



Chapter 5

I MADE my way to Cobbler's Fountain purposefully, walking down the Dredge until I was within a few alleys of the fountain, then veering off into the side streets and narrows. I was early—a full hour before dusk—but I wasn't here to meet with Erick.

I was here to stalk him.

I ducked into a narrow and crouched down, slipping from shadow to shadow, until I reached an alcove overlooking the circular fountain. Tucked into the alcove's depths, the wood planking of the door pressed into my back, I could see the statue of the woman holding the urn, her back toward me. Sunlight still touched the top of her head.

I glanced back down the alley, a nervous twinge in my stomach. It was early enough for people to be moving about, early enough someone might notice me. In the slums, no one would do anything but keep their distance. Here, closer to the real Amenkor . . .

There was no one in sight. I settled in to wait.

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The sunlight shifted. Overhead, the few clouds in the sky burned a deep orange, like fire. The light began to fade.

Someone entered the area surrounding the fountain, footsteps clicking on the cobbles. I tensed, heart thudding in my chest, but it wasn't Erick. The woman cut across the open area and entered another street, a wooden box clutched to her chest.

I sank back against the door, felt sweat prickle my forehead, between my shoulder blades.

"What am I doing here?" I murmured to myself, my voice barely more than a breath, nerves making me feel sick.

But I knew. I could still taste the betrayal of the night before, like ash in my mouth. Erick should have stood up to Bloodmark, should have threatened him, abandoned him. He should have done *something*.

My brow creased with anger. Instead, he'd walked away. I needed to know why.

Something moved near the fountain, a subtle shift of shadow. I scanned the area but saw nothing.

I was just about to use the river when Erick stepped from the darkness of a narrow.

Bitterness flooded my mouth. I reached for my dagger, but halted, my hand trembling. I tried to ignore it.

Erick moved to the fountain, stared up at the woman's bowed head. In the fading light, I could see his face clearly. His eyes were troubled, the skin around his mouth pinched with worry, with doubt. He searched the woman's features for a long moment, then turned away with a sigh, still troubled. He began pacing the cobbles, circling the fountain slowly, waiting.

For me. Or Bloodmark.

I sat back. The bitterness retreated slightly, still there but not as strong. A queasy uneasiness in my stomach had taken its place beside the anger. Erick's face had been too open, too exposed. My presence suddenly felt wrong, a betrayal of Erick's trust.

But I didn't move.

Dusk fell, deepened into night.

My legs had begun to cramp when Erick's pacing halted. He glanced once up into the night sky, the stars brittle, the moon high, then headed toward the Dredge, not trying to hide, his stride steady.

I waited, felt my heartbeat skip, then cursed my hesitation—cursed the bitterness, Bloodmark, the sense of wrongness—and followed.

I kept far enough back that Erick's figure was just a shadow, seen only in the moonlight that filtered down into the alleys. He moved straight toward the Dredge, but turned before reaching it, paralleling it using the side streets and narrows, heading farther from the slums, toward the bridge where the Dredge crossed over the River into the city proper. The texture of the buildings changed. Crumbling mud-brick no longer littered the alleys, cobbles lay mostly whole underfoot. Candlelight appeared in a few windows, glowing behind chinks in the wood used to cover the openings.

My uneasiness grew. We were moving outside of the slums. The alleys and narrows—the buildings themselves—no longer felt familiar.

Erick only stopped once, half-turned as I slid into hiding behind the remains of a shattered barrel. Breath held tight, I waited—for him to turn back, to pick me out of the shadows and frown down at me in deep disappointment.

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My stomach twisted in anticipation. . . .

But after a moment he continued.

A few streets later, he turned. When I edged up to the end of the narrow, glanced around the corner, I could see the arch of the bridge, could see moonlight reflected on the River, could hear the slap of water against the stone channel.

And on the far bank, Amenkor . . . the real Amenkor.

I stared at the buildings, noted with a strange disappointment that they seemed no different than the buildings surrounding me now. But different than those in the slums. These buildings were not half collapsed, stone sagging in on itself under decades of disuse. These buildings had edges and corners.

"Who goes there!"

I tensed, shrank back farther into the shadows, but the rough voice had called out to Erick.

"It's me, you bloody bastard," Erick growled, humor in his voice.

Two guards stood watch at the end of the bridge, pikes held ready. One of them shifted, pulled the pike back into a guard position with a grunt. "It's Erick," he said to the second guard, "the Seeker."

The second guard relaxed, fell back slightly as Erick approached. He appeared younger than the first. Both wore gold-stitched thrones on their shirts and were more heavily armored than any guardsmen I'd seen in the slums.

"Gave me quite a start sneaking out of the shadows like that," the first guardsman grumbled as Erick halted beside him. "You shouldn't scare us regulars."

Erick frowned. "I didn't realize there'd be guardsmen here."

The man grunted. "Captain Baill's orders, straight from the Mistress. 'All entrances to the city proper are to be guarded at all times.' The captain's set patrols throughout the city as well, and increased the night watch near the palace."

"What for?" Erick asked. "What are we guarding against?"

The guardsman shrugged. "Don't know. I don't think Baill knows either, but if the orders came from the Mistress. . . ."

Erick shifted uncomfortably, cast a glance across the river, toward the palace.

"If you ask me," the second guardsman said, "the Mistress has lost it."

