty silence filled the room.

At first Arico didn’t really understand what had been said. He recycled the words through his head several times before grasping the fullness of it. “A permanent supply. In a stra’tchi patch? How is that even possible?”

*It’s called a well. Jaas just told me about it,* Durhu explained quickly. *It’s a kind of hole dug straight down. From what Jaas said if you dig down deep enough, the hole starts to fill with the Waters! There are thousands of them in the Outside, one or two in virtually every city!* Durhu pointed over at a small roll of parchment flattened out on the Hauld’s desk.

It was a picture of the layers in the ground itself. It had the buildings and flagstones on top, and then the soil beneath it. The old Vasiri sewer system was below that, followed by more soil and eventually the solid city foundations. Beneath the stone foundations was a line that ran exactly parallel to the surface. Durhu extended the line with his finger, running it right to the Waters themselves as if the Waters flowed *beneath* the ground as well as on top of it. *If we can dig down past the city foundation, we should be able to find the Waters there!*

Arico felt a little lost as he tried to catch up with all the new information. He’d never heard of anything even remotely like that. Sometimes trickles of rain from the Outside would flow through the threads, but the only reliable drinking supply any of them had ever known was the Waters themselves. But he trusted Jaas, and she certainly had no reason to lie about something like this. “If that’s true, if there really are these wells out there, how could we not know about them?”

*It’s the Rejoining,* Durhu explained excitedly. *Jaas thinks the Ritual is about more than just snatching up every navigator child, or keeping family lines apart. She thinks they used it to control what we knew. That’s why none of us have ever heard of these things before!*

Arico shook his head. “That’s a little hard to believe. Besides, the dwarves have never had a Ritual of Rejoining. Sir, have you ever heard of anything like these ‘wells’?”

“Nay lad,” the Hauld admitted, “but then, me great-grandfather was only fifteen when tha Sustained wiped out all tha Elders, an’ he was one o’ the oldes’ left alive! Maybe they knew abou’ these ‘wells’, an’ tha’s why they were killed.” He grunted. “Or one o’ tha reasons, anyway.”

There was a momentary quiet as they all thought about it. *There were no wells in the original city,* Durhu eventually explained, looking like it just occurred to him. *They had the Waters, and from what Jaas said the old emperors sealed the city’s foundation magically, to keep anyone from tunneling in. The Council must have known that.*

“Because they controlled where the kids went, they could have manipulated things so that anyone who knew what a well was would end up dead,” Alzhi agreed. “It makes sense that they wouldn’t want people knowing about them. After all this time, it’s possible even the Sustained themselves don’t know what a well is!”

“But that happened centuries ago! If it’s true, then the Council has been messing with what we know, right from the very beginning.” Arico took a breath of realization. “Who knows what other things they’ve just erased from our history!”

The Hauld stroked his beard thoughtfully. “There’s no way o’ knowin’ fer sure. I’ve called fer diggin’ tools, though. We need ta tes’ this theory o’ hers, as soon as we can.”

Arico smiled slowly as he gave it more thought. After the Council was defeated, the Hauld had planned to start digging canals so that the Waters would flow into more patches. It would be an enormous undertaking: years of effort at least, by thousands of people. The Hauld had hoped that with enough work, more than half the city would be on the Waters, but it was obvious they’d never be able to bring the Waters to *all* the patches.

This news, however… “Sir, if this is true, these wells could change everything. It’ll take a while to tunnel down that far, but I agree. It’s worth checking at least.”

Alzhi gave a start. “Sir! I have an idea about that.”

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Sabra grunted with discomfort as the dwarf jammed sharp metal tongs into his shoulder. The bullet had hit one of the bones up there and shattered, which meant the healer had to dig the pieces out before bandaging it. This wasn’t fun at all. Gritting his teeth, Sabra closed his eyes and tried to focus on the lullabies he’d heard as a baby. Of course he only played them in his head (the last thing he wanted was for the dwarves to think of him as soft), but they were comforting.

The healer had seemed surprised that Sabra’s bones hadn’t broken in turn. Apparently being shot often broke arms and legs. Sabra had only shrugged. He’d never been shot before last night, but it was mostly the same as being stabbed. When she finally got the last bit of metal, the healer needed to tie two lengths of bandage together to get them all the way around Sabra’s arm. Despite that, the improvised dressing seemed to do the job just fine.

Sabra turned down the pain-deadening herbs offered him, barely remembered to thank the dwarf for her help, and loped away from the rest of the dwarven buildings. Crickets chirped from somewhere off to the left, and the stars were out by now. Sabra looked up and tried to find the Winged Messenger up there.

Every night back in the Deathwatch patch, Sabra had spent hours staring up at the stars. At least when it hadn’t been overcast for months on end. He’d even named some of the brightest stars himself, though those names didn’t match up to what most people called them.

Sabra thought back over the little raid in Sevvas patch. Little man had been shocked. He wasn’t used to fighting and killing at all, which was a shame. Sabra doubted that little man would ever have the stomach to just crush an enemy like that.

Not that he’d even be *able* to, without a big heavy rock or something. No, little man was a gentle soul. A talker and a thinker. At least he had friends like the dwarves and Alzhi, who were doers. And Sabra too, now that he thought about it.

Sabra had meant what he’d said back there: all Sustained really did deserve death. They served bad men, which meant that they were bad themselves. And stupid too, for serving anyone in the first place. He really hoped that little man and the dwarves would be able to bring them down. Patchwork had its fill of stupid and bad people already.

Off in the night he heard his dwarven watchdog finally step away, probably to relieve himself. They’d kept him under close watch every day since he’d first come to the Enclave. He didn’t blame them, really. At least they’d kept their watchers at a respectful distance. They probably thought he didn’t know he was being watched. Dwarves were like humans in at least one way: they also thought they were smarter than Sabra.

As soon as the guard left, Sabra began quietly piling up brush and dirt in a shape roughly matching his own. When his guard got back, hopefully he’d think Sabra was still there and had gone to sleep. It should be good enough, if the dwarves continued to keep their respectful distance.

No one here, except possibly the pretty lady, knew that he could read and write. Any other time, Sabra would just steal a scrap of parchment, write a note on it, and leave it for his navigator friends, but *this* news they would want to hear in person. By the time he reached the redline, an arm was already reaching out of the threads for him. If his luck held, Sabra would be able to sneak back in the same way he was leaving.

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The sun was rising, past the shuttered windows. The light burned orange through his eyelids, and M’abor squinted as he woke up. He rolled over in bed, trying to get his eyes out of the relentless light. Who had opened the window, anyway?

For a moment, M’abor tried to remember where he was. No sha’haln memories had visited him during the night, thankfully, but his surroundings were still a little unfamiliar. Then he heard the light whistle of a teapot from the other room, and smiled.

Wrapping his embroidered robe tightly against the cold, he got up unsteadily, and then made his way into the kitchen. There, standing next to a cooking fire was his angel. Her hair was a mess, probably even worse than his, but D’tor still looked as radiant as she had the day they’d first met. “Good morning,” he said slyly, wrapping his arms around her waist and kissing her neck.

“Morning? It’s almost midday! I’ve been up since before dawn.” She said in return, turning around to face him. “I thought you’d sleep the whole day away.”

“Well, I did have a big night. And a few drinks on top of that,” he admitted. A concerning thought hit him. “That didn’t affect anything between us last night, did it?”

“You were fine,” D’tor assured him, putting a finger on his lips to shut him up. “A bit sappy, actually, but still very charming.”

The teakettle was whistling up a storm by now. M’abor grabbed a heavy cloth and moved it off the fireplace. “Yes, I’m sure that’s what every man likes to hear,” he said dryly as he retrieved some of the tea leaves and poured a mug for each of them.

D’tor’s place wasn’t much to look at. Like any stra’tchi, she had only the basics, and being a dwarf made her even poorer than most. But she somehow always made it look like a home instead of some misbegotten shack in the middle of nowhere. He’d brought the tea with him, of course. Just a little something to brighten her day.

Still, she would *thrive* if she relocated somewhere else with him. Taking a deep breath, he braced himself. “You know, Atani Grover has just put his house in Borrgas patch up for sale. It’s got two stories and it’s out of the way, not far from the Waters. It has a large garden, too. It’d be perfect for us.”

D’tor sighed dramatically as she set down the cutting board. “And here we go again.” As she started chopping whatever strange vegetables she planned on including in breakfast, she spoke over her shoulder. “I’ve told you a thousand times, M’abor. I’m not one of the damsels from your plays. I don’t need to be rescued!”

He raised his hands placatingly. “I know. I’m not saying you do. It’s just… you don’t know what life is like, when you live so close to the Waters. It’s like a different world, and I want to share that world with you!”

“I’m not some potted plant you can just put on a windowsill either, you know,” she protested. “I have a life here. I know it doesn’t look like much to you, but I can’t just putter around in a garden and hope to be happy. Even if I am with you.”

“I know, I know. Just hear me out. I actually have a plan this time. I’m not just throwing out suggestions like I did before.”

“Go ahead,” she said evenly.

Not the most receptive of audiences, but he’d faced tougher crowds. “Remember when I told you my friend Wyren was with child? She’s only a few months away now, and when she gives birth, things will change in the troupe.”

D’tor gave him a glance that was at least partially curious. “What things?”

“Well, Cynnik and I were discussing expanding the series of plays. *Who We Are* has done great so far, but we both think that we should start a new series based on some of the same characters. A series that would appeal to a younger audience, and to more women.”

“I can’t argue with that,” D’tor admitted, still chopping away with her back to him, “but what does it have to do with me?”

M’abor sat forward in excitement, his tea forgotten. “Once Wyren has her baby, we introduce a new character to the plays. Her little girl, say… ten years old. I will continue to play Cynnik’s dark voice, of course, but now his daughter will have a dark voice as well. You would be perfect for it!”

D’tor turned around incredulously. “Me? I’m no actor.”

He waved a hand. “Of course you are. You’ve helped me with my lines countless times, and I’ve seen how you evoke the characters you play. You’re a natural! You might have some problems with stage fright at first,” he considered briefly. “Aquun knows I did. But you’ll get over it, and then you’ll be a star! Just like me!”

She added the vegetables to the stew over the fire and began stirring, apparently mulling it over. M’abor suddenly wondered how close to noon it really was. It was difficult to tell time without a clock. He should still have some time, but Cynnik would be waiting for him inside the threads at noon.

Cynnik was the only one who knew about M’abor and D’tor. He obligingly brought M’abor here a few times a week, and picked him up just as regularly. M’abor still didn’t entirely know why he was taking such a risk. Just the rumor of one of his troupe members shacking up with a stra’tchi could be damaging to the Vagabonds, but a *dwarven* stra’tchi? That could be catastrophic! Even with their rebellious, confrontational reputation. Whatever the reason, M’abor had decided not to question his friend, and just to be thankful.

“No.”

D’tor’s voice rattled around in his brain, the word bouncing from ear to ear. “What? Why not?”

She took both his hands, an earnest expression in her eyes. “I’m sorry, M’abor. But I can’t do what you do. I won’t.”

“I’m not asking you to make up your mind right now,” he explained hastily. “Even if Cynnik decides to go ahead with the new plays, they won’t start for at least four months. Take your time. Think about it.”

“I have,” she said sadly, but with a smile all the same. “You and I are the same in many ways. We were both born to human parents. We’re both outcasts: me from the stra’tchi and you from the Sustained. We’re both resourceful, and independent, and fun! But when it comes to acting, we’re very different people.”

She tightened her grip slightly. “I love that you want to give me a better life. Even if you’re wrong. I love that you care enough to take me away from all this. Even if it is my home. You’re an actor. It’s what you’ve been for a very long time now, and it’s *who you are*. No pun intended. I have to admit, it does sound exciting. Travelling with you and the troupe. Entertaining all over the city. Taking a bow with you at the end of each act. I’ve never even seen one of your plays, and I’m still curious as to what it’s like. But I don’t want to be part of that!”

M’abor slumped in his chair. “Why not?”

“Because it’s all a lie!” She stood suddenly, and started pacing back and forth. “I don’t mean the acting. I get that. You present a story to the crowd, and they love you for it. But *you’re* the lie, don’t you see? Every time you get up on that stage, and pretend to be the voice in Cynnik’s head, you put an image in the minds of everyone watching! You—the only dwarven actor in the city—are what’s evil in every man’s mind! You’re the voice telling him to take what he wants, regardless of the cost! You’re the part of him that’s hateful, and remorseless, and selfish!”

She closed her eyes tightly, as if with a headache. “Every time you do one of those plays, you tell everyone in the crowd that dwarves are evil. It doesn’t matter that they cheer and clap, or that they pretend you’re one of them after the play is over. It doesn’t matter that you have money, and a comfortable place to live. Even if you only want to share that wealth, and give me a comfortable place to live too!”

D’tor squeezed his hands again. “You may be able to live like that. And I can’t tell you how to live your life, but I can’t live that life myself. I’m sorry.”

M’abor felt like the air had gone from the room. He’d expected resistance to the idea. Hesitation, maybe, perhaps even shyness. But to hear that *he* was the problem? He hadn’t seen that coming. “Are you… telling me we can’t be together?” He asked with that same shortness of breath.

“No!” She looked back up at him fiercely. “Oh, no, no no. I love having you here. I love being part of your life, even if it’s only from the sidelines. I don’t want to lose what we have any more than you do. Just because I can’t do what you do… please, don’t let that change things between us, any more than it has to!”

At least she wasn’t ending it. M’abor took a deep breath, and tried to collect his thoughts. One thing was certain. No matter how much he wanted to give her the world, he couldn’t risk losing her over it. No. Never again.

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Two dwarven guards stood watch from above as Alzhi and Arico worked back to back. The Hauld was up there too somewhere, making arrangements should any of this prove to be true. Arico had to admit he was excited. There were so many new opportunities it could open up! Alzhi’s idea had been top-notch as well. Why dig with shovels and picks when you could simply *thread* the dirt as you went down?

Both he and Alzhi had one hand extended into the nearby threads, and were sweeping their other hands on the ground in wide circles. Because they weren’t concentrating on actually sending the dirt and rocks to any specific place, all the earth just ended up being threaded. That was just fine, though. It wasn’t in the way anymore and that’s what mattered. No doubt because of their digging, tiny bits of dust were raining down on people all over the city—far too small to be even noticeable.

The tricky part was threading the dirt under their feet. Every once in a while, both of them had to hop from the high ground to the lower ground, and then level out where they’d been standing before continuing with the rest of the hole.

Arico had dug a few holes back on the farm in Tellek patch, but he doubted anyone had ever even tried something like this before. The Sustained certainly had no reason to dig this close to the threads, and if they wanted to dig any further away, if they needed to dig out more dwellings most likely, they’d have to use more conventional methods.

The work was relaxing in some ways, and it gave Arico some time to think. As he rolled over the encounter in his mind, he realized he was less and less appalled at what Sabra had done back at the Spire. It was true that Sabra hadn’t *needed* to kill the guard in that particularly brutal way, but he had just been shot. And to be fair, he’d never received any formal combat training. Still, the look in Sabra’s eyes had been chilling. It was as if he’d just broken open a melon in his hands instead of a man’s head.

Abruptly, Arico realized they were pushing through more than just dirt and stones. They had reached the foundation of the city itself, put there by the builders of the city in the ancient past. There were several deep mines in the city, all of them in Sustained territory, but they all spread outwards far more than they went downwards. The two of them had already dug deeper than the deepest mine he’d seen.

That brought up another concern. “Uh, Alzhi, I’m going to start digging a ramp back up. Unless you want whoever comes down here to be stuck.”

“You… might want to see this first, actually.” Alzhi had just gone past the foundation into the soil beneath. He was staring down at the dirt and rock, his hand falling to his side.

The ground under his feet was definitely wet. The Waters seemed to be seeping in from the edges of the threads. As they watched, it pooled at their feet and slowly started to rise. Jaas had been right!

Grinning, Arico slapped Alzhi on the back. “Still think she’s nothing but dead weight?”

Alzhi gave him a wry look. “You can just shut up. Sir.” He started waving at the dwarves above them, inviting them to come down and see.

The Hauld made his way down with the help of one of the dwarven navigators, and they were ankle-deep by the time he did. As they watched, the Waters slowly rose past the foundation and finally came to a stop about two spans above it.

All of them just stood there, waist-deep, reveling in the sensation. Before long the Hauld was actually treading Waters, but not very successfully in his armor. Arico hurriedly threaded some stairs for him to stand on. It seemed the water had stopped rising at shoulder-depth. Well, shoulder-depth for a human, anyway.

“From what Jaas told us if we lower a bucket down here and fill it up, the Waters will rise back to this point every time,” Alzhi said slowly, still giving one of his rare smiles. “Unlike standing pools, we don’t need to worry about the Waters being tainted, either, unless some animal falls into the well and dies.”

“We should still boil it before we drink it though, just to be sure,” Arico said cautiously. Boiling had been a useful preventative measure in the past, because it purged anything in the Waters that could harm the drinker. “Not that I don’t believe her, but this could be the first time anyone has *ever* dug a well in the city. We don’t know what to expect.”

The Hauld reached up and a pair of his guards lifted him out of the Waters. In his excitement he’d apparently forgotten to remove his mail, which was still dripping. Arico and Alzhi shared an amused glance as he made a truly heroic effort to maintain his dignity.

“Good work, lads. This’ll be big fer our plans, an’ at tha Laentana itself.”

“Yes sir,” Arico looked up thoughtfully. “With your permission, I’ll see to adding it to our message.” The world spun around him suddenly, and he almost slipped underwater before Alzhi caught him.

“Nay, lad. Ye need ta res’. Ye’ve had a long day, an’ tomorrow’ll be even longer.” The Hauld took hold of him from the other side. For once, Arico didn’t want to argue the point. In addition to that dizzy spell, he *was* pretty wiped out. Saluting, he reached into the threads and went home to get some sleep.

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Chapter 18

*Bang!*

The wooden target splintered and broke apart. One of the dwarves grinned and started reloading, while his companions crowded around to examine the weapon. Jaas uncovered her ears and picked up the quill again.

*It seems the people here have developed a new kind of weapon. A metal tube of sorts, filled with a combustible substance they call sparkpowder. When they put a metal bullet inside and ignite the powder, the shape of the tube expels the bullet at great speeds—much faster than a simple sling bullet, or even a longbow’s arrow. The device itself seems to have several names: matchlock, flintlock, flametongue, or just plain gun. I’m certain that this is the same kind of weapon that injured Arico.*

*It’s fascinating, really. No one on the Outside has ever had much use for flammable powders. These flametongues would be useless compared to a well-placed fireball spell. And yet their design is ingenious. A properly designed gun could have range and accuracy far beyond any standard bow or crossbow. If they’re ever able to increase the size of the gun, to propel bigger metal projectiles, they might even be able to knock down walls and towers!*

She winced as another loud *bang* rang out, and thought back to her earlier encounters with the Sustained. *I’ve seen these weapons often, but didn’t know what they did. Had I known, I would have been a lot more afraid. The idea that a projectile can be launched at such a great speed that it could conceivably pass all the way* through *my body without even slowing down is disturbing to me.*

Jaas carefully looked back over her notes. Needle and thread used for healing. Aqueducts spread through dozens of different patches to distribute water. Now explosive powder used as a weapon? Time and again she’d been surprised by the marvels these people had invented without magic. Inventions they’d only achieved *because* they’d had no magic! And yet by comparison, a concept as simple as a well had apparently caused a great stir among them.

Arico had been sent off on another of his oh-so-important missions, but Alzhi and Durhu had come to bring her and Endu’s family back here. During the trip, they asked her dozens of questions about wells, including how best to dig and maintain them. Jaas only knew the basics of course; she was no farmer. She’d told them what she could.

Wherever ‘here’ was. It certainly wasn’t the Fishbowl, nor in the underground training area beneath it. They’d brought her inside a short, sturdy-looking building, and dwarven guards stood at all the doors. She’d seen walls at the edge of the patch as well, though they looked old and poorly maintained. At first Jaas had wondered what Endu and her two teenage boys were doing here, but then she realized they’d been brought back here for their own safety, and were being kept indoors for the same reason. Any navigator could look out from the threads at any time, and if the Sustained saw humans in a dwarven patch, unharmed, they’d know something was up.

Jaas mulled over the possibilities in her head. Endu had patched up Arico, after he’d first been injured, but then she’d returned to the village in Tellek patch. Then at the Ritual of the Waters, she and her boys had discreetly ignored Jaas and Arico in order to blend in with the others. Endu had hidden Jaas in her home briefly after the Rejoining. Was it possible that the Sustained had found out what Endu had done? Were they after her for helping Arico?

If so, Endu and the boys would most likely be moving into the Fishbowl like Jaas had. It looked like Jaas would have to give that puzzle box away sooner than she’d thought. That was fine, though. Jaas had spent an hour or two trying to solve it and open the box, but had eventually given up. She’d seen her share of blacksmith puzzles before, but they were nothing compared to the box itself. Codi Farrier was clearly a skilled blacksmith and designer.

The Fishbowlers had been welcoming and kind. Ansanah had been especially wonderful, helping her decorate her home in a comfortable manner, and her husband and son had shown up from time to time with her. Codi had dropped by once, with a gift of food. As before, he’d spent the next half hour talking about his niece and how wonderful she was.

To her credit, Endu seemed well at ease despite the walls around them. It seemed pretty clear that Endu was involved with the movement in some way. She’d probably been to the Enclave several times before. She was mixing sparkpowder in different quantities and purities, and had enlisted her sons to assist. They bored of it quickly though, and she eventually excused them to go play with the young dwarves at the other end of the hall.

A dwarven apothecary was present as well. Or a chemist, as he was called. Jass wasn’t completely familiar with all the new words here, but that one was easy. It was just a shortened version of alchemist. He carefully poured and tested each new variation of sparkpowder in turn. Such innovation! His methods were almost exactly the same as the magical experiments Jaas remembered back in the Academy with her peers.

There was some activity from across the room. Dwarves had spilled in from the training yard outside, and Endu’s boys were with them. Veles stayed with the dwarves and tried out some combat moves with them. As he tried to wrestle one of the taller dwarves, Sabra ducked into the building as well. He was able to stand in here, but not up to his full height. He watched Veles straining to put his opponent down with a barely visible smile on his scarred lips. Meanwhile the older brother had apparently noticed her, and was approaching.

“Lady Senneco,” Balter said, giving a deep bow. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you. I’ve looked forward to this ever since I first saw you grace our humble home back in Tellek patch.”

Jaas wasn’t sure what to make of this. His language was all out of place. Balter was a farmer, and he was only sixteen, but it was clear he was going out of his way to make a good impression on her. Slightly bemused, Jaas decided to play along. “Thank you for your warm welcome, Balter d’Endu,” she responded in the old Vasiri custom. He probably wouldn’t recognize the greeting, but it was the most formal thing she could think to call him. “And please, call me Jaas. I’ve never thought of myself as a lady anyway.”

“Of course, Jaas,” he said with a bit too much warmth in his voice. “May I join you?”

Jaas gestured to the seat next to her, and he wasted no time in sitting down, though he kept looking at her intently. “I’m told you’re from the Outside. You must have seen some incredible things out there. I’d love to hear about your adventures, if you’re willing. I’m sure my brother would want to listen as well,” he added, glancing critically over at Veles. “That is, if he can pay attention that long.”

“Another time, maybe.” Jaas said diplomatically, following his gaze. Veles was now sitting on the wooden floor of the large building, alone. The dwarves had mostly gone, and the remainder were sitting at the long tables on the far side, drinking together. Sabra took up an entire side of one of those tables, and had at least three mugs in front of him.

From what she could tell, Veles was staring down at the paneling of the floor with great interest, as if he was trying to figure out how it had been constructed. That made sense, actually. He’d spent his entire life in stra’tchi patches, where wooden floors were uncommon. Most of the buildings she’d seen back in Tellek had ranged between Arico’s simple log cabin, to stone and brick buildings on a rocky foundation, to the massive ugly brick factory in the middle of town. Even his own home had been stone and mortar.

“Actually, I’ve never been much of an adventurer either. Until I came here that is. But then, I’m sure you have a few stories of your own to tell,” she prompted Balter, hoping he’d stop staring at her and start talking about something else.

“Oh, yes,” he smiled broadly. “Have you heard of Ona?”

Jaas nodded fractionally. “I think I have. That’s a sport, right?”

“Only the best sport in the world,” he said excitedly. “There are teams all over the city, and huge tournaments happening all the time. Even in winter. In fact, there’s one happening at the Laentana itself!”

“Let me guess. You’ll be competing.”

“For the honor of Tellek patch,” he confirmed, sitting up a little taller with obvious pride. “I made our patch’s official team last year. The captain said I had real potential!”

Jaas smiled inwardly at that. In a village with fewer than two hundred people, an ‘official’ team had to be pretty small. Most likely Balter’s captain had been humoring him. Jaas listened offhand, as Balter began describing the game in detail.

It was clear that Ona wasn’t just a means to popularity for an already popular young man. It was also a passion of his—something he drew real meaning from. Despite his obvious excitement though, Jaas couldn’t quite get into the same spirit. Athletic challenges had never been that interesting to her, not even back at the Academy. Still, she was happy to listen to him ramble on about it, adding her own smiles and nods at appropriate points.

He was just getting into the intricacies of refereeing the games—what people could and couldn’t get away with—when his little brother spoke up from his own side of the room. “I challenge Sabra the Deathwatcher to an Earth Match!”

The entire room went dead silent. Even Balter shut up, looking at his brother in shock. Veles stood proudly extending his challenge through his stance. From what Jaas remembered, a Deathwatcher couldn’t refuse such a challenge. She’d seen Veles hanging around Sabra before, with a kind of hero-worshipping look on his face. No doubt he knew exactly what he was saying.

Sabra stood, pushing his chair back against the wall with a scraping noise. “How old is child?”

“Thirteen,” Veles responded defiantly. “But a Deathwatcher can issue a challenge at any age!”

Sabra snorted. “Child is not a Deathwatcher.”

“My name is Veles, and I should have been sent to the Deathwatch patch,” he insisted, and Balter shook his head, covering his eyes. Jaas spared him an amused look, but then refocused on the confrontation. Her memories of Arico’s Earth Match sprang back into mind, and she wondered what Veles could be thinking.

With a massive shrug, Sabra moved towards him. “Sabra will call child Bruise. Because when this is over, child will be covered with them.”

“When I *win*,” Veles countered, “you’ll name me a Deathwatcher. Deal?”

The dwarves stood up as well, and a few more who’d apparently been in the hallway outside joined them. Jaas and Balter moved a bit closer to see the fight—if it was to happen. “He’s been obsessed with Deathwatchers for years now,” Balter explained under his breath. “I never thought he’d be reckless enough to challenge one!”

“You could probably put a stop to this,” Jaas responded. “Sabra’s reasonable, for a Deathwatcher. He might let him go if you asked him respectfully.”

“Even if I did, Veles would never forgive me!” He paused, and a thoughtful look spread over his face. “My brother may be crazy, but he’s not stupid. He wouldn’t start a fight if he didn’t have at least a chance at winning.”

Frankly, Jaas couldn’t see *how.* Sabra was more than twice as tall as Veles—closer to three times, actually. He probably weighed eight or nine times as much. While Veles did look fit enough, being a farm kid, Jaas doubted he’d last more than a few seconds. And to win, he had to knock Sabra to the ground hard enough that he couldn’t rise!

Sabra nodded. “Very well. If child wins, Sabra names him Deathwatcher.” He stepped out into the middle of the wooden flooring, and Veles backed up a bit.

Jaas found that odd. Something didn’t feel right about the way they were standing. Veles didn’t look afraid, and he’d backed up intentionally, as if wanting something. While she tried to put her finger on it, one of the dwarves stepped up with a raised arm and lowered it between them.

Sabra moved just a bit closer, a mocking look on his face. Even as he approached though, Veles raised his right leg and stomped down on the floor as hard as he could. The wooden floorboard broke loose under his foot, and the longer end of it swung upwards, hitting Sabra right between the legs.

Jaas’ mind flashed back to Veles earlier, sitting on the wooden floor. He must have loosened the board then, and no one had noticed. Admirably, Sabra didn’t make even a sound, as virtually the entire room winced in sympathy. Even Veles looked grim, as he regained his footing and charged at the giant. He didn’t weigh much by comparison, but even his slight impact was enough to tip Sabra over onto the ground.

There he lay, clutching at his privates, his normally tanned face a noticeably paler shade. Veles stood and counted out to ten in front of everyone, and then leaned in towards Sabra. “You can name me later,” he said quietly.

Suddenly Jaas realized that Otrul had entered along with the other dwarves. He stepped forward, looking at Veles appraisingly, and then turned to the others. “An’ what have ye learned from this, eh?”

A rolling laugh spilled through the other dwarves. “Never let yer enemy pick tha battlefield!” One of them spoke up, and the others nodded in assent.

“Tha’s right!” Otrul said approvingly. “Yer ma’s lookin for ya, boy,” he said to Veles, and jerked his head to indicate the upstairs. Veles obligingly nodded and made for the door.

“I better go with him, in case he has any more crazy ideas,” Balter said disdainfully, but Jaas could hear the unmistakable pride in his voice as well. He took her hand in both of his. “If you need anything—anything at all—don’t hesitate to ask.” For a moment, Jaas was afraid he was going to kiss her hand, but he just bowed and left. She shook her head. A lover and a fighter. Endu must live a *very* interesting life indeed.

“Wait.”

The word was a bit strained, but loud enough. The boys paused at the entrance, and looked back again with everyone else. Sabra was standing up again, wincing. “Come here,” he ordered in a similarly pained voice. Veles smirked up at his brother and stepped back into the room, making his way surely and steadily over to Sabra.

Jaas felt a chill as she wondered what was going through Sabra’s mind. Was there some code of behavior Veles had broken? Was his cheap shot going to get him in more trouble than a defeat would have?

Sabra stood looking down at Veles for a moment, and then pulled a dagger from his belt. In one smooth motion he nicked his left palm, and then handed the dagger hilt-first to Veles. It was the size of a short sword to him by comparison, but that didn’t seem to bother Veles much. The boy did the same and they clasped hands together. Veles’ hand could barely wrap itself around a few of the giant’s fingers, but he didn’t seem put off by that. He held on firm, a triumphant look on his face, as blood dripped on the floor from both of them.

“As Deathwatcher, Sabra recognizes a brother. As warrior, Sabra recognizes a comrade. As exile, Sabra recognizes one who was lost. Sabra calls on all Deathwatchers to see, now, that this warrior has earned the right.” It was a meaningless statement, given that he was the only Deatwatcher there, but Jaas supposed the ritual was specific and unyielding.

The giant took a deep breath, and then continued. “Sabra names you a Deathwatcher, Veles. Let none question that in the days to come.”

The dwarves immediately started clapping, and Jaas joined in after a moment. Balter was clapping too, even as he shook his head. Jaas didn’t quite understand the importance of this moment, but she could tell a momentous occasion when she saw one.

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A few hours later, Jaas found herself working alongside Endu at one of the chemist tables. Endu was no doubt there for her expertise, and Jaas out of pure curiosity. From what Jaas had been told, sparkpowder was perfectly safe as long as no one lit up a fire. Still, she preferred to keep her hair and eyebrows intact. Jaas had seen some of the dwarves sporting some interesting-looking burns.

Jaas related what had happened down below, and Endu nodded knowingly. Apparently her sons were well known in Tellek patch for both traits respectively. Balter used his skill with sports to get attention, and had learned to be quite charming when it came to the women back home. In contrast, Veles really had been obsessed with the Deathwatchers since he’d been a child. Apparently he’d almost been picked as a Deathwatcher during his Rejoining, but hadn’t quite made the cut. Ever since, he’d used that as a drive to be the strongest—or in this case the most inventive—fighter he could be.

That reminded Jaas of the other Rejoining, which she had witnessed. “That girl, Pelo. Is she all right?”

“She will be,” Endu assured her. “I wrapped her shoulder up with birch leaves. They’ll deaden the pain and hold off infection.” Her eyes were lost in memory for a moment. “They did the same for me when I was little.”

Jaas shook her head. The word *infection* was new to her as well. In the outside world, wounds often festered and got worse over time without magical intervention, but she’d never really understood why until she’d had a chance to talk to one of the dwarven healers here. Apparently, the world was teeming with living creatures that were far too small for the eye to see. They could enter open wounds and begin multiplying, causing swelling and rot. These healers (apparently including Endu) had found a number of materials that could kill these creatures and prevent such infections. Strangely enough, strong drink was one of those materials, which explained why Endu had used it on Arico just after he’d been shot.

Jaas never would have believed it if she hadn’t seen these creatures herself. The dwarven apothecaries had shown her a device made of glass lenses set on top of each other, capable of magnifying objects hundreds of times their original size. Jaas had her own magnifying glass, wherever her pack was now, but she never would have considered combining them. It was simply another miraculous device: apparently invented by Endu herself. Perhaps that was why the Sustained were after her.

The threads themselves were often used for medical purposes. According to Endu, if a navigator brought someone inside, and then extended a part of their body out of the threads, the person inside could study what their flesh and bones looked like. Endu seemed quite knowledgeable about how the body worked, despite not being a navigator herself. Until navigators had started using that method, it had been necessary to dig up the dead and study their remains. On the Outside, Jaas’ people simply relied on magic to keep people healthy. When Arico had been shot, Jaas had found the stitching process fascinating, but there was no need for that kind of study back home.

Now that she was able to open them up on the chemist’s table, Jaas could see the inner workings of each gun. Each one’s metal tube was straight as an arrow, of course, as it would have to be. Jaas looked down it before handing it over to the nearby dwarf. “Have you tried cutting curved grooves on the inside of the tube?”

The dwarf shook his head. “There dinnae be any reason for tha’. Tha tube needs ta be straight all tha way, or it’ll break open as soon as it’s shot.”

“No, nothing that deep. Just enough to get the bullet to spin as it leaves. When I throw my—uh, ball, it always goes faster if it spins.” Jaas smiled nervously.

She’d been about to say ‘throw her spells’, some of which were a lot like projectiles, but she doubted it would mean much to them. “For that matter, the bullets will move faster if they’re shaped like ovals and not spheres. If you can get them to fill the entire tube, that is. If not, you’ll just blow a bunch of fire out the end of it when you light the powder.”

“Hm.” The dwarf looked through the tube curiously. “Ye may be on ta somethin’, lass. I’ll look into it.” He took the gun past the shooting range, back into what Jaas assumed was a forge.

“We’ve never had to shoot very far here,” Endu said thoughtfully. “Not with buildings everywhere. Still, you never know. If that idea of yours pans out we might get better range on these. Glad to see you’re getting into the spirit of things.”

“Thanks.” Jaas started pouring powder with her. “So how did the dwarves invent these things in the first place?”

“From what Alzhi told me it was mostly by accident. Charcoal and saltpeter are everywhere, of course, and they had a supply of sulfur from the old mine on the south end of the Enclave. Almost a hundred years ago, a chemist named Ulrog Stoneheart nearly blew up his forge by accident when a supply of sulfur happened to spill into his fire. Stoneheart recreated the accident and eventually managed to refine the first packets of sparkpowder. Finally the old Hauld had it turned into a weapon, and after a few years sold it to the Sustained.”

That was surprising. “Why would they do that? I thought they hated the Sustained. Why give up such a big advantage?”

Endu shrugged. “I don’t know exactly. It all happened long before I was born. They used guns at first to show the Ascendant Guards what they were up against. Then they offered them in exchange for territory, including a piece of the Waters themselves. One of the dwarven patches borders the Waters now.”

“Ahh, so that’s how the dwarves have stayed independent. Because the dwarves have as much water as they need, the Sustained can’t control them like they do everyone else. That must have been *some* negotiation.”

Endu nodded “Alzhi says they have records of it in Penntu patch. I’d like to see them someday. Perhaps if we live long enough, we’ll get that chance.”

Jaas gave her a sidelong glance. “Alzhi tells you a lot, doesn’t he? Are you two close?”

“You could say that. We’re married.” Endu kept her face deadpan.

She kept working, but must have seen Jaas’s startled expression out of the corner of her eye, because the ghost of a smile touched her lips.

“We first met when I was a child,” Endu started explaining before Jaas could ask. Her smile stayed, though. “For my Rejoining, just before I was sent to Tellek patch. I was four, and he was sixteen. On his very first trip outside Sustained territory.”

It made sense that the Sustained got their navigators working early. In most nations around the world people were considered adults at sixteen, but children—especially boys—often had to shoulder real burdens starting as early as twelve or thirteen. Patchwork was apparently no exception. Arico had been about sixteen when he’d run off to be with that Sustained lady.

One thing didn’t add up though. “You were four? I thought everyone gets tested at age three.”

“Most people do, but I was a slow learner as a child. I never could quite keep up with the other children, so the Sustained agreed to delay my test until I was ready for it. It’s one of my first memories, actually: Alzhi sitting me down inside that brick hut and asking me questions.”

Endu sighed. “After that I was branded and sent to Tellek patch. I didn’t think I’d ever see him again, and it was almost twenty years before I did. By then Balter was six years old, and Veles was three. I took them in after they were branded, and raised them with a little help from my neighbors. Now, I can’t imagine my world without them.”

Endu smiled slightly and leaned back away from the table. “But try to picture this: there I was twenty-three years old with two little boys on either side of me, listening to the penet’s sermon. And there standing next to him was this newly assigned Sustained navigator, tall and strong. Looking almost *exactly* as he had when I was little.”

Jaas listened with interest, trying to envision the scene. “Was he bald then?”

Endu laughed lightly. “No, only Ascendant senior navigators have to shave their heads completely. He had a full head of hair back then, sandy-brown. I didn’t think he’d recognize me; it had been so long. But the moment he looked at me, it was plain he knew me. He still had that gentleness and kindness in his face, things that most Sustained would never show one of us. I think we fell in love right then and there.”

She took a deep breath and her voice sobered a little. “We had to keep it a secret, though. He would have lost his rank if word got out, and I probably would have been killed. Sex with a stra’tchi; what a scandal!”

Gentleness and kindness? From Alzhi? Jaas had difficulty believing that. Endu was most likely seeing only what she wanted to see. Still, she had married the man. She was in a better position to know him than Jaas would ever be. “And no one knows? Even after all this time?”

“No one outside the Enclave but the boys, Arico, and Durhu. And now you.” She gave a long look over at the guards by the door. “I know the dwarves aren’t very inviting, but they’re good people. Very loyal to their friends, even if we had to earn that loyalty.” Endu kept on talking about her past, as if a set of floodgates had been opened to let the words out. It was clearly something she needed to share, so Jaas did her best not to interrupt.

“That was about ten years ago, now. Six years ago Alzhi started passing information to the Hauld, and I eventually started working with them on chemistry and medicine.” Endu grimaced. “It wasn’t easy to convince them, either. Alzhi had to give them information for *months* before they even agreed to meet with us! It was years before the Hauld started relying on either of us. Eventually we were married in dwarven territory by one of their goti priests. The boys were our witnesses.”

Jaas waited for a moment, but it seemed she was done. “Was it the Hauld who told Arico that you and Alzhi were rebels? Resistance fighters? Whatever it is you call yourselves.” Jaas was still having difficulty classifying this movement. It seemed to fit in many categories.

“We just call it the movement,” she clarified with a smile. “And no. I told him myself, years ago.”

Jaas looked over at her in surprise. “But why take the risk? For all you knew he might have gone to the magistrate in Tellek patch.”

Endu shook her head. “I knew he wouldn’t. I had just found out that he was a navigator, so I could have turned him in as well. I decided to do what my father taught me. To share trust with him, so that he could return it. I told him everything so that he knew he could trust me as well. It wasn’t easy to make that leap, but it ended up being well worth it.”

“Is that why you and Alzhi are here in the Enclave? To share trust with the dwarves?” Endu had clearly earned the dwarves’ respect, but Jaas suspected that she had another reason for being here.

Endu didn’t look at her. She just kept pouring small amounts of sparkpowder. Her hand had started to tremble, and her eyes wandered over to the training grounds.

Jaas followed her gaze. Off in the distance Veles was wrestling with one of the dwarven trainees, trying to pin him to the ground, while Balter cheered him on. Veles was taller, but the dwarf was older and stronger, so it made for a good match.

The boys.

Like a rush of cold water down her back, Jaas finally put it together. They’d both reached out to the dwarves six years ago… four years after they fell in love. “You and Alzhi had a child, didn’t you? And then the Sustained took that child away!”

Endu nodded, and wiped at her eyes. “My little girl. Satya.”

Without even thinking about it, Jaas wrapped her arms around the older woman. “And you want her back. No wonder you do this!”

For a moment Endu gripped her tightly, before stepping back and wiping at her eyes again. Her voice turned back to its old businesslike tone as she went back to pouring powder. “I know it’s a risk, but it has to be done. At least I know that if anything happens to me and Alzhi, the dwarves will look after the boys. Sometimes working with the movement is all that keeps me from going mad. Especially when Alzhi is gone for weeks on end, undercover.”

Jaas could only imagine. She was no soldier, but she’d seen the sacrifices the people here had made. Endu had given up a *lot* to be here. “But Alzhi’s a navigator. Couldn’t he track your daughter down, and bring you to her?”

“He did find her,” Endu responded quietly, her voice rasping a bit. “But it was too late. It was the middle of winter, and Satya had a weak chest. She came down with pneumonia—a… sickness of the lungs—just after they took her away. It spread quickly, and she died before either of us could see her again.”

“Oh, Endu. I’m so sorry.”

Jaas didn’t know what to say. She knew her words were trite and useless. She’d never had children; her focus on work had always eclipsed any chance of that. How could she possibly understand Endu’s pain?

“I see her in the sha’haln sometimes, you know,” Endu said softly. “But she’s older than I remember. She’s playing with the boys, and they’re teaching her how to play Ona. Sometimes I’m there, teaching her how to-” she cut off abruptly, and turned away. Her shoulders shook for a moment, like a kind of silent sobbing.

Jaas put a hand on her shoulder. “You don’t have to talk about it.”

“No. I’m sorry. I want to.” Endu wiped her eyes and turned back. “I see myself teaching her how to be a healer. How to use a mortar and pestle to grind herbs. I see… Alzhi teaching her how to navigate. Sometimes I can see her entire life before me! She would have been so much better than me. So much greater.”

Her shoulders stiffened again, and her face faded back to its usual norm as she got back to work. “I know you’re sorry, Jaas. But not as sorry as the people who took her will be.”

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Chapter 19

The flickering candlelight was a poor substitute for a steady, strong lighting spell, but it was all she had. It was well before dawn, so Jaas needed it.

*The day has arrived,* she carefully wrote in the darkness. *The New Day, rather. Dwarves all over the Enclave are bustling around, preparing for the celebration to come. I’ve helped in what little ways I could, but mostly I’ve just tried to not get in the way.*

*I’ve had a chance to learn a little more about the New Day system. Just after the threads first became invisible, people started to pay attention to the Outside as best they could. From then on the images would update themselves every three months, showing a ‘new day’ each time. It’s no surprise that they made a series of holidays out of it.*

Jaas took a break as she noticed Endu leave one of the stout dwarven buildings carrying an armful of colored paper. She hesitated at first, thinking about what Endu had told her the other day, and put quill to parchment again.

*I find myself having a hard time maintaining emotional detachment. Of course that was inevitable, given my isolation from my peers, but I was unprepared for the degree of difference here. The people in this resistance movement have suffered greatly at the hands of the Sustained. I’ve decided to help them, but not out of self-preservation or a desire to get out of the city. It’s strange, but for the first time in my life I actually feel drawn to a cause. And a political cause at that! It’s not scientific or practical, and I know I’m too emotionally compromised to be a reliable researcher right now.*

*Of course I’ll continue to record as much as I can,* she promised herself in writing, *but if any of my colleagues get the chance to read this, please be aware of my bias.*

Just as she had back on the riverbank when she’d first arrived in the city, Jaas found herself a little short of breath. Emotional detachment was the lifeblood of a scientist’s methodology, regardless of their field of study. She’d never even heard the word ‘scientist’ before coming here, but she was one regardless. Just a scientist who studied magic first and foremost. Even so, without that emotional detachment even rational and intelligent people were almost guaranteed to produce flawed results. Sometimes without even knowing it. She had just walked away from one of the most important principles she’d ever had, and she barely even felt bad about it!

Jaas shook her head to clear it, and looked around. Endu and Arico were helping the dwarves to hang painted banners over the designated field, and prepare the light show for later that night. It was still more than an hour before dawn, but even in the dimness she could see people’s eyes shining with excitement. Everyone except Sabra, it seemed.

He didn’t look upset either though, as Jaas rolled up her parchment and scooted over next to him on the hill overlooking the party grounds. For all she knew he’d never even attended a New Day party. Or Laentana actually, as this one was called. A celebration of the spring.

“I heard the dwarves hold a drinking contest in the evening of each New Day,” she broke the ice quietly, as they watched the ale barrels being rolled out onto the field. “I doubt most men could hold their own against the dwarves, but maybe you could. Want to give it a shot?”

Sabra snorted in response and scratched at the dressing on his shoulder. “Not fair to the dwarves. Sabra weighs a lot more than them.”

“Maybe take a handicap then? You take three drinks every time they take one?”

He grunted a laugh at her suggestion. “Still not a fair fight.”

Jaas shifted her seat, trying to get more comfortable. “You’re probably right. I bet Arico will have them save a few barrels for you though. Just in case.”

Sabra stretched out his uninjured arm, and his spine *popped* several times as he arched his back and yawned. “Sabra wishes to join pretty lady in the human celebration, but can’t. This celebration especially,” he added with a strange look on his face.

Given her own reaction when she’d first met him, Jaas could understand his frustration. A lot of people would no doubt be afraid of him if he turned up for the Laentana. “Don’t worry, Sabra. It won’t be this way forever.”

“Little man is good at bringing people together, but Sabra is better at doing the other thing,” he said softly, and his hands clenched. “Sabra knows little man is building a better future,” Sabra went on, his frustration was starting to show a little. “Sabra just wishes it would hurry up and get here. Sabra can’t go back to the Deathwatchers, not anymore. Not with what Sabra knows is out here now.”

It must have been something like Arico’s longing for the Outside world, back on the top of that tower. Now that Sabra had seen a bit more of Patchwork, there was no way he could return to his old life. It would be like stuffing a butterfly back into its cocoon. Or in Sabra’s case, a killer bee.

“Sabra, why do you talk like that? Why do you never use people’s names? Other than when you named Veles, I’ve never heard you call anyone by name.”

Sabra grinned. “Sabra does sometimes. But never when they can hear. Sabra can’t risk little man getting a big head.”

“Oh? So do you use my name at all?” She asked, amused.

Sabra reached over and patted her on the head with a gnarled hand. “Aww. Pretty lady thinks Sabra talks about her when she’s not around. That’s just adorable.” Jaas stuck her tongue out at him.

A few minutes later, Arico and Nemith had arrived from the Fishbowl. “Everyone listen up,” Arico said to the humans and dwarves assembled, as well as Sabra. “Up until now, everything we’ve done for the movement has been passive. Reversible. Deniable. But today all of that will change. We’re almost to the point of no return. Some of you,” he nodded at the dwarves, “are here because your lord ordered you to be here. I want you to know how grateful I am for your help, even if it wasn’t by choice. As for the rest of you,” he turned to the Fishbowlers, to Endu, and to Jaas. “I want to give you one final chance to back out. We can send you away, and the Council will have no proof that you were ever involved with the movement at all.”

He took a deep breath. “There would be no shame in backing out. Some of you have families to think of, both here and in other patches. I wouldn’t blame any of you for choosing to protect them. All the same, if you are going to make that choice, the time is right now.”

A soft silence spread over the group, and Jaas could see people exchanging glances. A sort of cold feeling spread through her at the thought of what was to come. She wasn’t a warrior, or a revolutionary—she was just a scholar! Did she really have what it would take to be a part of this movement?

Then with a rustle of grass, Sabra stood up. He grimaced a little, and gave a rueful glance at Veles, before speaking. “Sabra stands with little man. We all have much to gain with the new city little man will help to build. Besides, Sabra never runs from a fight, especially before it even starts!”

“Hear hear!” Nemith seconded him, and Endu’s boys joined in. Jaas felt herself going along with it, and before long all the non-dwarves had given their assent as well. Arico raised a hand to quiet them.

“I’m honored,” he said, his voice cracking a little, “and I’ll try to make you proud. Now let’s go. We’ve got a lot of work to do, so let’s get to it.”

The group broke into several directions. As usual, Jaas could only guess as to what most of them were up to. Arico started moving towards the tunnel that eventually met the threads, but Jaas caught his eye, and he turned to face her. Nemith started to approach as well, but Arico held up a hand, keeping him away at first.

“I know you’ll want to attend the Laentana,” he told her with a smile. “You’ll want to document everything you see, of course. But you’ll have to take notes in your head. No one there will know how to read or write, so you can’t either.”

“I understand,” Jaas responded. “I take it you won’t be coming along?”

“I have my own task in there,” he said evasively, “but they’d recognize me anyway. At least you’ll be safe. Your hair has grown out since they last saw you, and with the right disguise no one will even give you a second glance.” He extended a hand, and Nemith came closer. “I asked Nemith to go with you. He’ll be your guide for the Laentana.”

“Don’t worry,” Nemith put in. “I’ll try not to act like a babysitter.”

Jaas nodded trustingly. She’d suspected that the resistance movement would use the celebration somehow, and it seemed Arico was right in the thick of their plan. “Whatever you’re up to, good luck.” On impulse, she leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek.

“Thanks.” Arico looked surprised at first, but then gave her a brief bow and headed down the tunnel and out of sight.

Nemith didn’t give her much time to worry about him, though. “Arico didn’t mention this, but you should probably know. I’m not just coming along as a guide. If you’re recognized, or if things turn violent, you’ll need me to escape as well.”

“You’re a navigator?” Jaas asked, surprised.

Nemith nodded. “As is my son. Dwarven navigators will be useful in the months to come, but people like Arico, Alzhi, and myself… we’ll be *essential*. You’ll see why soon enough. Now come on. We’ve got places to be.”

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According to Nemith, all four patches set aside for the Laentana were completely clear of structures on the edges of the threads. As a result, the only way to get in safely was the same way everyone else got in: officially. Apparently the Sustained were few enough in number that they could all celebrate the Laentana in one single patch, but there were far too many stra’tchi for that. They would attend a ceremony at dawn, but then they would split off into two separate patches for the rest of the day.

Nemith led her down the same passage Arico had taken, so they could leave the Enclave without being spotted. Jaas found it unlikely that people would be watching this deep into dwarven territory, but she could understand why they didn’t want to take chances anyway. When he put out the torch and took her into the threads, she found a similar view as before. Apparently Nemith represented himself as a beetle inside the threads. Jaas decided not to comment, though she did examine him closely during the trip.

Their first stop was another farming patch. It looked similar to Tellek, but on a different side of the city; it was a patch full of rolling hills. A strange circular building had been set up on the far end, painted completely white. That must have been the monastery she’d been told about.

Nemith led her a bit to the west behind an old barn for privacy’s sake, and then reached into his pocket and retrieved a pair of small flesh-colored discs, each about half a hand in diameter. He also produced a vial containing some kind of clear fluid.

“Watch closely,” he instructed, and Jaas leaned in to get a better look.

Nemith opened the vial and extracted some of the clear stuff with a finger. He then spread it out on his left shoulder, before carefully positioning the disc on his arm. He held it there firmly, his knuckles going white, for about a minute. “Each stra’tchi has such a mark, as I’m sure you know,” he explained. “It’s not easy, but the dwarves—and Durhu, I guess—found a way to fake a convincing shoulder brand. The tricky part is getting it to stay on. Even the best glue has problems working on skin, but this stuff is pretty strong. It should keep for several days, so we can go to the Laentana and blend in.” He removed his hand and inspected his shoulder with a smile, at the same time clearing off his finger in the grass. “How does it look?”

“I would have a hard time telling,” Jaas said truthfully. She hadn’t really studied skin art or scars before coming to the city, so her experience was limited. There were some mages who scribed their spells right into their flesh, but she’d never met any of them.

She obligingly stayed still as he applied the adhesive to her shoulder, and then put on her own fake scar. She appreciated how exactly the hue matched her skin tone. Arico must have helped them with the details. When Nemith was done, she moved her shoulder experimentally. It felt a little tight, but not uncomfortable.

“We’re lucky this is the first New Day in the year,” he continued as he examined the edges. “It’s still chilly, so we won’t need to worry about sweating it off. Even so, we’ll need to be careful not to rub up against anything. If anyone asks, your name is Yaalo and you’re from Telledin patch. I doubt anyone will, though. There will be a great many people there.”

“Every stra’tchi in the city, right?”

Nemith smiled faintly as he stood back to his full height and stretched. “Every adult stra’tchi at least. The opening ritual requires silence, so the children are already being navigated to where the celebrations will happen. Once we’re done, we’ll join them there. This Laentana may be slightly different than usual, though,” he added cryptically. By then it had been almost an hour since Arico’s farewell. Streaks of light were crisscrossing the sky as heralds of the coming dawn.

Despite the lingering chill from the night air, Jaas wasn’t allowed a coat. All she had was a simple brown tunic, cut off at the shoulders. According to Nemith, no one was allowed to wear long sleeves for any New Day party. Apparently it was so that the navigators could tell exactly where people were from, just by seeing the brand on their shoulders. It was a good thing she’d been training with the dwarves so often and so early. She was used to shivering her way through early mornings.

Just like the Ritual of Waters back in Tellek, the villagers here were gathering together and plodding their way towards the nearest thread. Not all of them, though. Several women were staying back and waving goodbye to the rest. Jaas didn’t ask why, but she could see that at least two of them were with child. Perhaps pregnancy and moving through the threads didn’t mix well. According to Arico, infants could go into the threads safely, but they appeared as nothing more than glowing orbs of light once inside. Only when they were old enough to have a sense of self did they appear as anything else.

Jaas and Nemith waited until almost all of them had passed before following, she assumed to minimize the chance of them being noticed as strangers. Eventually they were close enough to the threads to see the navigator.

He was just a kid, really, blinking and bleary-eyed in the dimness. He was keeping an arm through the threads, just as Alzhi had done back in Tellek. He took one glance at their ‘brands’ and extended a hand to them. Nemith took it, still holding onto Jaas, and suddenly they were somewhere else!

The trip had taken no time at all. There had been no empty white room, no window in space to view where they were going, and no indication of what the young man’s internal self looked like. Then Jaas remembered: back at Ritual of Waters, Alzhi hadn’t needed any time to transport stuff through the threads. He’d just touched something and it had vanished. Jaas guessed that if a navigator was connected to two points at once through the threads, instantaneous travel was just a normality.

Looking back, Jaas was amused to see the young navigator’s arm just hanging out of thin air after Nemith let go of it. His wasn’t the only one, either. All along the east-west thread, people were appearing next to the threads while holding hands with some unseen navigator, and then letting go and leaving the arms just floating there.

As she turned around, the sight of the patch itself was just a bit more impressive. The entire patch seemed to be almost completely clear of buildings. Even the city wall on the far east side had been torn down, and she could see the sky beyond. The hill before them was paved with close-knit cobblestones in a sort of shallow stairway. The stairs sloped downwards towards the coming sunrise, but not too steeply. And congregating on those cobblestones, slowly and orderly, were thousands—no, *tens* of thousands—of people.

With a crowd this big, she expected to be deafened by the noise, but there was only a low rumbling of soft voices. Perhaps it was because of how early it was, or maybe it was the solemn nature of whatever ritual they were about to start. Just as Nemith had said, no one younger than twelve or thirteen could be seen at all. There was an unusual concentration of people at the back of the crowd, towards the west end of the patch. Jaas steered her way in that direction to get a better look, and Nemith followed closely.

It was Sabra!

He was just standing there a few spans from the western edge, surrounded by nervous-looking Sustained guards. Apparently the myth surrounding him had spread far and wide, because people all around him were whispering to each other about the Deathwatch Monster. As Jaas watched, Sabra flicked the end of his hair at a passing woman, causing her to jump and flinch away from him. He laughed, and the guards all clenched their weapons in response.

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Chapter 20

“I thought Sabra couldn’t be here,” she whispered to Nemith, who looked just as surprised as she felt.

“He’s a citizen of Patchwork,” he answered slowly. “Deathwatchers can attend the New Day if they want, but they almost never do. Besides, he’s done nothing criminal as far as they know. They couldn’t deny him passage here, but they’ll probably keep him under guard just to be safe.”

Jaas could only wonder what Arico was thinking, letting Sabra come here. From the looks he was getting, the crowd were both afraid of and fascinated by him. It was understandable, given that none of them had ever seen even a dwarf, much less a legendary giant.

People slowly condensed into the center of the patch, stopping once they couldn’t get any closer to the middle. The steps on the hill were shallow and about five hands apart from each other, each one stretching almost completely from north to south. Judging by the sheer numbers of people still arriving here, by the time everyone had arrived the crowd would probably fill up the entire patch! Nemith moved with the crowd, taking up position a little to the right of the midline, and relatively close to the front. Jaas followed, doing her best not to bump into anyone before sitting down. Then she noticed the altar in front of the crowd.

It was situated right next to the threads, directly in the audience’s line of sight but a fair distance away from them. Either made entirely of gold, or at least gold-plated, it stood out in the rising light. No doubt when the sun had risen high enough, it would shine to the entire crowd.

Disturbed, Jaas thought back over some of the stories of human sacrifice in old Vasiriah. Had the people of Patchwork brought back the old ways? Was that why all the children were waiting for them in another patch? She hoped the altar was just some kind of symbol, not to be used.

Off to the left a good distance, a navigator arrived with a pair of priests in white. They slowly walked towards the altar as the navigator left just as suddenly. As they approached, the entire crowd stood up, growing quiet. Jaas stood as well, feeling a growing sense of premonition in the back of her mind. Something important was about to happen.

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Arico floated in the threads, trying to balance his distractions. His stomach was doing backflips as he recited his words again and again, trying to remember every one. He knew that it was actually his *mind* doing backflips, because his stomach technically didn’t exist right now, but it was still unpleasant. At least he had privacy here. He repeated his words again, one last time. Brevity is the soul of wit, he’d heard, but in this case it would also be necessary.

The roiling chaos of white flowed all around him, beckoning and tugging at his attention as it always did. There were stories of navigators who had lost themselves to that hypnotic motion, never to leave the threads. The same fate had befallen people who’d gone to sleep inside the threads. No sign of them had been seen again, despite large searches being arranged.

From his viewpoint into the New Day square, he was staring at… well, everyone. He could see the entire crowd from here, just over the altar. He’d even been able to pick Jaas and Nemith out of the crowd. Nemith had wisely situated them a good ways back for safety. Good man. He wasn’t privy to the whole plan, but he’d probably guessed a good bit of it.

There didn’t seem to be any guards near the stage, either. It seemed Sabra was just as interesting to them as Arico had hoped. He allowed himself a moment of smugness. It had been a good idea after all.

A tiny white edge of string extended from the ground in front of him, *just* shy of the threads. Arico had covered it in a thin layer of dirt to hide it, but he knew it extended forward and underneath the altar where it was connected to a tinder twig. Which in turn was inside the crate he and Sabra had stolen from Sevvas patch.

A crate full of tightly wrapped packages of sparkpowder.

The High Penet had arrived with one of his acolytes to the right, and the crowd had stood in unison for the opening speech. Taking a deep breath, Arico reached out of the threads as they approached and gave the string a hard pull. About a second later the altar exploded.

The blast itself was nothing short of perfection. It had better be—Arico had spent several hours the night before burying the crate in just the right position, while Alzhi had covered for him and made sure no one interrupted. As the altar came apart in midair, its pieces were hurled up and away from the crowd, back into the threads. Arico instinctively winced as the storm of shrapnel and debris rushed at him, but he was perfectly safe. It was all threaded just before it reached him.

The altar had been far enough away from the crowd that they were safe from the blast, but the High Penet and his acolyte were less fortunate. The shockwave had taken them both off their feet, slamming them to the ground with brutal force.

Threads couldn’t carry sound, so Arico couldn’t hear the explosion, but its effects on the crowd were obviously stunning. The nearest people had clearly screamed as they flinched away from it.

He waited a few seconds and then stepped out, right behind where the altar had stood. “Citizens of Patchwork!” He called out as loudly as he could to the crowd. “Don’t be afraid. I’m not here to harm anyone. Even those who deserve it most, like your High Penet.” Arico spared a contemptuous glance for the High Penet and his aide. “He who would force himself on innocent children in the name of serving Aquun!”

A shocked noise rippled through the closest sections of the crowd. The High Penet’s taste for little boys was something of an open secret in Sustained territory, but it would probably surprise the stra’tchi.

“But he’s not the only monster living in Patchwork,” Arico continued, looking back at the crowd. “My name is Arico, and I’m here to tell you the vile truth! The High Penet and his colleagues; the Sustained Council and their Lord Ascendant, all of them have been lying to us for our entire lives! Manipulating us, controlling us, and using us for their own ends!”

He took a second to let that sink in. Off to the sides in the distance, he could see Sustained guards moving his way. He was safe for now, though. The crowd was very thick, and it extended in both directions almost right up to the threads themselves. Thanks to Sabra’s distracting presence most of the guards were too far away to matter, but he wouldn’t have long before the nearest ones pushed their way through the crowd and reached him.

Some of them were certainly navigators, but he wasn’t concerned about that either. Even if they got to the nearest threads, it would take them time to figure out exactly where to exit the threads close enough to reach him. Just like weight, distance meant pretty much nothing when it came to navigating.

“They’ve taken our children away from us!” He continued to the crowd. “But it’s not to keep bloodlines apart as they claim, and it’s not to protect us from the Blood Fever! They do it to protect *themselves*! They know that *anyone* can be born a navigator, not just the Sustained children. I stand before you all as proof of this. I was raised in a farming patch! That’s why they hide the children away in brick buildings for the test itself: so they can keep us from seeing that their *test* is nothing but a sham! They’ve taken the Waters for themselves too, turning a sacred gift from Aquun into a *commodity* that they can withhold from us whenever they want!”

He stopped for a moment, trying not to look in Jaas’ direction. The Hauld had encouraged him to mention one last thing, in light of their recent digging project. “They’ve even manipulated what we know, hiding our true history from us so they could better control us!”

He poured intensity into his voice. “Some of you already knew this, deep in your bones. You’ve seen for yourself just what the Council does. What they are. And you all felt the tremor: the threads have been breached and a visitor from the Outside has come here to Patchwork at last. I’ve had the chance to learn from her, and now I know just how deeply we’ve been deceived! In the coming days I will share that knowledge with you… if you have the courage to listen!”

The nearest guard finally managed to push his way past the crowd to get a clear shot, and drew his matchlock. As he took aim, Arico lifted his arms as if to embrace the crowd and stepped backwards into the threads.

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The crowd erupted into chatter as the Sustained guards converged on where the altar had been. Frightened voices overlapped each other in ever-increasing volume across the entire patch. Jaas knew how they felt. She’d expected *something* to happen, just not anything so eye-catching.

The people around them were all talking at once, but she was able to pick out bits and pieces of the conversations. Something about a prophecy, and a harbinger? Whatever it was, it had a lot of people worried.

Suddenly she realized they were in a precarious situation here. “Why aren’t we leaving?” She asked Nemith.

“It’s safer here,” he assured her. “They’ll be looking for both you and Arico again, but they don’t know what you look like now. It’s best to stay put and just be faces in the crowd.”

Of course he was right. It had been almost a month since she’d arrived in the city. Her skin was still darker than most people here, but her hair had grown, and with Endu’s help she’d braided it to match one of the local styles. All the same, she felt very exposed here. They had no weapons, and probably no help from the crowd if they were discovered.

Up ahead, another penet had arrived and was trying to calm the crowd down. Arico’s speech was a tough act to follow, it seemed. It took the poor man a while to get the people’s attention and keep it.

The High Penet and his assistant had apparently survived the sparkpowder explosion, and were being taken away by a few of the guards and a navigator. Arico had timed the blast expertly. He’d destroyed the evil symbol, carefully avoided killing anyone in the process, and had a chance to speak to every stra’tchi in the city, all in one stroke! It was brilliant. She briefly wondered who had come up with the idea.

Apparently, the Sustained had decided not to cancel the Laentana. The new penet gave a brief speech about not letting hatred and violence poison people against the spirit of celebration, and concluded that the day should continue as planned.

Hatred and violence. Jaas could almost feel the contempt from the crowd over that. Even the ones closest to the blast could probably remember Arico’s message being neither hateful nor violent. It had been a wake-up call to them, and Jaas could tell a lot of people had heard it loud and clear.

The crowd dispersed, splitting up into two roughly equal groups as they returned to the navigators waiting for them. Jaas couldn’t see Sabra anymore, either. Hopefully that was a good sign.

As she took Nemith’s hand and they reached one of the navigators, Jaas couldn’t help but wonder what new move Arico had planned for her. He’d mentioned her to the entire city. Like it or not, she was now *deeply* embedded in this revolution of his.

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Part 2: The Impetus of Change

Chapter 21

The marble halls were bustling with activity. Messengers and dignitaries alike moved quickly and with purpose into and out of the Council chambers. On the far side of the room closest to the window, Berilo stood at his usual spot and glared down at the various reports that had arrived concerning the Laentana.

One of his guard captains approached him hesitantly. “My liege…”

“Spit it out, Turos. It’s not as if this day could get any worse.”

“It’s, uh, Lord Tanner, my liege. He’s ordered his men to begin another search of the city. They’re deploying as we speak.”

“*What?*” He barked the word, and Turos flinched. “No, call them back right now. We need every man we can get at the Laentana patches. Don’t worry; I’ll take responsibility with Tanner.”

Turos gave a respectful bow and hurried out. Growling, Berilo resisted the urge to pace around the room. He’d called an emergency Council meeting to deal with the crisis, but as always, the isolating nature of the threads made convening the Council a slow process.

As he waited, the head of his House Guard entered the room and came to attention. He was standing so stiffly that Berilo wondered if he was actually pulling sockets out of joints as he did so. As well he should, Berilo concluded darkly, given the sheer magnitude of this failure. He walked over to the guardsman and held him at attention for another few moments.

“You have news?”

“Yes, my liege,” the unfortunate man answered, barely above a whisper. Berilo gave him the cue to continue, and he did. “Two of my men were at the site of the attack just now. They confirmed that this… speech-giver was the very same man who attacked the Spire last week. It appears that he used sparkpowder taken… from here.”

Now that was blatantly obvious. “You told me last week that the attack on the Spire was mere sabotage. That the intruder had *destroyed* the sparkpowder in order to stop the fireworks at the Laentana.”

Though it seemed barely possible, the man’s spine stiffened even further. “Yes sir, I did.”

“Three guards unconscious. One more in pieces in the nearby hall! And worst of all, it was *my* sparkpowder that was used to ruin the opener to this year’s Laentana! Can you give me any reason why I shouldn’t have your head mounted on a spear at the manor gates??”

“No sir.”

Berilo eyed him for a few more moments. His composure was admirable, given that his lifespan could very well be down to a matter of seconds. Grunting, Berilo dismissed him with a wave and he tromped off down the hall again.

To his credit, the Guard Captain had served him well ever since he’d become Lord Ascendant. He’d never be as loyal or true as House Fisher’s servants back home, but he was useful enough to keep alive for now. Conversely this… Arico heretic, whoever he was, was an unknown variable. He would have to be understood before he could be predicted, and eventually publicly executed.

Some of Berilo’s advisors had suggested that he cancel the Laentana, but apparently one of the penets had decided to continue with the ceremony regardless, and Berilo had supported his choice. Not only would canceling send a message of weakness and fear to the stra’tchi, but this celebration had just become a valuable opportunity. Of course the Sustained Heads would have to be convinced of that. They always did. At least none of them had any idea that the sparkpowder had come from Sevvas patch itself. Many of them wouldn’t hesitate to use *that* little tidbit against him.

There. The Councilors were finally arriving, including Tanner. Berilo waited a few minutes until the last of them took a seat, and then signaled for Tenlor to shut the door. As before, his son would sit in on this meeting.

“My lords. Forgive the abruptness of this meeting, but under the current circumstances I’m sure you understand the need for haste.” He tried to get a feeling for the room to see which, if any of them, might actually be involved in this crisis.

“I can now confirm that the heretic’s name is indeed on the Registry. There are four Aricos in the city, but only one was raised in a farming patch. It seems our heretic was born thirty-two years ago in Sallna patch, to parents who have since died. He was tested and placed in Tellek patch. My people have interned everyone from Tellek already, and the sifters are interviewing them even now. Their magistrate has also been contacted, and is on his way here.”

“Obviously whoever tested him made a mistake,” Lord Miller put in sourly. “This is clearly the same navigator who violated my territory!”

“And threatened the Deathwatchers, yes.” Berilo held up another parchment. “This is his certificate of testing. Unfortunately, his tester was Menru Scrivener.”

The Councilors exchanged glances. Scrivener had been one of the most distinguished navigators in recent history, but he’d died almost twenty years ago from a fall in his home. “Are you sure that it was Menru, my liege?” Lord Grover spoke up. Unlike the other lords present, Grover was old enough to remember Scrivener with clarity. “It wasn’t like him to make such mistakes.”

“I agree.” Berilo slid the parchment over to Grover. “We worked together for a long time, and I knew his handwriting better than most. But the document is a short one. It’s possible someone could have forged his hand, which leaves us at somewhat of an impasse. Just to be sure, I’ve asked for a list of any Sustained who have access to the records room in Penntu patch. If this is a forgery, we will find out who is responsible.”

He nodded to Tenlor, who stepped forward in front of the Council. “As for the Deathwatch Monster, he was under heavy guard when the attack commenced,” Tenlor reported gravely. “Apparently he was in on the plan, because he moved the moment the explosion went off. Before anyone could react, he was over the redline and vanished into the threads.”

A murmur of outrage rippled through the room. “The Monster is a navigator??” Lord Mason interjected, sounding stunned.

Tenlor shook his head. “Three of the guards saw a hand reach out of the threads to grab him. I’d be willing to bet the same Sustained who’s been helping our heretic get information was also the one who helped the Monster escape.”

Berilo gave Mason a curious glance. His interest in the Monster was irregular, for such a usually terse man. Berilo resolved to question Mason further, at a later date. Perhaps he knew something that could help them find the giant before it could do any more damage.

With nothing further to report, Tenlor withdrew to the back of the room again to watch the proceedings. He had instructions, however briefly given, to keep a close eye on the Councilors as well. It was becoming increasingly unlikely that one of them was behind this, but you could never be completely sure.

Berilo looked over the other notes he’d been given, including the heretic’s limited history. “There’s not much here about this Arico. His adoptive father—name listed as Durhu—is missing. Tellek has been searched for him as well with no results. The dwelling they shared has been cleaned out. Obviously they were both in on this.”

He paused for a moment. Durhu… there was something familiar about that name. He couldn’t quite place it, though, and gave an internal shrug. It would probably come to him later. There was a soft knock at the door. After waiting for Berilo to nod, Tenlor opened the door and admitted an old man with a cane.

“Magistrate Taono. Do come forward,” Berilo welcomed him.

The magistrate hobbled his way in front of the Council. His expression was one of haughty indignation. A mask, most certainly to cover his fear. After all he was responsible for the actions of everyone from Tellek patch, and he had to know by now that the attacker had been one of his own people.

“Tell us everything you know about Arico and his father, magistrate,” Berilo instructed without preamble. They didn’t have any time to waste.

“Yes my liege. I met them both nearly thirty years ago when they first arrived in Tellek patch,” the magistrate mumbled to the room. “Little Arico was asleep in his arms, and Durhu was… well, Durhu.”

“What do you mean, ‘arrived’?” Mason cut in. “Who brought them?”

“I don’t know, my lord. It was the early morning, and I had just risen. Durhu didn’t say anything of course, but he had a Transit Pass and all the proper documentation, and both he and the boy had been properly marked. The note he carried said the navigator who transported them had been very busy, and had simply left them at the edge of the threads.”

“And you believed that?” Tenlor practically shouted. A few of the Councilors made noises of displeasure as well.

The magistrate flinched at the noise. “Everything was in order! They had all the papers they needed; they had even been signed by Menru Scrivener!”

Berilo let out a strained sigh and raised a hand before Tenlor could berate the man again. “How well did they fit in, magistrate? Did they have any close friends in your village?”

The old man shook his head. “Not at first, my liege. Durhu repaired the old cabin outside the village and raised Arico there. They kept to themselves most of the time. The boy made a few friends in the village, but I almost never saw them except for the Ritual of Waters.”

“Was there anything unusual at all about them? Anything you can remember?” Berilo asked with growing frustration.

The magistrate paused, gripping his cane even tighter. “Well, there was one thing I found odd right from the beginning. Durhu never spoke a single word. At first I thought he wasn’t right in the head, or he’d lost his voice somehow. Eventually the patch healer told me that Durhu was a deaf-mute. He used a strange gesture language with his hands to speak. He taught only Arico and a few others to understand it.”

Time seemed to slow down for Berilo. A deaf-mute who used handtalk… named Durhu. No wonder the name had sounded familiar! “That sneaky little bastard!”

“My liege?” The magistrate looked at him curiously.

Abruptly Berilo realized he’d whispered that aloud. Thankfully, only the magistrate seemed to have been close enough to hear anything. “Never mind, magistrate. You’re excused.”

Still looking confused, the magistrate nodded and hobbled his way out. Berilo tried to clear his head. This was neither the time nor the place to tell the Council about ancient history.

“This heretic attacked the High Penet and one of his aides,” he continued harshly to the room. “Thankfully both of them will recover, but this isn’t just an attack on them. His message was heard by people from *every single* stra’tchi patch! He publicly undermined the authority of this Council, not to mention the validity of the Aquunite faith, and got away unpunished. That is unacceptable!” The room was quiet as a tomb for a handful of seconds as he swept his gaze across them all. So far, none of them had given any indication of guilt or treachery.

“Speaking of the High Penet,” a measured voice spoke up from the other side of the room, “I’ve had him removed from the clinic and placed in Council custody.”

Berilo had thought nothing could shock the people assembled in this room—not after today’s events. Apparently, he’d been wrong. The Clarion met each of their glares in turn, unflinchingly and unapologetically.

“He will of course continue to receive medical care,” the Clarion continued reasonably, “but I can’t allow him to speak with anyone other than the healers tending to him, and only because I chose them myself. They can be trusted to disregard anything he says.”

“And what gives you the right to just lock him away?” Lord Weaver spoke up, apparently choking back his indignation long enough to get the words out. From their looks, most of the other lords felt the same way.

The Clarion’s face didn’t change at all. That same intensity he’d worn like a cloak—ever since Berilo had first met the man, in fact—was still evident on his features. His son found those features unsettling, but Berilo recognized the Clarion for what he was: a most powerful tool that could be used for the benefit of the city. Still. Every tool wore out eventually, and the Clarion was no different.

His voice remained steady and calm, though. Even reasonable, if such a word could be applied to a zealot. “This Arico accused the High Penet of assaulting children, my lord. Of forcing himself upon them. Such an accusation—no matter its source—*demands* investigation. And given that the High Penet answers only to this Council, I am the only one with the authority to conduct such an investigation.”

“You don’t actually *believe* this… barbarian, do you?” Grover asked incredulously.

“It doesn’t matter whether I believe him or not,” the Clarion responded evenly. “I still have an obligation to investigate fully. If only to clear my esteemed colleague’s name, of course,” he added with a hint of sarcasm.

Berilo almost smiled. High Penet Paraku’s weakness for little boys was well known in the higher circles of Sustained society. Until now, no one had done a thing about it, because the man had connections among most of the Sustained Houses, and had been wise enough not to flaunt his activities. Despite his pious upbringing, the Clarion had probably heard some of the rumors himself. Now, thanks to this heretic’s public accusations, the Clarion could finally do something about it.

Even so, they didn’t have time for that right now. The Clarion would pursue his investigation regardless, and Berilo had bigger fish to fry. “Back to the business at hand, and the reason I called you all here. I know that some of you,” he gave a pointed look at Tanner, “are inclined to go out searching for this heretic at once. It’s obvious by now that he has help from within our ranks, possibly from one of the Ascendant Guards themselves. As such any new search for him will likely prove just as fruitless as the last one. Instead I’ve already arranged for some of my best people to participate in the stra’tchi Laentana itself.”

That caused a stir among them, but he cut it off quickly. “Consider this, my lords! Right now, stra’tchi from all over Patchwork are talking about this man’s little tirade. Weighing it, debating it, *thinking about it*. He promised he would get in touch with them again, didn’t he? We need people in there, listening to what people have to say about this man and his message! If fortune smiles on us, we may get a clue where we could find him, but at the *very* least,” Berilo speared them one after another with a hard look, “we need to get a feel for how they’re taking this information.”

Weaver was the first to respond. “My liege, you’re not actually expecting our people to… pretend to *be* stra’tchi, are you?”

“I’ve already got members of my own House Guard getting patch marks painted on their shoulders,” he answered coldly. “Your people will be expected to participate as well, Lord Weaver. The Laentana has already been going on for two hours! How many other times will our people be able to mix with theirs and listen in, without being painfully obvious about it?”

There were a few more objections from some of them, but nothing particularly forceful. Berilo dismissed the meeting and allowed the Council to head out. The Clarion was one of the first to leave, unsurprisingly. He no doubt had questions for the High Penet and his closest aides.

Strangely, not all the Lords were eager to leave. Weaver and Grover stayed behind, obviously intent on a private conversation with him. Grimacing, Berilo stepped over to them. “My lords, you both have work to do.”

“This is getting out of hand, Berilo.” Grover said harshly. “It was one thing when he was just sitting in on the Council meetings. When he had the arrogance to start giving us advice, it was frustrating enough, but now he’s locked up the head of the Aquunite religion! Who’ll be next?”

Berilo didn’t respond. Grover’s mistake was understandable—after all he’d known Berilo the longest of anyone on the Council. Still, he couldn’t let it slide, not with Weaver here watching. He merely kept Grover’s gaze steadily, until the other realized his mistake.

“My apologies, my liege. I… forgot myself.” He looked down to his feet. If he was lying, he was doing an admirable job of hiding it. Berilo nodded, satisfied.

“But he has a point, my liege,” Weaver added. “If the High Penet isn’t safe, then none of us are. The Clarion is behaving like some kind of rising star, and he’s treating us like nothing more than underlings!”

Berilo sighed. “Paraku has been indiscreet for more than five years now, my lords. I can’t protect him from himself! Our dear High Penet will have to hope he can dispose of any evidence that could damn him. Our Clarion will certainly turn over every stone before this is over. At least you two have the common sense to keep your dirty laundry hidden.”

He put his hands on both their shoulders reassuringly. “Do not worry, my lords. The Clarion is no threat to either of you just yet. If that should ever change, I trust you to find an effective, *discreet* way of dealing with him. Now,” he gestured to the door, “you both have places to be. I suggest you get to work.”

As usual, Tenlor stayed behind for more instructions after the others had left. Berilo paced in front of him, thinking out loud as he tried to piece together what to do next. “Well. It appears your predictions about this Deathwatch visitor were correct.”

“I wish I could take comfort in that, father.” For once Berilo could detect no ego, no gloating in Tenlor’s tone. “I’ll bring in my Ascendants to help with the… spying.”

“No, I’ve got a more important job for them. They’re all navigators by now, correct?”

Tenlor nodded, a suspicious look on his face. “They are. I dismissed the last normal guard last month.”

“Good. Take fifteen Ascendants and put one on each patch bordering the Enclave. They’re to stay hidden inside the threads, and report anything suspicious they see in dwarven territory—*anything* at all. Have the rest of them spread out throughout the city. Leave them in the threads as well, monitoring the most important industrial and rural patches. Any sign of dwarven activity and I want to know immediately, understood?”

“You don’t think the dwarves would be stupid enough to try and break the peace after all this time, do you? We outnumber them twenty to one!”

Berilo grunted. “All I know is right now we have only a skeleton force defending the city. More than three quarters of our navigators are tied up with the Laentana, and less than half our guards are able to be mobilized quickly. I’m certain the dwarves are involved with what happened this morning, however invisibly.”

He ran his finger across the table between them. An elaborate map had been carved into it, delineating the patches, the Waters, even the wall itself. The various Sustained territories, though, changed almost daily. As a result there was no point in painting particular patches on the table any one color. Suspiciously, he eyed the small corner on the south end of the city. Dwarven territory.

“They’re up to something, Tenlor—I’m sure of it. You and I have both been to the Enclave many times. True, we never went beyond the Keep’s gates, and we were only there to negotiate trade deals and maintain the Pact, but we’ve both met the Hauld and his son. Last month when I was there, there was something different in the old dwarf’s voice. Something was slightly off about our conversation, but I couldn’t quite figure it out. Now I know. They made this happen! Whoever this Arico is, he’s definitely working with them. We have to be ready for when they make their next move, or everything we’ve built here could be for nothing!”

Berilo sighed heavily. Now was not the time to be jumping at shadows, no matter who might be casting them. “I also want your people to look for places they can hide inside the patches themselves. Preferably high up where they can see most of the patch from one location. The stra’tchi spend their entire lives in these patches, so there’s no way we can move around them undetected. But we may be able to keep an eye on them at least. Issue the appropriate orders to your men.” Tenlor nodded obediently.

“Oh, and one more thing,” Berilo added almost as an afterthought. “Send a scribe to join the sifters while they interrogate the Tellek villagers. Have him draw a composite of this Durhu man, and then send it to me.”

Tenlor obviously didn’t remember Anathdur’hu from the magistrate’s description. That wasn’t much of a surprise; he’d only been a small boy the last time the man had been here. It was almost certain that Anathdur’hu and this Durhu rebel were the same person, but Berilo had to be sure.

Tenlor still looked skeptical, but he nodded again and took off. For a moment Berilo was tempted to order him to stay safe, but he knew that would be pointless. Tenlor could be stubborn when his safety became a concern, and they both knew that to hide right now would be to invite challenges to their authority.

He waited until Tenlor was out of earshot before calling for the manor’s Chamberlain. As was fitting for any good servant, the man was always just out of sight waiting for his master’s call. “My liege?”

“Andir, there was a servant girl who worked in the manor over two decades ago. Torha, I think her name was. She was partially deaf, but had learned to speak normally despite that. I want her found, wherever she is now, and brought in for questioning.”

“Her name is Toria, sir,” the Chamberlain answered, a bit hesitantly. “I know her well. She’s still part of the household staff, as far as I know.”

It was unlike the Chamberlain to equivocate. “What do you mean?”

“Well, she didn’t report for work this morning, my liege. I was going to send someone to her home, but-”

“No, just tell the guards where she lives,” Berilo cut him off impatiently. The guards would investigate, but Toria had probably been in on this plan from the start, which meant she was also long gone by now. “I’ll have them handle it. However, I want whoever knew her best to report here immediately.”

“At once, my liege.” Andir bowed deeply and scurried off.

Berilo sighed. He’d have to get a composite picture of Toria as well, and have it distributed. Anathdur’hu had covered his tracks well. Turning back to the window, he waited for more reports to come in.

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Chapter 22

The start of the Laentana was greeted by shouts and screams of joy. As soon as the parents began arriving in Sekkun patch, children from this entire side of the city ran pell-mell into their waiting arms. It was like being in the path of a joyful tidal wave.

Jaas tried not to get in the way of the kids as she held onto Nemith’s hand. He too, was smiling from the wave of emotion. For a single day every three months, patch designations didn’t matter. Scars on shoulders meant nothing. Children who had been taken away could see their parents again, and spend the day with them.

Jaas could tell it was a bittersweet moment for many people, though. Children only a few years past their testing were already more attached to their adoptive parents than their birth parents. Some of the greetings were more cordial and polite than they were warm and loving. And in many cases, parents were looking for children and not finding them at all.

Something strange occurred to her, and she turned to Nemith. “Why aren’t more of these parents taking the opportunity to reclaim their kids? I mean, everyone seems to accept this Rejoining rule, but I would have expected more resistance.”

Nemith grimaced. “There was resistance, a long time ago. The Sustained fabricated all their records about it, but the dwarves kept their own histories of what happened back then,” he said in a soft voice, looking around. “According to the Enclave archives, in the first few years after the Rejoining was made into law, every New Day celebration had parents doing exactly what you expected. Violence broke out time and again, and even the Ascendants couldn’t keep the peace. Eventually the Council threatened to ban any parents who’d recently given a child up to the Rejoining. For at least the next four New Days.”

He sighed. “It turns out that threat was particularly effective. Faced with the choice between seeing their kids for only a few hours but having to let them go again, and not seeing them at *all*, the parents almost universally agreed to behave.” Nemith shook his head. “I’m fortunate I never had to go through any of that. If someone tried to take Tarith from me…” he trailed off at that.

Jaas felt a chill run down her spine. Letting go of a child because they’d grown up was one thing, but being *forced* to let go because of a societal rule? That was an entirely different animal. And then there were the parents who couldn’t find their children and vice versa. Each patch would soon have about thirty thousand people in it, and the parents weren’t told where their kids had been sent. No doubt many of them never saw their children, despite looking for them all day long.

She didn’t have much time to reflect on family reunions, though. The activities had already begun, and she resolved to keep track of as much as possible. Bringing her ink and parchment here would be impossible—none of the stra’tchi could read or write, and she was pretending to be one of them—but at least she could take mental notes.

With a start, Jaas realized she didn’t even miss her collar-recorder anymore. It would make things easier certainly, but after all this time it was becoming increasingly clear that Jaas had been very spoiled by having such easy access to magic. Lem would no doubt get a kick out of that when he read her next letter.

Like the patch with the altar, Sekkun patch had apparently been extensively modified for the purposes of these celebrations. Based on the size of the foundations she could see, this had once been a warehouse area, but all the warehouses had since been torn down to make room. Large areas of paving stones had been ripped up as well, replaced with grass and dirt trails.

From their arrival position right next to the threads, Jaas could see an enormous dirt track running roughly parallel to the threads in both directions. It seemed to run along the edges of the entire patch.

On the other side of the track were dozens of smaller attractions, from a market filled with sweets and intoxicants for the revelers, to a petting zoo for the children. She could see temporary stages set up here and there, similar to the one she’d seen in Tellek, with actors already portraying figures in stories both historical and fanciful. A group of musicians had set up shop next to one of the track corners, attracting quite a crowd themselves, just across from the rather large archery range and its contestants.

However the real attention grabber was in the middle of the patch. A series of six rectangular fields had been arranged, each one marked with colored flags on the perimeter. In each field, two teams of seven vied for supremacy in a kind of sport she’d never seen before. It was the same game Balter had told her about: Ona’hatash. Or just Ona, to the people who lived here. A massive scoreboard had been set up on the far end of these fields and people clustered around it as the matches continued.

The board didn’t make much sense to her at first. If the people couldn’t read, what use could it be to them? Apparently they’d found a way, though. There was a ranking of teams each represented by an individual patch symbol, followed by the score for each game. It was easy enough to follow, even for people who’d been denied the schooling to read and write. An announcer made things easier for the crowds, but without magic the poor man was no doubt going hoarse with shouting.

She asked Nemith for more details, but he only shrugged. “Sorry. I never really got into the game myself, and the dwarves certainly don’t play it. Their games are usually a lot more, uh, militaristic.” He looked around for anyone who might be close enough to hear them. “Remember, the Ascendants might still be looking for you. Keep a close eye out, all right?”

Jaas nodded, suddenly much more aware of the people around her. About one in twenty of them had skin as dark as hers, and most of them had similar hairstyles. “I’ll keep it in mind. And if I see Endu or the boys-”

“You won’t,” he cut her off. “They’re still back at the Fishbowl. I know Balter especially wanted to be here, but after Arico’s speech it’s not safe anymore. Anyone from Tellek patch has already been rounded up for questioning. There are probably Sustained here in the crowd, as well.”

That was a sobering thought, cutting through the festive atmosphere around them. Now that she knew what to look for though, she thought she could make out a few of the Sustained in the crowd. They were wearing simple clothes just like everyone else, but they stood differently, and *moved* differently. Just as a man with a lot on his mind had a different walk, these people didn’t quite share the celebratory attitude.

Jaas was tempted to go up to one and ask him to join in one of the nearby dances. It would be funny, if possibly disastrous. She’d probably been spending too much time with Sabra. Shaking her head, she tried to listen in on some of the nearby crowds. It was still early in the day, and Arico’s explosive speech was still the prime topic of conversation.

She only listened for a little while, trying to glean a better idea what he’d meant back there. From what she could tell there was some kind of prophecy that had been around for at least a hundred years. It mentioned several people: a Harbinger who had come from the Outside (that part caught her attention especially), and several other people called the Unborn and the Shorn, whatever that meant. No one seemed to know exactly who these people were, though.

Someone from the Outside. Was she the Harbinger? What did that mean for her if these people found out? Not for the first time, Jaas wished that Arico was here so she could get some answers. If she’d known about any of this, she would have pressed him for details—which meant he’d hidden it from her on purpose. But why would he do that?

It seemed there had been several prophecies uncovered over the centuries, and every one of them had come true. Or at least could be *interpreted* as having come true, from a certain perspective. The most recent prophecy had only come to light about five years ago. No one seemed to know exactly what it said anymore, but everyone agreed it was very important. Quite a few of them even thought the prophecy about the Harbinger foretold the end of the city itself. For a group of people who had been stuck in one place for centuries, anything that promised change, even if that change took the shape of a disaster, might be something to look forward to.

As the sun climbed into the sky, talk of the prophecies and Arico’s speech slowly died out. People went back to the standard entertainment they’d been expecting to see today. Jaas joined them, observing what she could. Nemith was nearby as well, watching the matches with some interest.

Arico was taking a risk, letting her come here and see all this. A bodyguard like Nemith was a reasonable precaution under the circumstances. Still, Jaas found it a little insulting. She could speak the language like one of them by now, and knew how to stay out of trouble. Her accent wouldn’t be a problem either, based on the sheer number of dialects she was hearing right now. As she’d expected, the threads separating the patches had also divided the language itself.

A group of young people had climbed up on the scaffolding underneath the Ona scoreboard. They probably had a good view of the matches, so Jaas decided to climb one side of the scaffolding herself. She was barely two spans up when her foot slipped and she almost lost her grip. She gasped, hanging on with just her hands for a second or two before she could re-establish her grip. Just as she was finding her footing again, a hand reached out to her from above.

It was a sandy-haired man with a friendly smile looking down at her. He was wedged into one of the y-shaped struts, apparently quite firmly. Grimacing, she grabbed his hand and let him help her up to his position. He let go as soon as she was situated. “Careful, *ami’ha*. Those stones down there don’t look very forgiving to me.”

“Thank you,” she said a little shortly. Partly from being out of breath, and partly from annoyance at needing the help. The word he’d said—*ami’ha*—was unknown to her. It sounded friendly enough, though.

His gaze swept over her painted brand briefly. “Don’t mention it.” A cheer rose up through the crowd on the scoreboard, startling her. Her new friend joined in as well, his eyes shining with excitement. “Oh, good shot!”

She nodded, trying to make sense of the sport while getting better footing in the scaffold. The teams were now facing each other with seven people on each side. Each contestant was also carrying a kind of wooden staff with a hooked end. Strangely, there were *two* balls on the field, one painted green with a patch symbol burned into it, and the other brown with its own symbol. The referee blew on a small wooden whistle, and both teams sprang into action again, whacking at both balls with their wooden sticks.

“Are you an Ona player?” She asked the man next to her, as he clapped.

“On my good days,” he said easily. “You?”

Jaas shook her head slightly. “Never even seen a match before.”

He looked at her in surprise. “How could that be? I hear even the Sustained have their own tournaments and players.”

“I’m from Telledin patch,” she said hastily. “I was cloistered there since I was little.”

He nodded. “That makes sense. Never met a cloistered woman before, though.” He extended his hand. “I’m Marek, from Uttos patch.”

“Yaalo.” She shook his hand.

As part of her cover, Nemith had told her a few things about Telledin patch. It was known as a recruiting ground for the Aquunites, so a great many of its youngsters were put into monasteries of a sort. They were kept away from all distractions, to make sure they were both dedicated and pure for their later work. It was a useful alibi, since most stra’tchi seemed to know about this practice. Marek certainly believed her. He obligingly explained the game to her as they watched.

The goal was pretty simple: in order to score a point, a team had to get its own ball to come to a complete stop inside a small target area on the far end of the field. They could only move the ball by hitting it with one of their sticks, and there were a number of other restrictions as well. Kicking or grabbing the ball was against the rules, as was intentionally touching the opposing team’s ball if it was on the opposite half of the field. The referee’s whistle cut through the air quite often as a result. Each match only lasted half an hour, as judged by a partially emptied hourglass, at which point the team with the most points won.

Penalties imposed by the referee could be as mild as returning one team’s ball to the far end of the field, or as harsh as expelling a player from the game (usually for one player hitting another with his stick).

Ona’hatash was obviously a variation of Ataska, a game played in the old Vasiri empire. She only knew a little bit about the original version of the game, but it seemed there were still a lot of similarities even after all this time.

The game made for a very interesting visual experience from her viewpoint up on the scaffold. Since both teams had restrictions on where they could go, or at what points they could move either ball, it was like watching schools of fish move underwater. Or rather, how they would move if there were invisible glass walls in certain places. Jaas shook her head. Invisible barriers, just like the threads. Of *course* the sport would have evolved in that particular way.

Marek introduced her to a group of his friends, all from Uttos patch as well. They were pretty raucous, having drunk a lot even before climbing up there, but Marek didn’t drink anything himself. Apparently he was skilled enough to play officially for his patch, and he wanted to keep a clear head. Before long he ran off to join the next game, but his team ended up losing pretty badly anyway.

He took it well enough. Out of nearly four hundred stra’tchi teams, there could only be one winner each New Day. Strangely, after several rounds of game elimination, the colored flags on the edges of the fields were moved to make the field larger. Marek explained that the more important matches always took place on larger fields. The final match of the day would take place on a field six times as large as the original ones. The size of the teams would be increased as well, to allow them to cover the extra ground.

With a sinking feeling in her gut, Jaas thought of Balter. He was annoyingly interested in her—an infatuation to be sure. But he was also deeply invested in this game, and Jaas knew it was her fault he was missing this tournament. If she hadn’t shown up in the city, Arico would have never had to rescue her from that Miller gaol. The Hauld’s plans wouldn’t have been accelerated, and Balter might be down there right now winning game after game for his home patch.

Marek offered to show Jaas around after the next game, and she accepted after only a moment of hesitation. He certainly didn’t act like he was one of the Sustained agents, and Nemith had encouraged her to blend in.

Ona wasn’t the only sport being played as part of the celebrations. Sprinting and jumping contests dominated this side of the large track, and wrestling matches could be seen near the far corner of the patch. Marek pointed out one strange game, where two blindfolded men each had to keep a hand on a wooden chest between them, as they tried to hit each other with sand-filled socks. The first one to land a hit on the other would be declared the winner.

Jaas had seen similar large-scale tournaments back in her hometown, but those also included swimming and boating competitions. Of course the Sustained couldn’t allow that here. They couldn’t risk letting the stra’tchi know what they were missing, she reflected grimly.

Then they came to the archery range she’d seen earlier. At least twenty people were there, practicing with bows and arrows in preparation for the accuracy contest to come. There were no matchlocks here, though. Apparently the stra’tchi knew exactly what sparkpowder was and how it was made, but they didn’t have any. When she asked, Marek told her that the Lord Ascendant had decreed that only the Ascendant Guard were allowed to use guns.

That made sense. From what Endu had told her, sulfur was rare enough inside the city. Still, it was strange to be in a place where the ammunition was actually more scarce than the weapons that *used* it.

Just after the archery contest concluded, a low gong was sounded from near the middle of the patch. It must have been a pretty big gong, to be heard all the way out here. People began talking excitedly again, and slowly converged by the track near the threads. Curious, Jaas took a place next to Marek on the edge of the track.

“It’s race time,” Marek said, looking north along the track. Off in the distance, riders and horses had assembled along the track.

The gong rang out three more times, and on the third they all sprang into motion. Six riders in all, they raced past her and the roaring crowd. Jaas could barely see the patch symbols just below each saddle. The riders each made an expert turn at the corner where the threads met, spreading out a little as they did so, and galloped out of sight.

Jaas winced as they did so. They were all stra’tchi racers, which meant that none of them was a navigator. If any of them hesitated, or turned even a split second too late… they could be thrown into the threads and die. But it seemed they knew that, and despite the invisible and lethal nature of the threads, they each continued with both skill and determination to win.

“There are hundreds of patches represented here,” she said curiously. “How come there are only six racers?”

Marek grunted. “They’re the only patches in this half of the city that have their own racetracks, and enough horses to spare that they can race them. Another race is probably happening right now in the other Laentana patch, but they only have five riders. I heard a few years ago Tammas patch tried to compete with their own riders, but they weren’t fast enough to deserve a place here. Besides, expanding the racetrack would cut down on space for everything else.” Marek’s friends joined them, cheering madly for one of the teams, but it wasn’t their own. Uttos patch apparently had no horses, or at least not ones bred for speed.

The day wore on into the evening, as the various competitions continued. Until the gong rang out again, anyway. It signaled the evening meal, and the central Ona fields were cleared of all flags and markers.

In their place, hundreds of Laentana organizers set up tables and loaded them up with food. Then the lead organizer (a stra’tchi from a patch she didn’t recognize), stood up on one of the chairs. Almost simultaneously, the entire crowd quieted. The elderly man gave a short prayer of thanks to Aquun, which the crowd chanted as well, before stepping down again. Then people began to converge on the tables.

It was a remarkable sight. People from all over Patchwork suddenly had access to dishes they had never seen in their own patches. Something that was exotic to one man was an everyday meal to another, and vice versa. The children especially seemed to revel in the wide selection. Nemith stepped up next to her with a sideways smile, and piled up his own plate with roast fowl and mashed potatoes, before heading to the far end to fill a mug of mead.

Of course a bunch of the Ona competitors refused to eat. The tournament was getting important now, with only a few games left before the final match, and the players probably wanted to be at their best despite the nearby feast. Pretty soon now there would be just one Ona team left undefeated. When that happened, the winners from the other New Day patch would come here for a final showdown. From what Marek told her, they alternated where the final match took place, every New Day.

Jaas had expected the crowds to get right back to the tournament as soon as the meal was over, but she was wrong. They cleared away the tables and chairs, but then all gathered at the tracks on the edges of the threads again. Marek beckoned her over and pointed up. “If this is really your first New Day celebration, then you’re in for a treat.” She followed his gaze up to the corner where two threads met, wondering what he meant, when suddenly figures started appearing in the sky!

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Chapter 23

The sun beat down on him with a merciless glare. Arico glanced up at it with squinting eyes, and shook his head. So far, he was less than impressed with this New Day. Reliable sunlight was a boon to the farmers of course, but then he wasn’t really a farmer anymore, was he? At least the clouds were moving in. If they were thick enough to provide some cover, it might make his job easier for the next three months.

He thought of Jaas and Nemith at the celebrations, and couldn’t help but worry a little. He’d convinced the Hauld it was the right thing to do—letting her witness the New Day in all its glory. She had to see for herself what kind of life the stra’tchi lived, and that included their festivities. They had taken ample security precautions as well. Nemith would look after her, and help her escape if they were discovered. Still, worry gnawed at his insides, and he tried to push it down and concentrate on the task at hand. After all, the message he’d given the stra’tchi was only half the job.

Down the tunnel and waiting for him were Chanul and Otrul. Both were breathing heavily, having hoisted the massive contraption into place at the top of the incline. Ahead and downhill was a specially resized door—closed, of course—and just beyond that were the threads.

Chanul handed him a waterskin, and Arico sniffed at the opening tentatively. Knowing his friend, there was a bit more than just water in there. He knew how important Arico’s mission was, though. Whatever spirits inside were definitely not strong enough to interfere. In fact, Arico probably could use them to settle his nerves.

It made sense that Chanul carried something like that with him, actually. As the heir to everything in the Enclave, Chanul had needed to work twice as hard to prove himself, and even then there were still whispers that his instructors had favored him to get on the Hauld’s good side. Arico didn’t envy him. He nodded to the others, and they split up, with Chanul heading down the passage towards the special door and the torch next to it.

Otrul inspected the device for damage, while Arico carefully and slowly donned his bulky new backpack. He had been practicing with it when he could spare the time over the past few months, but Arico still felt ridiculous wearing it. As for the device… well, that looked even more ramshackle.

The dwarves had been master inventors for centuries, but even they had outdone themselves with this flying machine. Rather than imitate a bat or a raven’s flapping wings, they had eventually settled on mimicking a hawk and building a glider. It seated one person, and was unfortunately built in Arico’s size.

Arico was the only one who could fly the damn thing.. There couldn’t be even a hint of dwarven involvement, and Alzhi couldn’t fly it without blowing his cover. Still, Arico’s stomach twisted at the thought of what he was about to do. “You’re sure it’ll fly straight?”

“Are yeh havin’ second thoughts, lad?” Otrul asked with a smirk as he checked the cargo seal.

Arico shook his head. “We could always trade places. You helped build this thing. You probably know how it works better than anyone.”

Otrul’s smile died in an instant, and his face paled a little. “Nay, lad. It’s insane enough tha’ ye’re goin’ up there. Dwarves belong on tha ground, plain an’ simple. Or better yet, underground.”

Oh well. It was for the best anyway. “Wish me luck.” With a little effort, Arico wedged himself into the flying machine, trying not to dislodge his ‘backpack’ in the process.

Otrul gave him best wishes and then stepped back behind the glider. Arico tried not to think about what was at stake here. Months of work and a lot of resources had been spent on this project. A great deal hinged on the next few minutes.

Down in the tunnel, Chanul took the torch off the wall and smothered it in dirt, plunging the passage into darkness. It wasn’t a problem for the dwarves, who could easily see in the dark, but Arico had to fight the sense of panic. If Chanul didn’t open the door in time…

The wings trembled a little as Otrul gave him a shove, and Arico felt the glider accelerate downhill. Wind whipped past him, and he found himself grinning like an idiot despite the situation. Just as when he’d practiced, he could feel the wind rushing past him! It was exhilarating, given that the closest he’d ever come to wind before had been the small breezes coming from the threads.

Abruptly he’d entered the tunnel and the near complete darkness. Arico could envision the threads approaching, and instinctively braced himself. Otrul had been right. In many ways this really was madness, but it was *fun*, too!

The first step was easy enough. As soon as he found himself inside the threads, Arico opened a window to the neighboring patch and started navigating his way upwards, keeping careful count of how far. Because neither he nor the glider existed inside the threads, he didn’t have to worry about speed. As soon as he left, he’d be moving just as fast as when he’d entered. Arico ‘thought’ his way up to a place about as tall as his lookout tower, and then pushed his way forward out of the window and back into normal air.

The glider immediately started falling, almost straight down, and Arico clenched his teeth as he pulled on the rudder to reverse its direction. Sure enough, just before it was about to hit the ground, he maneuvered it to the side and back into the threads. Wash, rinse, repeat, he told himself, as he navigated back up again. This time a significant distance higher, though.

Walking from one patch to another was easy enough, but if you wanted to leave the threads at any kind of speed, you had to build it up first. Navigators had taken to running full-tilt at the threads in order to catapult themselves out on the other end. Some Sustained guards and Ascendants had even trained horses to charge at the threads at full speed. Sometimes with disastrous results. Despite all that, Arico seriously doubted anyone had ever considered going quite as fast as he was about to be going.

The third time he got back into the threads, Arico judged he was going fast enough. He felt a little nauseous from the constant speed changes—going fast one instant and floating at a standstill the next, even if it was all in his head. Grinning tightly, Arico made his way to the final exit point.

The glider left the threads high off the ground, speeding its way into the patch. From this high up though, it felt almost like a slow and gentle ride. For a brief moment, Arico could see pretty much the entire patch, including the twisting blue line of the Waters.

About ten seconds after the glider cleared the threads, Arico pulled the lever and the seat beneath him dropped away. A panicked moment of free-fall gripped him before he could pull another strap on his backpack, and a pair of much smaller glider wings deployed from his shoulders.

He caught a fleeting glimpse of the large glider continuing its path, before he white-knuckled the straps as hard as he could. He turned, slowly with his new wings, and made his way back towards the threads. He was still falling pretty fast. For a moment Arico was afraid he’d hit the ground first, but then felt his weight drop away into the threads.

Arico gave out a sigh of relief. He’d trained for this of course, but not as much as he’d wanted to. There were Sky Riders who spent years messing around with these gliding devices, and he was just an amateur by comparison. Still, he’d gotten the job done. Arico opened another window in the threads to get a look at his handiwork.

The glider was continuing on course, remarkably straight thanks to its dwarven design. Based on its slow rate of descent, it would probably make it all the way across the patch and into the threads on the other side before hitting the ground. Its oh-so-important cargo was now spilling out the back as it flew, floating down on the patch from above. Thousands upon thousands of papers: each one carrying the same revelations he’d given to the stra’tchi only hours before. Even now, Sustained revelers were probably picking them up off the ground and reading them.

The Sustained were, almost all of them, spoiled rotten by comparison to the stra’tchi. They had clean drinking water and could bathe whenever they wanted. They had better food, and more of it. They could read, because basic schooling was a guaranteed right to *everyone* born in Sustained patches. Despite the contempt that Arico felt for people who had been raised in such a soft environment, he had to admit that they were innocent. Technically. And he had lived as one of them for a time, with Nouma.

These people had never seen how the stra’tchi lived, or perhaps they’d never *let* themselves see. It was all too easy to turn a blind eye to the suffering of others, if you didn’t have to look at it. Either way they deserved the chance to make up their minds, and Arico hoped those leaflets would force them to think about their nobility’s crimes against the stra’tchi.

Arico winced as the glider made its way over the Waters. Hundreds of leaflets would probably fall into the Waters and be ruined, but the rest would be pretty evenly spread across the patch. In the distance he could see clusters of people moving in response to the rain of papers.

Arico allowed himself a grim smile. Right now the Council was probably scrambling to cover up what he’d done at the stra’tchi Laentana. The High Penet would have been missing from the Sustained ceremony, because the wretched bastard had been knocked clean off his feet only an hour or so before.

They’d have a hell of a time covering this up, too. But there was still more for Arico to do. Two victories on the same day was a pretty good record, but he was flushed with success and determined to make it three.

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They looked like huge birds at first, but Jaas quickly realized they were people. People wearing some kind of wing-like devices on their shoulders. With the evening backdrop, they looked particularly striking as they left the threads.

They soared over and around each other, gliding like hawks through the air. It was soon clear that they were performing for the crowd, arranging stunt after stunt before gliding back into the threads and being replaced by the next glider.

“They’re called the Sky Riders,” Marek whispered to her as the crowd cheered around them. “They’re Sustained who can actually *fly*!”

Jaas could see now how they got up there. Arico had told her that when he was inside the threads, he could exit anywhere within the city, even up in the air or under the ground. As a result these aerial acrobats would never have to climb up there at all. Their descent rate was slow enough that they had time to turn around and get back into the threads before they hit the ground! They probably had to build up a lot of speed first, though.

There were at least thirty people up there, but it wasn’t easy to count them. They kept on flying in and out of the threads. While they were outside the threads, it was just like a hawk dropping out of the sky to snatch prey on the ground. The crowd was growing quiet again. Something was about to happen.

At exactly the same time each glider started emitting white clouds behind them, which stuck in the air. They swerved as they moved, controlling where the clouds were and weren’t. From the crowd’s perspective down here, it was like watching a painter using the sky itself as a canvas! Or rather, thirty such painters. They moved intricately together, assembling a picture in the reddening sky.

All of that must have taken months of painstaking practice! Jaas suspected that each ‘painter’ must have some kind of hand valve running the length of their glider. That way they could control whether (and when) they left clouds behind by gripping or releasing the valve. The fact that many of the Sky Riders came within just a few feet of each other, but none actually collided, spoke to their skills. She was pretty sure she’d smash a glider into the ground under such circumstances, and probably lose her lunch before that. Even looking at it made her feel queasy.

The sky-portrait finally finished up, taking the form of a fish. It was the very same image she’d seen before on Alzhi’s uniform as he’d branded that little girl’s shoulder. The symbol of the current Lord Ascendant Berilo Fisher, and a reminder to the masses below who their master really was.

The crowd burst into applause and cheers, but Jaas turned away in disgust. Such beauty and capability! Men who could fly without magic, and paint wonderful images in the air for thousands of people to see! All of that, wasted just to support yet another hateful and oppressive society.

Marek had noticed her leave. With a concerned look on his face, he fell into step next to her as she wove her way out of the crowd and back towards the Ona fields. “I know cloistered people haven’t experienced much of the city,” he said hesitantly, “but you were there for the opening prayer, right? With the altar?”

Jaas nodded. “I was there.”

He walked with her in silence as they made their way back to the scaffold. “Do…” he trailed off at first, apparently gathering his courage. “Do you think that navigator was right? Did the Sustained and the penets really lie to us?”

She came to a stop and turned around, looking back up at the floating fish in the sky. Whatever smoke-substance they’d used to create their clouds was wearing off, and the fish itself was slowly fading. “What do you think?”

Marek shrugged uncomfortably. “I don’t know. It’s been this way for as long as anyone can remember. Aquun chose the Sustained to watch over us. They protect us and give us the Waters, and we honor them and pay tribute. That’s… how things work!”

Jaas knew she’d have to tread carefully here. The urge to explain how things really worked to Marek was very powerful. Arico might want her to, as well. Even so… she was pretending to be a cloistered woman. Someone who’d been trained from infancy to eventually become an Aquunite.

But what was the point of knowing the truth, if she didn’t give him the chance to know it as well? Jaas climbed back up the scaffold with him, and then gave him an intent look. “If they are lying to us, would we ever be able to tell? They have all the navigators, so they have all the power. They could do it without any of us ever knowing for sure.”

Marek looked troubled, as his gaze drifted back down towards the Ona fields being set up again. She could sympathize. He’d been born a slave—though of course he’d been raised to think otherwise. This life was all he’d ever known, and Arico’s speech had been full of new concepts. Just like everyone else who’d heard it, Marek would need time to think it over.

“I’m not saying he’s right,” Jaas continued slowly. “I don’t know for sure. But if they really have been using us for centuries, isn’t it our responsibility to find out?”

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Chapter 24

It was after dusk by the time Jaas got back from the celebration, and she was bone tired. She hadn’t participated in any of the Ona matches, even though there had been a fair share of informal matches where anyone could play. She had joined in with the musicians after the tournament had ended, though. As a child, she’d practiced with stringed instruments a great deal. Thankfully the other players had tolerated her lack of practice, until she’d gotten a little more comfortable with the kind of lute they’d given her to play.

She didn’t get the chance to return to the Fishbowl, however. Just like before, she and Nemith had used their fake marks to get back to Telledin patch, but then he’d immediately left the crowd and taken her back to the threads. Arico had been waiting for them, and had spirited her away back to the Hideaway instead. She’d barely had a chance to thank Nemith before he too had disappeared.

“The Sustained will be watching the Enclave very closely right now,” Arico explained as soon as they arrived. “The Hauld figured it’d be safer for us to go here instead.”

Durhu was there as well, waiting for them. He gave his son a broad smile and a big hug, while Jaas looked on uncomfortably. She was grateful Arico had a family that looked after him, but it also reminded her just how far away her own family was. None of them even knew that she was here! That might change, though. If she didn’t keep in regular contact with Lem via the letters leaving the city, he would reach out to her brother for help. Jaas just hoped it wouldn’t come to that. She was still hoping to get out of here, and deliver a full and exhaustive report on the city to her superiors back at the Academy. Every time she thought about how they would react, Jaas couldn’t help but smile. They’d probably be torn between disciplining her for breaking the law, and giving her a medal for her discoveries!

As they headed to the secret chamber under the bridge, Arico and Jaas filled Durhu in on what had happened, one after the other. Jaas was surprised to hear that Arico had also taken to the skies, but then it did make sense. The best way to get a message to a hostile crowd without risking your neck would be to drop that message on them from far, far above. It was just something she never would have considered, having never had to think tactically.

*Home sweet home*, Durhu signed with a wry look, before rolling the hidden door open. Arico looked tired as well. She didn’t see any injuries from the explosion he’d set off, but he was dirty and his shoulders drooped noticeably. He suddenly stiffened, though, looking down into the Hideaway. Flickering lamplight was coming up from below.

Arico and Durhu exchanged glances, drawing their weapons as Arico went down first. Hurriedly, Jaas grabbed a large rock from beside the entrance. It was a poor weapon compared to the ones she’d trained with, but it was better than nothing. Jaas heard a clatter from below as Arico dropped his sword on the floor. Suspiciously, she followed him downstairs with Durhu right behind her.

In the middle of the room, Arico was hugging a strange woman Jaas had never seen before. She was tall and heavyset, with black and gray hair, and wearing simply cut but comfortable-looking brown work clothes. Her expression was one of bliss as she returned the embrace. Durhu immediately sheathed his dagger and joined in the hug with a smile.

Not knowing quite what to do, Jaas stood aside and watched them for a bit. They broke apart and began signing to each other very rapidly. Despite Jaas’ experience with the language, they lost her very quickly. Apparently the stranger was deaf as well, based on the speed her hands were moving.

Jaas gave a polite cough, and Arico suddenly broke away from the group. “I’m sorry,” he said excitedly, beckoning the woman over. “This is my, well… I guess you could call her my aunt, Toria. She’s Durhu’s cousin. We weren’t expecting her until tonight, but Alzhi dropped her off early.”

“It’s so good to finally meet you,” the older woman said, pulling Jaas into an embrace as well. “I’ve heard so much about you.”

Somewhat bewildered, Jaas smiled over the woman’s shoulder. Arico had never said anything about his extended family. She’d always assumed it was just him and Durhu in their own little family unit.

Arico seemed to sense her confusion. “Aunt Toria lives in Sevvas patch,” he explained as she let Jaas go. “Or she did until today. She’s been keeping an eye on the Lord Ascendant’s family for us, just like Alzhi keeps an eye on the Ascendant Guard. After my speech today, it wasn’t safe for her to stay there anymore, so she’ll be joining us in the Fishbowl soon enough.”

Jaas nodded. She knew that Durhu’s deafness was a family trait, and it made sense that his cousin would suffer a similar affliction. She must have trained very hard to sound normal. She must be very brave, too, to risk her life by spying on the Lord Ascendant’s manor.

Durhu and Toria paired off, exchanging words quickly and indecipherably, and Jaas let them go. Clearly they had a lot to catch up on. Arico looked like he wanted to join them at first, but then took a breath and looked back at Jaas. “Speaking of surprises,” he said conspiratorially, “I’ve got one for you as well.” He pointed to a corner of the hideout, beyond the cooking pit.

Curious, Jaas rounded the firepit and saw her old pack leaning against the wall. Giving a cry of joy, she rushed over and opened it up. “My scrolls!”

Everything was out of place of course, but it was definitely her stuff. The genealogies, histories, astronomical observations, and maps of the old city… years of her work, suddenly returned to her! Her focus was in the bag too, though inside the city it was really nothing more than a carved twig.

Jaas jumped up and hugged Arico fiercely. “Oh thank you, thank you thank you thankyou!”

He laughed lightly as he lifted her off the ground for a second and then put her back down. “I wasn’t able to get everything, sorry. They were examining some of the documents in another patch, but I figured you’d want that pack at least.”

“You figured right! But how did you get it? Didn’t they have it all under guard?” She let go and looked up at him.

“They were being stored in one of the upper levels of the Library in Penntu patch. It’s where most of the Sustained records are kept, including the Registry itself, though that’s much more heavily guarded. Apparently the Lord Ascendant didn’t trust any of the other Houses with them, so he had his own people watching that floor. After my little display this morning, all the Ascendants had their hands full watching the Laentana and the dwarves, so I decided to hit them where they were the most short-handed.” He rubbed his hands together, and Jaas saw bits of dried blood flake to the ground. “The guards didn’t see us coming, but they still put up a fight anyway.”

“Us?”

“Me and Sabra. After Alzhi pulled him out of the celebration, I brought him to Penntu with me. Then he came back here with Aunt Toria.” Arico pointed over to another corner. In the darkness, Jaas could make out the massive, slow-breathing form of her giant friend lying on two cots pushed together. Jaas hadn’t noticed him before, what with Aunt Toria’s presence. He must have had a hard time squeezing through the human-sized entryway to get down into the Hideaway.

“I’ll thank him when he wakes up,” Jaas said brusquely. Her fatigue suddenly forgotten, she sat down on the ground near the firepit and began organizing her papers without delay. After a few minutes, she realized they’d brought her bag from the Fishbowl as well. Along with her field notes and the records of the local language changes… this could take all night! Dimly she was aware of Arico joining the other conversation across the room, and giving her some space.

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Dawn crept its way over the hill, sending rays of warmth and light across the abandoned streets and buildings near the Hideaway. Arico sat cross-legged on one of the bridges, trying to center his breathing. He wasn’t worried about being spotted (he was far enough away from the threads), but the enormity of the task he’d just begun was finally settling in on him. Odjes had taught him a few meditation techniques that helped, but none of them staunched the feeling that he would soon be drowning in responsibility.

All the same, he still felt giddy from yesterday. He’d spoken to the entire city! He’d laid bare the lies the Council had been spinning for centuries. He’d papered the Sustained celebration, and gotten Jaas’ records back as well! And soon he would be seeing just how much traction his revelations had gained with the stra’tchi.

“Do you feel pride over what you’ve done?”

The voice was misty, intangible. Arico opened his eyes and saw Odjes sitting facing him on the bridge.

“Shouldn’t I?” Arico said defensively. “I’ve done something no one in Patchwork has ever done before. Several things!”

“Oh, there’s no denying that,” Odjes admitted softly, reaching out between them. A game board appeared under his hands, and he made one of his typical aggressive moves. “I’m certainly proud of you.”

Arico felt taken aback. It wasn’t like his dream-friend to just admit to that. He’d been friendly and reliable to Arico over the years, but sparing at best with his praises. He’d served as a sounding board, always willing to hear Arico out and respond with witty and insightful advice.

“I am concerned, though,” Odjes continued more predictably. “Are you sure your heart’s in this fight you’ve started?”

“Of course I’m sure.” Arico felt a little more comfortable now that Odjes had returned to his advice-giving pattern. “This is everything I’ve wanted… everything I’ve trained for, for my entire life!”

“Not all your life,” Odjes countered softly. “Remember Nouma?”

His lip twisting at the thought, Arico didn’t respond at first. The game board was set up just like it had been during his last dream. Sometimes a game between them would last for several weeks. Sometimes the game was the only part of the sha’haln dreams he could remember. “As if I could forget Nouma,” he answered at last, moving one of his own pieces to reinforce his beleaguered left flank. “It was a mistake, to think I could fit love and a happy life into my mission. And it won’t happen again.”

“Really? Then what’s she doing here?” Odjes tilted his head to the left, his eyes on something behind Arico.

Arico looked over his shoulder. Jaas was there too, about twenty spans behind him and surrounded by her papers. She waved at him with a friendly look in her eyes, before returning to her work.

Arico supposed he should feel upset, but didn’t really. It was the first time Jaas had ever come here. Something about her presence felt… right, though. She didn’t pay any notice to Odjes, even though she’d certainly never met him before. That meant she was just another part of his dream.

“She’s here because she’s important to the cause, obviously.” Arico explained patiently. “She’s a noted scholar, a mage, and of course, the Harbinger.”

“But why haven’t you told *her* that?” Odjes insisted. “Wouldn’t it be better if she heard the whole thing from you or Durhu, instead of hearing it from some stranger?”

“I’m getting to that. I just needed to find the right time.”

Odjes only raised his eyebrows. Letting out a frustrated growl, Arico concentrated briefly. In answer to his summons a great wind swept past them, blowing her image through the threads and out of sight. For once though, the wind he called down on them actually *felt* like wind! An instant later, Arico was back in the glider, barreling down towards the threads at high speed with the wind whipping past his face.

Only this time the glider had a second seat, and Odjes was in it. “She’s taken everything else you’ve told her in stride,” his voice cut through the wind. “Why hesitate to tell her the truth about the prophecy as well? I think there’s more to it.”

Arico shook his head and tried to focus on the ride. “Think what you want.”

Odjes didn’t say anything more, but Arico could feel his gaze to the side. As always, his dream-friend would keep gently persuading him, dream after dream, until Arico eventually admitted that he was right. Or that *Arico* was right, actually, because Odjes was nothing but a part of Arico’s mind.

Closing his eyes, Arico began to control his heart and breathing again. It was more difficult than usual, possibly because he liked the wind so much, but before long he could feel the dream-scape start to shift around him again. The sun’s rays faded away, and the wind’s noise gradually disappeared as well.

Replaced by the faint sound of a fireplace.

Breathing deeply, Arico opened his eyes and sat up in the Hideaway. Durhu and Sabra were still asleep in their cots along one wall, Aunt Toria along another, and it seemed Jaas had finally decided to get some rest as well. She was laid out on the ground next to the flames, surrounded on three sides by papers arranged on the floor.

Odjes had made a clear implication: that Arico had feelings for Jaas. For once though, he was dead wrong. True, she’d shown up in the sha’haln dream, but that wasn’t surprising. She’d already been an enormous help to the movement, and as the Harbinger she might be even more important soon. Arico squared his shoulders as he looked down at her. His time with Nouma had been a mistake—him trying to live a life that wasn’t his to begin with. He could have very easily put her life in danger, and he wasn’t about to repeat that mistake. Jaas deserved better than that.

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“So, lass. What’dye think?” The Hauld peered up at her with a sly smile on his sturdy features.

In truth, Jaas didn’t know what to think. The machine in front of them was a mystery to her. But she supposed she should come up with *something* nice to say. “It looks… very impressive, sir.”

There was an awkward moment of silence between them, as the Hauld’s smirk gradually grew bigger. Jaas smiled as well, finally admitting defeat. “All right. All right. I’ll ask the question. What *is* it?”

For once it was just her and the Hauld. They were in a small room off the main corridor in his keep. When he’d deemed it safe, Arico had brought everyone from the Hideaway to the Fishbowl, and most of them had set up shop there, including his aunt Toria. He and Durhu had moved back into the dwelling already arranged for them off of one of the Fishbowl passages. Sabra had his own room near the top of the Bowl, which despite being the largest one they had, was probably still massively uncomfortable for him. Not that he would complain about it, though. Deathwatchers never whined about things that annoyed them, and despite not being human, Sabra was no exception to that.

Arico was still upstairs working on something else, and the nearest guards were a few rooms away standing at their posts. In private like this, the Hauld seemed more comfortable. More personable. Still chuckling, the Hauld stepped over to the machine and lifted a long wooden covering from the front. “See fer yerself.”

Beneath it, Jaas could see two black metal plates inside the machine. A closer look showed that each had… letters on it. They were written in Vasrah, just slightly above the rest of the metal. She didn’t understand. Why would anyone carve letters into metal plates? It was sturdy, sure, but it would be terribly heavy, and the writing itself must have taken days!

“We call this tha Stamp,” he explained, slowly removing the plates and showing them to her. It was hard to read what was on them against the black backdrop, but she could make out bits and pieces. With a breath of realization, she recognized the speech Arico had made at the Laentana! Or a variation of it anyway.

Possibilities swirled through her head. Did they mean to memorialize his speech for future generations? No, they would have written it in dwarven. What was it, then? The Hauld slowly lowered the metal plates to the ground, and gave her a curious look. “Arico told me wha’ he stole fer ye, lass. Papers upon papers, includin’ a list?”

Jaas nodded. “The names of people who used to live here before the Threading, and their professions.”

“An’ how long dye think it’ll take ta copy tha’ list?”

Jaas grimaced. “Days. Maybe weeks to copy everything. I wanted to make a copy in case my pack was stolen again, but it would just take too long!”

The Hauld chuckled again, and patted the machine. “Na wit’ this, lass. Here, lemme show yeh.”

He lifted the plates again and moved to behind the machine, beckoning her to follow. Back there, resting on a large table, was a kind of leather-bound oval bowl attached to a metal stick about the length of her forearm. The Hauld deposited both plates on the table, words facing up, and picked up whatever the bowl thing was. From underneath the table, he pulled a pan filled with black powder and poured a small bit of it on the table.

It looked like sparkpowder, but it was a little too fine for that. Suddenly all the pieces fit together, and Jaas smiled. She almost interrupted, but decided she wanted to see the whole process.

The Hauld rolled the bowl-shape in the powdered ink for about a minute, and then transferred the ink to the metal plates. It must have been made of something soft, because it spread the ink pretty evenly across the metal as he brought the bowl down repeatedly. Finally, he picked up the plates again and put them back in the machine.

“This is why we call it tha Stamp,” he said, and pulled a long wooden lever near the top of the machine. His muscles strained with effort, and the space between the top of the machine and the metal plates quickly disappeared. A flat piece of paper inside the upper portion was compressed *into* the metal plate. He held it there for a few seconds before releasing the lever and removing the paper inside.

Jaas stared at it with an amazed smile. “Incredible.” The writing was perfectly legible and understandable. She doubted she could have written it more perfectly.

The Hauld merely shrugged. “Tha Sustained use smaller machines like this one. We jus’ made i’ better is all.”

“And you want to use this to copy my list?” Jaas said slowly. “That could take a while. You’d need to make a metal plate for each page, so you’d need a few blacksmiths working together. You’d also need a lot of paper. How many copies do you want to make?”

“One fer each patch, lass. Mor’n five hundred in all. But dinnae ye worry. We’ll make one copy fer now, an’ make more when we find enough paper. We were gonna copy tha Book o’ Aquun firs’, so when you showed up wit’ yer list, i’s a small-fry by comparison.”

That made sense to Jaas. She’d been able to read passages out of the Hauld’s copy of the Book of Aquun. It referred to everyone living in Patchwork as children of Aquun—all equal, and all loved equally. If they could teach the stra’tchi to read, and distribute enough copies of the Book of Aquun, it would give the people another example of how they were being exploited and controlled. Apparently her list of names took priority over that, though.

“I take it you like what you see?” Arico’s voice filtered down to them from back by the stairs. Jaas turned and saw Durhu and Toria peeking past him into the room as well.

“Oh, I love it,” Jaas said truthfully. “There are spells in the Outside that people use to copy messages, but I *never* thought anyone could do it this fast or this accurately without magic! This is wonderful!” Belatedly, she noticed a carefully folded cloth in his hands. “What’s that?”

Arico hesitated, and gripped the cloth in his hands. “I assume you heard talk about the prophecies during the Laentana. About the Harbinger? Nemith said you were asking about them, but he didn’t know how much to tell you.” He glanced at the Hauld with a not-quite-accusing look in his eye. “We kept this secret before now because we felt it was safer, but now that the movement is out in the open, you need to know everything.”

Jaas felt a little unsettled at that. Between the theatrics at the Laentana, and the return of her papers, she’d somewhat forgotten her questions about the Harbinger. Now it seemed they would be answered whether she asked them or not.

“Yeh saw tha ruins o’ tha old palace, right, lass? Tha crystal shards outside o’ Sevvas patch?” The Hauld inquired, sitting down on one of the benches near the Stamp.

Jaas nodded as she and the others followed suit. There was plenty of room here, most likely for dwarven metalworkers to be comfortable while they reconfigured the metal lettering. “Well, o’r tha years, people’ve been findin’ messages on those crystal pieces. Four or five in all, we think. Each fragment had some message abou’ tha future, once translated. An’ each message event’ly came true.”

“The first one predicted a Tumult that *no one* saw coming,” Arico put in, while Jaas just sat there. She’d never believed in prophecies before. They were all lucky guesswork or attention-seeking stunts, as far as she was concerned. Even so, it seemed most of the people in this room were taking them seriously.

“One of the lords in House Mason kidnapped a Farrier princess over two hundred years ago,” he elaborated. “It sparked a fight that lasted over a year, and spread across nearly all of Patchwork as the other Houses jumped in on one side or another. But no one expected it to start in the first place! Somehow, whoever wrote that prophecy knew what would happen, and left a warning for others to find on that crystal!”

“Tha nex’ one predicted a flood o’ tha Waters o’er two months in advance, an’ tha’s precisely wha’ happened,” the Hauld confirmed.

“No one knows why they’re recorded on those crystal fragments, or who wrote them,” Arico concluded grimly, “but they’ve all come true. Aquun herself must have blessed whoever put them there, because some of them have actually been used to avoid a lot of suffering.”

“Let me guess,” Jaas continued for them. “The most recent prophecy, whenever it was dug up, was about someone coming from the Outside. And it named that person the Harbinger?”

Toria’s jaw dropped fractionally, and Arico and Durhu smiled over at her. “Told you she was quick,” Arico said smugly.

Jaas ignored the compliment as she considered the ramifications of what she’d heard. Divination magic could accurately gather information over great distances, but then magic didn’t work here. It might be possible for a skilled spymaster—such as this Huun woman she’d heard of—to make predictions about a coming war, but that didn’t explain the prediction about the river. No, she still didn’t buy it. There had to be another factor here, something no one had considered yet.

Arico seemed to sense she was ready to hear more. He unfolded the cloth and carefully showed it to her. As he displayed it, a sense of quiet fell over the room. It seemed infectious, because Jaas felt a kind of reverence come over her as well. Curiously, she looked over the words written on the cloth.

“The most recent crystal fragment was dug up five years ago,” Arico explained gravely. “Aunt Toria got ahold of one of the copies made of it, though she couldn’t see the original. The crystal’s locked up deep in Penntu patch, in a heavily guarded vault.”

“I can see why you wanted me to take a look at it,” Jaas admitted. “It’s written in Aseonic Patali: an obscure dialect.” She looked up at them. “I assume you’ve had it translated?”

“As much as we could. I’m no language expert, but the Hauld had his own people look at it. I was hoping you’d be able to help with that.” He cleared the table and carefully spread out the cloth so she could read it.

Again she felt that sense of importance from all of them. Jaas decided to read it aloud. *“When the threads are torn and the fabric weakened, the Harbinger arrives from beyond. The twin powers of Unborn and Shorn serve as guide, the Archivist with knowledge, and under the Harbinger’s gaze, comes the end.”*

Jaas looked up from the tablet. “Well, that’s pretty much solid nonsense. It could mean anything!”

“Maybe not, lass,” the Hauld said softly. “Tha dwarves ne’r really believed in these prophecies, but i’s kinda hard te ignore anymore. Ye’r tha firs’ person, *ever*, ta come into Patchwork. If tha prophecy’s true, then ye’r tha Harbinger. No doubt abou’ it.”

“This prophecy was written at least five years ago, probably much longer. How could they possibly have predicted you would come here when no one else has?” Arico’s voice was firm. His earlier statement about Aquun rang in her ears. He probably wouldn’t confirm it aloud, but it was pretty clear he believed it.

Jaas stayed quiet, looking over the original text. The translation seemed pretty easy, start to finish. The text was faded though, and the cloth itself had been ripped. Probably when Toria had stolen it, but maybe even before that. “Unborn and Shorn are written in the accentuated transitive form,” she thought out loud. “So is Archivist. In Aseonic Patali, that means they’re proper nouns. The names of people. Do you have any idea who they could be?”

Arico shook his head. “And we don’t know for sure what the ‘fabric’ is, either. There was an earthquake, for the first time anyone can remember, that happened just as you arrived. Maybe the magic that holds the threads in place—the fabric of threads—was weakened when you passed through them.”

Jaas looked over the last part of it again. “Under the Harbinger’s gaze, comes the end. But the end of what?”

No one answered her at first. Arico and Durhu shared an uncomfortable glance. *The end of the city, some think.* Durhu signed slowly. *Many people think the Harbinger brings the end of all life here.*

Jaas shook her head. It was just another prediction of doom, and she’d heard her fair share of those Outside. So as far as the people in this city were concerned, she was some kind of prophetic icon. Part of her wanted to blame Arico for ‘outing’ her in his speech, but she supposed it would have gotten out eventually. “I guess we play this by ear, then.”

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Chapter 25

That evening, just after the sun had set on the far hills, Jaas and Arico were preparing to head out. Durhu and Toria were both staying behind, but Sabra had insisted on coming along for security. Jaas figured he just wanted to see another patch. The three of them made their way through the dwarven tunnel, doused the torch to ensure complete darkness as usual, before entering the threads. They exited in complete darkness.

For a moment Jaas thought Arico had turned around and gone back, but then she heard the striking of a tinder twig and a torch illuminated more rock tunnels. Jaas looked behind them, seeing the threads. They’d definitely left the Enclave. But if they were out of dwarven territory, why were there dwarven tunnels here?

Sabra looked unhappy crouched down like that; he’d probably thought they were done with tunnels for now. He growled slightly as they made their way a good distance down the passage before climbing a metal ladder to the surface. A stone slab had been laid across the vertical exit to the tunnel, which Sabra moved aside with ease before climbing out. Arico followed him, and then extended a hand to help Jaas up as well. Rather than being on a hillside under the stars as she’d expected, they were actually inside a house.

It looked much like the cabin that Arico and Durhu had shared back in Tellek. There were copper pots and pans in the kitchen, and hand-sewn work clothes hanging outside through the window: clean but looking somewhat threadbare. As she took in all the details though, the bedroom door opened and a strange man approached them. Whoever he was, he smiled as he shook Arico’s hand. His eyes widened as he took a look at Sabra, who still looked uncomfortably cramped even outside the tunnels. Jaas tried to suppress a smile as she remembered her first sight of him.

“This is Gainos,” Arico introduced the apparent homeowner. “He’s a friend. Gainos, this is Jaas and Sabra.”

“I was born in the Fishbowl,” Gainos said reassuringly, as he shook their hands one by one. To his credit, he didn’t flinch when Sabra’s massive grip engulfed his own. “The Hauld had me marked and sent here when I was three so that I could live with these people and get to know them. When I was old enough to buy this house,” he looked around proudly, “the Hauld had his people start digging the tunnel you just used.”

“So that his people could come and go from this patch undetected,” Jaas finished for him, realizing that final detail. She didn’t bother to hide the admiration in her voice: it was warranted. Yes, the Hauld had orchestrated it all, but it had been Gainos here who’d made it happen. From the age of three, no less!

Jaas wondered how many more ‘sleepers’ there were out there in other patches like this one. Probably a great many, given the magnitude of the movement’s task. Gainos seemed to sense her approval. He nodded, smiling slightly, and gestured out the door. “This way, please. My house isn’t big enough for the gathering.”

He led them just across the street to what looked like an older barn. At least originally. It had apparently been refitted multiple times, to what was now some kind of theater room. Inside, a full crowd of people waited for them.

They didn’t look particularly hostile so much as curious. A few of them reached out with their hands, but Sabra gave them a malevolent glare and they backed off in a hurry. In contrast, Arico stepped out towards them with hands extended in both directions, and one of the locals approached and embraced him. Arico had told her that would be a common greeting here in Sakkas patch. Sabra hadn’t been thrilled to hear that either.

Apparently word of her status had spread as well. The crowd didn’t reach out to her, but they didn’t back away either. The word ‘harbinger’ was whispered again and again as she passed. She moved through them as resolutely as she could, trying not to look like a hunched-over bookworm.

“Aren’t these people worried the Sustained will find out we’re here? Every stra’tchi patch has a magistrate to keep an eye on everyone, don’t they?” She whispered to Arico as they moved.

Arico shook his head. “From what I’ve been told, this magistrate is known for drinking heavily. This patch has a well-known tavern, and the magistrate is there right now. He’s probably buried in empty bottles by now. Besides, Gainos would have told us if he was out and about.”

A podium stood on a raised platform on one end, and the people had clustered in front of it. Arico and Jaas wove their way forward, leaving Sabra in the back. He seemed quite comfortable with that decision, and stared daggers at anyone foolish enough to lock gazes with him. Few did.

Sakkas patch’s Mayor was up on the platform and shook hands with them when they arrived. “Thank you for meeting with us, Arico. And you, Harbinger.”

“Just call me Jaas, sir,” she said uncomfortably.

“Thank you, Mayor,” Arico spoke in, smoothly covering for her. “We’re happy to be here, despite the secretive circumstances.” He gestured at the podium. “May I?”

The Mayor nodded, and Arico stepped up in front of the crowd. “Citizens of Sakkas!” He enunciated, projecting his voice to the very back of the room while trying not to be too loud. Even Sabra looked surprised at first, and then smiled gruesomely back.

“Many of you have questions for us, of course. Many of you have fears about who we are, or what we represent. I understand those fears, because I once shared them myself. However, we’re not like the Sustained. We come with answers, freely given. All you need to do is ask.”

One man didn’t hesitate. Though slightly shorter than his neighbors, he stood out from the others as he called up. “How do we know you aren’t a danger to us? You destroyed the New Day altar, and attacked the High Penet! You’ve declared war on the Council—on the Ascendants! Why should we risk our necks even talking to you?”

“The High Penet was uninjured,” Arico answered after a moment. His voice was noticeably darker as he continued, “despite his many crimes. And the altar was a symbol of how the Aquunite faith has been corrupted and used to control us. Let me be clear about this: *I* was the one who declared war on the Ascendants and their Lord. I made no such claim about you. Unlike the Council, my friends and I will give each of you a choice. No one’s asking you to fight or to risk your lives, and no one’s making you stay here and listen to this if you don’t want to.”

He took a deep breath and gentled his tone slightly. “That said, it’s my hope that you want more than just the life of servitude you were born to. Knowledge can free you, if you have the courage to listen.”

Those were the same words he’d used to conclude his Laentana speech. A challenge to the people, to be *brave* enough to risk change. Jaas was starting to see how clever it was. People who would turn down an offer and refuse a request might actually be more receptive to a challenge. It was basic psychology perhaps, but it looked like it was working.

“You talk like you’re one of us,” a burly young man said in a challenge of his own, “but I don’t see a Sakkas mark on your shoulder. I don’t see any mark at all! If you’re really a stra’tchi like us, then why don’t you have one? Why should we listen to you?”

“I was hidden away as a child,” Arico explained slowly. “I was kept away from the Ritual of Rejoining so that I could wear whatever mark I needed on my shoulder. It was necessary for the work I needed to do.” He pulled out one of the fake brands and tossed it to the man in the crowd. “Take a look. It’s a perfect duplicate, and I’m sure I can make one like it for any one of you, to cover up your own mark.” The burly man passed it onto the rest of the crowd, his challenging look partially replaced with an impressed one.

Arico let them look at it for a few seconds before pushing on. “I know you take pride in your marks. I probably would too, if I’d been raised here. They’re a symbol of your home, of everything you hold dear.

“But aren’t they also a symbol of your enslavement? Weren’t you each branded with this mark the day you were forcibly taken from your parents? For those of you who’ve had children, would you have *ever* chosen to give them up, even if it meant they would wear a mark they would someday be proud of?”

He sighed. “We’re trying to build a better future here in Patchwork. There are Sustained who will stand in the way of that, but there are many, many more of you than there are of them. Once they back down, none of you will ever again have to feel the pain of having your children taken away!” The people murmured to each other for a few seconds. Jaas could practically hear the gears turning in their heads as they considered what he was saying.

“You talk about a better future,” an older woman called out, giving a nasty look to Jaas, “but you’re risking us having a future at all! The prophecy is clear: the Harbinger brings the end of all of us, and you brought her right to us!”

Jaas shivered. She’d never meant to bring fear to these people, nor to incite them in any way. Like them, though, she’d been assigned this position just by being here. She had no choice in being called the Harbinger, no more than they did in being called stra’tchi.

“I don’t believe in the prophecy,” Arico countered softly. “At least not that interpretation of it. For all we know the Harbinger will bring the end of the Council instead! But even if your version is true, what difference would bringing her here make? If we’re all doomed anyway, then it doesn’t matter where she is, does it?”

Jaas looked down briefly. Yet again, superstition and fear were getting in the way of progress. At first, she’d thought Patchwork was different. They’d invented such wonderful devices and methods to get around their magic handicap. Unfortunately, all it took was hearing one little prophecy and so many people were more than willing to slide right back into isolationist stupidity.

Arico let that sink in for a few seconds. “Now, think about what it means if I’m right, and the prophecy doesn’t mean what you think it does. Jaas was raised on the *Outside*! Think about what she’s seen and learned out there. About what she could teach us!”

That was her cue. Nervously, Jaas stepped up next to him. She looked down at the woman who’d just spoken. “Tell me your name, please.” She tried to inject some friendliness into her voice, despite its nervous tremor.

“Alys,” the woman responded slowly. “Alys Henshaw.”

“Henshaw. A name your family gave itself, correct?” Alys nodded, and Jaas continued. “But what’s the oldest family name you remember for yourself? Before you chose a name based on your farming life here?”

Alys thought for a moment. “Pelechos, on my father’s side. That was the name they used long ago.”

Jaas smiled openly and with relief. “Yes, I know that name. Ardan Pelechos was a merchant in old Vasiriah, and a pretty good one by all accounts.” She opened up her pack and pulled out the genealogy scroll. There hadn’t been time to copy it onto the metal plates before this meeting, so Jaas was keenly aware of just how irreplaceable it was right at this moment. “He was a financial advisor to the Vasiri treasurers who worked directly for the old emperor. I have his family line here in writing.” She lifted the parchment to the crowd. “It’s all a matter of public record on the Outside!”

For a few seconds, Jaas marveled at the hypocrisy of it all. Because everyone in this patch was adopted, there was no way of knowing if Alys was related to Pelechos at all. Yet for some reason everyone here insisted on making that assumption anyway! Was it this way for every stra’tchi patch? She suspected it might be. Regardless of their station, people always seemed to have a *remarkable* gift for lying to themselves. By the gods, even the Lord Ascendant himself came from a family of fishermen!

Well, there was nothing for it but to play along. She looked down at the young man who’d challenged Arico’s right to speak as one of them. “You, sir. What’s the oldest name your family’s had?”

“Tal’unos,” he answered suspiciously.

That one wasn’t familiar to her. Spreading the parchment out on the podium, she ran her finger down the list of names until she came to it. “Here it is. Taal Tal’unos, a musician in the Court of Songs.”

A rustle of laughter rippled through the crowd. “You, a musician?” Another man heckled him. “I’ve heard you try to sing. You sound like you’re trying to drown a cat!”

Their tone had changed, if only subtly. The people here had quietly stopped challenging her and Arico. Now they were showing genuine curiosity. One after another after another eventually received information about their ancestry, or at least what they assumed was theirs. Information they’d never had before, and which was obviously precious to them.

Before long though, Arico put a temporary stop to it. “The Mayor and two of his aides have agreed to come with me to see what else we have to offer. We’ll be back in an hour at most, but if you wish to see for yourselves, now is the time to join us.” He glanced down at the people gathered around Jaas and the parchment. “We have a few hours before sunrise. If you want to keep looking up your ancestors, I’m sure Jaas can help.”

A few of them left along with Arico, and Jaas had to admit the cunning of his plan. Their fear of the Harbinger had been subtly replaced with gratitude for the information she’d brought. Shaking her head, she turned back to the people and kept on looking up names for them.

It wasn’t long before people started asking other questions about the Outside. What it was like to be on a boat, what elves looked like, what kind of exotic animals she’d seen; that sort of thing. It reminded her of Arico’s little tirade on the top of that tower just after she’d arrived in the city. She answered as best she could.

Then a boy raised his hand. He was young: perhaps six years old. “Why is your skin so dark?”

There was a rustle of amusement through the score or so remaining people. Jaas knelt next to him. “What’s your name, child?”

“Warek.”

She smiled. “Well, Warek. The truth is, my skin isn’t dark. It’s *your* skin that’s light.” Another noise rippled through the group, this one noticeably more indignant. People gave each other confused glances at that.

Jaas hid a grimace. She’d forgotten one of the most important things about speech-giving. People are proud, and she had to pander to that pride. “What I mean by that,” she explained quickly, “is that Patchwork is special in that way. Most people in the world have my skin color, or darker.”

“But why?” Warek persisted.

The hostility seemed to have passed, but Jaas knew she had to tread carefully. Arico wasn’t around to guide her anymore. “It’s because of the people who built this city, actually. Centuries ago when the First Emperor found this place, he decided to build his capital here. He wanted it done quickly, too. But it was already summer by then, and he knew he wouldn’t have a livable settlement built before the winter snows arrived.”

Again, she looked up at the crowd. It was important that they understood this part of their history. “He needed help to build this place, and he got it. The Paleqi tribes all around this area were strong, hard-working, and very used to the cold. The First Emperor sent out soldiers to capture the Paleqi by the hundreds and bring them back here. As… slaves.”

A solemn quiet fell over the room. Even Warek seemed to sense it. Jaas had never really seen slaves before coming here. There were servants in many houses she’d visited as a child, but they were all paid—all able to leave if they wished. That wasn’t true for the stra’tchi.

“The Paleqi tribesmen were everything the Vasiri wanted. They built the city their southerner masters wanted, but they weren’t allowed to go home after it was done. When the Vasiri moved in, they didn’t want to give up their new slave labor force. At first there was resistance from the Paleqi, but over the next few generations, the idea of Imperial slaves working in and around the capital became, well, normal.” Jaas felt a little sick at that. Her ancestors had been Vasiri too, and had stolen those peoples’ futures away from them.

“It took a hundred or so years, but eventually people started to get fed up with how your ancestors were being treated. Paleqi were the only ones at first, but after a while even some Vasiri joined the fight. According to the histories there was finally a bloody uprising, which started not twelve leagues from this very spot,” she pointed to the west, towards where the remains of the Crystal Palace had fallen. “Emperor Torekan the fourth was slain, and his cousin Artruris took his place. The new Emperor was sympathetic, and used the opportunity to name all Paleqi, and anyone who was even part Paleqi, as freedmen.”

Jaas sighed. “Even after that though, it was decades more before whites had the same rights as any other citizen! Laws had to be changed again and again, and not every Emperor was as just as Artruris. Some of them simply refused to enforce the laws of the people, just because my ancestors stubbornly refused to consider anyone with even a hint of Paleqi blood as an equal!”

She reached out and put a hand on Warek’s shoulder, giving the audience a sweeping glance. “After the Threading, there was no time for people to hate others just because of how they looked—everyone was too busy just trying to survive. Once the immediate danger was gone, that hatred just came back. Only now it’s not about skin color anymore, it’s about whether or not someone’s a navigator! Before, it was whites who had no say—no future, and no hope. Now, it’s the stra’tchi! It’s the exact same hatred as before, just with a different target this time around!”

“Wait a minute,” one of the villagers interjected, sounding angry. “Navigators are chosen by Aquun. It was She who gave them the power to go wherever they wish, and the right to rule over the rest of us!”

Jaas looked over at him. He was young, perhaps fifteen years, but he didn’t look threatening or violent—just challenging. “Let me guess. The magistrate here in Sakkas patch told you that, and he said it was from the Book of Aquun.”

The kid nodded firmly, and Jaas reached down into her pack. She pulled out a copy of the book, one of the few the Hauld had been willing to lend her, and held it up for everyone to see. “This is the Book of Aquun. I’ve read it from cover to cover, and it says *nothing* about navigators having a right to rule over the rest of us. Your magistrate, and the penets, and the Sustained Council themselves, have all lied to you! They tell you whatever they want to, in order to keep themselves in power, and because you are forbidden from learning how to read, they can keep doing it forever!”

She shook her head slowly. “It’s a story I’ve heard again and again on the Outside. People in power making sure that the laws will always keep them in power. The Sustained were born with power, and the stra’tchi born without. My ancestors were born with power, and most of yours were born as slaves. Where is the difference? Power must be earned, or given freely, else the people who have it don’t deserve it!”

Grimacing, she looked back down at Warek. “I know all of this is confusing. It doesn’t make much sense to you, but there is at least one thing that you should remember most of all. Your ancestors were strong and proud people. They fought for everything they had, and weren’t afraid to die so that they could be seen as equals. You should be proud to be like them.”

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Arico led the way back into the sewer tunnels, flanked by the Mayor’s guards and about a dozen other people. Sabra had obligingly agreed to stay behind and keep an eye on Jaas. Arico doubted anyone would try anything stupid, but Sabra’s presence would definitely help with that.

Mayor Aldwith walked with quiet dignity behind him, apparently lost in thought. Some of the people who’d volunteered to come along weren’t so placid, though, whispering excitedly to each other.

Years ago, based on information provided by both Alzhi and Arico, the Hauld had come up with a list of patches to convince first. He’d kept quiet since then, right up until Arico had made his speech. That was the spark to light the flame, and now they had to work quickly to pile on as much kindling as possible.

They were starting with Sakkas patch because it was the richest stra’tchi farming community in Patchwork. Nearly one in twenty of these people had a Transit Pass and could spread the word of what they’d seen to other patches. Still, this was just the beginning. He might have to give dozens, even hundreds more speeches before this was all over. The demands on Jaas might be just as bad, if not worse.

Trying not to think about that, he quietly led them up to the still pool underground. It was a strange sight even to him, and he’d been the one to dig it in the first place. They were right at the corner where two threads met, and the hole itself was the shape of a hemisphere. It was as if an apple had been cut into eight equal pieces, and they were standing in front of a hole in the ground, shaped like one of those slices. He’d then filled the hole with the Waters so it could be used in this way.

Lying on the ground next to him was the cured sheep’s stomach he’d brought from the Enclave. It was inflated and sealed to keep air in, and it worked remarkably well. He scooped it up and turned to face the others. “Another of the Council’s lies is that there’s no way to communicate with other patches unless you have a navigator. I’ll prove otherwise to you, right here and now. Is anyone willing to participate and see for themselves?”

They exchanged glances amongst themselves for a bit, before two youngsters nodded to each other and stepped forward. The Mayor’s guards stopped them at first, but he waved a hand and they were allowed through.

“You’re Hanji, aren’t you?” Arico inquired, looking at the older of the two. He’d been one of those who’d asked Jaas for information.

Hanji nodded. “And this is my brother Othan.”

“All right. Hanji, I’m going to take you over there.” He pointed through the threads, at what looked like a solid dirt wall. After the next New Day happened, it would appear as it really was, with the pool occupying both sides. “Othan, if you’ll stay here and watch, we’ll send this back to you through the threads.” He hefted the sheep’s stomach. “Be sure to grab it as soon as it’s in reach, ok?” Othan nodded.

Hanji seemed comfortable enough with going through the threads, so Arico took him by the hand and navigated. Because they were only passing to an adjacent patch, it was as easy as walking through an open room.

The other side was exactly as he remembered it. Another eighth-of-an-apple-shaped pool, but no crowd visible from this side of course. “Now, Hanji. I want you to write a message to your brother. It has to be something only the two of you know, so that he’ll know it’s from you. I’ll put it in this and send it through to him.”

“I… can’t write.” Hanji said quietly.

Arico slapped his forehead. Of course! “I’m sorry, Hanji. I’ve been able to read and write since I was a kid, so I forgot. How about you tell me what to write? I’ll send it through, and they can take it to Jaas to read it. Tell me something only Othan would know.”

Hanji thought about it for a few seconds and smiled. “Tell him… he’s the pointed one this time.”

With a smile of his own Arico wrote that down, carefully wrapped the scrap of parchment inside the cured container to keep it from getting wet, and jumped into the pool. It was deep enough that he sank up to his shoulders before reaching the bottom.

“Watch closely,” he instructed. “You have to be careful, or you might lose a hand in the threads. What you have to do is throw it like you would a ball. The container has to be underwater when it reaches the threads, or it won’t make it through to the other side. This one has rocks inside, to make sure it doesn’t float too quickly.” Choreographing his movements for Hanji’s benefit, he ‘threw’ the sheep’s stomach into the threads, careful to let go and pull his hand back before it went in as well. He was in no danger of course, but any non-navigator sending that message would have to be just as careful.

The container vanished as soon as it hit the threads, just as the ones he regularly sent to Jaas’ friend on the Outside. At first, Arico hadn’t been sure this… Inelem had even been getting them, but then he’d started getting responses coming back through the north end of the Waters. Arico had written his own letters to Inelem as well, right from the start, and now he was including messages from Endu as well.

He hadn’t told Jaas about any of the other letters, though. The plan they were working on together had no guarantees of success, and Arico didn’t want to get her hopes up in case they failed.

Arico climbed back out of the pool, sopping wet, and extended a hand to Hanji. “Come on. Let’s see if they got the message.” He paused though, looking at Hanji’s expression. Something wasn’t right.

The kid was staring at the pool, but he looked afraid as well. “What’s wrong, Hanji?”

Hanji looked up at him. “If I want to send a message through the threads, I have to get in the Waters… but I can’t swim! How will I be safe if you’re not here? How will anyone?”

Arico sighed. “It’s not that deep, trust me. As long as you stay away from the threads, you can just stand in the Waters. I know you never learned to swim—none of the stra’tchi can—but all of that will change if we gain equality for your people. You’ll have as much of the Waters as you need, whenever you need it!”

He hadn’t considered just how many stumbling blocks were in place between the stra’tchi and their freedom and equality. Literacy was just one of them, and this swimming thing was another. It was yet another reminder of how little he really had in common with the stra’tchi.

Othan was holding the sheep’s stomach when they got back. Apparently he hadn’t been quite as afraid of drowning as his brother had been. Of course they had to bring it back to Jaas to confirm what it said, but when that was done everyone seemed very impressed.

“You can send these to any patch bordering ours?” The Mayor inquired, excitement seeping past his carefully cultured air of dignity.

“Anyone can,” Arico assured him. “Whether they’re a navigator or not. You can communicate with your neighbors whenever you want. All you need to do is set someone to watch the pool and make sure that any messages make it out without accidentally floating back into the threads.”

He sighed. “This is only the beginning, though. If you want to talk to *all* your neighbors, you’ll need to dig holes on all four corners of Sakkas patch, and fill them each with the Waters. We can help with that, too.”

There was a problem with that as well. That pool was situated underground to keep it from being obvious to any navigators who came here. All the other pools would have to be underground too, at least until the Council had been overthrown. There was no way they would allow stra’tchi patches to communicate openly. They’d have to deal with that problem another time, though. For now he was just trying to convince them to be open to the possibilities.

“But this is only useful if we can read,” one of the Mayor’s aides pointed out, picking up on his fears. “The magistrate’s the only one knows how to do that, and he’d never teach us.”

“It’s easy enough to learn, believe me.” Arico put a hand on Hanji’s shoulder. “Jaas and I have friends who could teach you.” He tried to keep the tension out of his voice. The dwarves would certainly be willing to teach them (that was part of the Hauld’s plan after all), but centuries of propaganda against them made it unwise to mention the dwarves just yet. He’d have to talk to the Mayor about that in private.

Othan looked worried. “If the magistrate finds out, though-”

“What will he do, test us to see if we can read?” Hanji asked scornfully. “We can always pretend we can’t.”

The Mayor held up a hand, stemming further discussion. “We’ll… talk about this in private. Later. As for now, will you and your friends join us for a late meal? I’m sure there are others who will wish to hear what you have to say.”

Arico glanced over at Jaas, as she was talking animatedly about her hometown. Sabra was standing silently in the background as some of the Sakkas children chased each other around his tree-trunk-sized legs. He gave a slow nod, indicating he saw no danger.

Arico took another deep breath, this time in relief at how well this had gone. “Thank you, Mayor. We’d be honored to join you.”

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Chapter 26

Despite the late notice, there was quite a crowd gathered in the courtyard at Sevvas patch when the Clarion arrived. The courtyard itself was walled in, with gates situated in the middle of each of three of its four walls. Right now the gates were open; anyone could just walk right in. And due to the large number of navigators available at this time of day, on a normal business day, at least three hundred people were there already, waiting for him. The yard was built to handle a thousand, though.

The courtyard, along with the Ascendant barracks, the Aquunite temple, and the Lord Ascendant’s manor, was easily within sight of the Spire. All four structures were equally placed in a square, with the Spire at its center. It towered up behind the Clarion—a symbol of the power and majesty of the Council and of their right to rule. The courtyard was usually only used during the Twin Suns celebration, or whenever there was some important announcement or activity that the Sustained needed to witness. Such as today.

The Clarion took a deep breath, recognizing the importance of the moment. As well as the juxtaposition of his duty with his training. He was a pacifist, after all. As he let it out though, that tickle in his throat caused him to cough lightly. He choked back any more coughs for the time being. He couldn’t afford to speak to the crowd in a raggedy voice.

One of the local guards—not a navigator, but assigned to protect him anyway—leaned in to whisper in his ear. “Are you sure this is a good idea? The crowd might go for it, but I doubt your bosses would.”

The Clarion smiled widely at the directness of the question. Giyan had known him for years, protecting him both in and outside of Sevvas patch. Officially, the Clarion had the same rank and authority of any member of the Council. He was Giyan’s superior’s superior’s… superior. Giyan wouldn’t dare to question anything said or done by one of the Council members, or even people lower down the chain of authority. But somehow he was perfectly comfortable questioning the Clarion’s course of action.

The Clarion hoped it was because of his winning personality and genial nature, and not the result of any lack of authority on his part. The Clarion was in charge here, yes, but he didn’t want people to fear him because of his official power. In fact, he really liked it when people working for him felt comfortable enough to talk to him like that. Two heads were better than one, after all, and at times his guards/friends had reminded him of things he’d missed.

“No, it’s not a good idea, Giyan,” he answered softly, “but it still has to be done.”

“Because of what Arico… uh, the heretic said?” The Clarion looked at him in surprise. Giyan did look a little embarrassed at what he’d said, but he kept eye contact. He did want an answer.

“I can’t speak to the heretic’s motives,” the Clarion answered carefully, “but in this case, he was right. Come on, we’ve got a job to do,” he ended the conversation quickly. He did have a job to do, but he also didn’t want to risk talking any further about the heretic. He wasn’t even sure how to *feel* about the heretic just yet.

The chatter in the crowd cut off abruptly as he made his way up and onto the stage in front of them. He’d done this a handful of times now, but it still had an effect on him each time. The crowd looked up at him, respectfully but also expectantly.

“People of Patchwork!” He tried to project his voice into the crowd. Unnecessarily, as it happened. He kept forgetting that this place had excellent acoustics. “By now you’re all aware of my most recent investigation—it would have been futile to try keeping it secret. Well, my inquiries have uncovered some deeply disturbing evidence. I presented my findings to the Council, and they have confirmed my conclusions and proclaimed the guilt of the man in question.” He beckoned to one of the other guards assigned to help him.

From behind the stage, the guard hauled a figure up the wooden stairs next to him. A blindfolded and gagged man with grey-white hair. The Clarion pulled the blindfold off so that the crowd could see him. Even though most of the crowd knew who he was beforehand, a rustle of disquiet passed through them as they gazed up at the former High Penet.

Paraku had been stripped of his title at the commencement of the Clarion’s investigation—basically the whole Aquunite faith had insisted he be separated from them during this embarrassing affair. Now it was time for him to face the *rest* of the consequences.

The Clarion spoke up again, sweeping the crowd with his sternest stare. “As your Clarion it is my highest duty to preserve the soul of our city. To do that, I must be willing to cut out sickness wherever I find it. While painful, the administration of justice to the deserving can only be of benefit to everyone else!”

He reluctantly looked down at the prisoner. “Paraku Stoker, for the multiple crimes of abuse of power, assault of children, manipulation of justice, bribery, and assisted murder, I, the Clarion of Patchwork, hereby sentence you to death.”

Even as the crowd made noises—both of protest and of approval—the Clarion reached down and removed the gag from Paraku’s mouth. At the same time he reached back with his other arm, and Giyan placed a familiar weight in his hand. “Do you have any final words?”

Paraku spat on the ground to clear his mouth, and glared up with hate in his eyes. “You’ve betrayed every navigator there is, *Clarion*. You’re a stain on what it means to be a navigator! You would have us deny our rights as Aquun’s chosen messengers, and corrupt the very meaning of what we stand for!” He gave a final sneer before looking away. “You disgust me. Do whatever you have to do, traitor, and may the Shemra take you!”

The Clarion gave him a sad smile. In other words, Paraku felt perfectly justified forcing himself on dozens of little boys—and making sure two of them died to keep them from talking—just because he felt it was his right as a navigator to do whatever he wanted.

By the sound of it, the crowd felt the same outrage that the Clarion did. Or had, anyway. He’d gotten over his rage at Paraku’s crimes, and was now calm again as his duties required. Angry voices began calling out, from parents most likely. It made sense. Not all of Paraku’s victims had been stra’tchi boys after all. Some had been born nearby, within Sustained territory. That was why the Clarion had moved the execution up to earlier in the day, in fact. Right now, most of the children were in schools all over the city: there were no kids here to see this.

“There is no place in Patchwork for anyone who brings harm to children,” he said softly. Gripping the axe in both hands, the Clarion lifted it… and brought it down swiftly.

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An hour later, the Clarion stood at stiff attention in the Spire. The Lord Ascendant was pacing back and forth in front of him, obviously agitated. “What were you *thinking*?” He bit out, finally coming to a stop.

The Clarion said nothing. As was true of most people without his specific training, the Lord Ascendant didn’t really want an answer just yet. He needed to vent a bit first, and the Clarion wasn’t about to interrupt.

“I’ve just left an emergency Council meeting. The others are incensed with you! Most of them want you to publicly apologize for overstepping your bounds. Grover and Tanner both want you ejected from the Council immediately, and they never agree on anything! Miller and Weaver had even more… inventive ideas of what to do with you. Ideas even the sifters might have a hard time carrying out. You’ve put me in a very difficult position here, Ger-” he cut off briefly. “Clarion.”

The Clarion raised his eyebrows. Berilo must be under a lot of stress indeed, almost using his old name like that. It wasn’t like him to make such mistakes. “You were there, my liege,” he said respectfully. “I delivered my report, and they all agreed. It was the Council that instructed me to punish him in the first place.”

“To punish him, yes, but not to kill him!” The Lord Ascendant glared back at him. “You defied the *entire Council* this afternoon! Is it any wonder they’re up in arms about it?”

As usual, the Clarion met harsh words with calmness and gentleness. He had plenty of practice; that was for sure. “Their desires are meaningless, my liege. It’s their actions that matter. If they choose to punish me for this, that is of course their right. However, I cannot let the threat of punishment deter me, even slightly.”

He smiled slightly. Every leader he’d ever met had only done what was best for himself. The Council was no different, and neither was their Lord Ascendant. Perhaps that was why people found him so off-putting. Because he didn’t care if he was punished as long as he was doing the right thing.

“As Clarion, it is my responsibility to uphold the moral authority of the Council,” he continued in a soft voice, again suppressing the urge to cough. That tickle in his throat had been getting worse and worse over the past few weeks. He’d even arranged a medical examination to see if there were any tonics he could take to help. “In my estimation, simple imprisonment wasn’t enough to do that, not when his crimes were so numerous and so heinous. Paraku had been doing this for years now! It was his *duty* as High Penet to represent the will of Aquun to the people, and he failed. Spectacularly!”

“So you decided to just kill him? As if he were a lame horse, or a sick dog?” There was still anger in Berilo’s voice, but it was mixed with genuine curiosity now.”

The Clarion turned to look out the window down at the rest of Sevvas patch. “The Ascendant Charter clearly states that it’s within my authority as Clarion to determine the degree of punishment for capital crimes, my liege. And that’s exactly what I did. The Council’s recommended punishment was just that: a recommendation!”

He paused and took a deep breath. “A recommendation which I chose to ignore.”

The Lord Ascendant just looked at him for a few seconds. Over the past few minutes, the Clarion had gotten the increasing impression that Berilo’s ire had been just for show. He was complaining on behalf of the other lords he had to work with. If the Clarion had to guess, he would say the Lord Ascendant was actually… amused by this whole situation!

Sure enough, he smiled slowly. “The Clarion hasn’t overruled the Council on such matters in over two hundred years! You certainly don’t have a problem using your authority, do you?”

The Clarion shrugged. “There hasn’t *been* a Clarion in all that time. But isn’t that why you and the others installed me on the Council in the first place? You needed me to give you moral authority in the eyes of the people, yes, but you also needed my influence. The others may not have seen that until now, but I think you did, my liege.” He shook his head. “I am a useful tool to the Council, but I won’t be a puppet as well. I will continue to do what I feel is right, as I always have. If that means I get ejected from the Council, so be it.”

“Well,” the Lord Ascendant stepped up next to him. “You won’t have to worry about that just yet, at least. I can handle the Council. I would advise you to never do anything like this again, but we both know it would be a waste of effort on my part.” He gathered up the papers on the table, and turned to leave.

“One more thing, my liege,” the Clarion said over his shoulder. “Please tell the Councilors that my investigation is not yet complete. Paraku’s crimes demanded an immediate and permanent response, but my report was just on him alone. I’m sure there were others who helped him over the years. People who protected him, rationalized his actions… and in doing so, endorsed them. In time, I will discover everyone who was involved.”

“Do you plan to cut their heads off, too?” The Lord Ascendant asked, his voice suddenly becoming more serious.

“Perhaps,” the Clarion responded unabashedly. “I’m sure some of them deserve it. But I don’t have the authority to condemn, merely to punish. The Council has to decide their guilt, when the time comes. I’m sure they’ll do what’s right for the people of this city. Regardless of their feelings towards me,” he added in a similar tone.

His message was as clear as old palace crystal: they had most likely known about Paraku all along. They could try to stop the Clarion’s investigation, or ignore the results of it, but the people loved him and were backing him. If any of the Councilors tried anything stupid, they could probably avoid punishment from the Clarion, but would invite it from just about everyone else.

The message had obviously been received as well. For a moment he thought the Lord Ascendant would try to warn him again. Perhaps he wanted to, but he left in silence.

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Chapter 27

Her breaths were quick but even in the night air. Moisture produced a faint vapor for a split second after each one, but she was moving too quickly to take much notice. Instead, Jaas focused on her footfalls. *Thump, thump, thump, thump…*

She was back on the track underneath the Fishbowl, running in wide circles. The torches were in place and lit, but even so, she could barely see where she was going. At least the track was cut evenly.

Her mind kept on wandering back to Sakkas patch as she ran. The suspicion in the villagers’ faces. The curiosity about their history. The risks they took just to hear her and Arico out. She tried to keep their faces fresh in her mind as she counted the number of times she’d rounded the track.

Otrul had officially graduated her from training over a week ago, before the Sakkas mission. There had been a brief ceremony in which she was given a wooden coin and everything. Jaas knew regular exercise would still be necessary, though. She didn’t have anyone to spar with, not this late at night. There were some advantages, too. She could run alone for as long as she wanted, and that gave her time to think.

With a grin, she realized how strange this was—how out-of-character for her. A year ago, if Jaas had been told that she’d be a semi-athlete by now, she would have dismissed the idea as pure craziness.

Her ribs and legs were protesting again, as she completed her fifth circuit and stopped for some air. There. That should be enough for now. Retrieving a towel from the railing on the staircase, she wiped sweat out of her eyes and began the long climb back up to the Fishbowl. It seemed there were also some disadvantages to having such a private exercise yard.

Jaas felt her breathing even out as she climbed. For once her head wasn’t filled to overflowing with thoughts and considerations. For once the notes that she so yearned to take down weren’t all that important to her. It was just the quiet, stillness of the night. A peace that she’d somehow never really noticed before.

Just at the top of the stairs, Jaas’ right foot slipped and she grabbed the rail in a panic. Her foot glanced off the stairs as she fought to regain her balance, and one of her running sandals went spinning off into the darkness! Pain seared through her ankle as she held onto the railing, or risk tumbling all the way back down the stairs again.

Choking back a whimper of pain, Jaas sat down at the top of the stairs and unstrapped her right sandal as well. Underneath it, her ankle was already swelling. She gingerly felt around the ankle, but couldn’t tell if it was broken, sprained, or just strained.

Endu would be able to tell, and she might be up by now. With a wince, Jaas pulled herself up and began limping up into the lower passages of the Fishbowl. As she made her way past one of the dwellings, though, the front door opened and light spilled out into the tunnel. “Jaas?” It was Codi Farrier, the smith. He was holding a lantern aloft and looking out at her with some concern.

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“I’m sorry to disturb you,” Jaas apologized again, inside Codi’s home. “I should probably just go.”

“It’s no trouble at all,” Codi said over his shoulder, as he put a teakettle over the fire. “I’ve got plenty of experience dealing with sprains. Alya has been running for years now, so I know my way around bruised ankles.” Suiting action to words, he reached up and pulled out a long cloth from a nearby cabinet. “Besides. I’ve been wanting to spend more time with you. You must be exhausted, with all the work you’ve been doing for the movement. I’d love to hear all about it.”

She was seated on one of the stone seats extending from the wall. The house he shared with his niece was small—about thirty hands on a side. The kitchen and dining room were one and the same. From what she could tell, Codi’s room was up a short stairwell above them as was Alya’s, apparently. She still hadn’t met Codi’s much-lauded athlete niece.

Codi pulled up a chair in front of her and reached down towards her ankle. His hands moved carefully but confidently as he pressed various places on her foot, testing for injury. “It’s just a sprain,” he said reassuringly. “The swelling is normal, and I can’t feel any breaks. I’ll wrap it tightly, but you need to stay off it for a few days at least. And you should talk to Endu about getting some herbs to dull the pain.”

“Thank you,” Jaas said gratefully, as he finished wrapping the ankle up. “I didn’t want to wake her so early. I’m just lucky you were up and about.”

“Oh, I’m usually awake early,” he said, standing up and getting some tea leaves from the kitchen. “Alya runs early in the morning as well, and I like to have things ready for when she gets back.”

Jaas didn’t remember seeing anyone else down there on the track. Or on the bottom levels of the Fishbowl itself. Come to think of it, the dwarves wouldn’t let any humans run outside on the surface, either. It would be far too dangerous if they were spotted by any Sustained navigators who might be watching.

Jaas craned her neck and looked back at the staircase to the rear of the house. “Is she upstairs, then?”

“Oh, no. She’s still out. She should be back any minute now, though. I think you’ll like her, and I *know* she’ll want to meet you.”

There was a strange cold feeling on the back of Jaas’ neck. This place was cramped enough for one person, let alone two. A teenager would definitely have left at least some signs of habitation here, but it seemed Codi was alone. There was only one set of dishes set out for breakfast. There was only one size of shoes at the entrance, not counting her one remaining running shoe, and only one coat hung on the rack by the door.

“You know, I should probably head out,” Jaas said, standing up as casually as she could. “Thank you so much for tending to my ankle. I’m feeling much better now.”

“Oh, it would be a shame if you left so early,” he said with a sad tone to his voice. “I just poured some tea, and Alya will be disappointed if she misses you.” He put the tea down on the table and pulled out a chair for her.

“I… have some letters to write,” Jaas said nervously. “Thank you again.”

“You really must stay,” Codi said suddenly, moving over towards her. “Alya has been talking about you for some time now, and you shouldn’t be walking on that ankle just yet.” He grabbed her wrist as she tried to back away.

His voice hadn’t changed at all, despite his actions. That was part of what was so strange to Jaas! His tone was friendly, welcoming. Even a little sorrowful, as he gripped her arm painfully and pulled her towards the chair.

Even as her breath caught in her throat, Otrul’s lessons surged into her mind. Fear of what was about to happen to her was washed away by muscle memory and swift action. Jaas used the pull on her right arm as leverage, as she struck with her left. With the heel of her open palm, she hit him in the face, right in the nose.

He let go immediately and backed up a step. Blood was already seeping from his nose, but he didn’t seem to be in much pain. “Well, that was uncalled for,” he said in that same friendly voice, and moved at her again.

This time Jaas didn’t wait for him to grab her. Painfully shifting her weight to her injured ankle, she kicked him right between the legs and then hobbled her way to the door. Behind, she heard a thump on the ground.

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The repeated knocking on his door was growing ever more urgent, as Arico pulled on his nightgown and ran over there. The moment he opened the door, Jaas slipped right inside and closed it again.

“Jaas? What’s going on?” He rubbed his eyes and could now tell she was breathing heavily. She was missing her shoes, and one ankle was wrapped tightly. “What in Aquun’s name happened to you?” He moved to the door to see what was going on, but Jaas flinched away from him.

That more than anything else woke him up. Jaas had never been afraid of him, not even at their first meeting! He held up his hands slowly and as non-threateningly as he could. “Jaas, tell me what’s going on. Are you all right?”

She seemed to collect her thoughts, and moved to the side so he could get to the door. “I will be, for now,” she said raggedly. “I was just attacked… by Codi Farrier.”

A chill flowed through him, spine to heels. “Codi Farrier is here?”

Arico slapped his head. Of course he was here! The Fishbowl would be the first place they would bring him! “I’m so sorry, Jaas. I… didn’t know he was here. I thought he was still living in Barros patch!”

“What is going on??” Jaas said tersely. “Why did he attack me? You know he’s dangerous, apparently, so what’s he doing here?”

Arico raised his hands to stem the flow of questions. “Let me explain. You’re safe now. He won’t come after you, I promise.”

She still looked suspicious, but nodded. He offered a seat to her, for once grateful that Durhu was deaf. Otherwise all the racket would have woken him for sure. Arico went to the cabinet and reached for a pair of wooden mugs. Instead of opening the water jug though, he reached for some dwarven q’rish brandy. He poured some for her, and she tossed it back immediately.

“Did he do that?” He pointed down at her ankle, and she immediately shook her head.

“Accident while running,” she said, pouring more brandy for herself and taking another sip of it.

“Good,” he said with some relief. She was looking at him seriously, of course. But at least she didn’t seem afraid anymore.

“Codi didn’t mean to harm you,” Arico explained after a moment. “Not intentionally anyway.” He looked out the window at the faint light that was just starting to make its way down into the Fishbowl. “He’s… not right in the head, you see.”

Jaas gave him a curious look. Already her anger and fear had subsided, replaced by that professional tone she did so well. “Did he take a blow to the head at some point? Or some other kind of injury?”

“Nothing so clean as that.” Arico said sadly. “Codi’s brother and sister-in-law were killed a few years back, during the Tumult. Alya came to live with him in Barros patch. He was a smith there too, making weapons for house Grover.

“They were safe for a while, but when the Tumult was almost over, things changed. During the final days, a crime lord named Kurkennis and his followers took control of Barros. He was little more than a brutish thug, but he had connections to both the Grovers and the Tanners, so for a time he was basically untouchable.”

Arico glowered down at the floor as he continued. “Kurkennis demanded protection money from the people who lived in Barros patch, and a few other patches he could control. All the navigators in the patch had already been conscripted and taken away, so there was no one left who could escape or call for help. Everyone in Barros was at his mercy, and they all knew it. Most of them paid whatever he asked, and promptly, after he beat a few of them up. With his own hands no less. He’s the kind of man who enjoys that.”

“But Codi refused to pay?”

“Damn right he did,” Arico said proudly. “He stood up to Kurkennis’ people right away. He set an example for his neighbors and friends, even though he ended up taking a few beatings himself. They could beat him, but they couldn’t break him, despite everything they did. I guess it was inevitable that eventually Kurkennis would try to take it out on Alya instead.”

Jaas stayed quiet. She looked as though she already knew where the story was going. Arico wished he didn’t have to explain, but she deserved to know. Especially after what she’d just been through.

“I wasn’t there for it—I was still at Durhu’s farm in Tellek patch—but from what I’m told, Kurkennis made her an offer. He would exempt Codi from the list of people who had to pay… as long as she paid him in another way.” He raised a hand when Jaas’ expression started to turn to horror. “No one knows if she would have accepted the deal or not,” he explained quickly, “because Codi overheard the offer. He physically threw Kurkennis out the door, and threatened to kill him if he ever touched Alya.”

Arico sighed. “Two days later, Codi came home and found her dead on the floor of their house. Apparently Kurkennis had taken his time. He’d sliced her leg open at the ankle, and then let her bleed to death, right there on the floor. The healers had at least some good news, though. They concluded that she had passed out from the initial injury, so at least she had been unconscious. Still, it’s a bad way to go.”

“Tell me Kurkennis paid for his crimes,” Jaas said softly, but with noticeable anger.

“Not all of them, but enough, I guess. The Tumult ended two days later, and he was arrested by Grover forces. He denied any involvement with Alya’s death, but there was enough proof of his other crimes to convict him anyway. He’s rotting away in a gaol somewhere to the north—I don’t know where exactly. At least he can’t hurt anyone from there.” His eyes strayed back to the window, towards Codi’s house. “It came too late, though. Codi hasn’t been the same since.”

Jaas leaned back in her chair, looking pensive. “So, he’s convinced himself she’s still alive, then? That’s why he talks about her that way. So he doesn’t have to face the fact that she’s gone?”

“That’s it, exactly. As long as nothing challenges that illusion, he’s safe—even friendly. That’s why I’m certain he won’t come after you. In fact, in the morning he probably won’t even remember what happened, because it might conflict with his… reality. I’m so sorry, Jaas,” he said abruptly, with as much sincerity as he could convey. “I had no idea that he’d been brought to the Fishbowl, or I would have told you! I thought he was still living in Barros somewhere. But it makes sense that he came here. He’s had trading connections with the dwarves for a long time now, since back even before the Tumult. Also, he’s one of the city’s best blacksmiths by far. They would want him here where he could be safe and useful.”

“But why didn’t anyone else tell me?” Jaas asked, her indignant tone returning slightly. “I understand why he’s not dangerous as long as he’s left alone, but the dwarves had to know about his condition! Why would Channul keep me in the dark about it?”

Arico could only shrug in response. “He probably doesn’t know, actually. It’s not common knowledge among the dwarves. I only know about it because Nemith told me the whole story. The other Fishbowlers probably knew as well, but they wouldn’t have expected you to visit Codi alone in the middle of the night. I certainly didn’t.”

“I’m not that kind of woman,” Jaas said wryly. They sat in silence for a moment. “Are there any *other* secrets you want to share? About this place or otherwise?”

Arico shook his head. “I’m sure there’s a great many other secrets out there, but I’ve told you all the ones I know. I’m just glad you could take care of yourself, and didn’t get hurt.”

Jaas flexed her left hand into a fist briefly. “It’s funny. I’ve never struck anyone before in my life. Not even in jest. My brother is a good seven years older than me, so I never really got into fights with him. Our parents taught us that violence should only ever be a last resort. But now that I think back on it, I’m *glad* I hit him. Not that I enjoyed hurting him—I’m not that kind of woman either. No, it’s more that I’m glad I wasn’t helpless. I don’t remember ever feeling that way before tonight, and I *really* don’t want to feel it again.”

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Chapter 28

*Field notes, the 22nd of Arasil, 1571.*

*The past week has been exhausting. Arico seems determined to reach out to as many patches as possible, and I’ve been conscripted to join him on many of these excursions. The process is usually the same: gaining trust with them with my information first, then answering questions, and finally demonstrating how he can help them and encouraging them to support him against the Sustained.*

Jaas could feel the ache in her hand as she wrote, compounded by the number of times she’d demonstrated writing for her many audiences. Thankfully she hadn’t needed to copy her list of names (the dwarves had completed the metal plates and were now just waiting on paper to copy them), but all the writing she’d done in her ad hoc ‘classes’ had still taken a toll.

Each mission was a risk, as well. There was always the chance the magistrate or his guards would catch wind of what they were doing and get word out to the Council. If that happened, the Lord Ascendant’s wrath would come down on them like a bag of hammers.

At least it seemed like they were making progress. Word had spread, quietly of course, that the Harbinger and the heretic (the title given to Arico by the Sustained) were becoming champions of the stra’tchi.

Champions. She’d never championed any cause before, but it did feel good. Hesitating at first, Jaas dipped for more ink, and then put quill to paper again. *With regards to the incident a few nights ago… I am feeling better. My ankle is stronger—though not fully healed yet—and I’ve had time to think back on what I learned.*

She sighed as she kept scribbling. *I’ve never had any real experience with sickness, either of the body or the mind. To meet someone like Codi, who seems so normal, and yet is so broken in his mind… was truly jarring to me. I don’t blame him anymore. I’ve had ample time to come to grips with how he came to be that way, so now I just feel sorry for him. But then, he might just have easily been a true monster. When he grabbed me like that, my thoughts immediately went to the worst possible place. How many others, I wonder, have similar stories? How many people, both here and on the Outside, have had their sanity rocked by tragedy? I never would have even thought about it, had I not touched upon someone like Codi.*

Sabra touched her on the shoulder. “It’s time, pretty lady.”

Jaas looked up, and then out the window. Already the sun was getting low in the sky. She couldn’t tell time without a clock as easily as Arico or Durhu could, but Jaas guessed she’d been alone for more than an hour now. Reluctantly, she packed up her things and extended an arm up to Sabra.

He helped her stand, and then walked behind her on their way back to the sewer entrance. One of the dwarven navigators would be waiting for them at the underground threads; she hoped they’d be bringing her back to the Fishbowl for some rest. Jaas didn’t think she had the energy for more teaching at the moment. Arico was busy in another patch right now, and who could say what work Alzhi was doing for the Ascendants at the moment?

Most of the patches she’d visited so far had similar underground tunnels to the one underneath Gainos’ house, but this patch had been an exception because these tunnels had already been dug centuries ago. These sewers hadn’t been in use since the city had been called Vasiriah. Sanitation infrastructure hadn’t really been necessary since the Threading, with waste simply being thrown into the threads. Most farming patches repurposed waste as fertilizer for their fields, and apparently it worked quite well in some of the Sustained patches. Threading reduced *all* matter to parts even smaller than dust, so there was no threat of disease. As such, no one had thought about the sewers for such a long time that it was almost second nature to ignore them.

Of course it wouldn’t always be that way. Arico had told her he hoped by the time the Ascendants caught on, there would already be enough patches ready to oppose them that it would no longer matter. Until then, the movement would continue to use the sewers to get around—at least in patches that didn’t already have secret dwarven passageways.

Sabra lifted the metal disc up, and Jaas climbed down into the tunnels. The nearest threads should be just down one of the corridors. He climbed down after her, using the light from above as a guide. One of the locals had promised to put the disc back in place after they’d left, so that no one would notice.

As soon as Sabra reached the bottom of the ladder and was lifting his torch to look around, he froze in his tracks. Jaas stopped as well, wondering what was going on. Sabra reached for the side of his neck and turned to her with a small feathered dart in his hand. “What is-” his eyes suddenly rolled up in his head and he collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut.

“Sabra!” She cried out, trying to catch him as he fell. She only partially succeeded in rolling him to the ground; he was too heavy to keep standing. Jaas let go of him, frantically reaching into her pack to get her gun, but strong arms grabbed her from behind and lifted her off the ground. As she struggled a figure in the darkness reached down and picked up the torch, revealing four others including the one holding her.

Jaas’ breath caught in her throat. They were all wearing Ascendant uniforms, with varying house symbols. Two of them had shaved heads like Alzhi, and the rest had topknots.

“It’s all clear, sir,” one of them reported from down the hall. “Looks like it’s just the two of them.”

The closer bald man nodded. “Let’s go before more stra’tchi arrive. Bring the Monster too, if you can drag it that far,” he added with a thoughtful tone, glancing down at Sabra’s unconscious form. “It might be useful.”

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Jaas tried to control her breathing as her captors walked her through what felt like a wooden floor hallway. They’d blindfolded her almost immediately, and taken her away from the point in the threads where she’d been expected. Then they’d navigated her here, though that hadn’t helped much. Inside the threads, she just saw their bodies as she had before. No animals, and no symbols like the dwarven navigators used.

Since their arrival at… wherever they were, she’d been nothing but baggage to them. At one point, she’d even been picked up and thrown over someone’s shoulder as they went up a set of stairs. She was actually grateful for that; she wouldn’t have wanted to climb stairs blindfolded. The dwarf navigator wouldn’t have seen her. He wouldn’t have any idea she’d been captured! She had no idea where they’d taken Sabra, either. Probably a different patch entirely.

The Sustained guards didn’t speak, but she could hear at least three of them moving around her. They’d taken her pack again, but this time she only had notes in it for her writing lessons. And her gun, of course. The rest of it was back in the Enclave, safe and sound. Unlike her. When they finally came to a stop, Jaas heard a door close behind her, and then rough hands were removing the blindfold.

It was a small room, perhaps thirty hands on a side, with a closed wooden window. She noticed a chair in the middle, and a desk and cot on one side. A bowl of fruit and a glass pitcher of water rested on the desk. Without a word, the guards left and closed the door behind them. She didn’t hear it lock, but she was sure it was guarded. Jaas’ heart was beating so fast she had to stop and take a deep breath. She’d been captured. Again. The last time had been bad enough, but this time they knew who she was!

Strangely though, this room didn’t look like a gaol cell. From what the Hauld and Arico had hinted, she was important to the Sustained. Possibly because of what she knew, but more likely it was because they thought she was the Harbinger. Whether it was true or not, she hoped it meant they wouldn’t hurt her.

The door opened again, and an older man wearing a light gray robe entered. He smiled at her as he approached. “Lady Senneco. I’m so pleased you’re all right.” Taking her hand in both of his, he examined her head and neck. “I don’t see any bruises. At least those barbarians didn’t dare hurt you. At any rate, you can relax. You’re safe now.”

It was hardly the greeting Jaas had expected. She opened her mouth in surprise for a moment. “How… who are you?”

He grimaced. “My apologies. I’m Helleco Thatcher. I’m the Lord Ascendant’s Chief Sifter, and I’ve been assigned as your evaluator.” He kept looking at her deferentially as he spoke. It was a little unnerving.

Almost as ominous as what he’d said. Jaas tried to collect her thoughts, looking around the room again before examining this Chief Sifter. Arico had told her about the Council’s sifters. About how they tortured people to get whatever story or confession they wanted. “And… what exactly are you evaluating me for?”

“Of course. You wouldn’t know what a sifter is, would you?” He gestured to the chair, and went over to the desk. “Please sit down. I’ll try to explain.”

Helleco poured a pair of drinks from the pitcher on the desk. “Do you want something to eat or drink? I don’t imagine you’ve had the best food where you’ve been.”

Jaas shook her head, but he handed a glass to her anyway. “In case you change your mind.” He pulled out another chair and sat nearby, still tentatively staring at her.

Apparently he became aware of that as well, because his face colored and he looked away. “Forgive me. It’s just I’ve heard so much about you, and I’ve really wanted to meet you for a long time now. The things you must have seen on the Outside…” he trailed off.

“Anyway,” his tone changed to a more businesslike cadence, “sifters are mostly arbitrators, in our day-to-day lives. We sort through stories told to us by two or more parties, and it’s our job to determine the truth. Then we’re asked to render a fair ruling for everyone involved, of course. Sometimes, such as right now, we’re also assigned to evaluate people and determine a threat level for our superiors.”

He chuckled as she thought that over. “Frankly though, I think your case might be the easiest one I’ve ever had.”

“Why is that?” She asked faintly.

“Because you’re from the Outside, of course,” he gave her a surprised look. “Clearly, you could have had no past association with the heretic Arico, nor with the fanatics who work for him. He kidnapped you weeks ago, and obviously forced you to work for him as well. I mean he had the Deathwatch Monster itself guarding you, for Aquun’s sake! No, I think I’ll be able to give the Lord Ascendant a glowing report about you.”

Jaas was tempted to ask about Sabra, but she knew she had to be careful. Whether they were trying to trick her or not, anything she told them could be disastrous. “I’m sorry, Lord Thatcher, but I don’t know anything about your justice system here. If I’m not under suspicion as you say, then why did your guards bring me here blindfolded? Where are we, anyway?”

A pained look flashed across his face. “Yes, I’m sorry about that. The Ascendant Guards believe in taking no chances. They were ordered to rescue you, which they did, but they tend to view everyone but their own people as a possible threat.”

Jaas nodded slowly. “I thought it was because they think I’m the Harbinger.”

“Ah, so the heretic told you about that, did he? Well you don’t need to worry,” Helleco waved a hand dismissively. “No one here believes in those old prophecies and portents! As for where we are,” he rose and headed over to the window, “you can see for yourself.”

He opened it for her, and Jaas could see the river itself, slowly winding its way south. Beautiful buildings lined both sides of it, lamps suspended in front of each of them to illuminate the river. Even this late in the evening, some people were still in the water, playing and splashing each other. Children’s laughter echoed up from the shore.

“Welcome to Barros patch, Lady Senneco,” Helleco said quietly.

Jaas took it in for a few seconds, before turning away and surveying the room again. She caught a glimpse of the guards outside. “You’re sure I’m safe here?”

Helleco followed her gaze. “Ah, of course. The guards are a necessary precaution, I’m afraid. It seems the heretic has followers inside the Ascendants themselves, and as a result we’ve had to keep your rescue a closely guarded secret. Only a handful of people know that you’re here, and we have to keep it that way until we find out who betrayed us. In fact, you could be very helpful in that regard. Any detail you remember, no matter how small, could be of use in tracking this traitor down.”

So that’s what they were after. She didn’t know if Alzhi was the only spy working against the Sustained, but she wasn’t about to turn him over to them. “I’ll tell you everything I know,” she said quietly.

Jaas doubted Alzhi would be able to find her, not if they were keeping her location secret. That meant it was up to her to find where they were holding Sabra and escape with him. She only hoped she could keep her lies straight until she found a way to do that.

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Arico felt like his head was about to split open. It had only been a few hours now, but he was already about to tear his hair out from sheer concern. What had he been thinking, sending her in alone? Sure, Sabra was with her, but he wasn’t a navigator! She could be in terrible danger, wherever she was!

He was doing a bang-up job protecting her; that was for sure. First she had injured her ankle, then Codi’d attacked her, and now… this, whatever was going on here. Arico wasn’t sure she could survive much more of his benevolent protection!

The moment he exited the threads, he was approached by the Hauld and his guards. “Any luck, lad?”

Arico shook his head in frustration. “I spoke to Direk. He said he waited for more than half an hour, but they never showed up at the threads. He never saw any sign of them at all. I retraced their steps into the patch, and spoke to a few of the locals. None of them saw Jaas or Sabra after they left from her lesson.”

“D’ye believe ‘em?”

Arico’s chest tightened. Jaas and Sabra couldn’t have gone anywhere else, not without a navigator. Visions of her being tortured were racing through his head, and he tried not to think about that. “I don’t know, sir. It’s possible they turned her over to the Ascendants; remember, we both have a price on our heads. Even if they’d done so, wouldn’t the Ascendants have also been waiting for me to show up looking for her? And why would they take Sabra too? They have some idea how dangerous he is. It would have been safer for them to just kill him and leave his body there. I don’t think they did that, though. Sabra wouldn’t go down easy, and I didn’t find any blood or bodies down in those sewers.”

“Aye. It’s soundin’ more like some kinda power play in tha Sustained Houses. Ye think one o’ the Houses is actin’ alone here?”

“It’s possible, sir. Maybe Alzhi can confirm it for us. Have you had any word from him?”

The Hauld shook his head. “Nay, he’s workin’ surveillance in tha threads. Watchin’ tha Enclave, ironic’ly. Contactin’ him would put him in danger, an’ tha chances he knows anythin’ abou’ this’re pretty much nil.”

Arico turned around again. “Then I’ll keep looking. I’ll come back here in an hour. Could you leave someone here if there’s any news?” He barely waited for a response before he was back inside the threads.

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Chapter 29

Helleco sighed as his guards took the prisoner downstairs to the basement. So much for this being a challenge. The Harbinger was clearly intelligent, but she was a terrible liar. They’d let her rest for the night, but when he’d started sifting in the morning, it had taken less than five minutes for him to break through her little soap bubble of lies and verify her allegiance. Her allegiance on the surface, anyway.

“It’s all right, Helleco,” Velya reassured him, putting a hand on his shoulder. “We knew this would happen eventually. You’ll just need to tread carefully now.”

He gave her a grumpy nod, and then followed the guards downstairs. Velya followed too, keeping a good distance. It was important that the Harbinger not see her yet, so Helleco had arranged for Velya to listen in on the interrogation from a side room.

The torture chamber had been built in his great-great grandfather’s day, back when his family had been in power. The Thatchers had never raised a Lord Ascendant, but they had been important enough that the Council of the day had been forced to pander to them in order to win their support. Quite a few of his family’s enemies had died down here.

After the guards tied her firmly to the chair, he dismissed them and slowly walked around looking at the chains on the walls. “I was afraid of this, Harbinger,” he said conversationally, projecting a sad tone in his voice. “You were among the stra’tchi for too long. I’ve seen it many times. So often, captives end up sympathizing with their captors—even helping them! Unfortunately, that means you’ll need some persuasion to see things our way. Now the Lord Ascendant left orders that you aren’t to be harmed, and I can see why. You’re the Harbinger: an important symbol to the people of this city. Sustained and stra’tchi alike know who you are. Ordinarily that would be a problem, but I have my ways around it.” He reached over to her left forearm, jamming three fingers in a specific place on her wrist. Jaas gasped and twitched from the pain.

“You might not have known this on the Outside, but the body has many pressure points. In places where the nerves are clustered, or joints that stretch the veins out. I’ve had years to master the art of pain. In some places it only takes a few carefully timed touches, even as light as a feather, to cause incredible pain.” To illustrate his point, he twisted his fingers on her wrist. He knew (from personal experience actually) that the pain would increase tenfold. The Harbinger gritted her teeth, letting out only a small cry of pain. When he finally let go she gulped in air, still twitching from the after-effects.

“I’ve been at this for a long time, you see,” he continued in that friendly tone. “I’ve discovered all sorts of ways to affect the body without leaving a single mark. Amazingly enough, the process even works in reverse.” He tapped on her wrist again, twice, and she slumped in the chair as the pain vanished.

“I’ve never been very good at anatomy,” she retorted, breathing raggedly and glaring up at him with hatred. “But it doesn’t take a genius to recognize a man who takes far too much pleasure in his work. Does it give you a thrill, tying women up down here and doing whatever you want to them?”

He smiled slightly, masking the sick feeling rising in his stomach. “I’m a professional. I do enjoy my work, but I don’t let that get in the way. What I do is necessary to protect Patchwork. The Council itself has deemed my work in the city’s best interest.”

“I hope that comforts you,” she gritted out between clenched teeth as he started on her other wrist. “Only a small, pathetic man could convince himself that *this* is for the greater good.”

“Your opinion means nothing to me,” he responded calmly, wishing he really meant that. Nothing about this would sit well with him, but he had to keep up appearances. Hiding a grimace, he approached her again. “Everyone has a breaking point. When I find yours, you’ll tell me everything I want to know.” He tapped her behind the left ear, and she screamed out in pain.

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The Clarion sat quietly in his consort’s dressing room. Outside he could hear voices: Hazra and her servants arranging things for the upcoming reception. It was her brother’s fortieth birthday, and his fourth anniversary of taking command of the Ascendant Guard. Representatives from every major House would be there, along with a few hundred more. And it would take all night.

“I’ll try a few of these on. Go get yourselves ready,” she ordered her servants. “Go! We don’t have much time!” Hazra backed into the room, laden with four or five outfits no doubt specially made by her family. Her family. It had been years, and he still didn’t feel like part of it. Though in retrospect that was no great surprise. The entire city was his family—or it was supposed to be.

She came to a surprised stop upon seeing him there. “Clarion! Shouldn’t you be out in the courtyard already?” She moved across the room to hang up the dresses.

“Did you think I wouldn’t find out?” He asked softly, and her step faltered ever so slightly.

“Find out what?” She asked with an admirable imitation of innocence. No wonder it had taken him weeks to catch on. Him—the observant, universally-loved Clarion of the Council. Him… the love-blinded fool.

“They found Terizo Sharpe this morning,” he continued slowly. “He was dead. A single stab wound to the chest. No—don’t act surprised!” He said quickly, as she opened her mouth to feign concern. “I know you’ve hated him for years. Ever since you found out what he did to that servant girl of his! Then there was that stra’tchi who got mud on your riding dress. And the craftsman who ruined your cousin’s wedding arrangements. There are more, too, I’m sure. Perhaps dozens more.”

He stood purposefully and looked her right in the eye. “When we were made consorts, I said the words I was expected to say, and so did you. But we also promised each other afterwards. No secrets, remember? Now’s the time to honor that promise. It was you, wasn’t it?”

The Clarion’s chest tightened with pain, and he shook his head. No. This wasn’t how it had happened. He hadn’t figured it out on his own, he’d *stumbled* onto the truth! He’d walked in here, and seen her covered in blood, from head to toe. From her first kill. She’d even been carrying the dripping daggers in her hands!

But this way was better. He resolved to continue anyway. “You killed them, didn’t you?”

Surprisingly—and yet no surprise as he knew deep down, Hazra’s demeanor changed. She let the pointless dresses slip from her hands—which were suddenly deadly weapons themselves. Even her voice changed. More intense and deeper. Huskier even. “They got what they deserved. All of them.”

At least this part had happened. The truth was out. He knew what she was, for certain this time. The Heartbane was Hazra. He was consort to a killer. An assassin. Any number of options flashed through his head, and the pain in his chest eased. There was really only one thing he was going to do. One thing he *could* do, given the circumstances.

“I only need to know one more thing,” the Clarion asked softly. “How can I help?”

-Suddenly he fought the urge to sneeze. Something tickled at his nose, and he woke up with a start.

He was lying on a table in his cousin’s home in Allash patch. Elathvor was there standing over him with a rag. No doubt covered with whatever sulfurous compound he’d put in front of the Clarion’s nose.

The Clarion’s chest was covered with bandages, as he’d expected. No doubt Elathvor had kept him under for hours as he’d explored every nook and cranny of his insides. Still, he felt very little pain—just a numbness across his whole midsection. Elathvor always kept a wide variety of pain-deadening herbs on hand.

The Clarion’s cough had grown even worse since his conversation with the Lord Ascendant. A medical examination had shown problems with more than his lungs, though. A chirgury would be necessary to find out what was wrong. Technically speaking, he had no family in the city, but of course even the Clarion had to come from *somewhere*. Back when he had been known as Gerit Clark, as a child he’d lived here in Allash patch. And despite all his training—his years of preparation as an initiate—the Clarion did still think of Elathvor as his cousin. He knew it was wrong; that he had to treat everyone equally, and trust everyone equally.

Of course the Ascendants had their own healers, but Elathvor was the best in the city by far. Especially when it came to chirgury. No one knew how to open someone up and then close them again without causing lasting harm like his cousin did. Most people could only open them up, and only after they were dead. Despite its massive promise, chirgury was still a long way from being in regular practice.

“Well?” The Clarion asked slowly. “Did you find anything in there aside from dust and cobwebs?”

His cousin didn’t answer at first, and just helped him up to a sitting position. The Clarion’s joking mood faded away, and he took Elathvor by the shoulders. “Tell me, cousin. How bad is it? You know I can take the news.”

Elathvor’s dense eyebrows furrowed. “I’m sorry. I found signs of tissue death… on virtually every one of your organs. The damage is… extensive.”

He supposed he should be surprised or shocked by that, but the Clarion just felt a sense of dull acceptance. Somehow, he’d known that it wasn’t just a really bad cough. “Is it the Blood Fever?”

“What? No. It’s not the Fever, I’m sure of that,” Elathvor assured him. “The damage here is just too widespread to be the result of any disease I know. There’s really only one thing that could have done this.”

The Clarion nodded. “Poison.”

Ever since the Laentana, the Clarion’s thoughts had rested on what that heretic Arico had said. He had read the notes dropped onto the Sustained again and again. The heretic’s warnings had been proven correct, at least with regards to the High Penet.

Other things the heretic had said lingered in the Clarion’s mind as well. Especially the parts about the Plague Test. It didn’t help that the Clarion had been a sickly child—prone to all sorts of illnesses in his early years.

They both just sat there in silence for a while. Elathvor still seemed shocked, but the Clarion found himself surprisingly calm. Perhaps having lived among a power-hungry, manipulative, and vicious bunch like the Council had given him a certain resistance. Though not the *right* kind of resistance, unfortunately.

“Can anything be done?” He asked, knowing the answer already.

Elathvor shook his head. “It’s gone too far. All I can do now is manage the cough and the pain. I’d guess it’s been done slowly, over the past few weeks. Probably in your food. You have three, maybe four weeks before…”

“Before I croak?” the Clarion asked, smiling up at him. “Before I take a swim with Aquun? Make my last trip through the threads?”

Elathvor relaxed a little. “Yes. The good news is, you should be able to function normally for most of that time. The cough will get a little worse, but the other symptoms won’t be hard to manage.”

His shoulders straightened. “But in the meantime… we’ll find out who’s responsible for this. I’ll talk to your father, and *you* can talk to the Lord Ascendant. We’ll arrange an inquiry. It has to be someone on the manor’s cooking staff, or a servant who at least has access to your meals.”

“No!” The Clarion answered forcefully. A little too forcefully perhaps. Elathvor gave him a confused look.

The Clarion took a deep breath. The last thing he needed was people poking into his private life. They’d do the same for Hazra, and the truth about Heartbane would get out. “No, let me arrange things privately, Elathvor. If we do this officially, the poisoner could find out and then would probably go into hiding. This way, we can catch him by surprise.”

Elathvor nodded. “Good idea. I didn’t think of that.”

The Clarion sat up off the table and carefully stretched his arms, mindful of the stitches in his chest. “It’s most likely one of the Councilors who did this to me, or at least ordered it,” he commented casually. “I’ve done plenty to piss them off recently. They’ve got more than enough reason to come after me.”

“I don’t get it. Why aren’t you angry? Why aren’t you furious about this?” Elathvor said, giving him a look that was equal parts frustration and commiseration.

The Clarion didn’t answer at first. How could he explain it? He felt worry, sure, for the future. There was a kind of quiet regret as well, but nothing more. “I have no room for fury, Elathvor. It has no place in my mind or in my heart. I want whoever did this to face justice, yes, but only because I am Clarion. Justice is part of who I am. But anger? Hatred? A desire for retribution? They’re of no use to anyone!

“If you want to feel sorry for me, don’t. I certainly am not. It’s true I wanted to do more, to have more time, but I know I’ve lived a good life. When I die, I’ll have no regrets. How many others in Patchwork could say the same?”

Elathvor pulled him into a big bear hug, and the Clarion smiled faintly. He’d always known he was different. He’d even sometimes indulged in the idea that he would have been different even without all the training. That he would always have a different view of life than most. No, he had many things to consider right now, but the only thought that stuck around was… what would happen to Hazra when he was gone?

He still had time. He’d come up with something.

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Jaas didn’t know how long she’d been down here. A day, perhaps? A few hours? Helleco had been working systematically and professionally. He didn’t ask her any questions, but he did watch her reactions closely. He seemed to be taking mental notes of when she flinched, and how badly. Of when she cried out the loudest, or how long it took for the twitching to stop. His attention to detail would have been impressive, in any other circumstances.

There was one ray of hope: the chair she’d been tied to didn’t feel very sturdy. When she twisted her left arm, it felt like the nails holding the chair’s arm weren’t solidly in place. She took great care to hide that fact as she slowly worked the nails loose.

Eventually he stood back from her. She was still twitching in the chair, glaring back at him. “Your resistance is impressive, Harbinger,” he said quietly. “More so than I was expecting.”

“I’ve had some endurance training recently,” she admitted, her hands gripping and ungripping as she envisioned wrapping them around his neck. It seemed Otrul’s tireless drills had increased her pain threshold as well.

“Apparently so.” He hesitated. “There are other methods I could use, of course. I suppose I could have my guards rape you, one after another. I doubt they’d leave any marks on your body. Nothing detectable, anyway.” Jaas kept her composure, despite a stab of terror.

Helleco grimaced. “No, something tells me the Lord Ascendant would object to that. Besides, I think I have a better way.” He beckoned to one of the guards and whispered something to him. The guard nodded and ran out.

She heard shouting a few seconds later. Sabra’s voice. With a great deal of effort and clanking of chains, four guards dragged a struggling Sabra in. He was manacled, hands to feet, but he still struggled mightily as he roared in anger. He almost knocked them all off balance more than once. The moment he caught a glance of her, his struggle faltered. He glared up at Helleco, as the guards secured him to the wall. “Sabra will kill you all. Slowly.”

“Yes, I’m sure you would,” Helleco said gravely. “When he woke up, he broke through his bindings very easily, you know,” he turned back to Jaas. “We had to sedate him again, and truss him up like a turkey this time so he wouldn’t break free again. He’s a remarkable creature, isn’t he?” Sabra lunged at him, muscles straining against the manacles chaining his wrists and ankles to the wall.

To his credit, Helleco didn’t give any reaction, despite how close Sabra got to him. He only laughed. “Such spirit! Once he’s been properly broken, and if he survives, I’m sure he’ll make a fine attraction in the Sustained Menagerie with the other animals.”

He drew a gun from one of the guards’ holsters, and leaned down next to Jaas as he checked it. Apparently it was already loaded to his satisfaction. “Of course you could spare him from that fate. If you tell me what I want to know, I could see to it he’s released back to the Deathwatch patch where he belongs. He’d have to stay there, naturally, but at least he wouldn’t end up on display.”

Jaas looked back over her shoulder in turmoil. Sabra flicked his eyes in her direction, defiance burning bright in them. The thought of him being gawked at in a cage was a hateful notion, but she knew he wouldn’t want her to give in. And there was also the near-certainty that Helleco wouldn’t keep his end of the bargain. Wordlessly, she shook her head.

Helleco shrugged, and aimed the gun at Sabra’s head. “Have it your way.”

He nodded to one of the guards, who drew a wicked-looking serrated dagger from his belt. “My colleagues have had a chance to study the Monster over the past day,” he continued his old conversational tone, keeping his aim steady. “From what they tell me, it’s unlikely a beating will be that harmful to him. He seems to have abnormally thick muscles and bones, a result of his aberrant birth no doubt. Because of that,” he nodded to the guard, “we’ll have to dig a little deeper.” The guard plunged his knife into Sabra’s side.

Sabra grunted in pain and tried to headbutt the guard but the chains held him in place. Jaas couldn’t see his side from her position in the chair, but the wound had to be bad. Black blood oozed over the knife’s hilt and dripped onto the floor. The blood of giants—who had also been tortured and slaughtered like he was about to be.

“Again,” Helleco commanded, and the guard stabbed the knife once more. More blood stained the floor, and Jaas winced at Sabra’s groan. Their attention was all on him, though. She took the opportunity to keep pulling at the chair.

“We have a fairly good idea where the Monster’s internal organs are,” Helleco said softly. “We’re avoiding them for now. I have to wonder just how much of this he can take, though. He’ll certainly bleed to death eventually, unless we put a stop to this soon. Still not feeling talkative?” He added sardonically, and gestured with his free hand. The guard stabbed again.

There, it had finally happened. The arm was loose under her bindings. Gritting her teeth, Jaas shifted her weight and toppled the chair to the ground. Pain shot through her shoulders and chest as the chair came apart under her. As she’d hoped, the ropes loosened with it.

There were three guards in the room, all armed. With both prisoners restrained, none of them had drawn their guns. Their mistake. From the floor, Jaas swung the broken chair’s arm as hard as she could, catching the closest guard across the knees. He fell with a pained cry, and with the speed borne from her combat training, Jaas rolled to her feet. In another instant, she had ‘liberated’ Helleco’s gun and pointed it back at his head.

“Don’t do it!” She snapped at the other two guards as both moved towards her. “I’ll kill him!”

Thankfully they both came to a stop. Silence pervaded the room, and Jaas stood up, hearing her heart thumping fast in the sudden quiet.

She took a moment to free herself from the last of the ropes. “Drop your weapons and raise your hands. All of you, now!” She raised the tip of the gun for emphasis, and they looked at Helleco for instructions. Looking grim, he nodded and they did as she said.

“You,” she glanced at the guard with the now-dropped knife. “Unchain him. Sabra, are you all right?”

“Sabra is fine,” he grunted, breathing heavily as the guard fumbled with the manacle keys. The moment he was free, Sabra rammed his shoulder into the guard’s gut, knocking him down. He then rose slowly. “Pretty lady did good. Sabra should probably hold that, though.” He tentatively reached out for the gun.

Gratefully, she handed it to him. Otrul’s training had included the use of sparkpowder weapons like this one, but she’d never aimed it at a living thing before. She’d been trying to hide the shaking in her hands the whole time, and she wasn’t even sure that if she’d squeezed the trigger, it would have gone off! At least Sabra knew how to handle himself in life or death situations.

“Come on,” she said more confidently now that she was no longer holding the metal death machine. “I think I know a way out of here. Helleco here is one of the Sustained higher-ups, so I bet he’d make a pretty good hostage. You’re going to take us to the threads where our friends can see us,” she said fiercely to him, “or Sabra will break your arm clean off.”

She started to move, planning on locking the rest of them in their own torture room, but Sabra grabbed her arm lightly. “It’s all over now,” he called to the door. “Sabra’s in control.”

He then handed the gun back to Helleco, as more people stepped into the room.

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Chapter 30

Velya took in the scene, in stunned silence. The chair was in pieces on the ground, and the Harbinger’s guard was sitting down in a corner, nursing his bleeding legs. Helleco’s gun was safely back in his hands, but he was a little pale all the same. Some of this she’d expected, but it seemed the Harbinger had surprised her once again. From her expression, Jaas felt the same.

Helleco waited for her nod, and then left the room. They’d agreed, after what he’d done to Jaas, it would be better if he wasn’t around for this. He took the other guards with him, leaving just Sabra and Velya with the Harbinger.

“It’s all right, Harbinger,” she said reassuringly, holding up a hand to Sabra. He released Jaas, and she gave him a betrayed look of hatred. “You’re safe. No one will hurt you here. I’m Velya Cooper, originally from the Deathwatch patch. You might remember me from the Earth Match you saw there.” She stepped forward into the torchlight to give their ‘prisoner’ a better look at her face.

Jaas stepped away from both of them, obviously suspicious. “What is going *on* here?” She demanded harshly. “Am I supposed to believe you’re suddenly my friends now? That you’re not really Sustained?”

“Oh, we are Sustained,” Velya admitted, “and more than that, too.” Carefully parting her hair, she bowed her head so Jaas could get a look at her scalp. Velya felt exposed, almost naked in a sense, given that she worked hard to conceal the tattoo there from just about everybody.

Clearly, Jaas recognized it. “You’re… a Thorne? Like Sabra?”

Her curiosity and excitement had apparently overridden her fear, at least temporarily. Tilting her head back and rearranging her hair, Velya nodded. “We all are. Everyone you’ve met since we picked you up in that sewer tunnel.”

At Velya’s nod, Sabra removed his left sandal and lifted his foot up. Inked into the arch of his foot was a similar tattoo. It was always in an easy-to-reach place, but never somewhere obvious. Velya’s scalp still itched from time to time, even though she’d worn this mark since childhood. It was almost as familiar to her as a patch designation.

Jaas’ face was a mask of realization and amazement. Followed by suspicion again. “That dart you got stuck with…” she trailed off, turning to Sabra. “You faked that?”

Sabra nodded and showed her his neck, clear of any puncture marks. “Sabra can handle most poisons, so they didn’t try any,” he said confidently. Velya almost shook her head. This was hardly the time to brag, but Sabra had never been what she would call diplomatic.

“But you were stabbed, several times! I saw them do it!” Jaas pointed down at the bloodstains on the floor, as if they had somehow betrayed her as well.

Sabra reached down and scooped up the knife, handing it to her handle first. “Eyes lie, sometimes,” he said gently.

As they watched, Jaas ran her fingers along the knife’s edge, and then slowly tested it on the wall. The spring-loaded blade retracted into the hilt, and the blood substitute inside oozed out from the edges, coating the wall. She reached out and ran her hand along Sabra’s side. Black fluid coated his ribs, but his skin was unbroken.

“Even the fake blood was black,” Jaas said in an undertone, before looking back up at Velya. “You sure went to a lot of trouble getting the details right.”

“If you were from Patchwork,” Velya explained gently, “you might have seen through the trick, but you’re from the Outside. Sabra told me how people out there use magic instead of machinery. Chances are you’ve never even considered something like a spring-loaded knife.”

“You’re right. I haven’t,” Jaas admitted slowly. Without warning, she reached down to one of the guns on the ground and checked for its ammunition. “Are these fake, too?”

“The guns are real,” Velya put in hastily, trying at a gentle tone. “But there’s only wadded paper inside. We call them blanks. Just the same,” she added, attempting a smile, “if you’d shot Helleco in the head at that range… it still might have caused serious injury. We didn’t expect you to go for the gun. Just to break the chair and then try to run away.”

“I didn’t think I could get away alone,” she said faintly. Her knuckles tightened on the gun, and she closed it up again. “How about you tell me why shouldn’t I just shoot you *now*, for all you’ve done? Kidnapping me? Bringing me to Sustained territory? *Torturing me*??” Sabra didn’t move, but Velya could see his muscles tense. He was ready to stop her, and quick enough to do it too. Thankfully she didn’t try anything.

“I’m sorry we had to do that,” Velya said, and meant it. “Please try to understand our situation here. The Thornes have been around since before the Threading itself, and we’ve survived by staying hidden all that time. Unfortunately, your arrival changed all that. When Sabra drew that symbol in the ground, it was a test. You recognized it immediately, and knew what it meant. If the Council gets their hands on you, and forces you to tell them about us, we won’t stand a chance. They would hunt us down without mercy, just like they do to any other threat to their power. You may be the single greatest threat the Thornes have ever faced!”

“And that justifies *abducting* me?” Jaas bit out harshly.

“We had to be sure you wouldn’t give us up if you were captured and questioned.” Velya shrugged helplessly, “so we captured and questioned you about Alzhi to make sure.”

“Helleco did say he was here to evaluate me,” Jaas said softly. She shook her head. “So did I pass your little test?”

“With flying colors. But you weren’t the only one we were testing,” Velya added. “Arico has been clear about his goals so far. He hasn’t changed his message yet, but his methods are just as important to us. We had to know how he’d react to your disappearance. Some of us feared he would tear that patch apart looking for you, just like the Council would. Thankfully, he did no such thing.”

“I have to let him know I’m all right,” Jaas insisted. “That is, if I really am all right,” she added in a darker tone.

“You are,” Velya assured her. “Even if you’d failed our test, we wouldn’t have harmed you. That’s not our way. You would have been kept in confinement, though. Somewhere safe and out of harm’s way until this conflict comes to an end, and we can find a way to send you back Outside.”

“I do remember you from the Deathwatch patch,” Jaas suddenly changed topics. “Arico said you were one of Drakos Bloodeye’s advisors. Is Bloodeye a Thorne too? Are you the one who recruited Sabra for the Thornes?”

Velya smiled. Sabra was right; she really did have a mind for details. Sabra kept his distance, apparently still sensing Jaas’ anger towards him, but Velya moved over to him and reached a hand up to his shoulder. “Drakos isn’t one of us, no. He is one of the more important people in the city, though. That’s why I was assigned to keep an eye on him in the first place. And yes, I did bring Sabra into the fold, but it’s a bit more than that. Sabra is actually my little brother.”

She pulled up another chair, looking again with amusement at the shattered remains of the Harbinger’s previous seat. “Sit, please. This will take some time to explain.”

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*Field notes, the 25th of Arasil, 1571.*

For once, Jaas didn’t know where to start. She balanced the quill on the edge of the inkwell, thinking. Her return to the Enclave had been a turbulent one. The Thornes had brought her and Sabra back without incident, sure, but the dwarves had been less than trusting. She couldn’t blame them. Not with what they’d had to endure so far. Somehow, Velya had known about the secret dwarven passages into the threads. Most likely, there were Thorne spies in the Enclave too.

Arico had been overjoyed to see Jaas at first. He’d swept her up in a roundabout hug, saying how glad he was to see her safe. Unfortunately, that hadn’t lasted long. Like the dwarves, he was full of questions… which Jaas couldn’t immediately answer. Velya had requested that she keep the existence of the Thornes a secret. An understandable request, but one that put Jaas in a difficult position.

When Arico asked, she said she and Sabra had been with some ‘friends’, which was true enough. She apologized for going without warning and promised it wouldn’t happen again, but that hadn’t meant much to the dwarves. Jaas suspected that she’d be in a cell right now if not for Arico reluctantly vouching for her.

Jaas sighed as she looked down at the parchment.

*I never thought that my role here would become so complicated. In a way, teaching dozens of patches how to read would be easier than dealing with this kind of diplomatic impasse. It’s clear Arico no longer trusts me completely. I can’t tell him where I’d been, or with whom. An ordinary man might be able to let me get away with that, but a revolutionary leader like Arico can’t afford to be lax with a possible spy.*

*At least he’s still the same kind person I first met in that gaol cell. I’m grateful for that. I think he knows I wasn’t with the Sustained (the real ones, anyway). He has to be feeling pressure from the Hauld though, to find out the truth. The dwarves can’t afford any allies they aren’t* absolutely *sure of.*

She was also grateful that she’d gotten in the habit of writing in Uatoni script. She couldn’t afford anyone in the Enclave reading her notes, either.

*On the upside, Sabra did tell me a bit more about himself now that he’s… well, out. Apparently the story about the Deathwatch Monster is mostly true. As a baby he was left on the edges of the Deathwatch patch, where Velya found him. She was only a few years older than him at the time, so she’s more of a sister to him than a mother.*

*When Arico and I showed up at the Deathwatch patch, he was curious. He didn’t say exactly why he joined us—whether it was because he wanted to, or because his sister wanted him to gather information about us—but he seems content enough. He’s even been pretty useful, when he’s not getting me kidnapped or faking being stabbed.*

*It seems the Thornes are everywhere, spread across the city, even if there are only a few dozen of them. Velya wasn’t exactly forthcoming when I asked, but I saw stra’tchi marks on some of the guards’ shoulders. They seem to have influence in every major patch, and across the minor ones, too. The fact that they were confident enough to hold me in Sustained territory is very telling. Perhaps Helleco wasn’t even lying when he said he worked directly for the Lord Ascendant. It’s looking increasingly likely that they have people here in the Enclave, too. That’s probably why they wanted to stay a secret from the Hauld. The older secret society doesn’t want to be compromised by the younger one, I guess.*

Jaas shook her head angrily. *They kept me for days. Tortured me. Threatened me with rape! And then made me think they’d stabbed Sabra. I want to be furious at them. I still feel the aftereffects of that… ‘touch’ method Helleco used on me.* She sighed. *But they were right. There was no other way they could be sure I was trustworthy. Not until they’d tested me for themselves. I just wish there had been another way.*

*The dwarves were right to train me, too. I’ll have to thank Otrul, if I can find him. Wow, that felt strange to write.*

Across the walled courtyard, she saw Arico and the Hauld emerge from his subterranean audience chamber. Arico stopped when he saw her, briefly, and the Hauld looked in her direction too.

The Hauld’s gaze was cold and calculating, as usual. There was nothing in his glance that surprised her. Arico’s look cut right through her, though. His eyes were suspicious and hurt.  
Part of her wanted to rush over there and tell him everything, right now. She didn’t know if she could take keeping it from him for long, but she knew she had to. She was now, like it or not, the unofficial liaison between the Thornes and the movement, and she couldn’t risk betraying the trust of either side. Only time would tell if the Thornes would be willing to support the dwarves and Arico.

*It seems the Hauld still trusts me a little,* she continued after they’d gone*. He set guards to keep an eye on me while I’m in the Fishbowl, and I bet Arico won’t let me or Sabra out of sight when we’re out and about, but they did tell me about an upcoming… summit, of sorts.*

*Apparently the various Mayors and Bosses of the patches we’ve been visiting have been very interested in what we’ve been telling their people. The leaders from more than a dozen different patches have agreed to meet in an abandoned patch tomorrow evening. The Hauld won’t let me go, though. He claims it’s to keep me safe, but I know better. I’m sure I’ll have to earn back the rest of his trust.*

Jaas dipped the quill in the inkwell, careful not to let it drip on the parchment, before she started a new line. With a start, she realized just how accustomed she’d become to this kind of ink.

Ink was easy enough to get on the Outside. If people didn’t just magic it up, they were usually able to acquire some by combining soot and animal glue. The people here had taken that simplistic method and expanded on it in a big way. Here, the process now involved tree bark cut in the spring, soaked for days, boiled until the pigment itself separated from the plant, combined with a kind of crude wine, and then finally mixed with iron salt over a flame to get the final product. Even visualizing the sheer effort they went to made her head spin a little.

*Strangely enough, Endu will be coming along to the meeting. Probably because I’m not. She taught me the basics of their chemistry and medical techniques, and I returned the favor with a primer on different languages. Of course the dwarves taught her how to read and write ages ago. Her sons, too. At least the three of them seem to be fitting in to the Fishbowl community.* She smiled slightly. *Balter is as… persistent as ever with his affections. It’s actually kind of endearing, but I’ll have to find a gentle way to let him down easy. If that’s even possible when it comes to young love.*

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Arico tried to get that image of Jaas out of his head as he descended into the audience chamber with the Hauld. She’d looked haunted at the sight of him. Ever since she and Sabra had gone missing, he’d been torturing himself thinking about what might have happened to them. He’d spent almost two days straight searching the threads, scanning the edges of every Sustained patch again and again, just hoping for a glimpse of her. He’d nearly been spotted twice when he’d left the threads to get a closer look.

But then, perhaps this wasn’t what he thought. Sabra and Jaas had been alone and out of contact for days. Perhaps they’d actually just wanted privacy. My mistress with a monster is in love, Arico thought to himself, not entirely convinced it was a ridiculous notion. No, that couldn’t be it. Neither of them was a navigator, so they couldn’t have just disappeared without help.

It was infuriating to be this… compromised! Arico had completely ignored the Hauld’s advice, and Alzhi’s too, when he’d finally showed up later to give it. He’d lost all objectivity in his fruitless search to find her. So much for learning from his mistakes with Nouma. But then, this wasn’t the same. He wasn’t in love with Jaas. It was hard for him to say what he felt.

None of that excused his behavior, though. If anyone under his command had acted that way, he would have disciplined them for disobeying orders. Arico still didn’t know why the Hauld hadn’t punished him yet. It was possible, if unlikely, that the Hauld had gone through something similar of his own. As they walked down the stairs together, Arico gave him a sideways glance. There was still a lot Arico didn’t know about the old dwarf’s past.

Still, since Jaas and Sabra had returned things had only gotten a little better. She’d refused to tell him where they’d been, or who had taken them (and which navigator had returned them). Sabra had been just as tight-lipped about it. Jaas only asked him to trust her, and just left it at that. Arico shook his head. He did trust her, to a point. But not knowing… it was like some kind of tiny animal was chewing away at the back of his mind. Perhaps that was why they were called gnawing doubts.

Alzhi and Endu were waiting for them as they got to the audience chamber. Grateful for the distraction, Arico noticed a stack of parchments in the older man’s arms, and a grim expression on both faces.

“I was instructed to deliver these to a bunch of patches on the west side of the city,” Alzhi said darkly, handing one to each of them. “They were to be given directly to the magistrate of each patch.” Feeling a sense of foreboding, Arico skimmed the document. At first it looked like any other public announcement, to be read to each patch by their magistrates. Except for the contents.

In it, the Sustained Council claimed to have tracked down the ‘heretic’ (that was him, Arico had heard), to his home patch of Tellek. While the heretic hadn’t been apprehended, the searchers had found the patch devastated by an outbreak of the Blood Fever. There had been no survivors.

A cold chill seeped through Arico as he read it again. “By the Many…” He looked back up at Alzhi. “Has this been confirmed?”

The part of him that wasn’t in shock was still hoping this was just one of the Council’s mindgames. There were a hundred and twenty-two people in his home patch. Somehow he knew it was true, though. The Council wouldn’t make such a claim unless they were sure no one could contradict them. They were all dead: parents, children, siblings, spouses. Probably the Sustained’s own magistrate as well.

Or perhaps not everyone. “Dwarves are immune to the Blood Fever, right? D’tor lives on the very edge of the patch!” Arico said with a brief surge of hope. “She might still be there, hiding!”

“D’tor’s not a true dwarf, though. She’s just a short human.” Alzhi responded sadly. After a moment, he looked up again, “Still, if it’s not the Fever, it’s possible she’s avoided notice. I went to Tellek patch but I didn’t look at her house. I did see a bunch of Ascendants from the edge of the threads, though. They were carrying bodies towards the threads, but I couldn’t tell how they’d died. It might be false, but why would they order me to deliver these announcements if there was anyone left who could deny it?”

The Hauld spoke up before Arico could say anything else. “Could it be true, lass? Could tha Sustained have brough’ back tha Blood Fever?” He gave Endu a questioning look.

She was silent for a moment, before finally shaking her head. “I doubt it, Hauld. I’ve read everything your ancestors recorded about the Fever. Even if the Council had isolated some of the original carriers of the disease, there would be no way for them to be sure it was being passed from generation to generation safely. As soon as one infected person dies, the disease dies with them. That’s why the Ascendants are having no problem handling the bodies now. Either they killed everyone themselves and are making it all up, or they faked the disease somehow.”

“Because of me,” Arico said softly. He ran his finger down the edge of the announcement. Sure enough at the bottom there was a warning to all patches. It claimed the heretic was most certainly a carrier of the Fever, and any contact with him would prove deadly.

“Think about it,” he continued slowly. “I stood in front of the entire city and claimed the Blood Fever was long gone! That it was just an excuse the Council was using! They *had* to make a liar out of me. How better to discredit me than to have the Fever destroy my home, and claim I was responsible for it??”

Arico wanted to go there himself. He had to see the bodies of his friends, of the people he’d grown up with, but he knew it had to be a trap. If Endu was right, the Council had done this not just to discredit him but also to draw him out of hiding.

The Hauld put a hand up to his shoulder. “This innae yer fault, lad. An’ we dinnae know if it really was tha Council.”

“Of course it’s my fault! They’re all dead because I was stupid enough to give the people my real name! I did this!”

He turned away, but Alzhi caught him by the shoulders before he could leave. “You know better than that, sir,” he intoned forcefully. “None of us could have predicted this. You took steps to protect them when you left. That’s all you could have done.”

His eyes flicked over to Endu, and Arico could see the relief in her glance. If Arico hadn’t warned her; hadn’t arranged her removal to the Fishbowl, she and the boys would be just as dead as the rest of Tellek patch. “The fact is, you still have people depending on you. We have no time for self-pity, not right now.”

“Ye know ‘e’s right, Arico.” The Hauld’s voice was the same mixture of gentleness and implacable honesty. “We need ta be sure o’ this. Alzhi, can ye get one o’ tha bodies fer us ta test here?”

Alzhi thought about it, and slowly shook his head. “I doubt I could get a body away from Tellek patch, but I might be able to sneak Endu *in* to take a look.” He turned to her. “You wouldn’t need long, would you?”

“Half an hour at most,” she said confidently.

“I’ll go with you,” Arico said automatically. He had to see it for himself.

“Ye will not!” The Hauld answered sharply. “Yer face is plastered all o’er tha city, lad. One good look by any o’ tha Ascendants, an’ all three o’ ye are done fer.” Not waiting for any response, and clearly not willing to entertain any objections, he turned back to Alzhi and Endu. “Go upstairs an’ grab a disguise, both o’ ye. We need ta do this quick. If’n ye find Arico’s frien’ alive, bring ‘er back here safe, would ya?”

Alzhi glanced over at Arico and nodded. “Yes sir.”

Arico could tell the Hauld was throwing him a bone, and he appreciated that. It was a risk, bringing D’tor here. Even if she was similar in appearance to the natural-born dwarves, she’d been raised a stra’tchi, with their ideals. Come to think of it, she might not actually want to stay here, or in the Fishbowl.

Arico knew he was just trying to distract himself by pondering all this. A hundred and twenty-two people had just died, but more lives were still in the balance. He felt a stab of shame at his earlier outburst. The Hauld was right. He could do no good there, and potentially a lot of harm. This was war, and people died in war. He couldn’t take that all on himself.

Endu hurried out to get her disguise but Alzhi hesitated, looking back at Arico. “The Ascendants are handing these out all over the city,” he lifted the parchment stack. “I’ve got my own corner to take care of, though, including most of your would-be friends. The Mayors in Yassa patch and Hokketh patch have already pulled out of the meeting tomorrow. Should I deliver any of these to the rest of them?”

“No,” he responded automatically. “Not until after the meeting, anyway. It will be better if I tell them myself. That way I can soften the blow.” As an afterthought, he added, “I should probably tell Jaas about this as well. If I really am a monster, it’s better that she hears it from me.”

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Chapter 31

Endu’s disguise was simple enough. A blue-and-white Aquunite robe adorned with the symbols of faith on the sleeves and neckline. It might not be able to fool a close inspection but it would do, especially with the high foot traffic in and out of Tellek patch.

Alzhi held her arm as they stepped out of the threads, and into the stream of people moving to and from the village. Red and gold coats mixed in with blue and white robes, as well as the red and brown of lower-ranked Sustained guards brought in to search for survivors.

However, the announcement had said there were none, and in his heart Alzhi knew it was true. This was a punishment delivered to Arico, for daring to speak out against them. The same would happen to anyone else foolish enough to listen to him. The Lord Ascendant had just sent a message as well: there would be no compromise. He would not give a single span of authority in this fight. It could only be victory, or death.

Remembering the Hauld’s order, Alzhi turned aside and headed west towards D’tor’s house. He only knew where it was by Arico’s description, but he’d never met her before. The idea of a dwarf being born to human parents was strange, and she’d no doubt suffered a great deal of abuse just for being short. Still, Alzhi had only ever thought of her as just another stra’tchi. He doubted he could afford to think of her in any other way, not since he’d started working for the Hauld.

Just as Arico had said, her home had been vandalized. A partial symbol had been painted on one wall of her home in white paint. Tentatively, Alzhi opened the door and headed inside. As he’d feared, she was there. Lying contorted on the ground in her own living room. It didn’t take him more than a glance to know that she was gone. Strangely, there were two wooden glasses on the table, and two clay bowls left out. She hadn’t been alone here.

He nodded to Endu, and they split up. She went into the kitchen while he examined the bedroom in the other direction. In his head, he reassured himself that as long as he didn’t touch any of the bodies, he would be fine. The Fever required at least some contact.

Endu apparently hadn’t found anything, and followed him into the bedroom after a bit. Alzhi was still just standing there, staring at the dwarf lying dead in bed. His body was contorted in a similar fashion to D’tor’s, lifeless eyes staring up at the ceiling.

“Another dwarf?” Endu said, clearly startled. She recovered quickly though, and moved closer to look at the body. “Do you know him?”

“It’s M’abor. The performer from Cynnik’s Vagabonds,” Alzhi answered faintly. “I saw him in a play, a few months ago in Barros patch. He was brilliant! The entire crowd cheered him at the end of it.”

“I guess D’tor felt the same way,” Endu said grimly. “Come on, let’s go on to the village. There’s nothing we can do for them now, and I need to examine a human body, not a dwarven one.”

Alzhi held out an arm to stop her. “Wait. We can’t just leave him like this.”

“Why not?” Endu asked, a bit callously. “At least he died happy. Ish. Well, at least he died in bed. There are a lot more out there who probably couldn’t say the same.”

“No, you don’t understand. M’abor isn’t…” Alzhi trailed off for a second. “M’abor *wasn’t* a navigator. That means someone else brought him here. Probably multiple times over. Whoever helped him was willing to defy the Council’s law against fraternizing with stra’tchi. You and I both know how dangerous that is. If those searchers out there find him here, whoever helped him will be in serious trouble. We have to get rid of the body. We’re right next to the edge here, so threading it should work.”

He moved to pick up the body, and then hesitated. “Is it safe… to touch him?”

Endu gave him a look of exaggerated patience laced with a small smile. “Mi’he, even if he *did* die from the Fever, he’s no longer contagious. The Fever can only survive in living hosts.”

Alzhi nodded, feeling his cheeks redden. He hastily lifted M’abor—who was thankfully still partially clothed—and then conveyed him over to the threads while Endu put away the extra dishes.

There. M’abor was gone, with no trace that he’d ever come here. Though Alzhi was willing to admit to himself, he’d done it as much for M’abor’s reputation as for the mystery navigator’s safety. The little performer had made a name for himself across the entire city, not just for being born a dwarf, but for taking that and turning it into an advantage on the stage.

From her expression, Endu still didn’t seem to care, but then she’d never seen him perform. And now she never would, which was yet another missed opportunity. Alzhi had hoped to take her to a play now and then, once the movement had succeeded.

Together they made their way downhill, towards the village itself. Even from a distance, they could see bodies littering the ground inside the village square. Fresh corpses, too, not yet stiff from death. Alzhi knew it had become common practice for each patch to report in daily. This must have started sometime last night, after the magistrate’s last report.

The bodies were messy, too. They had contorted as they died, just like M’abor and D’tor. Blood had also seeped from the mouths, ears, and eyes of each victim, much more so than the two back in that cabin. For some corpses, it had even come from fingertips and the skin itself. Endu didn’t seem surprised at their state, so Alzhi just assumed the same thing would have happened to Arico’s friend if she’d been human-sized. Some bodies had contorted so drastically that they’d snapped tendons and bones in the process. Despite himself, Alzhi felt a twinge of nausea. He was trained to deal with grim situations, but none of that had prepared him for the sheer number and state of these victims.

By comparison, Endu might as well have been walking through an empty field for all the concern she showed. Alzhi’s stomach twisted again, in a way that had nothing to do with the bodies. Before Satya’s death, Endu had been a gentle soul. Kind, attentive, supporting, and touchingly devoted to her friends and family. Afterwards, though… she had slowly become this matter-of-fact woman. She was still devoted to him and the boys, but now it was more of a fierceness of defense than a loving connection. All the things that had once shocked her, or frightened her: they no longer mattered. Nowadays, she could now stroll through a village filled with bodies with hardly a second glance.

Alzhi and Endu had sworn to get vengeance together, on the people responsible for Satya’s death, but sometimes he wondered if even revenge would bring back the gentle, radiant woman she’d once been.

She gave a tiny hand signal, indicating one of the mid-sized houses, and they quietly stepped inside. Thankfully there was only one body in here: a middle-aged woman collapsed on the floor. Alzhi locked the door while Endu lifted the woman’s body onto the dining room table and tore open her tunic to get a look at her veins. Alzhi stood by the window, looking out for anyone who might approach. “Did you know her?” He asked quietly over his shoulder.

“Her name was Ianek,” Endu responded evenly, pulling out a sharp knife and cutting into the chest of the corpse. “She used to babysit Veles. She played games with him and Balter to pass the time while I was out tending to people.”

Alzhi could detect no regret in his wife’s voice. No pain from cutting open a woman she’d once called a friend. It was true, he had never been raised in a community like this one—before he’d married Endu, the Ascendant Guard had been his entire life. Still, he had to wonder just how close the two of them had been before Endu had… gone away.

“What I don’t understand is *why*, though,” Endu continued, as if speaking to herself. Blood oozed out from under her knife, as she laboriously spread the ribs away from each other, breaking them one by one. “I mean, we know the Sustained did this, but why bother poisoning people or inflicting a long-dead disease on them, when they could just line them up and shoot them? They control all information coming from this patch and they’re busy threading the bodies right now, so why bother with the charade at all?”

“Because not all Sustained are the same,” Alzhi reminded her grimly. “I’ve met more than a few who would be just as horrified by the truth as we are. The Council and the penets had to put on a show, not just for the stra’tchi but for their own people as well. It’s like Arico said: they *had* to make a liar out of him. For their own sakes.”

“Ah-*ha*!” Endu interrupted him, with the first note of excitement (or any real emotion, for that matter), he’d heard from her all day. “There it is!”

He abandoned his place near the window. “You found something?” He tried not to wince at the bloody mess that was once Ianek.

“Here,” she lifted an organ out of the body and held it up to him. “See that discoloration there? The Blood Fever killed by overheating the body, causing blood to thin to the point where it came out the nose and ears and eyes. It caused significant damage to all internal organs, but this heart is damaged in a very different way. Those lines there,” she turned it around and he could see black trails on the underside, “those are new. And I think I know what caused them.”

“Some kind of poison?”

She nodded emphatically. “A rare one, too. The only poison I know of that could duplicate the effects of the Fever *this* closely would be nethrit root. It was probably delivered in the water supply. That explains why none of these people were able to call for help. The nethrit in the water wouldn’t be fatal at first, but it would have built up in their systems until they were too sick to even move. Then the navigators who delivered the poison could walk through the village and finish off anyone who was still alive.” She sighed. “Still, whoever did this would need a lot of it to poison this many people. I guess that’s why they didn’t do something like this the day after the Laentana. They’d need weeks or months to grow this much nethrit and refine it.”

“Would the poison kill animals the same way? I heard that animals died of the Fever as well.”

Endu frowned at the change in topic. “Most animals, yes. Chickens and other birds might take longer to die. Why do you ask?”

“It’s nothing, really. There’s just something else Arico asked me to check on, if it turned out to be poison after all.” Alzhi glanced back out the window. The Council had apothecaries of their own who might be able to tell the difference as Endu had, but somehow he doubted any of them had been sent here. The guards would just thread the bodies and call it a day.

Speaking of whom, it wouldn’t be long before they came here too. He grabbed the edges of the tablecloth. “We need to go. Get cleaned up, while I wrap her tightly so no one can see she’s been cut into. Regardless of my rank or your disguise, that *would* draw attention to us. They might start asking questions I can’t answer.”

It took the tablecloth and several bedsheets actually, to wrap up the body and the blood to his satisfaction. With Endu’s help, he laboriously carried the body up the hill to where the others were being threaded.

Usually the threading of a body was a ceremonial affair, just like the funerals their ancestors had held in ages past. Here though, there was no ceremony. No dignity, no moments of reflection. Just people being disposed of in the most convenient way possible. It was no different than how he’d destroyed M’abor’s body, but at least that had been for a purpose. To these people, it was just another chore. After they placed her on the ground, one of the Ascendant guards touched Ianek’s body and it disappeared right into the threads. Alzhi caught Endu’s eye and could tell she was thinking along the same lines he was. These people deserved better—far better than this.

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Arico was exhausted. Merely arranging this meeting had taken a lot out of him, given that the patches were all over the city and couldn’t communicate with each other. Even with the methods he’d shown them over the past weeks.

Then Jaas had been kidnapped, or whatever it was that had happened to her. He still couldn’t wrap his head around it. Why wouldn’t she tell him what was going on? He’d never kept anything from her, certainly not when it came to the cause.

With a twinge of guilt, he realized that wasn’t entirely true. He could have told her about the prophecies on day one if he’d wanted. There were also a few other things about his past that he could share with her, things she’d probably want to know.

And *then* there had been this poisoning! He’d strongly considered keeping her in the dark about that as well. After confirming what had really happened to his friends, Alzhi and Endu had returned here. Alzhi had immediately returned to his undercover work, but he’d given Arico the bad news about D’tor first. For once her isolation hadn’t been a boon to her. How many more blows could they keep taking?

Despite his grief over Tellek patch, and his outrage over it, Arico’s thoughts kept sliding back to Jaas’ and Sabra’s disappearance. Arico had been born to this role. He’d been trained and conditioned for it his entire life, because he’d been born a navigator… as well as for other reasons he couldn’t even admit to himself just yet. Jaas had just been dropped into this situation, though, without any warning at all. Was it any wonder she might not be as dedicated to the cause? He wanted to trust her, but with stakes as high as these… he wasn’t sure he could. Mercifully, she wasn’t here right now. He really didn’t need the distraction.

Back to business. He gave the accommodations one final sweep before heading out to the threads. They were crude, but should be good enough for an informal meeting like this one. Most of the people who’d agreed to meet had refused to go to one of their neighbors’ patches. There was a lot of distrust among them, and not just stemming from the Ona tournaments each one had won and lost.

Each patch had its own way of doing things. They all had their own customs, philosophies… dialects. Everyone in Patchwork spoke Vasrah, but over the centuries the language had changed for each individual patch, especially the stra’tchi ones. Arico could understand them, but it took effort. Jaas was a different matter: she’d navigated the different speech patterns as easily as he moved through the threads. If he needed her to broker an agreement between just these twelve patches, how in Aquun’s name was he supposed to do the same for the rest of them without her? Shaking his head, Arico tried to focus on the matters at hand.

At least things had worked out so far. Mayors and Bosses alike had eventually agreed to meet here at Atsekka patch, the closest thing in the city to a neutral location. That was probably because it was full of abandoned old-city houses that were really of value to no one. Ancient crumbling buildings filled up every corner of the patch, with deteriorating streets as their only boundaries.

That would also make it more difficult for anyone to spy on the meeting. Arico knew that there were Ascendant Guards who’d been assigned as watchers out there, in places all over the city. Fortunately they didn’t have the numbers to watch everywhere all at once. Thanks to Alzhi, the movement’s few navigators had been able to move around unnoticed so far.

Arico hoped their luck held up.

All twelve patch leaders and their aides knew where to be in their own patches, and when. It took only seconds for him to snag them, two by two, and deposit them back in Atsekka patch. They responded predictably. Because the only navigating they’d ever done had been to and from New Day celebrations, they’d never spent any time actually inside the threads themselves. Just like Jaas had at first, they took it in with awe as they examined the empty white space between patches. Arico didn’t bother to change his form from the kingfisher he usually portrayed. It wasn’t like he was trying to keep anything from these people. Just the opposite, in fact.

He’d brought Endu in first, to serve as a welcoming party for the attendees. She ushered them away from the threads as they arrived, and when he’d retrieved the last of them, led the way to the meeting place.

It wasn’t much to look at, but it made up for that by being more secure. The squat one-story building was heavily built with reinforced walls, and he’d surrounded it with improvised traps as a sort of warning system. Arico had read in the old records that this building had once been a bank vault in old Vasiriah. There was only one entrance on the street level, and Atsekka patch had no sewer access, so they could have at least relative safety inside.

Arico was just glad the dwarves had finished their ‘renovations’ in time for this meeting. They’d dug dozens of tunnels in patches all over the city, but that was all underground, and relatively safe. In this case, they had been forced out into the open for short periods of time. It was a violation of the peace treaty keeping them safe, but the Hauld had ordered them to go ahead with it anyway. That risk itself underscored just how much importance the Hauld was placing on this meeting.

As for comfort, Endu had done what she could. Chairs specially made for human size had been brought in from the Enclave, and the long stone table in the middle of the large room was covered with a woven tablecloth and dotted with baskets of fruit. The smoke from any kind of fire would have been a dead giveaway, so she’d sealed off the old fireplace to keep in the heat, and lit candles in strategic places through the room. Arico smiled. Leave it to Endu to know just how to set people at ease. Part of a healer’s gift, no doubt.

When they had all gathered and been seated, he finally took his place at one end of the table. “Thank you all for agreeing to come here. I hope we’ll all find the risk to be worth it,” he began quietly, in the morning gloom.

After everyone had been introduced, Arico deemed it was time to give them the bad news. He pulled out the announcement parchment Alzhi had brought him, and read it aloud. Predictably, a noise of dismay rounded the table as Arico finished it. He knew how they felt, and he’d had more than a day to adjust to the news. But they needed to know, if they were to make an informed decision about where to go from here.

He quickly raised a hand to quiet them. “Part of this is true. Tellek patch has been wiped out. The rest of it is a lie, though. It wasn’t the Blood Fever that did this—no one has contracted the Fever in centuries. If you doubt that, just remember that over the past two weeks I’ve visited each and every one of your patches and spent many hours talking to your people. Up close and personal with many of them. If I really was a carrier, then at least some of your patches would be feeling the effects of the disease by now. But since this came as a surprise to you, I’ll assume your people are still healthy and whole.”

He gave them a moment to think about that, and they exchanged glances down the table. They might take his words at face value, but the Fever had been so devastating… killed so many people. Even to this day the mere mention of it was enough to bring back that same paralyzing fear. Arico took a breath and continued, hoping to break up that fear with more information.

“No, the Council knew I was from Tellek patch. My friends were poisoned like vermin just because they happened to be from there, too.” He shook his head. “I don’t expect you to take my word for this. That’s why I asked each of you to bring an apothecary with you. If two of you and your healers will agree to come with me to… what’s left of Tellek patch, I’ll show you that it wasn’t the Fever. I ask that you come with me, as neutral witnesses.”

The leaders exchanged glances and murmurs across the table. Some of them—those who’d shown the greatest reluctance to come here—looked vindicated in their suspicions, and shook their heads at him, but eventually two different leaders volunteered. Arico breathed a careful sigh of relief. One of them was Drakos Bloodeye, his old ‘friend’ from the Deathwatch patch, and the other was Mayor Aldwith from Sakkas patch. One leader who was feared, and another who was trusted. That should make things easier.

The others stayed behind to discuss this latest development while Arico led Endu, the patch leaders, and their apothecary assistants to the threads and joined hands with them. A minute later he was back home again. It was late in the evening and the sun had just set, but he could still see the outline of their old cabin, abandoned now for several weeks.

“Come on,” he said quietly. “I have a friend covering for us from within the Ascendants, but we can’t spend long here without being noticed.”

Instead of the cabin, he led them to the barn behind it. The old floorboards were just as creaky as ever, and the stalls were empty. No sound—not even birds, could be heard from the nearby village.

Choking back his memories, Arico slowly lifted a loose board covering a root cellar in the back of the barn. She had always come here when she was sick or injured, probably taking comfort from the close quarters. Sure enough, Tula was inside, curled up in her old spot under the floor.

“I want you all to witness that we found her here, this way, before we take her back for testing,” he said firmly. It was important that everyone knew the goat’s body hadn’t been disturbed. He waited for them to agree before nodding to Endu. She and the apothecary from Deathwatch patch, Velya, carefully pulled Tula’s body from the earth and wrapped it up in a white cloth.

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Chapter 32

Panoso sighed inside the threads. Watch duty again. His shift had just started, and he had eight scintillatingly exciting hours ahead of him, staring out at yet another abandoned patch.

His request to bring a friend along had been denied, of course. They could spare non-navigator guards, of course, but ever since Tenlor Fisher had been made Ascendant Commander, non-navigators had been less valuable among the Ascendant Guard. Only the navigators like him were trusted anymore.

He slowly shook his head. At least this time he’d been assigned to the threads themselves. It might not be exciting but at least it was comfortable, floating in the streams of light. Still, this wasn’t quite what he’d had in mind when he’d first agreed to join the Ascendant Guard.

Suddenly he leaned forward in interest. Something was happening. Two Ascendants had stepped out of the threads adjacent to him, and more were popping out nearby. He recognized his immediate superior, Ontos. The older man couldn’t see him of course, but beckoned to him anyway. Torn between curiosity and a small amount of indignance at being summoned like a dog, Panoso obeyed and stepped out of the thread. A total of twenty-five Ascendants had arrived, including both of them. Ontos waited until they were all at attention before speaking.

“We’ve received new orders from Commander Fisher, who apparently got them straight from the Lord Ascendant himself. We’re to spread out evenly across this patch’s threads and watch for the heretic and his supporters. From what I’m told the rebels may already be here in this patch, so keep your eyes open. If you see them, keep track of where they go, and then head straight to Sevvas patch and report your findings. We are not, repeat *not*, to engage them until Commander Fisher gives the word. Understood?”

Panoso saluted with the rest, and then listened carefully to find out where he was being stationed. Apparently today might not end up being so boring after all.

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The first thing Tenlor noticed when he arrived… was the smell. He tried to identify it at first, before realizing it wasn’t a smell so much as the lack of one. Atsekka was nowhere near the Waters, and had been abandoned for a long time. There was no scent of fish being sun-dried and salted for later. No taste of the smoke from hardwood being burned nearby. No hint of the aromatic candles his sister loved to burn day and night in the Manor. There was just… dead air here.

He waved a hand to signal his bodyguards and advanced forward. According to the initial scout reports, there could be a fair number of rebels hiding in here. There were at least six of them spotted as recently as half an hour ago.

Oranok tapped his shoulder and pointed off to the left towards the entrance to one of the abandoned stone buildings. Inside, Tenlor could make out a few Ascendants gathered together. Curious, he stepped inside and exchanged salutes with them. “Lieutenant, what’s going on here?”

Selesh was a promising addition to the Ascendants, but he was still green and it showed in his voice. “Sir. We found these three hiding near the threads.” Tenlor followed his gaze to a woman clutching two young children in her arms.

*Now* he could smell something. The stink of sweat and fear rolled off them, mixed in with the dirt from their torn and threadbare clothing. From her dress, she was Sustained, of moderate means. The kids looked no better off.

“They’re lurkers, sir,” Selesh said softly, apparently trying not to be overheard by them. Not that they were likely paying attention. The woman seemed too afraid to do anything but cower under the watchful gaze of her guards.

Tenlor gave him a surprised look. “Lurkers, here? What makes you say that? They could just as easily be the heretic’s followers.”

“I don’t think so, sir. For one thing, they’ve been here a long time. We found their… dwelling not far away. There’s no evidence of anyone but the three of them. Also, they haven’t even tried to fight or escape. I doubt any true rebel would be taken that easily.”

Tenlor eyed them again, and shrugged. “You’re probably right. What is her story, anyway?”

Selesh straightened up again, giving his report as formally as he could. Tenlor suppressed a smile as he listened. Apparently her name was Wereya, and she was the wife of a merchant in Veddis patch. She’d been stingy with the details, but Selesh believed she’d fled here to escape her husband. Selesh had seen bruises on her forearms and midsection, and signs of similar injuries to her children as well. He was convinced that neither she nor the children were navigators. That meant someone else had brought them here, and continued to drop by with supplies so that they wouldn’t starve while in hiding.

Tenlor only shrugged. He raised his hand to give the signal of his next very obvious order, but then paused. “Tell me, Lieutenant. How would you deal with this situation? Assuming they really aren’t rebels, I mean. What would you do?”

Selesh hesitated at first. “Well, sir, before you showed up I was about to transport them back to Veddis patch. That’s why they’re here next to the threads. Once there, I was going to have people guard her until her husband could be found and charged. Once he’s in custody, I’ll leave it to the courts to decide his punishment.”

Tenlor dismissed the other Ascendants, sending them back to the search with the others. That left only him, Selesh, and his two bodyguards, along with the lurker woman and children. He took Selesh aside, out of the building, leaving Oranok and Gazu to watch them. “That’s an understandable reaction,” he told Selesh gently, once they were outside. “No one likes an abusive husband. The man who beats his family doesn’t deserve to have one, wouldn’t you say?”

Selesh nodded, apparently unsure how to respond, but Tenlor didn’t give him the chance to speak. “You’re a soldier in the Ascendant Guard, and a soldier’s job is to protect. Naturally, you want to protect her and the children. Even so, a leader has to look at the bigger picture. Tell me, as a leader, what do lurkers represent to our society?”

“Um, lurkers are outcasts, sir. They don’t… represent anything at all.”

“Wrong. Lurkers are a drain on our society. They’re leeches, feeding off the livelihood of others and contributing nothing in return. As a leader, it’s not just my job to protect people but also the city as a whole. Both the Sustained and the stra’tchi each have their own part to play in Patchwork’s destiny. Even the dwarves have their own part, even if it’s just to serve as a deterrent to others. Lurkers have no such role, do they? All they do is clog up the court system with their petty crimes and waste valuable time and money with their criminal behavior. Which reminds me: in this matter there are also the woman’s crimes to consider as well.”

“Sir?” A certain dread had wormed its way into Selesh’s voice.

“She left her husband, lieutenant! She took his children away from him! That may be exactly what he deserved—I don’t know for sure—but it wasn’t her decision to make, was it? No, she’s guilty as well, just for a different crime.”

He glanced back inside. “No, when I said that such a man doesn’t deserve to have a family, I meant it literally.” He gestured to Oranok, who acted immediately. Drawing his sword, he stabbed her in the back of the neck, severing her spine and killing her instantly. The children barely had time to realize what had happened before he did the same to them.

Selesh gasped and moved instinctively towards the door, but Tenlor kept a grip on his arm. “Hold, lieutenant. There’s nothing you can do for them. It’s done.”

Placidly, as if wiping mud off his boots, Oranok cleaned his sword on the woman’s clothing and then resheathed it. Taking her by the arms, he dragged her out of the building and tossed her body into the threads. Gazu did the same with the children.

Tenlor kept a close eye on Selesh’s face as they did so. Though pale, he clenched his jaw and held back any comments he might feel like making. “Now that’s a good soldier,” Tenlor went on casually, indicating Oranok. “He knew exactly what needed to be done, and didn’t hesitate in doing it. He saved the expense of a trial, and meted out justice where it was needed. The abusive husband is next, when we get back to Sustained territory.”

Selesh’s jaw twitched beneath the skin. Tenlor gave him a moment, and then gestured. “Speak your mind, lieutenant.”

He took a few deep breaths, his face still pale, before looking back at Tenlor. “What of the children, sir? Even if Wereya deserved… that. Did they deserve to die, too? Just for going with her?”

“No, of course not,” Tenlor assured him. “Children are innocent. But let’s face facts here. What kind of life would they have had, bereft of both parents like that? How much suffering would they have experienced? And how likely would it be that they would just end up being lurkers themselves because of what their parents did? No, that was mercy on Oranok’s part. It’s far better to die quickly at the end of a blade than to suffer like that for the rest of their short, miserable lives.”

He beckoned, and his bodyguards returned to him. “Orders, lieutenant. I want you to set up a shift watching the threads here, ‘round the clock. Find the navigator who brought them here. Find out why he did this, and then kill him and thread his body. Understood?”

Selesh’s eyes strayed back inside the building, to the trio of bloodstains on the ground. “… understood, sir.”

Tenlor placed a hand on his shoulder briefly. “You’re a promising soldier, Selesh, but you have a lot to learn about leadership, and about seeing the greater need of the city instead of the small need in front of you.”

As they continued their search for the rebels, Tenlor glanced back to see Selesh just standing there. With luck, he would overcome his frailty and gain some real strength. Only time would tell.

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Once Arico and his passengers had returned to the relative safety of Atsekka patch’s banking district, the discussions began in earnest. While he and the leaders were talking, Velya and the other apothecaries examined Tula’s body in one of the corners. Endu kept her distance from them, as he’d instructed.

He studiously avoided mentioning the dwarves, naturally. Even though their involvement was necessary, there had just been too much propaganda against them, for far too long. Most of the people in these patches had bought into the lies wholeheartedly, hating dwarves with a degree of viciousness and spite that was hard to understand. Especially since none of them had ever even seen a dwarf for themselves.

Arico had once asked Jaas if people from the Outside were just as gullible. She’d shaken her head and said that most people will always believe what they’re told because most people are unwilling to think for themselves.

It wasn’t the only disparaging thing she’d said about her own people. Sometimes Arico wondered if that was the real reason Jaas had decided to risk everything and come here in the first place—just to get away from them. Trying not to think about that, Arico laid out the dwarven map of the city before them. Only the Enclave was marked on it, along with Sustained and Sustained-controlled patches, and the Waters themselves. One by one, Arico pointed out each of the twelve patches represented in this room.

“As you can see, each of your patches borders eight other stra’tchi patches. I don’t have the time or manpower to teach them all one by one, but you can reach out to them on your own, using the Waters as I showed each of you. If even a few of them do the same, we’ll have the opportunity to build up a massive following. If we can convince enough stra’tchi patches to stand up to the Sustained at the same time, we can *force* the Council to give up control over the rest.”

“And what makes you think you’ve convinced us?” Kandiu, the Mayor of Bylloth patch, spoke up harshly. “For over two hundred years, any patch that has shown any resistance to them has been severely punished. Why should any of us put our own people at risk when we can just keep our heads down and wait for them to swat you like a bug?”

Arico grimaced. So much for the easy sell. “Because that way nothing will change!” He spread an earnest look around the room, at the faces of his would-be allies and friends. “Deep down, we all know the truth. We’re all slaves right now! Sure, we’re safe enough, but only because they need the supplies we provide them through the Ritual of Waters. Or the Bonded warriors, in your case,” he nodded at Boss Bloodeye. “They can do whatever they want with us, whenever they want, just as they did to Tellek patch. And they will always have that power, until we *take* it from them!”

Bloodeye smacked a scarred fist on the table. “The boy’s right. Even now, Deathwatchers are dying for people who don’t care a whit about us. We aren’t strong enough yet to put the Shemra’s fear into the Sustained, but if we work together we soon will be.”

“So we can have Deathwatchers calling the shots instead of Sustained?” Pratun, the Boss of Tsobba patch snorted loudly. “Thanks, but no thanks.”

There was a moment of silence. Arico got the impression that Pratun wasn’t just concerned about the Deathwatchers; he was just as worried about Arico himself. It made sense, really. Arico was the only navigator they’d seen so far. He did object a bit to being called ‘boy’ by Bloodeye, but not much. Deathwatchers tended to see all others as being childish, even if he wasn’t much older than Arico himself.

“That won’t happen,” Arico started off slowly, looking from one to another. “No stra’tchi patch has navigators yet, and without them no patch can have any advantage over the others. Everything we’ve taught your people has been for that one goal! Digging wells so that you can get your own access to the Waters, learning to read, using pools to send messages between the patches. Everything you’ve learned has been to help your patches, *each* of them, become more independent. That way each patch will be able to decide what’s best for themselves!

“When we’re done here, every stra’tchi patch will be its own village. We’ll trade with each other, but each patch will be able to decide its own fate, and no patch will have power over any other. There won’t be any more tithes for the Ritual of Waters, no more Ascendants punishing individual patches, and no more Ritual of Rejoining taking our kids away from us. I think that’s something we all want.”

Another silence fell over the chamber, and Arico knew he’d finally started to make some progress. “I can’t say this will be easy; it won’t be. We’ll all have to be careful, especially when we start teaching what we know to our neighbors. Tellek patch could happen all over again, to any of us at any time. Until we have the majority of stra’tchi on our side, we’ll have to be careful, even paranoid about how we conduct ourselves.”

Arico paused for a moment, glancing over at the apothecaries examining Tula’s body. “When the Council destroyed Tellek patch, they wanted to send a message. For the gullible, it was to fear the Blood Fever. For the smart, it was to fear *them*. I’ve had time to come to grips with what they’ve done, and the message I heard was very different. With that one casual act of brutality, they told me that they have to be taken from power. I hope that doesn’t mean killing them, but one way or another, they can’t rule this city anymore. Before, this movement was about freedom and the right to choose our own fate in our own patches. Both noble and laudable goals to be sure, but now… it’s about *survival*.

“I know you’re worried. If they cut off the Waters, all of us could die in a matter of days. I can help you defend against that, though. I can provide you with the Waters secretly, if they try it. But unless we stand together against them, we’ll never end their threat once and for all. We’ll be at their mercy forever!”

Bloodeye nodded vigorously at that, and a few of the others looked like they were thinking it over. Arico was grateful the Hauld had reminded him to include that bit about the Waters. According to the Book of Aquun, the Waters were a gift from the goddess to every one of her children, stra’tchi and Sustained alike. While stra’tchi couldn’t read—yet, anyway—that passage had been widely distributed long ago, and was known by everyone. Reminding these twelve leaders that they didn’t actually *have* access to the Waters was another way to remind them of the Council’s hypocrisy and obsession with control.

“Say you’re right,” Kandiu said slowly. “Say you can keep providing us with enough of the Waters to survive. Say we even convince every stra’tchi patch to stand together. Sure, we’ll have the numbers, but they’ll still have the mobility! With their navigators, they can invade each of our patches one by one and wipe us out! How can we hope to defend ourselves, or our neighbors, if you’re our only navigator?”

“I’m not,” Arico assured him, putting as much confidence into his voice as possible. “We have people in the Ascendant ranks, people who can give us warning if they’re about to strike. And I have more than a hundred navigators on the side, willing and able to help us fight for each other. Some of them are waiting in the threads right now, to take each of you back home.” They were dwarven navigators, true, but Arico wasn’t about to mention that just yet. Not until they’d come to at least a tentative agreement.

The conversation continued, though with less hostility than before, as the leaders talked it over amongst themselves. Arico stayed at the table, but only to answer questions. He’d said his piece already; he didn’t want to overdo it.

He was grateful to find that most of their questions and concerns were predictable enough. For the most part they were worried about what would be expected of them when the fighting finally broke out, and how they would trade with each other should they succeed. Pratun and Kandiu still had some reservations, mostly about the Deathwatcher involvement. It was hardly surprising, given the Deathwatchers’ highly violent history. Thankfully when Endu and the others came back and reported that Tula had indeed been poisoned, it seemed to convince even those two that all of this was worth the risk.

Arico shook his head at another question. “No, it’s too risky for me to send the Harbinger to each of your patches one after another. Every time we navigate, there’s a chance the Council will find out.”

He hesitated, trying to find the best way to phrase his next suggestion. “If you really want to teach your people how to read and write, I have an alternative for you to consider. I suggest that you take one or two dedicated people from each of your patches, and send them to Endu and Jaas for a few weeks or months where they can all learn together. We have a safe place they can learn. Numbers will be easy—most everyone already knows that from the Ona tournaments—and it won’t take long for your people to learn the rest. Then when they’re ready, we’ll send those people back to you and they can start teaching the rest of your people.”

Before he could tell them more, Arico heard a muffled booming noise from outside. It took him a moment to remember what it was, and then a cold hand seemed to grip at his heart when he realized what was about to happen.

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Chapter 33

The sound had come from one of the outer buildings in the cordon. Tenlor winced as it went off. Not because of how loud it had been, but because of what it meant. With a growl under his breath, he beckoned his two bodyguards and headed in its direction.

The rest of the Ascendants kept to their training, maintaining their position around the cluster of buildings, or continuing their search. They knew better than to defy orders over something as simple as curiosity. “What happened?” Tenlor demanded as he walked into the room that was the source of the noise.

Two Ascendants were already there, one on his knees with hands clapped to his ears. The other pointed to a tripwire already set off. “It was a trap, sir. A sparkpowder charge and tindertwig were set up next to the window. Not enough to kill, but enough-”

“Enough to alert the whole patch that we’re here,” Tenlor finished for him. With a disgusted glance down at the still-incapacitated Ascendant, he turned to examine the tripwire.

It was a simple enough design. Anyone with half a year’s training in sparkpowder use would be able to set something like that and leave it for a day or so, but despite all that, it had done its job. The rebels knew they were coming now, and would certainly try something desperate.

He turned to his guards. “Get in touch with Ontos and Tasaos. Have them stop moving forward and hold the line here. Make sure they understand that *no one* is to escape that perimeter. And remind them that if they see the Harbinger, she’s to be taken alive. The rest of them too, if possible. If not,” he waved a hand dismissively, “I’ll understand.”

As they both saluted and left, the remaining Ascendant approached him. “Sir, we don’t know how many followers the heretic has in there. I recommend we bring in more troops to secure the perimeter. That way we can close in on them without any chance of them escaping.”

Tenlor shook his head. “No, we can’t bring anyone else in on this. The more people who know, the greater the chance his spies will hear about this and arrange some kind of rescue. We’ll have to do this on our own.”

He spared another look at the spent trap by the doorway, and the emptied container of sparkpowder next to it. He was sure this hadn’t been the only trap set by the rebels. “But I might have a way of evening the odds.”

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“I count at least twenty from here,” Arico reported grimly, looking down from the old bank’s south-facing window.

“More like thirty on this end,” Endu followed up from the other side of the room, in her usual, nonchalant tone. “Looks like they’ve got at least two squads deployed out there, surrounding us.”

Bloodeye grunted. “They knew we were here. That’s the only way they could mobilize so many against us at once.”

“I agree, but I doubt they know exactly who they’ve trapped in here. As long as we can keep them from identifying you, you still have a chance of returning to your patches safely.” Arico caught Endu’s eye. “And we’re far from helpless in here, if it comes to a fight.”

“They outnumber us at least three to one!” Kandiu protested. “They’re all trained, battle-tested, and armed to the teeth. We can’t hope to fight them.”

“We won’t have to,” Arico soothed him. “There’s another way out of here. Follow me.”

He led them downstairs, towards what had once been the ancient bank’s vault. Endu took up the rear, making sure they all went together. As they walked, Arico’s mind buzzed with possibilities. Bloodeye was most likely right: someone had betrayed them.

Alzhi knew about the meeting, but not which patch it was in. None of the dwarves who’d been to this patch would give up the location, not without days of torture first, and maybe not even then. Jaas couldn’t have betrayed them, either. She hadn’t even been told about the meeting until after she’d returned from… wherever she’d been, and she’d been under constant surveillance since then. And it couldn’t be Endu, of course. If she had warned the Ascendants, they would have bypassed the warning traps easily, and already be inside.

That meant one of the Bosses or Mayors themselves was responsible. Or one of their aides. Any of them could have told their own magistrate before the meeting had even started. That way the Ascendants could wait for them all to incriminate themselves by showing up, and then snatch them all at once.

Fortunately, none of them were armed. That was a condition wisely set by the Hauld as necessary for all attendees. Unfortunately, that meant they couldn’t put up a fight, either. Arico had his own gun, and his shortsword. He hadn’t brought them to the meeting itself, but he made sure to pick them up on his way downstairs. It seemed Endu had also brought her daggers and her own matchlock in her pack.

Once they reached the heavy stone doors of the vault, Arico slowly pulled them open. He slipped into the darkened room and pushed aside a broken wooden table in one corner. “Over here.” He fumbled with a tinger twig at first, and then finally used it to light a torch. The sudden light illuminated a stone passage under the remains of the table.

“My friends spent several weeks digging an emergency tunnel down here,” he explained quickly. “I saw how close the perimeter is. The other end of the tunnel is a quarter league to the south, so you should have a straight shot from there to the threads. If you can get to the place I first brought you, my friends will be able to take you home.” He handed the torch to Bloodeye.

“You’re not coming with us?” Bloodeye asked slowly.

Arico pointed up. “They’ll break through the front doors any minute now. Besides, that perimeter out there is dangerously close to the tunnel’s exit. Endu and I will stay behind and cause a distraction; draw them in a little. That’ll at least give you a chance to escape.” He neglected to mention that if there really was a traitor among them, it wouldn’t matter if they all got away. There was nothing he could do about that right now.

He’d expected Endu to stay with him, and she did so without a word. What did surprise him was how many of the others hesitated to leave as well. Bloodeye grunted. “Come on. He’s giving us a chance here. We can’t waste it.” At his urging, the rest of them entered the passageway and disappeared into the darkness.

Arico hoped they wouldn’t be too upset to see dwarves waiting for them at the threads. It was their only escape and they would know that, but he doubted it would help his case at all. If he made it out of this alive, that was.

“I hope you’re ready for a last stand,” he told Endu as they pushed the vault doors closed and headed back upstairs.

She only shrugged in response. “My boys are safe. That’s all that matters.” Despite her words, Arico thought he could hear something else in her tone. A hint of eagerness, perhaps? If she really was looking forward to this fight, he felt a little envious.

Just as they reached the door at the top of the stairs, Arico heard voices from the main room. They were already inside. From the footsteps though, it sounded as though most of them had already spread out through the building. They still had a chance to get out, if they acted fast. Arico loaded his gun and counted to three, before nodding to Endu and grabbing the door handle.

The moment he pushed the door open there was a blinding flash of light, and a concussive wave seemed to move through him. His ears rang, and his head felt like a hot spike had been driven through it.

Clutching his ears, he fought the sudden rise of nausea in his gut. Dimly, he was aware of Endu falling to her knees as well. Through the continuing ringing in his ears, he heard voices approach all around him. Heavy hands grabbed his wrists and clapped manacles to them.

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Their captors lifted them both up roughly, and carted them into the next room where they were dumped unceremoniously on their knees. His head still ringing, Arico craned his neck and looked up… to see Tenlor Fisher looking back down at him, a mocking smile on his lips.

The effects of the spark-trap were finally fading, and Arico could now see and hear at least a little of what was going on around him. They were back in the foyer on the main level, with Tenlor and more than a dozen of his Ascendants. One of the guards had taken Arico’s sword and gun, and was rummaging through Endu’s pack as well.

“Sir, we’ve searched the bank top to bottom, and these two were the only people we found,” another of the soldiers reported, “but there is a small tunnel in the back of one of the vaults below that leads to the south. The others must have gotten out that way.” The Ascendant’s voice was deadpan and professional. If he feared punishment for failing to catch the others, he wasn’t showing it.

Tenlor shook his head. “No matter. We have the heretic at least. Send a half dozen men through the tunnel, and take the rest to search to the south of here. I’ll handle these two myself.”

The Ascendant saluted, fist to heart, and left with his men. Leaving just Tenlor and his two bodyguards.

“It’s Arico, isn’t it?” He inquired lazily. “I guess the name ‘heretic’ has to be getting old by now. I’m Tenlor Fisher, Commander of the Ascendant Guard, but you know that already, don’t you?” He lifted the remains of the spark-trap and examined it closely. “You’re clever, just like these little devices you left for my men. Dwarven-made, I assume.”

Arico glanced over at Endu. She seemed mostly unhurt, though still dazed. “Actually, I made them myself. So glad you approve,” he grunted.

Tenlor gave him a smirk. “Oh, I do. You stole sparkpowder from my father’s manor and used it against us at the Laentana. I figured a little payback was in order, so I decided to return the favor.” He shook his head. “To your credit, disarming and moving the traps wasn’t easy. Of course, I doubled the amount of powder in my version. I wanted you to have a little taste of what you did to my men. My father didn’t leave any particular orders to take you alive, but I’m looking forward to seeing what the sifters do to you. If I have a say, they’ll skin you alive.”

“Sir,” the guard interjected from the left. Gingerly, he lifted a gold-plated matchlock from Endu’s bag.

Tenlor’s eyes widened, and his jaw dropped fractionally. He crossed the room in an instant and took the gun in his hands. From his angle on his knees, Arico could make out tiny words engraved on the hilt.

Turning it over, Tenlor read the inscription on the side again and again. “This is… impossible! How did you get this?” He demanded harshly, turning to Endu.

Arico didn’t know what to think. Like anyone in service to the Hauld, Endu had been trained for marksmanship and given a gun to use. The standard model had only a wooden handle, though. He had no idea where she’d gotten that one.

Tenlor grabbed Endu by the throat with one hand and forcibly lifted her to her feet, slamming her against the wall. Her manacles ground against the stone behind her. “How did you get this?” He repeated, with a dangerous tremor to his voice.

“Shemra take you,” she said, and spat in his face.

Tenlor flinched away from her at first, but then struck her forehead with his own, smacking the back of her head against the wall. “How did you get my gun, stra’tchi??” He shouted at her, hitting her across the face with the gun’s handle.

Endu twisted her face away from the blow, lessening it a little. When she looked back, blood oozing from her mouth, she gave him a macabre grin. “Friend… stole it for me,” she choked out the words. “Replaced with… a fake.”

Tenlor held her there for a few more seconds before letting go and turning away. She swayed, but didn’t fall. As she coughed loudly, he examined it again more closely, before glancing back at her. “You expect me to believe that your… friend broke into my chambers in the manor, and instead of just waiting there to kill me or mine, he stole my gun and replaced it with a fake? Why in all of the Shemras’ dark hearts would he be so stupid?”

It was hidden from the guards by her body, but Arico could see a lockpick in her hands. She must have slipped it from her sleeve while being held up against the wall. Even now she was at work trying to loosen the lock on her manacles. Ruefully, Arico remembered his own lockpicks were back in the Enclave. She would need a distraction if she wanted to get the drop on the guards.

He opened his mouth to get their attention, but she gave him a quick warning look and cut him off. “I guess I don’t look familiar to you, *Ascendant Commander*,” she bit out those last words, and then spat out some blood. “You’ve killed so many people, but I thought you might at least see something in my face you might recognize. We stole your gun for one reason only. So that someday we could use it to kill you. Just like you did to my daughter, you festering waste of breath. You can call me stra’tchi all you want, but in truth, *you’re* the dirty one. Only for you the filth isn’t on the surface, but flowing through your veins!” Endu’s voice suddenly held such venom, such spite that Arico barely recognized it.

All he could do was stare at her. He had no idea what she was talking about. Alzhi had told him the story of their daughter Satya. How she’d died from a complication to the brand she received just after her testing. Her death had been horrible, yes, but accidental. Hadn’t it?

Endu licked her teeth and spat again. “I was going to make a special bullet for you, too, but I just didn’t have the time. I planned to carve my daughter’s name into it, just to make it more personal. Something tells me she would have liked that.”

Tenlor stared at her too, and Arico realized that somehow… it was true. Tenlor had killed her little girl. And here she was, finally face-to-face with him. It occurred to Arico that escape might not be her plan after all.

Suddenly Tenlor broke out into laughter. Long, incredulous bursts of it, shaking his head and looking at the guards still at attention. “Can you believe her? All this effort, and it ends like this!” As he started to wind down, he carefully loaded the gun. “I admire your determination, girl. I really do. To carry such a weight, for so long… it must have been unbearable for you.”

Tenlor slowly turned the gun over in his hands. “I’ll be honest. I don’t even remember killing your daughter. They all blend together after a while. And I still can’t tell if this is a fake or the original. I’ll find out for sure when I get home. Either way, it’s an impressive creation. I’ll be sure to mention that to whichever dwarven craftsman made it. Before I kill them all, that is.”

He sighed, as he checked the gun to confirm it was loaded. “Ordinarily, killing stra’chi is just a chore to me. Just a job I do for the Council, which most of my men wouldn’t have the stomach for. I’m actually grateful that for once I can do it for a greater purpose. That I can at least relieve your pain while doing it.” He aimed the gun at her head.

Endu’s manacles hadn’t loosened yet; Arico had to buy her some time! With a yell he charged at Tenlor, intent on knocking him off his feet, but he never got there. The bodyguard next to Tenlor deftly slipped in front of Arico and brought a knee up into his stomach, hard. Arico doubled over, coughing, and vomited on the ground. From the floor, he saw Endu’s right hand finally slip free of her bonds.

Tenlor gave him a reproving glance. “Wait your turn, heretic. She’s going to die here and now, but you have to stay alive. Long enough to tell us who her ‘friend’ is, anyway.” Casually, he looked back at Endu and pulled the trigger.

Another bright flash lit up the room, but this time with a slight *popping* noise instead of the sound of a gunshot. Almost too fast to see, the gun came apart in his hand and a chunk of metal propelled itself backwards, burying itself deep in his left eye socket! He stumbled backwards, his hand still spasmodically pulling the trigger, and fell.

The guards both looked towards Tenlor in shock, and Endu made the most of that brief moment of indecision. Lunging forward, she swung her manacles into the nearest guard’s face. As he raised his hands to protect his eyes, she snatched his gun from its holster and kicked him between the legs. While Arico’s guard was reaching for his own weapon, she confidently cocked her stolen gun and shot him in the head. Blood sprayed past Arico onto the ground, and he dropped like a stone.

The first guard was on his knees, gasping in pain. Almost as a signature, Endu spun and swung the butt of the gun into his head, dropping him to the ground. A pervasive silence flooded the room, in contrast to the momentary violence. Endu just stood there, her face flushed and breathing heavily.

“Come on,” she said, springing into action again. She lifted the manacle keys from the unconscious guard’s belt and freed her other hand. “Some of them might have heard that.”

Arico stumbled to his feet again, still stunned, as she helped free him too. “You… rigged the gun to misfire? That wasn’t the original?”

“No. Alzhi tracked down the dwarf who made the original, and convinced him to make this sabotaged duplicate. Alzhi was going to plant it in this bastard’s chamber,” she kicked Tenlor’s body savagely. “Then all we would have had to do would be to wait for him to kill himself. But Alzhi was never assigned to the manor in Sevvas patch, so he never got the chance. I’m just lucky I keep it with me as a reminder. I guess it did its job after all.”

Arico nodded, more out of habit than understanding. Regardless of what she’d done or why, this was hardly the time to stand here dissecting her actions. He couldn’t see anyone coming through the crack in the foyer’s door, but then most of the remaining Ascendants were to the south. “It’s clear for now.” His nausea seemed to be fading as well, thankfully. It seemed the dead guard had carefully moderated his blow to Arico’s stomach: it hadn’t done any lasting damage that he could tell.

As they moved towards the door, Endu paused again and looked back. Leveling the other gun, she pumped another shot into Tenlor’s body, splitting more of his head apart. “For my little girl,” she said viciously down at the corpse.

Arico gave her the moment, before taking her arm and pulling her outside. They slipped out onto the street and sprinted north towards the threads. By now it was fully dark outside, with clouds covering the new night’s moon. They heard a distant shout ring out as they ran, but it was nowhere near enough to be a threat.

“I didn’t know he’d killed your daughter. I’m sorry.” Arico said once they’d rounded a corner and slowed down to catch their breath. “But why did you lie to the Hauld and me? Why not just tell us?”

Endu’s face hardened up again. “I’ll explain everything, if you can get us back to the Enclave in one piece.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” he promised as they got moving again.

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Chapter 34

In a flicker of motion, the letter was pushed through the threads and let go. The hand pushing it vanished back into the threads as fast as an eye could blink. Carefully positioned, it flipped several times before hitting the ground about a span from the edge. Both dwarven guards looked towards it curiously, and one of them approached slowly. One look at the writing on the vellum cover was enough to widen his eyes. He snatched it up and hurried downstairs to tell his captain.

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Almost four hours after they’d left, Jaas saw Arico and Endu limping back down the stairs into the Hauld’s audience chamber. She gasped, covering her mouth. Both of them looked like they’d been through a three-day battle! Any number of cuts and scrapes covered their skin, and their faces and hair were singed. A livid bruise was forming on Endu’s left cheekbone. The Hauld stepped forward and called for a healer to join them at once.

Despite his apparent injuries, Arico didn’t seem to have lost any of his energy. “The meeting was a trap, sir,” he said immediately, waving off a helping hand from one of the dwarves. “Did your navigators get all the patch leaders and aides out in time?”

The Hauld nodded. “Aye, tha lads picked ‘em all up jus’ where ye said.” He turned and pointed down one the adjoining hallways. At the end of it and past a handful of guards, the various patch leaders and their aides were clustered together. Jaas doubted they were in a very good mood, not just because they were being detained, but because it was *dwarves* doing it.

“They won’t be safe here for long, sir,” Arico continued, glancing down the hallway. “If the Council finds out they’re here, they won’t hesitate to strike.” He hesitated, looking over at Endu. “We sorta… pissed them off a little. They’ll be looking for revenge.” Jaas wondered what he meant by that. As usual, Endu’s face was unreadable.

The healer arrived and reached up to apply ointment to some of Arico’s cuts. “See to her first,” he insisted, directing her to Endu instead. They both took a seat as their wounds were tended to, but Arico didn’t seem any happier for their safe escape. “We were set up, sir. I’m sure of it.”

The Hauld also glanced down the hallway towards the detainees. As they watched, each one was led away to a different room. “How can ye be sure, tho? Ascendan’s coulda been watchin’ any one o’ those patches.”

“But then they wouldn’t have known where we’d gone! It only makes sense if one of those people tipped off the Council before we ever showed up. Then they waited for us all to gather in the same place, and tried to snag us all at once. If it hadn’t been for your secret tunnel, and for Endu’s… planning, it would have worked, too!”

Again, Jaas wondered what could have happened back there. Still, it could wait. Arico’s logic was sound—the only way they could have been ambushed like that was if the Ascendants had gotten inside information.

“What about Kandiu?” Endu put in softly. “He seemed pretty hostile during the meeting. Pretty sure we didn’t stand a chance against the Sustained.”

Arico grimaced. “For all we know, it could be Bloodeye himself, or his advisor Velya, or even more than one person! I’m sure the Council would pay the Deathwatchers handsomely if they could deliver me *and* expose my connection to the dwarves.”

Jaas had seen Velya taken in with the others. She opened her mouth to defend her… ally, but then closed it. What could she say to convince them without putting Velya under scrutiny, after all? Certainly neither Velya nor the rest of the Thornes would appreciate that, and it was unlikely the dwarves would punish anyone without proof of duplicity, anyway.

The medics, their task complete, made their way back upstairs. The rest of them sat in silence for a few moments, each pondering their current shared dilemma. “Hauld!” A guard quickly descended the stairs, brandishing a letter as if it was some kind of flag. He came to a respectful stop at the entrance to the chamber, and the Hauld waved him forward. By his uniform, he was one of the captains in charge of the keep defenses. “This jus’ arrived a’ tha threads, sir. Addressed ta her,” he looked at Jaas hesitantly, as he put the letter down on a table next to them.

“No one saw who lef’ it, Hauld,” he explained before anyone could ask. “Tha guard on duty jus’ saw it flutter down on tha ground.”

Jaas reached for it, but all three of the others moved to stop her at the same time. “Wait!”

The Hauld excused the guard and turned back to her. “Jaas, lass, some poisons can kill by touch. If ye open tha’, it could be a death sentence.” They all stared down at it for a few seconds in silence. The name ‘Jaas’ was simply inscribed on the envelope, with no other words or symbols they could see in evidence.

“We never told the Sustained her real name. They only know her as the Harbinger,” Arico reasoned aloud.

“But she’s been teaching people in a dozen patches how to read and write, using her own name all along,” Endu added. “We know at least one of them is a traitor. Maybe he told his magistrate her name as well. There’s no way to know for sure.” Their words seemed to fade into the distance for Jaas, as they continued to speculate on its origin. The letter itself looked innocuous enough.

She retrieved the magnifying glass from her pack. It was an extremely primitive version of the medical device built by Endu, but good enough for reading script at least. Unfortunately, it didn’t look like the glass would be any help. This was looking more and more like a matter of faith.

Jaas took a deep breath. Faith had never been of much use to her, even after she’d come to Patchwork. She’d always trusted in the rules of the world—first her parents’ gentle guidelines, then the more strict code required in the Academy, and finally the similarly rigid rules of both magical and scholarly study.

Still, sometimes none of that could help, and faith was all that was left. Before anyone could react she grabbed the letter off the table and started opening it, ignoring their surprised objections. She smiled. At least they cared. Maybe they didn’t see her as just a security risk after all.

Inside was a single page, covered in a light and free-flowing hand. *To my most* trusted *friend, greetings in haste,* she read aloud for the others.

*I regret the crude form of delivery, but I’m sure you would agree that these are strange times, and require strange methods.*

*Apologies as well for the strained hand in which this comes to you. A rosebush has such treacherous stems, and I’m afraid I wasn’t careful enough retrieving my husband’s anniversary gift this year.*

*I wished to inquire as to your lessons with the youngsters. I heard you’ve been having problems recently, with some of their parents. Sadly, they disapprove of some of your methods, which is of course ridiculous. Perhaps you should consult the Tun-pra text I sent you last year, for methods in convincing them. I think you’ll find that reading aloud the passage concerning ‘open and transparent methods’ will be most helpful.*

*In any case, I hope the New Day has been treating you well. Mine has been dreadful, to tell the truth.*

*Health and hope,*

*Lady Erevos Cutter, Bassos patch.*

Jaas lowered the letter, wondering what all *that* could mean. “Cutter…” Arico mused aloud. “I haven’t heard much about that House. One of the smaller ones, with little or no power, from what I’ve heard.”

“D’ye know what it means, lass?” The Hauld looked at her.

Jaas thought about it for a moment, before giving them a triumphant smile. “Actually, I think I might.”

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Gritting his teeth in preparation for what he was sure would be an unpleasant reaction, Arico unlocked the last of the cells hidden away underneath the Enclave’s fortress. Predictably, Bloodeye had been pacing back and forth; to such a degree he’d left a line of polished stones in his cell.

“It’s about time!” He grunted irritably. “You kept me here long enough!”

“I’m sorry, Drakos,” Arico said as soothingly as he could. “We had to make sure everyone was interviewed before we could release anyone. You understand.”

“I take it you believe me now?” He brushed past Arico, heading upstairs in a huff.

Arico nodded accommodatingly. “We have our traitor now, and it’s not you.”

That brought Bloodeye up short for a moment. He eyed Arico suspiciously, before nodding and moving again, this time more slowly. Arico hid a smile as best he could. Naturally all of their ‘prisoners’ had claimed to be innocent, and the Hauld would have had a tough time proving which one had betrayed the rest. Until that letter had arrived, that was.

Arico still could only guess at who Jaas’ mysterious benefactors were, but it seemed they’d hit the mark. Not only had they known about the traitor even before the Hauld had, but they’d even provided the means of uncovering him.

Jaas had noticed that the letter’s vague reference to ‘Tun-pra’ had been emphasized especially. She recognized it from an earlier list she’d been given: Boss Pratun of Tsobba patch. He was one of the twelve leaders that Arico had been meeting with in Atsekka. Later when Arico was interviewing Pratun, he’d reacted to the phrase ‘open and transparent methods’. Not much, but enough to incriminate himself a little later on.

Once Pratun had cracked, it hadn’t taken long to get the whole story. He’d contacted his patch’s magistrate about a week before, hoping to turn in the ‘rebels’ as proof of his loyalty to the Sustained Council. His aide, a young man named Dapalos, apparently had no idea what he’d done, and Arico was a little grateful for that.

As he brought Drakos into the Hauld’s audience chamber, Arico could see the others talking quietly amongst themselves. Despite their many differences they clumped together, eyeing their dwarven hosts with deep suspicion. Arico grimaced. So much for shared hardship enhancing trust.

Jaas was there as well, standing a few spans from the collected leaders. Due to the help her ‘friends’ had just given, the Hauld had decided to bring her in on this, and hear any advice she might have to offer. Arico was grateful for that, as well. Her mysterious benefactors remained just that—mysterious—but they seemed to be on the side of the dwarves for now. Maybe Jaas could keep it that way. Somehow, her friends had known not just what had happened in Atsekka patch, but how to help. That suggested at least one of these very people was working for them. Arico pondered for a moment who it might be.

“You’re all free to go,” he said just as he and Bloodeye joined them. “Pratun was the one who sold us out. He’s still in a cell downstairs, as I’m sure the dwarves will have more questions to ask him.”

“But you didn’t know there was a traitor at first, did you?” Kandiu demanded dramatically, gesturing at the others. “What gave you the right to imprison us like that?”

Arico opened his mouth to respond, but Bloodeye cut him off. “Oh, shut your yap, Kandiu. If it hadn’t been for the kid we’d all be in the Council’s hands right now, and Aquun only knows what they’d end up doing to our patches.” He lowered his voice, glancing at the guards at the other end of the hall. “I for one am grateful the dwarves didn’t just cut our throats to be done with it.” A few of the others nodded their agreement.

Enough was enough. “That’s it,” Arico said firmly. “All of you should remember that it was the *dwarves* who rescued you from Atsekka patch! That was a dwarven tunnel you used back there, and it was dwarven navigators who brought you here. If you’re still interested in teaching your people how to read and write, or digging a well in each of your patches, it’ll be dwarven teachers who teach you, and dwarven builders who dig them!”

He gave them a few breaths to think about that. “They’re not what you’ve been told. I should think recent events are proof of that, don’t you?” Perhaps he’d gone too far. These were proud people after all: leaders each in their own right. But that didn’t mean Arico was willing to just stand there and listen to them belittle his friends and allies.

“In the Outside world, people are often raised to hate and fear groups they’ve never even met,” Jaas put in quietly. “Tell me. Had any of you even *seen* a dwarf before today? And all those stories you’ve heard about them… who came up with them? The Council? The Ascendants? The very people who want you to be divided and fearful! And they want the same for the dwarves.” She looked over at the attendants, the Hauld, and now Chanul who had just arrived. “Tell me, do these people look violent or evil to you?”

Arico couldn’t tell if his or Jaas’ words had made any impact on them. At the very least they stopped badmouthing the dwarves for the moment. Perhaps feeling the awkwardness of the moment, Aldwith spoke up. “What about Pratun, then? Are we taking him with us when we go?”

“The Hauld has made it clear to me that what happens to Pratun is up to you,” Arico assured him. “You were the ones he betrayed, after all. As leaders of your respective patches, you’re the only people who have a say in this matter.”

“Just kill him and thread his body,” Bloodeye said immediately, his eyes narrowing. “The Ascendants will never know what happened to him, and the rest of us will be safer for it.” A few others nodded their heads in agreement.

Arico felt his gut twist. Summary executions were commonplace for the Deathwatchers, and it seemed Drakos was happy to carry on the tradition. For once though, Arico was inclined to agree. Keeping Pratun alive was a security risk to the entire movement! Still, Arico was no patch leader. He simply had no authority to weigh in here.

“I’m sure that’s what the Ascendants would do,” Kandiu answered pointedly, “but maybe we should consider something a little less… permanent. If we keep him locked up, safely away from the Sustained, then when the fighting’s over we can hold a trial.”

At first, his suggestion was met only with silence. ‘Trial’ was an unusual word, here in Patchwork. As part of her history lessons, Jaas had told people about criminal trials in other countries and in old Vasiriah, which was possibly where Kandiu had gotten the idea. “Think about it,” he urged the others. “Back before the Threading, the Vasiri Empire had a time-tested way of dealing with situations like this. The old Emperors knew they could never rule fairly if they controlled the courts, so they had the people appoint arbitrators to hold trials. *Real* arbitrators, not political puppets like the ones the Sustained have watching over us. If we truly wish to be better than the Sustained, why not start here, by proving that justice actually *means* something to us?”

Arico privately admitted Kandiu might have a point. Arico was a soldier, unlike these Bosses and Mayors. As such he’d been trained to think about the threat first, and the diplomatic solution second. Perhaps Kandiu’s idea did have merit. After a moment, Mayor Jandyo spoke up “You say that like we’re guaranteed to win this ‘trial’,” he pointed out sourly. “What if we lose? Would he just get away with what he tried to do to us?”

“No justice system is perfect,” Kandiu admitted. “But we have to at least try, or we might as well be just like the Sustained—accusing people of a crime, and then executing them for it, without giving them any chance to defend themselves!”

“There’s another thing to consider,” Arico said slowly. He wasn’t sure what to make of it, really, hence his hesitation. “Once he realized his guilt was clear, Pratun offered to swear ta’sana to me. For… the rest of his life. I refused of course, but I’m sure he’ll make the same offer to you. You know, provided you don’t kill him and toss his body into the threads,” Arico nodded at Bloodeye.

For a handful of moments, the entire group was silent. It had been an hour since the offer had been made, and Arico still felt the same shock they did. He’d heard about ta’sanas being offered and accepted before, but it was so rare he’d never expected to see it happen during his lifetime, much less be the person receiving that offer!

Jaas gave him a confused glance as the leaders began talking it over, so Arico sidled up next to her. “Ta’sana is a kind of blood oath,” he explained to her in an undertone. “Once given and accepted, the ta’sana compels the oathgiver to obey and serve the oathtaker. There’s a long list of rules—the oathtaker has to guarantee the oathgiver’s safety from everyone but himself, for example—but it’s considered the highest oath anyone can give.”

“I’d like to see those rules,” she responded predictably, as she watched the others’ conversation with great interest. “It sounds a lot like some of the Vasiri traditions I read about before coming here, though.”

Arico shrugged. “That’s probably where we got the idea. But it is a rare thing, even today. Pratun basically offered to become my property, if I could spare his life. Though it usually has a time limit of a few weeks, or a few years at most. He offered his entire life. He must be terrified of what they’ll do to him.”

Something in his voice must have stood out, because Jaas kept staring at him despite the voices nearby. The other patch leaders seemed caught up in their own conversation and didn’t need any input from them, so she leaned close again. “There’s more to it, though, isn’t there?”

He grimaced slightly. “I… may have been responsible for his ta’sana offer. I threatened to kill him back there.”

Arico had expected her to look frightened, or disappointed, or angry, but her expression didn’t change at all. “Was it part of your interrogation?” Her voice remained steady as well.

“No,” he admitted, somewhat confused. He’d expected to have to defend his actions to her, and was just now realizing he couldn’t really defend them to *himself*.

But she would want to hear his reasons anyway, so he swallowed hard and continued, barely remembering to keep his voice low. “I told Pratun that I didn’t have the authority to kill him right then and there, but that I would try to convince the other leaders to have him executed right away. It wasn’t revenge for him setting us up, I’m sure of that. I wasn’t even angry about nearly getting killed back in Atsekka patch. I wanted him dead—and I still do—because it’s the safest thing for the movement.”

Jaas glanced back at the others still waging their verbal war over what to do. Her brow furrowed slightly. “Isn’t your movement all about being better than the Sustained and their Council, though? About doing the right thing, while they would just make him disappear?”

“You don’t need to tell me, Jaas,” he said tiredly. “I know I should feel guilty about wanting him dead, but I really don’t. The movement is on a knife’s edge right now. Any one of those two dozen people over there could destroy us by turning us in. And Pratun wants to! Or wanted to, anyway. It’s safer to put him down now, rather than risk him being recovered by the Ascendants later on!”

“You won’t do it, though,” she said softly. Her tone was finally echoing some feeling again, and Arico nodded. It wasn’t a command, but a statement; he could tell that much. She knew him well enough to know he wouldn’t do anything to Pratun without permission from the other leaders. No matter how much he wanted to.

To his relief, Jaas let the matter go, at least for the time being. But she wasn’t done, in typical scholarly fashion. “So what happens if he breaks this… ta’sana oath?”

“It’s never happened before, to my knowledge,” Arico admitted. “According to city laws if you break a ta’sana, from either side of the oath, your life is forfeit. Any rights you had as a citizen are stripped away. All your property immediately falls to your closest relative or your spouse. And it becomes legal to kill you. Anyone, stra’tchi or Sustained, can just cut you down in broad daylight in front of everyone.”

“That sounds a bit harsh.” Jaas looked back down the hallway to where Pratun was being held.

“Like I said, it’s never happened before. But then, I’ve only heard of four or five ta’sanas actually being offered and accepted, and that’s over hundreds of years. That’s one of the reasons people want as many witnesses as possible to make sure everyone knows it’s genuine. If they accept, they’ll probably bring in several hundred people to watch it happen.”

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They ended up debating it for over an hour, during which time the dwarves set up a small meal for them in an adjoining room. Arico was encouraged to see that most of them ate the food without suspicion. Perhaps they were just too busy arguing to care.

In the end they decided to just leave Pratun in the Enclave, and discuss what to do with him at some other time. Arico supposed that was the best he could expect, given the circumstances. He promised himself that he *would* be involved in whatever follow-up discussions happened, ta’sana or not. This was too important a decision to make lightly.

Once they’d seen Pratun’s accommodations (and Arico had made sure they were humane enough), the rest of the leaders were returned to their own patches. Pratun’s aide Dapalos was allowed to leave as well, on Jaas’ advice.

At first Arico had hesitated, and the Hauld had openly objected. He’d changed his mind eventually, when Jaas reminded them that anyone else from Tsobba patch who was considering betraying them would have to wonder how Pratun had been caught in the first place. Jaas’ mysterious allies had been able to identify him without any trouble, and even get him to incriminate himself. That meant they had positions in the sifters and the Ascendants themselves. Any other traitors would think twice before trying what Pratun did.

Arico still had no idea who these allies of hers really were. Obviously Sabra was connected to them, but Arico could only guess how. Apparently Sabra was just one of many, and they had navigators of their own. He had shared his suspicions with the Hauld, but they’d both agreed not to ask her directly. Clearly her allies wanted to stay in the shadows for now, and by their actions they were more ally than enemy. They could certainly use every ally they could get right now.

As for this Lady Cutter, Alzhi had been able to tell them a little about her when he’d gotten back. She was a minor noble, just like they’d expected, who had lived in Bassos patch for at least eight years. No place on the Council, no major connections to the Aquunites or the Ascendants. Basically the perfect position for someone who was pretty much never noticed by anyone. As to whether she was one of Jaas’ allies or just a convenient patsy, that was anyone’s guess.

Besides, Alzhi had been a little distracted upon getting back. After telling him how she’d killed Tenlor, Endu explained her actions to the Hauld directly. It was only them, Arico, and the Hauld in the room.

“It was more than six years ago. Just before we decided to join you, Hauld,” she said quietly, gripping Alzhi’s hand in both of her own. “Satya was almost three, and I knew they would take her away soon. Of course I didn’t tell anyone that Alzhi was her father. That could have gotten them both killed. But I knew she was a navigator; Alzhi told me how to test her, and I did.” She gave an uncharacteristic sniff at the memories.

Arico resisted the urge to put a hand on her shoulder. Killing Tenlor must have opened her up, at least a little, to these painful memories.

“I told myself again and again that it wouldn’t be goodbye. Alzhi would help me see her in secret, so she would always know I was nearby. So when they finally took her, I was ready for it.” She looked up at her husband, who continued for her.

“I asked a friend of mine who works in Penntu patch to find out where she would be sent. A household in Sustained territory, or so he told me,” he said darkly. “But when I got there, all I found was an abandoned warehouse. It had to be a mistake, I told myself. Some kind of clerical error. I knew the navigator who’d been sent to test her, so I went to him first. He told me he’d handed her off to Tenlor Fisher, just as he’d been ordered to do, in Gullas patch.”

Alzhi’s voice cracked. “I—I navigated there. To the edge of Gullas. I opened up a window in the threads… just in time to see it.”

Even though he knew approximately what came next, Arico couldn’t help feeling dread rise up inside him. The way Alzhi described it, and the heaviness in his voice, drew people in as if they had seen it with him.

“Tenlor was there, alongside his two favorite bodyguards. He was holding her hand just on the edge of the threads. It was so casual to him. So… ordinary. He just… unsheathed that sword of his and ran her through! There was no hesitation at all. He might as well have been swatting a fly!”

His voice was thick with anger now, and Arico could see his knuckles going white as they gripped Endu’s hand. “Then he tossed her into the threads and just turned away. I navigated there as quick as I could, and jumped out the other side. She was still alive!”

Alzhi looked down at the floor, obviously overcome with emotion. Endu continued for him without pause. “He must have thought she had died instantly, and would have been threaded, leaving no evidence. Still, she didn’t last long. She just stared up at him as her breathing slowed and stopped. I wasn’t there to say goodbye, Hauld! I just hope that none of you ever have to hold your child in your arms as they slip away like that. I could barely handle *hearing* about it, and she was my daughter!”

There was a long silence. All this time, Arico had believed that little Satya had died from an infection in her arm after the Rejoining. The fault of the Council, yes, but somehow better than the truth. But they hadn’t just killed her with negligence. There was no way Tenlor would have executed a little girl without the permission of his father and the rest of the Council. This wasn’t stupidity or apathy; it was calculated murder!

Before he could even ask it though, Endu was speaking again. “Hauld, we don’t have any proof yet, but I believe they killed our daughter because they didn’t need her. They already have plenty of navigators born every year in Sustained territory. Why bother raising a stra’tchi navigator when you’ve already got enough of your own? They didn’t want her, and they couldn’t send her back to the stra’tchi, not if she was a navigator. So they killed her. Just to tie up an inconvenient loose end.” Endu took a deep breath, as if cleansing herself of something foul within.

Arico thought back to Endu’s confrontation with Tenlor. Not that he didn’t believe her now—Tenlor had all but admitted his crime back in Atsekka patch. Arico had also studied Tenlor’s history, along with that of his father and sister, as part of his research on the Sustained Council. He’d pieced together stories passed around Sustained territory during the years before Jaas had shown up, and they painted a pretty graphic picture of Tenlor’s past.

He’d been a military man, devoted to serving his father and leading the Ascendant Guard in their duties. Arico had also heard of Tenlor’s many conquests, but not on the battlefield. It seemed he’d had a woman in many different patches across the city. In addition to his wife, of course. His Sustained mistresses seemed to have been treated well, from what Arico had gleaned, but the stra’tchi ones hadn’t been so lucky. Each time a stra’tchi woman had caught Tenlor’s eye, the stories often ended the same way: with her disappearance. At first, Arico had thought he was just hiding them away somewhere, but now… it was pretty clear they were all dead.

Given what had happened to Satya, it was also clear why. Tenlor couldn’t afford any of his bastards being born to a stra’tchi, not if there was a chance they could be a navigator. He wasn’t the only Ascendant who’d been known for taking a stra’tchi mistress, either. Some women even volunteered for such a duty. It meant an easier life for them, in some ways, than they’d have in a stra’tchi patch.

Arico had shared his findings with the Hauld a long time ago. It was one of the reasons they’d decided the Sustained Council had to fall. This new information just made it even more necessary.

“Alzhi did more research after that, after we started sending you information, Hauld,” Endu continued intensely. “He never found any written records, but there are many more children who just disappeared after the testing, never to be seen again. The Sustained are killing them, just like they killed her!”

The Hauld took a deep breath and leaned forward, elbows on knees. “Why did ye lie ta us abou’ this, Endu? Alzhi?” He asked grimly, looking from one to the other. “Why na jus’ tell us, an’ ask fer our help?”

Endu shared a glance with Alzhi. “I wanted revenge, Hauld. We both did. If you knew about this, you might keep us from doing missions that would take us near him, and neither of us wanted that.”

Her blunt honesty resonated through the small chamber. Arico had suspected something like that, ever since they’d gotten back to the Enclave. Still, he hadn’t expected her to just say it aloud.

“There’s more to it, though,” she continued suddenly, almost desperately. “If word got out of what Tenlor was doing, he would do whatever it takes to bury the evidence. We needed proof before we could tell you, or anyone else!”

“Proof tha’ died with Tenlor,” the Hauld grunted irritably. “Now we may never know jus’ how many kids ‘e killed!”

“She had no choice, sir,” Arico spoke up quickly. “Yes, it’s true she was already planning on killing him, but in this case it saved both of our lives! We never would have gotten away if it hadn’t been for her.”

The Hauld waved a hand. “Ach, it dinnae matter now, anyway.” He turned to Endu and Alzhi. “I can understan’ yer need ta get vengeance, better’n most. Ye’r not tha only people ta lose family ta that bunch. Bu’ ye’r both part o’ somethin’ greater now, ye hear? I cannae have two o’ me mos’ trusted people doin’ stuff behind me back!”

He speared them both with harsh looks. “Arico, give us tha room, would ye? Tha three o’ us are gonna stay here fer quite a while, talkin’ abou’ anythin’ *else* they been keepin’ from me.”

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Chapter 35

Berilo stood in silence next to his son’s body. It had been hours now, since they’d brought Tenlor back from his botched ambush. Still he stood there facing the corpse, but seeing nothing. Rota had been there when they’d first brought Tenlor’s body in, with their four-year-old daughter Tela at her knee. She hadn’t stayed long, upon seeing the mess they’d made of her husband’s face. She was a delicate soul, his daughter-in-law. Just like his granddaughter.

Then his Councilors had dropped by, one after another whispering their condolences and extolling his son’s many virtues. Not that a one of them meant any of it. Lies spewed forth from them as easily as breathing. One after another they had faltered at his silence, and gone back to their plots and schemes.

Berilo had once relished all that machination. Outmaneuvering people in the Council chambers and in life itself had been a great source of joy for him. Almost as much joy as holding his infant son for the first time.

One of Tenlor’s bodyguards had survived, and told Berilo everything. A woman—one of the rebels—had tampered with his gun to kill him. They couldn’t beat his son in a fair fight, so they cheated to do it. Berilo’s hands tightened on the coffin’s edge.

It was a ceremonial coffin only; tradition demanded that Tenlor be threaded tomorrow in a public funeral, just as with all honored Sustained dead. There the High Penet—or rather, his replacement—would praise Tenlor to the Sustained people, saying all sorts of good things about him. There he would lie to the people, and most would believe him. Only a few would know better. The Lord Ascendant was no fool. He knew his son had had many faults. Impatience, arrogance, and a lack of subtlety among others. Still, they had killed him. They had killed his *son!*

Tasaos Miller was Tenlor’s second-in-command for the Ascendants. He’d already taken over, promising swift retribution, but Berilo already knew revenge would be a small comfort. Nothing would bring his son back.

Tenlor’s body was on display in the viewing room on the north end of the manor. The cloudy and stormy sky outside reflected the mood perfectly. A sky that was dark and turbulent, promising devastation but being unable to cause it. Just like Berilo right now.

As the sun dipped its way past the clouds and below the city wall, the foot traffic in the room slowly subsided. Berilo remained, studying his son’s face. The staff had done a good job covering the damage, such as it was. Berilo imagined they must have a wide selection of methods on how to make corpses presentable to audiences before their threading. With a prickly sensation on the back of his neck, Berilo realized he was all alone in the viewing room. Even the servants were gone from their usual places by the door, which was now closed.

There was a whisper of movement to his left, and Berilo straightened up before turning in that direction. There, not ten spans away, was a short figure wearing leather armor and a skull mask, and carrying a pair of daggers.

Heartbane.

Berilo ignored him at first, turning back to the coffin. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the figure start, as if surprised by his lack of response. Berilo supposed he would feel the same, any other time, but right now, he just didn’t care.

“What do you want?” He asked tiredly, not bothering to turn again.

In answer, Heartbane tossed one of his daggers over. It was slow incoming, and Berilo’s old knife-fighting instincts kicked in, plucking it right out of the air. He turned it over and over in one hand. It was perfectly balanced.

“You’ve never shown any interest in fair play before,” he commented slowly. “But then, I suppose you’ve already taken precautions. I take it calling for my guards would be a useless gesture?”

Heartbane nodded, and then raised the knife, beckoning with his other hand. Berilo sighed. “If you think that waiting until my son’s funeral to attack me would somehow lessen my will to survive, think again. I’m perfectly willing to gut you before going back to my grief.” He hefted his new-found dagger, and finally turned to face the assassin again.

In a blur of motion, Heartbane jumped at him. Berilo spun away from the attack, catching the edge of Heartbane’s dagger with his own before putting some distance between them again. Briefly, he wished he was wearing a cloak. They could be surprisingly useful in close quarters like this.

After evaluating his attacker briefly, Berilo charged in this time. He held his dagger close to his center of gravity, putting not just the force of his arm behind the attack but his entire weight as well. Heartbane dodged as well, but not entirely. He caught some of the blow as he moved away, emitting a grunt of pain.

He spun even as he dodged, pivoting on one foot and sweeping with the other leg. The kick wasn’t that forceful, but Berilo was already off balance from his charge, and he fell backwards onto the ground. Heartbane was on him in an instant, dagger driving forcefully towards his chest. Berilo barely managed to bring his own up in time to deflect it. The blades caught each other, grinding audibly against one another.

It was clear he was the stronger of the two. Heartbane kept on disengaging whenever they got in close, but then the assassin was significantly faster. This time though, Heartbane didn’t jump away. He swung his head forward into Berilo’s face, just above his nose. The mask was made of metal, dazing him, and in another moment Berilo’s dagger had been wrenched from his grasp and Heartbane’s blade was already touching his chest.

But it went no further. He just held Berilo there on the ground for a moment, before slowly standing up and taking a step back.

Acutely aware of just how close he’d come to death, Berilo stood as well. He retrieved the dagger, but didn’t hold it up again. For whatever reason, Heartbane seemed unwilling to kill him. “Sparing me was a mistake, you know. I’m sure whoever hired you will be quite displeased.”

“No one hired me,” a woman’s voice answered, and Heartbane pulled off the mask. It was Hazra. Berilo’s jaw dropped, and he took a step back on instinct. A woman? *And Hazra??*

Surprise and shock had cut through his grief like one of those knives. It couldn’t be. His own, sweet, useless daughter? But the face was unmistakable. Now that he looked at her, the build was just about right. Her heels were gone, replaced by leather flats. Her breasts had been concealed as well by the tight armor, to hide her identity and to keep from getting in her way. It was her. Slowly, painfully, he forced his mind to accept this new reality.

“ … how?” It was the only word he could manage, given the circumstances. Even his rage and grief had been temporarily put aside, replaced by sheer surprise and confusion.

“It’s a long story, father,” she said calmly, sheathing her dagger. She reached out for the other. When he didn’t move, she sighed and took it from his hand, sheathing it as well. “I’d hoped you would figure it out yourself. I left clues for you over the years. Little tidbits you could pick up on and connect back to me. I wanted you to eventually discover the truth and give me the credit I deserve, but it’s only recently I realized that day would never come.”

Berilo resisted the urge to cough from sheer shock. It was still so unbelievable! His daughter? The same girl whose nurses had all commented on her happiness and easygoing nature? The same child who had fallen asleep dreaming of unhappiness and waked herself with laughing?

“And rightly so,” he finally responded harshly, finding his voice again. “You’re my daughter, not some common killer! You have no business risking your life like this!”

“You’re right,” Hazra said with the ghost of a smile on her lips. “I am no common killer. I’m the *best* at what I do! Tell me you didn’t think so, before you found out it was me! Tell me I’m not famous across the entire city for what I do!”

Berilo was taken aback. Again. Hazra never spoke like this! Between her visits to the shrine to speak with her mother, and the time spent with the various noblewomen in her circle of friends, he’d never heard a single harsh or prideful word out of her. But he did have to admit she was right. Heartbane, the killer… was one of his most potent weapons.

Not anymore. “No,” he said sternly. “I don’t know who taught you, or when. I don’t know where you got that armor, or those daggers, or that mask. And I don’t care. As of yesterday, you are my only child, and you will *not* continue with these… crazed excursions of yours!”

Her smile widened, and she gave a brief chuckle. “And how do you propose to stop me? Would you have me arrested?” She asked derisively. “The Clarion would never allow you to lock me up, not without cause. If you told him the truth, would he believe you? Would anyone? By the Multitude, that’s why I had to attack you in the first place! You would never have believed I was Heartbane, not unless we’d fought first! And even if you did somehow manage to imprison me, I’ve got people all over the manor! You’d never be able to hold me for long.”

Hazra shook her head slowly. “No, father. I’ve been killing for years without your approval, and I’m not going to stop now.”

It was an unfamiliar, and very uncomfortable feeling, being out of control like this. Berilo kept his eyes on his murderous daughter, as he took a seat to rest his legs. That fight, brief as it had been, had taken a lot out of him. “If… you didn’t want me to stop you, then why tell me at all?”

Hazra pulled a pack out from underneath one of the chairs, not answering at first. She removed a pale blue dress from inside, and slipped it on over her leather armor. She pulled out a pair of long-toed shoes as well, replacing her flats. Then she put the mask, daggers and shoes back in it. To a casual observer, she was herself again. “I want you to name me your heir.”

Berilo had thought nothing could surprise him at this point. He was wrong. Before he could speak, she was already explaining. “Think about it, father. You’re an old man. Even if you took another wife *today*, and got to work right away, there’d be only a slim chance you could produce another male heir. Little Tela is only four years old, too! It’ll be more than a decade before she can give you any great-grandchildren, and even then there’s no guarantee that any of them would be male.”

He shook his head sternly. “So you think you should lead instead? You would never be able to maintain a Sustained house! You don’t have the political skills, the patience, or the cunning. You’d bring the Fishers to ruin in a matter of days!”

“Just like I don’t have the skills to be one of the city’s most effective assassins?” She countered evenly. “What’s the alternative? Uncle Rondo? He’s fine as an administrator back in Nassa patch, but he doesn’t have your daring, or your determination. I inherited both!”

She sat next to him, her leather creaking slightly under the dress, and put her arm around his shoulders. “Tenlor is gone, father,” she said sadly, looking up at his casket. “In just a few hours, he’ll be going into the threads for the last time. I’m your best hope at keeping House Fisher in power, and you know it. Name me heir, and I’ll do just that!”

Tenlor’s death rushed back through him like a foul wind. Briefly dispelled by the fight, and the surprise, the fog of grief was rising again. “The Council would never accept having a woman as a head of House,” he explained darkly. “Forget about losing the Ascendancy, we wouldn’t even have a Council seat anymore!”

“Then I’ll just have to convince them, won’t I?” She said with a grim smile. “I wouldn’t have to go after them directly. Trust me, I know more subtle ways of getting people to see things my way.”

Abruptly, Hazra changed the subject. “Do you remember the masquerade ball you held in this room four years ago, to celebrate Tela’s birth?” Her eyes swept the room slowly, as if seeing all the guests dancing in and around each other again. “Your mask was scaled like a fish, of course, to represent our House. Do you remember mine?”

Berilo sighed. It had been only a few months after Hazra’s first miscarriage, and he’d wondered if she would make any kind of appearance at the ball. “I remember.”

“Mine was a swan,” she said softly. “The artisans made three masks for me, and I liked the swan best. That was where I first saw the skull mask. At first I found it hideous and frightening, but it’s grown on me over the past few years.

“I had Terres Huun make a metal one that was more durable. You felt that one yourself,” she added, looking at his forehead with a smirk. “She arranged for the armor and the daggers as well. But my trainer, he’s someone special. I don’t want him to get in trouble, so I won’t tell you who he is. Not just yet, anyway.”

Her eyes weren’t looking at him or Tenlor anymore; they seemed lost in the past. “My first kill was… messy. I surprised a stra’tchi laborer in Yeggin patch. I figured no one would go looking for him, and I was right.” She smiled at the memory. “He got in a few good hits, too, before I finally put a sword through his eye. I threaded the body, and my clothes, too. I couldn’t bring them back to the manor with that much blood on them. Oh, that was before I learned how to use daggers. Before I was good enough to always hit true.”

Despite himself, Berilo listened with interest. It was very strange, hearing stories of blood and death from someone other than Tenlor, but it felt good as well. Suddenly he realized what she was doing. By putting herself in Tenlor’s place, if only metaphorically, she was easing herself into the position of heir, as well!

He shrugged her arm off and stood up, walking back to the casket. “I’m sorry, Hazra,” he said over his shoulder, unwilling to look at her while he said this. “I understand why you fight and kill—only too well in fact. I’m even willing to let you continue, provided you let me know where you go, and check in with me regularly. But that’s the extent of my leniency.”

She was quiet. Then, softly, he could make out the sound of her armor moving again. Part of him—some animal instinct deep in his mind—was afraid she might attack again, but now he knew she was too smart for that. Even if whatever insane part of her mind that had become a killer did take over, killing him would do her no good, and she knew it.

“I overheard the report on what happened in Atsekka patch,” she whispered, suddenly at his side. “I know how Tenlor died. How that woman tricked him with his own gun.

“I’ve learned how to hold myself back, over the years. How to kill carefully and precisely. To avoid collateral damage and innocent targets. Do this for me, father, and I’ll make it right. I won’t hold back anymore. Name me heir, and I will kill all of them for you. Every rebel—every dwarf in the Enclave—every sympathizer, in every patch! I’ll even kill the Harbinger for you too, unless you still want her alive.”

She gazed down at her brother’s body. “You know that I can do it. Let me do this for you. Let me prove that I’m ready!”

Tenlor’s eyes were closed, but even so he seemed to stare up at Berilo. All decisions made by the Lord Ascendant were complicated. He’d been balancing hundreds of issues with each call he’d made as the Lord of the city. But this call was easy. This one was… pure. It was revenge, plain and simple. Slowly, tentatively, he wrapped his fingers around hers, and nodded.

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Jaas and Chanul stood next to the fire, sharing a look of concern between them. Arico gave them a comforting smile. “Trust me. This should have been done years ago. I would have done it yesterday, if it hadn’t been for the meeting with the stra’tchi leaders.”

“But there’s no need for it, Arico!” Chanul insisted. “It might make you more personable to the stra’tchi, but it could cause problems with the-” he cut off abruptly. “It could cause problems later on,” he corrected himself, sounding embarrassed. It seemed he’d almost forgotten Jaas was there, and that she didn’t know everything about Arico’s past.

Jaas gave him a curious look, but Arico went on anyway, trying to distract her. “It’s the best way to honor the memory of Tellek patch, along with Satya, hundreds of dwarves, and everyone else the Council has murdered,” he reminded them grimly. “Besides, I’ve been straddling two lives for far too long. It has to end.”

Arico silently rolled up his left sleeve and nodded to Chanul. Reluctantly, his dwarven brother reached towards the fire, lifted the branding iron in the shape of Tellek’s patch symbol, and pressed it against his arm.

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Chapter 36

It was the shouting that woke her, off in the distance. Jaas sat bolt-upright in the cot they’d given her in Bahhna patch. They sounded like screams. Sabra was inside the house in an instant, his absurdly large sword drawn and ready. The dwarves had made it for him the week before, and it looked large enough to cut through a tree in one blow. He beckoned to her, putting a finger to his lips in warning. Nodding, she slipped on her shoes and followed him out into the night.

Bahhna was one of the more recent patches she’d been assigned to teach. It was a simple farming community, much like Tellek patch had been. Alzhi’s risk assessment of this patch had been negligible, so after Arico had made contact with them she’d been brought in with Sabra as a bodyguard.

It had been almost a week since Arico had branded himself as a stra’tchi. He had taken it easy the first few days, before sending her here. She’d been teaching for most of a day, and was practically falling asleep where she sat, so they gave her an empty cot to get some rest. There was a dwarven navigator on standby in the threads, in case of emergency. Chances were he was already aware of, well, whatever it was going on out there.

Sabra led her to the top of a small hill overlooking the village, and shrank down as low to the ground as he could get short of a crawl. She stooped as well, and looked back down at the village. Dark shapes flitted from building to building, illuminated by the occasional flash of moonlight off of eyes in the darkness. There was a whisper of movement behind her, and as Jaas turned to face it, Sabra was already grappling with some… thing!

In the moonlight it looked like a huge man, but with an oversized boar’s head and tusks. It grunted savagely as it tried to jam those tusks into Sabra’s throat. Its clawed hands gripped at Sabra’s arms, trying to cut into him as well. His initial surprise had apparently passed, though, and Sabra casually lifted it off the ground and twisted, breaking its neck. It went limp, and he dropped it on the ground.

As Sabra kept watch for any more of them, Jaas examined the body. On closer inspection she could see that it was really a wooden mask in the shape of a boar’s head, affixed to the man’s head like some sort of grisly helmet. Attached to the man’s hands were claw-like appendages that looked like they were made of bone. She undid some of the straps and removed the helm, showing a top-knotted head underneath. “This is one of the Ascendants!”

Sabra nodded, breathing heavily. “No weapons, though. They must not know pretty lady is here.” He looked back at the village as more screams erupted and gave a low growl of his own. “Sabra has heard of this before, years ago. Sabra’s sister said they were called Beasts. Just guards usually, given animal heads and claws but no weapons, and set loose on patches to kill randomly before being called back. Sustained used to unleash them to cause fear and superstition, long ago.”

Jaas let out a breath, hissing in anger. “But why? These people certainly never gave any sign of unrest or uprising. Why would they be a target?”

Sabra grunted. “In the past the Beasts were set loose on patches randomly, to cause terror. Their job was to punish and intimidate, not to destroy completely. Sabra was told they sometimes did it for their own amusement.” He grabbed her hand. “Come on. It’s too dangerous to stay here.”

“Wait!” She gestured back at the village. “We have to help these people. If those Beasts only have claws like you said, you could probably take them all with that sword of yours!” She found she was gripping her own dagger. As if she would be of any use in such a fight.

Sabra shook his head adamantly. “No. Sabra has to keep pretty lady safe. And if Sabra cuts all those Beasts down, Sustained will know this patch is with us. Little man and Hauld wouldn’t want that.”

“We can’t just leave them! People are dying down there!”

“Sabra knows that.” His voice was calm, but even in the darkness she could see the grim expression on his gnarled face. “But if Sabra stops this now, many more here will die later. Could pretty lady live with that?”

Jaas hesitated. He was right. The Sustained might be willing to forgive a few of their ‘Beasts’ being killed by local stra’tchi in self-defense, but if an entire group was wiped out, their most likely response would be to poison another patch.

Seething, she nodded and let him lead her back to the threads, and to the dwarven navigator waiting for them inside. As they ran, Jaas repeated in her head again and again what she would say to the Hauld. She *had* to convince him to respond. Not just here, but anywhere else these monsters were attacking!

As it turned out, Sabra’s initial instincts had been right. The Hauld confirmed it as soon as they got back: Beast attacks on nearly thirty different stra’tchi patches that they knew of, all over the city. Arico and Alzhi weren’t there—each of them had their own assignments—but she stood in the Hauld’s war room as reports came in one after another.

“This isn’t tactics…” she said slowly. “This isn’t war. This isn’t even reason! This is just simple… rage!”

The Hauld shook his head. “It’s more than tha’. Tha Lord Ascendan’ is stokin’ tha flame all over tha city; hurtin’ people jus’ fer tha sake of hurtin’. ‘E lost ‘is son, an’ now stra’tchi all over are payin’ fer it. It’s a tes’, too, though. If we stop any o’ this, we tip our hands an’ he’ll know who we’re protectin’.”

The dwarven soldiers placed markers shaped like men on the map in the war room. One marker per affected patch. They seemed to be random, spread across stra’tchi territory. No rhyme or reason to it, except what the Hauld had said. Jaas shook her head. “I doubt Bahhna patch will have anything more to do with us after this. They’ll think the Sustained knew about me! And they won’t be the only ones, I bet.”

“Aye, lass. This’ll be a setback, ta be sure, but na’ a complete one. This’s jus’ like when they poison’d Tellek patch. Some o’ tha patches’ll be afraid, true, but some’ll know wha’ this really was, an’ they’ll come back stronger fer it. An those’ll be tha ones we wan’ on our side, in tha end.”

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Ta’anu’s brow furrowed as he and the other Thornes heard Velya’s report. The Beast attacks had been recent, and some were even ongoing, but what she had to say was of greater importance. “Are you sure of this, Velya?” He asked quietly, but with a tremble to his voice. His fists were on the table, white-knuckled.

“As sure as I can be,” Velya admitted from her end of the table. “I examined the body myself. Granted, it was just a goat’s body, but the effects are the same: it was definitely nethrit root. It’s a plant that can be mixed into a very deadly poison, and its effects would look like the Blood Fever to most everyone.”

Quiet inundated the room, as they all shared looks of concern over this news. Velya herself looked at Ta’anu in suspense. Thankfully despite his obvious strain, he seemed to be in control of his emotions for now.

It was the first Briar meeting held in over two years, and it was sparsely attended. Of all the Thornes in the city, only ten had been able to show up on such short notice. Still, they were the ten who mattered most, so Velya wasn’t concerned. She wasn’t worried about the noise, either. They were all ensconced in her cousin’s basement in Barros patch, safely away from prying eyes. It had been a bit of a chore getting Sabra in here unnoticed, but his presence had been necessary. He’d given a detailed and concise report to the others, while Velya watched with pride. And shamefully, a little surprise as well. She shouldn’t have underestimated him like that.

“First we have generations of enslavement at the hands of the Council and the Ascendants,” Ta’anu spoke up again, his tone slowly gaining intensity. “Then they poisoned an entire patch full of people, like they were nothing but vermin! And *now* we find out that they unleashed the Beasts on stra’tchi patches all over the city, for the first time in decades. What’s next?”

Velya felt a sympathetic ache run through her. She, Ta’anu and Sabra were the only stra’tchi here at the meeting. She and Ta’anu had both been tested as children, misfiled in the Registry to hide the fact that they were both navigators, and then sent to their respective patches by the previous generation of Thornes. Ta’anu had been groomed specifically to become Boss Bladescar of Rennil patch, one of the most heavily populated stra’tchi patches in the city.

Similarly, Velya had been sent to the Deathwatchers, and had eventually become one of Drakos Bloodeye’s advisors. The Thornes had wanted her to be Boss herself, but no one could ever fully predict the Deathwatchers, and Drakos had been stable enough that they were content to let him stay in charge.

She’d found Sabra a few years later, crawling the streets naked and alone, and decided to raise him on her own. She’d kept him secret at first, but he ate so much that eventually she’d been forced to reveal his existence to the other Deathwatchers. Fortunately they respected strength, so Sabra would always have a place among them. He would never be Bonded to any Sustained house, though. He was simply too hideous for them. Eventually he’d joined the Thornes as well, even if he was still only a conditional member. Actually, that was one of the reasons she’d asked Sabra to join Arico’s little group. She’d been hoping that his report on Arico and the dwarves would earn him some respect in the eyes of the others.

Despite their disparate origins, all Thornes had an equal voice in this meeting. It was one of the things that set them apart from the Sustained Council, but hopefully not from Arico’s resistance movement. Velya remained hopeful that whatever government he was trying to create would focus on equality, just as the Thornes did. But even if it didn’t, it would still probably be better than the Council.

“The Beast attacks are bad enough, but we can’t let them use this poison again!” Ta’anu insisted into the silence, breaking through her thoughts.

His outrage was perfectly understandable. Ta’anu had many friends in many patches, usually from meeting them during New Day celebrations, but Tellek was a special case. His mother—his birth mother, anyway—had died there. Poisoned along with everyone else.

His fervor was captivating as well. He was young, strong, and passionate—all things that grabbed for attention—and his message was certainly dramatic enough. “What do you suggest we do?” Velya asked, not entirely sure she really wanted to know.

Strangely, Ta’anu lowered his voice and took a deep breath. Perhaps he felt he’d overreached a little. When he spoke again, his tone was just as passionate but not quite as dramatic. “We need to find where they’re growing this poison plant of theirs. There are only so many places they could be hiding the fields. If you tell me what they look like, I could have my people searching within the hour! When we find it, we’ll burn the fields and destroy the poison to send a message to the Council!”

“Absolutely not.” A voice from the other end of the table said harshly. “It’s far too great a risk.”

As a regional commander in the Ascendants, Ornos had gained a reputation for giving keen and insightful advice on military matters. His well-timed missives had been quite useful over the years, and he’d earned a degree of respect, even from non-trained Sustained Thornes.

“They’re killing people, Ornos!” Boska Smith spoke up.

In public, Boska was just a minor member of a much more powerful House. Here among the Thornes though, he’d always been something of a communal conscience for the group. If the Thornes had a Clarion, he would be it. “I know we’re all afraid of exposure,” he said evenly, “but can we really afford to just stay in the background anymore? They’re committing mass murder now, and we have the power to stop it! If we don’t even try, our hands might as well have the same blood on them!”

“Besides,” Ta’anu picked up from him, “we have a rare opportunity here. Right now everyone in Patchwork knows about Arico and his little band of rebels. As long as they’re out there, we can strike without fear of exposure. Any action we take—any trouble we start—will no doubt be blamed on them! Who knows: maybe Arico will even appreciate the boost to his reputation. In the end, the more damage we can do to the Council’s power structure, the closer we’ll be to our Emergence!”

Emergence. The long-awaited moment when all Thornes would finally come out of the shadows and be recognized by everyone. All Thornes longed for it, making Ta’anu’s proposal a tempting one.

Velya cleared her throat. “Our ancestors decided to keep to the shadows for a reason. We’ve already stretched their mandate by helping Arico, however invisibly. That said, I don’t think any of us would object to getting rid of that poison. And Ta’anu does have a point. Now may be the safest time to take action that we’ve ever known.” She took the opportunity to nod over at Ornos. “However, I’m sure there are steps we can take to lessen the risk even further. Commander, if you have any suggestions I’m sure we’d all be eager to hear them.”

Ornos didn’t respond at first. Of all of them, he’d always been the staunchest defender of keeping hidden. He’d even objected to helping Arico at first. Eventually though, he gave a grudging nod in her direction. “If we really are going to take part in this madness, we should at least do it right,” he grumbled. “I’ll help with the plan.” With his agreement, Velya could practically feel the spirits of the others rising. The vote came up a few minutes later, with predictable results. For the first time in Patchwork’s history, the Thornes were going to war.

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*Field notes, 27th of Arasil,* Jaas scribbled, sitting down in a corner.

But she didn’t know what to write down. Her head was still swimming in recent events. Just as Jaas had predicted, the mayor of Bahhna patch had refused to let her back into his territory after the last attacks. He’d claimed it was getting too difficult to hide her from their magistrate, which to be fair could actually have been the truth.

There were still plenty of places she was needed, though. Now she and Arico were in Yeggin patch, a fruit-growing municipality just on the edge of Sustained territory. He was off giving his sales pitch to their Boss Saunis, a wiry but canny-looking man about her size. His brand was still red and would no doubt be painful for months to come, but Arico gave no sign of it to her or anyone else. In fact he’d gone out of his way to make sure everyone saw it.

As for Jaas, she’d done her part here, just as she had back in Sakkas patch. She’d confronted a few of the curious citizens, sharing what she could about their ancestry from before the Threading, and just as before it had apparently made quite an impression on them. Now it was his turn, and she’d retreated to a nearby empty barn for quiet and privacy to take notes.

*It’s been more than a week since my last entry,* she explained as if apologizing to herself. *The movement here has continued to evolve, as has the feel from the entire city. Even I’ve felt it, and I have virtually no military experience at all.*

She stared down at the parchment, willing the words to come in a smooth and clear manner.

*When Arico first explained to me what he wanted to accomplish here, it sounded so high-minded, so idealistic. The dwarves backing him seemed the same way, when I first met them. To teach literacy, to link together people who otherwise would have no real connection to each other, to convince them to stand up for themselves and each other! The idea had purity of intent and action. Of course I couldn’t know what we were in store for.*

*The movement has changed, by necessity. We’ve… grown out of our innocence. That said, if anyone reading this thinks that we’ve lost our ideals, think again. We still have the same goals, the same driving force behind us. Fighting tyranny is all well and good in theory. In practice, though,* she grimaced, *it’s a gritty, bloody business. People get hurt and killed. The innocent especially have paid the price in this war.*

She snorted a laugh to herself. *War. This is on such a tiny scale. At any given time, perhaps a hundred people are fighting on each side. At most. Real wars like the ones I studied in the Academy had thousands or tens of thousands locked in combat all at once. All the same, the size of the conflict doesn’t matter, not in here. To these people, this is their future, no matter how small of a bottle this tempest is trapped in.*

*There is an upside to the changing face of this fight, though. It’s forced people off of the fence. Either they’re hiding, trying to stay out of the fighting, or they’ve joined us in standing up against the Sustained. We know who we can trust now, and that number is growing. I think the Lord Ascendant knows it too. It might just be wishful thinking, but I get the impression his actions are getting more desperate over time. These Beast attacks over random patches are brutal, but they also seem exploratory to me. As if he’s living up to his name and fishing for leads on us.*

She paused for a moment, wondering if she should include this as well. It was personal, but it also had an impact on the war.

*Arico told me what precipitated these attacks. How the Lord Ascendant’s son murdered Endu’s little girl, and how Endu got revenge for that. I can’t fault her for doing it, but I have to wonder just how much worse things will get because of her. Perhaps she did the right thing for the wrong reason, though. Maybe stirring the pot a little will make this fight end sooner. Even though I know she didn’t do it for any reason but revenge.*

Jaas hadn’t been around for whatever punitive measures the Hauld had decided was right for Endu and Alzhi. However they’d been punished, there was no sign that their duties had changed at all. Alzhi was still undercover somewhere, and Endu was still in the Enclave, mixing sparkpowder and bandaging the injured. The dwarves had set up a sort of triage center in one of their less-populated patches, Ste’hetha.

*That reminds me,* she noted almost for herself, *I’ve remembered what was bugging me about the names of the various patches.* *Patch names didn’t exist in the Vasiri empire of course, but the modern names tend to follow a regular rule. Each one has to have a pair of consonants in the middle of the name. Tellek, Sevvas, Bassos. So far, the only exceptions I’ve seen to that rule have been the Deathwatch patch (a patch that seems to be an exception to almost every rule) and the dwarven patches. No one I’ve asked seems to know exactly* why *the patches are named that way, though. It bears further investigation.*

Of course the dwarves had been forced to evacuate Ste’hetha patch so that the wounded wouldn’t know they were in the Enclave. That left just Endu, Sabra, and a dozen or so medics from the few patches they could trust. Just another way to keep themselves and the people they were helping safe. Jaas closed her notebook and sighed. Laying back on the straw, she closed her eyes for a few moments. It was going to be a long war.

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The tunnel was old, and in disrepair. In his haste, Halseus kept on bumping and scraping against the walls. There was no time! It could start any minute now, and he couldn’t afford to be late! If he was, decades of work could be lost.

It had been months now since he’d seen Jaas enter the city and begin exploring. He’d kept a close eye on her through the link, and read everything she wrote with great interest. Still, she hadn’t told him the one thing he wanted to know most of all. If he failed, she wouldn’t get the chance, either!

This time he was alone, though. No Untos backing him up, whispering caution from his side. And this time he wasn’t here just to watch, either. The timing had to be perfect: he couldn’t trust any of his children with this, not even Untos.

No doubt humans would find this mode of transportation very unsettling, but it certainly was faster than running, or even riding on horseback. The tunnel was vertical, cut straight up to the surface dozens of years ago, and pressurized water was propelling him up along the shaft. He kept on smacking into the walls during his rapid ascent, but a few bumps and scrapes were a small price to pay, given the limited time he had to get into position.

Just before the surface the water slowed its rise, and Halseus took a moment to check his links again. Phew. Jaas wasn’t moving yet, and Arico was only moving at a slow walk. He still had some time left. Reaching out, Halseus braced his arms and legs against the tunnel walls and began climbing the rest of the way as the water receded back down the tunnel. It was ironic that this was the *exact same* structure that Arico wanted to dig in almost every patch. Especially since such structures were all over the city already, just carefully hidden from view in every case.

Halseus hoped against hope that it would stay that way, too. He was all for the humans having plentiful drinking water—nothing wrong with that. But he also needed his network of transport tunnels to remain hidden, even from the dwarves. With a little effort, he squirmed his way out of the tunnel and crawled out from under the rock covering it. A moment later, sunlight poured down on him from above.

From the links, he knew no one was around to watch him, but the trip had badly disheveled his costume, and he was quick to re-apply the bandages to his head and arms. One look at him would be enough to tell he wasn’t human, and he *really* didn’t need that trouble right now. Fortunately he was drying off quickly enough. No longer under pressure from below, the water faded out of sight.

After gaining his bearings, he made his way south to the abandoned structures lining the southern edge of Yeggin patch. Arico always entered and left patches under as much cover as possible, so Halseus was sure he’d head there.

Through the links, Halseus was suddenly aware of someone leaving the threads up ahead. He froze, and then took cover behind one of the buildings. Then, carefully balancing his normal senses and the links, he began climbing up the side of one of the stone structures. Once on top he found a concealed position, and laid down flat on his back with a chunk of rock clutched to his chest. Now all he could do was wait, and hope.

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Arico’s head jutted in through the nearby barn door. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Jaas looked up at him bleary-eyed from the haystack. The light from the windows had only shifted a little; she guessed she’d only been dozing for a few minutes. “Are you all set out there?”

“Mostly, but we should head out anyway.”

He slipped inside, took a seat next to her, and started helping her pack up to leave. There were a lot of scrolls to roll up and stuff into her bag. “Boss Saunis is talking it over with his people. We didn’t have time to dig out any pools on the corners of this patch, but he already knows what they can do. I-” he hesitated.

He shook his head tiredly. “You know what, I’m done predicting these people. Either he’ll commit, or he won’t. Regardless, we should get back to Ste’hetha patch while they think about it.” He extended his arm in an old-world show of gallantry and Jaas took it, feeling a little surprised. Fortunately it wasn’t his injured shoulder. She’d told him about that sort of gesture a while back, while describing life in various noble circles. She hadn’t expected him to remember after all this time.

Yeggin patch was mostly orchards, despite its proximity to Sustained territory. This early in the year, their fruit trees hadn’t grown anything worth eating yet, but she could see some flowers just starting to bloom. From what Jaas had learned, after the Threading most fruit trees simply hadn’t bloomed at all. People had discovered by accident that apparently bees were a necessary part of their growing any fruit. There were two beehives in the whole city, and one of them was here. It was atop a tree in the magistrate’s yard, naturally.

Only a few of the buildings from the original Vasiri city block remained, and that’s where they were headed. It made ideal cover for anyone who might be watching, though Arico had been assured the magistrate was being kept busy while they were here. Once they were inside the old ruins, he would take them through the threads back to the Enclave.

Just after they left the stone walkway near the threads, Jaas heard a crumbling noise, and a small chunk of ancient brick tumbled from one of the nearby structures. Jaas didn’t see anything there, but Arico came to a stop anyway. There was a *thunk* of metal against stone, and a quivering crossbow bolt was suddenly sticking out of the stone wall right in front of him.

If he hadn’t stopped, it would have buried itself right in the side of his head!

“Look out!” Before Jaas could even realize what was going on, Arico was already dragging her out of the way as a shape dropped down from one of the nearby buildings and began running towards them. At the end of the wall was what was left of a closed wooden door. Arico had almost gotten her around it and under cover when another projectile whistled through the air and pierced her hand, pinning it to the door!

The sheer suddenness of it was almost instantly replaced with searing pain, and she screamed, clutching at the dagger sticking out of her wounded hand.

Arico immediately put himself in front of her, his gun drawn and his eyes locked on the approaching figure. “Don’t pull on it!” he insisted quietly. “You could do more damage.”

Easy for him to say, she thought bitterly, blinking back tears and trying to stay as still as possible. The dagger had hit parallel to her fingers, so it didn’t look like it had cut into any of her bones. It hurt like hell though, and blood was already dripping heavily onto the ground underneath her.

Now that his prey had been prevented from leaving, their attacker slowed his pace and approached at a walk. He was short, whoever he was; dressed in black studded leather and carrying another dagger in his right hand. A menacing-looking mask in the shape of a skull covered his face.

Arico stiffened, looking back at him. “Die with me,” the figure hissed at them, and charged in dagger-first.

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Chapter 37

Despite his disbelief, Arico kept a steady aim on their attacker, waiting for him to get closer. He was almost in range when the assassin did some kind of strange roll and disappeared behind one of the stone walls. In another instant he was back, closed the distance, and kicked Arico’s gun out of his hand, quick as a thought! Arico partially dodged a vicious stab as he fumbled to draw his own sword. The blade nicked his arm above the elbow.

*Move*, Arico! He berated himself.

Behind them, Jaas was bleeding against the wooden door and cursing under her breath. She was reaching down to her dropped pack, probably trying to get her own gun. It didn’t look like she could reach it, though. He was on his own for now. If what he’d heard about this ‘Heartbane’ was true, Aquun herself have mercy on him.

He had to throw the assassin off, somehow. On an impulse he charged Heartbane in return, and was rewarded with a momentary widening of the eyes behind the mask before he hit, knocking them both off their feet.

In this close he couldn’t use his sword, but it seemed clear Heartbane was less experienced in close-quarters. He could hear ragged breaths as his assailant tried to wriggle free, and long black hair was loosed from behind the mask. A woman!

Arico tried to squeeze, to crush the breath right out of her, but it was like wrestling with a fish. With barely a whisper of noise, she slipped free and rolled away from him, giving him another kick for good measure.

He charged again, but this time only partially succeeded in grabbing her. They both clipped a nearby pillar, though she hit harder than he did. With more crumbling of stone, the pillar collapsed, part of it knocking her down. She was up in an instant, but immobile, her foot partly pinned by the rubble. As he backed away, she pulled at it, groaning with effort. Briefly, Arico considered attacking again.

No. This… was Heartbane! Woman or not, Arico knew he was no match for her, not without his gun. She might have reinforcements nearby as well. He had to get Jaas out of there, right now. He briefly considered getting her gun from the pack, but he knew she never kept it loaded.

Jaas was still pinned to the wall, at least fifty spans from the edge of the threads. There was no way he could reach that far, not while holding onto her at the same time. He’d have to risk pulling the dagger out, despite the damage it might do. He ran back to her and gripped the dagger, trying to pull it free as evenly as possible. It didn’t budge.

“Leave me,” Jaas said tightly. “She’s working for the Council, right? That means she wants me alive, but she’ll kill you. Just go!”

“Yeah, that’s gonna happen,” Arico grunted sarcastically, trying again. Still no luck.

With a cry, Heartbane yanked herself free. They were out of time. Arico grabbed Jaas’ wrist, ready to pull her hand free of the dagger. Damaged was better than dead, and Endu could do miracles with needle and thread, he told himself.

But Jaas could tell what he was about to do. “No!” She grabbed his arm with her own. “Wait! That’s my writing hand!”

With a sigh, Arico let go. Even if he had been willing to tear her hand free, likely damaging it beyond repair, it was too late now. Heartbane was free, and approaching them again. If they ran, she’d probably just put her other dagger through the back of his neck, and Jaas would be stuck here if he died.

This time, Heartbane had a much softer tread as she neared them. A cat stalking wounded prey. Her foot didn’t seem to be troubling her, and she’d retrieved his gun from wherever it had fallen. With a mocking laugh, she aimed it at his chest and pulled the trigger. The sound of sparkpowder igniting was suddenly muted, as roiling white streams of light surrounded him.

He was inside the threads!

Jaas was there too, looking just as confused. Her body looked as it did before, uninjured. “Arico?” She asked tentatively, looking around. “How, uh, did we get in here?” She rubbed her palm slowly, still looking pained.

“I have no idea.” He patted his chest, wondering the same thing, and how in Aquun’s name Heartbane had missed him. Granted, she’d been at least thirty paces away, but her aim had been dead sure. “At least we’re alive.”

He quickly opened a window in the threads, to find out where they were. Sure enough, it seemed they had just gone to the nearest edge. From here he could still see Heartbane standing by the stone wall. Her head was tilted to the side, as if in sheer disbelief.

Arico knew how she felt. Shaking his head, he decided not to question his luck. Because Jaas didn’t consider the dagger to be one of her possessions, it had been left behind, even though it had been touching her. She was all right for now, but only so long as she stayed in the threads. But that didn’t mean Heartbane hadn’t cut some deep vein. For all he knew, the moment they left the threads, Jaas would just bleed out.

“Come on,” he said as steadily as he could. “We can figure this out later. For now, I’ll take you to Ste’hetha patch. Endu’s there, taking care of the wounded from some of the Beast attacks. She’ll sew you up while I report… whatever just happened to the Hauld.” Jaas was still just staring through the window, and Arico moved them gently away.

The trip took longer than usual for Arico. He wasn’t that used to going to Ste’hetha, and so couldn’t just zip over there. He had to do a little exploring, so it was a few minutes before he could see it through the threads. There were secret dwarven tunnels underneath Ste’hetha, just like there were in every Enclave patch, but the whole purpose of using this patch was to convince people they were in human territory so they wouldn’t be afraid. Instead, he aimed for the abandoned Vasiri buildings on the south end of the patch. That would at least give them some cover if anyone was watching.

Jaas became ‘real’ again upon leaving the threads, and took a shuddering breath. She slumped to her knees, gripping her bloody hand with her left. Suddenly Arico noticed her pack had been left behind as well. He felt a moment of dismay at that, before he remembered she’d copied everything down. Still, the Sustained had at least some of her records again. And Jaas was right: the fact that Heartbane had targeted him specifically meant that the Council itself was behind this attack.

Even so, this was hardly the time to speculate about such things. Off in the distance, he could see people moving between some of the houses in the makeshift hospital Endu had set up. Jaas looked back at the threads fearfully as he helped her up.

“Don’t worry,” he assured her. “No one can track anyone else through the threads. We’re safe here.”

They’d only made it a half dozen paces when Arico heard a low growl coming from behind them. Jaas gave a choking gasp, and Arico turned quickly as well. A familiar, skull-faced figure had just emerged from the threads.

“You were saying?” Jaas asked him in a shaking voice.

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Arico sighed, letting go of Jaas and putting himself between them again. It seemed miracles were working for both sides today.

At least Heartbane still seemed to be acting alone. Somehow he’d expected to see a dozen Ascendants jump out behind him—her, Arico reminded himself. Also, she’d brought Jaas’ pack along with her. She either wasn’t thinking, or she was supremely confident. Given how she fought, he was betting on the latter.

Heartbane dropped the pack and sprang in again, this time wielding both daggers. He blocked one and dodged the other, pivoting on his feet to try and unbalance her; hoping she’d overcommit and give him an opening to grab her by the neck. Suddenly she ducked away from him, barely sliding underneath a massive sword-swing that rang against the nearby stone wall. Sabra had arrived.

Growling, he swung his huge sword again, forcing Heartbane to back away from them and almost out of the ruins themselves. “Get pretty lady to safety,” he ordered, grinning for a change. “Sabra will take care of… skull-face.”

Jaas didn’t wait around to argue. She scooped up her pack with her good hand, now that Heartbane wasn’t close enough to stab her again, and scurried up the hill towards the houses. Arico stayed behind, spacing out into a triangle with his friend and his foe.

“Death takes us all,” Heartbane spoke again, looking from one to another. “Heretic and abomination alike.”

Sabra gave Arico a wry look as he took ahold of his massive braid with a free hand. “Little man always attracts the crazies, eh?”

Arico grimaced. He never should have told Sabra about Terres Huun’s little crush. “Don’t I know it.”

At least that seemed to get to her. With an angry yell she went straight for Sabra. At the last moment, just as he swung towards her she jumped, pushing a leg against the wall, and propelled herself up high enough to slash at his head. He jerked away from it, taking only a graze across the nose as she backed away from him.

Arico started to move at her again, but Sabra gave him a warning look. “Stay back,” he ordered menacingly. “Sabra has this.” Strangely, he was keeping a grip on his braid with his left hand. The assassin moved in again, but this time Sabra was ready. He flicked his wrist and the braid lashed out like a whip, catching her in the hand. One dagger dropped to the ground and she shook her hand in pain, cursing under her breath.

Sabra wiped at the bridge of his nose and lifted his sword purposefully towards her. “Sabra hoped to fight skull-face someday,” he said conversationally. His voice was almost friendly! “But not as a soldier. As a true killer.” He dropped the sword with a clang on the stones.

Arico stared at him. What in the Many was he *doing*? “Sabra! Pick up your sword!”

“Stay back,” he warned again. “Sabra won’t be denied this chance.”

For a long moment Heartbane just stared back at Sabra. It was clear that she didn’t consider Arico to be any threat at all. He would have been insulted, if it wasn’t so obviously true. After apparently thinking it through, she slowly nodded and dropped her remaining dagger. Sabra grinned and wrapped his hair around his neck again. He beckoned to her. “Come on then.”

Just like before, she charged in and used the old walls to jump up high enough to reach him. He swung at her but missed, and she grabbed him around the neck. Her arms pressed against his braid as she tried to apply pressure. Thankfully, Arico wouldn’t have bet on *anyone* in a wrestling match against Sabra.

Sure enough, she seemed to be struggling. She’d grabbed Sabra by the throat, but his braid was in the way, and his neck was too thick to get her whole arm around. With a dark grin he leaned backwards, trying to crush her against one of the stone walls.

She barely slid out of the way as Sabra made contact and the wall shuddered. Sabra started chuckling, and reached for her with both hands. Even as he reached though, Heartbane pulled a thin metal spike from *within* her mask itself and plunged it into Sabra’s chest!

Sabra gave a grunt of pain, looking down at his chest in shock. As a follow-up, Heartbane grabbed ahold of the nearby wall, right at the top, and jerked them both into it, smashing the side of his head into the stones. He collapsed to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut.

Arico could only stand there as she calmly extricated herself and pulled the metal spike free. It was a thin weapon, but obviously very sharp and long enough to have stabbed into his heart. Sabra wasn’t moving. If she could kill Sabra, then what chance did Arico have?

On an impulse he stepped back away from her, and she followed him out of the ruins. She didn’t attack immediately, though. She tilted her head as though examining him. “How did you disappear into the threads like that?”

He wished he knew the answer. “How did you track us through them?” He countered, grateful for the chance to buy some time. Jaas and Endu would be evacuating by now, with help from some of the dwarven navigators hiding in the threads. He only hoped Heartbane couldn’t track them if they’d been gone a while. Maybe if he could get to the threads, Heartbane would follow him again and let them go.

Heartbane only shrugged as she bent down to retrieve one of her daggers. “Maybe in another life we would have been friends, heretic. But this is my life, and your life is over. You’re not the best fighter, but you are determined and steadfast. I’ll give you a quick death.”

Arico wearily raised his sword again, intent on dragging this out as long as possible. “Even if you kill everyone here,” he said, a strange calmness spreading through him, “you can’t stop what we’ve set in motion. The wheels are turning, and I promise you that sooner or later *every* patch will be free.” There. He’d said it. The sense of calm had settled deep within him, granting a comfort that washed away any fear.

Below the mask, her lips twisted into a grin. Even as she started to charge at him though, a chunk of stone the size of a bread-basket clipped her on the side, taking her clean off her feet. She spun in the air, hit the ground with a sickening *crunch*, and rolled a few paces before coming to a stop.

Arico looked back at the ruins in shock.

Sabra was leaning against one of the pillars, crumbling it a little. Despite the blood oozing from his chest, he gave a ragged smile. His face was pale even through his leathery tan, but his arm was steady as he pointed at where the stone had landed: precisely on top of a rabbit hole. “Sabra knew he should have been an Ona player.”

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The moment she’d gone running uphill, Jaas had known she wasn’t going to leave Arico for good. As soon as she’d made contact with Endu and gotten the evacuation started, she would go back to help him. Not that she knew precisely *how* she could help. She was making it up as she went, really.

Endu rubbed some kind of adhesive into her wound before hurriedly bandaging it, as the others evacuated. By the time both of them got back to the fight, they were just in time to see its end.

Sabra hurled a chunk of building at the black-clad attacker, knocking her down and possibly killing her. And then he collapsed against the stone wall, black blood still leaking from his chest. Endu ran down towards him, with Jaas following a little more cautiously.

Arico caught sight of them, and his expression darkened from fatigue to anger, but only for a moment. “Before you say it,” Jaas explained quickly, “the rest of the patch is evacuated. We just had to make sure you were all right.”

Whatever reprimands he was about to give, he apparently thought better of them. Even now, Jaas could see him almost staggering from fatigue. “Keep an eye on her from a distance,” he ordered, pointing at Heartbane’s still form. “She might still be alive.” He winced and gripped at his own right leg, which was bleeding too. “Let me know if she so much as twitches, you hear?” He made his way back to the ruins, to where Sabra was now sitting with Endu tending to him.

Jaas did as instructed, hurriedly loading her matchlock and pointing it carefully at the woman’s midsection. Somehow, despite the speed and the sheer torque of her final spin through the air, her mask was still securely in place.

“Skull-faced bitch cheated!” Sabra bit out, wincing as Endu carefully explored the edges of his wound and reached into her medicinal bag. “Stupid hidden dagger. Get off!” He grumbled at Endu and rubbed at the side of his head. “Sabra just got his bell rung is all.”

Endu just gave him a patient look, and he sighed and let her continue. “Is skull-face… dead?” He asked, apparently a little calmer.

“I don’t know. She’s down; that’s what matters.” Arico’s relief came through in his voice, and he laid a hand on Sabra’s other shoulder. “How are you still alive? She’s killed dozens of people. She always aims for the heart, and never misses!”

Sabra shrugged. “Sabra always knew there was an upside to being heartless.” He roared in pain as Endu cleansed his wound with alcohol. “Shemra’s touch, woman! That hurts!”

“You’re not heartless, you big baby,” Endu said calmly. As if challenging him, she pulled a needle and thread from her bag. “Your heart’s just in a different place, that’s all. Jaas told me a bit about giant anatomy after you joined us. You’re not a full giant, but you’re close enough that she missed. You might just be the luckiest man in the whole city.”

“Funny. Luck still feels like searing pain to Sabra,” he said sarcastically, and grimaced as she got to work stitching his wound closed.

Apparently satisfied that Sabra would be all right, Arico turned back to the assassin. Despite her incredible violence she looked almost peaceful to Jaas, lying there on the grass like that. Hesitantly, Arico approached her. “Careful!” Jaas said without thinking. “She might wake up.”

Arico only nodded. “I don’t think so. I’m no healer, but I’m pretty sure I heard ribs break when she got hit.” All the same, he did show great caution as he lifted her wrist and measured her pulse. “She’s still alive, whoever she is.” He gently turned her over and untied the mask, slowly lifting it off.

With a gasp, Arico backed away from her as he stared down at her face. From his position in the nearby ruins, Sabra made a similar noise of disbelief. Curiously, Jaas took a look as well. It was certainly no one she knew. “Who is she?”

“It’s… Hazra Fisher!” Arico answered breathlessly.

“Fisher?” Jaas echoed. “As in *Lord Ascendant* Fisher?”

Everyone looked over at her unconscious form. Even Sabra still seemed taken aback with the notion. As stra’tchi, or people who lived with stra’tchi, they were all aware of dangerous women—Endu *was* a dangerous woman after all. The idea of such a dangerous combatant being a Sustained noblewoman though, much less the de facto princess of this city, was stunning.

Of course Sabra was also the first to break out of it. “Oh, now little man *has* to kill her. Lord Ass-End took from us, and now we take his daughter from him. Gah!” He grunted again as Endu returned to her work.

Ordinarily Jaas would have objected. To kill a defenseless woman seemed unconscionable. But she’d seen what this assassin had done, and if she got back to her father and reported what she’d seen, it might mean the end of the Pact between the Sustained and the dwarves. The fight had taken place in dwarven territory, though it was possible that this princess hadn’t known exactly where she was before being knocked unconscious.

Arico shook his head. “No. I won’t kill her. Endu, when you’re done with Sabra, do what you can for her as well. Once she’s stable, I’ll take her somewhere she’ll be safe until she wakes up.”

Sabra made another noise of disbelief, as did Endu. Despite whatever unknown problems it might end up causing though, Jaas was relieved. Deadly assassin or no, this seemed like the right thing to do. “But why do you care?” Jaas asked, genuinely curious. “Do you know her?”

“Only from a distance.” Arico let out a small sigh, and he looked back down at her with sorrow on his face.

“She’s my sister.”