"We didn't ask you, did we?" the first guardsman barked. "Now stand up! Hold that pike like you mean to use it, not like some slack-jawed lackwit!"

The second guardsman glared, but straightened, back as rigid as stone, and turned his attention toward the street. The first guardsman grunted, shot a glance toward Erick.

There was fear in his eyes. Hidden behind a thick layer of loyalty, but fear nonetheless.

It sent a shiver through my skin. The Mistress ruled the city. . . . No. The Mistress *was* the city. If something happened to her, it would affect everyone.

Even us gutterscum in the slums.

"Are you headed back to the palace to report?" the first guardsman asked.

Erick nodded, his attention still on the other guardsman, his face creased in thought. "Yes. But I'll be back tomorrow."

"Good hunting?"

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All emotion left Erick's face. He turned and caught the first guardsman's eye.

The guardsman stepped back sharply, gaze falling to the stone cobbles of the road. "Forget I asked," he mumbled, voice thin, thready.

Erick didn't answer, simply stepped around him and crossed the bridge.

The guard waited a moment, then turned to the other guardsman and scowled.

Back pressed against the stone of the narrow, I hesitated. I could follow Erick farther if I wanted. The two guardsmen would be easy to distract, and they were watching the street, not the water. . . .

But I was already too far beyond the slums. If I entered the real Amenkor, I'd be stepping onto totally unfamiliar ground.

I wasn't ready to do that.

I hesitated a moment more, then slid back down the narrow, back into the darkness, wrapping it around me like a cloak.

I still didn't have any answers, but I'd seen and heard enough. For now.

†

I was moving through the depths of the Dredge, moving toward the white-dusty man's door, when I ran across the body. The man had been thrown into a corner of the narrow, where it turned and cut left. His head rested on one shoulder, rolled slightly forward. His hands lay in his lap, his legs stretched out before him, one knee bent outward. He was barefoot, breeches coated with mud, and his muscled chest was bare and streaked with blood. He'd been stabbed four

times. Twice in the chest, once in the side, low, and once in the gut.

I halted as soon as I saw him, scanned the narrow in both directions. It was littered with refuse, with broken stone. A rat skittered along the base of the wall, then vanished through a crevice in the mud-brick. But otherwise I was alone.

Stepping close, I knelt, reached forward to push the man's face into view. But I already knew what I'd find, had known the moment I'd seen the body.

It was the mercenary, Bloodmark's and my current mark. Blue eyes, brown hair, sun-weathered skin shaved smooth except for a narrow band of beard on each side of his face, stretching from his ears to the base of his jaw. He reeked of ale, his dried sweat sick with its stench. A trail of vomit touched the corner of his mouth. A pool of vomit had congealed near his side.

Carved into his forehead was the Skewed Throne. Brutal and deep.

Bloodmark.

I lowered the mercenary's head slowly and sat back on my heels. The hot anger had flushed my skin again, but now it felt worn and used. I thought about telling Erick. But Bloodmark always killed the marks now, *our* marks. At least, if he got to them first. And Erick did nothing, said nothing.

Not after Tomas.

The thought sent a pulse of bitterness through the flush of anger, hotter and heavier, aimed at Erick.

I stood, staring down at the mercenary. He was only a shadow in the moonlight now. The sun had set.

I turned away, heading again toward the Dredge. I was hungry.

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I crouched down at the entrance to the alley across from the white-dusty man's door and immediately noticed the tuft of cloth peeking out from the stone where the white-dusty man hid the bundles of food. A prickling sensation, like gooseflesh, swept through me and I smiled, my stomach growling. I'd left the linen beneath the stone a few days before, but there'd been no response. I'd thought that perhaps the desperation that haunted everyone's eyes on the Dredge now had finally forced the white-dusty man away, that he'd left, that he'd forgotten me. The thought had hurt. But the white-dusty man hadn't gone, hadn't forgotten.

I almost stepped out onto the Dredge, heading for the bundle without thought, my stomach clenching with hunger. But at the last moment, weight already shifted forward, I remembered Bloodmark, felt his breath against my neck from weeks before.

What are we watching?

I shuddered, pulled back and scanned the nearest alleys, the darknesses.

Nothing.

I hesitated at the world of gray and red and wind, then pushed deeper.

I saw nothing, felt nothing, smelled nothing, until I'd pushed myself as deep as I'd ever gone before. There, the ice-rimmed hand began to press against my chest, so faintly it barely touched my skin, as if the hand were hovering a hairbreadth above my breastbone.

I sensed that I could go deeper, but the grayness had solidified so I could see into the shadows, could see oil

light flickering a lighter gray in the cracks around the white-dusty man's door and window—oil light I had not seen from the alley. And the ice of the hand seemed distant, removed.

I drew back until only moonlight lit the Dredge, the tuft of cloth.

The hand against my chest faded.

I hesitated a moment more, then scurried across the Dredge, keeping low, keeping to the shadows. I crouched in the thin recess of the white-dusty man's door, removed the loose stone, then dragged out and opened the bundle.

Inside, there was a small loaf of bread and a chunk of cheese the size of my fist.

I smiled, realized I'd been more worried than I'd thought. And hungrier.

I sniffed back the worry, and grabbed the loaf of bread. I was just about to bite into it when the door opened.

Oil light flooded out onto the Dredge. With it came a wash of dense heat—

And the heady, overpowering scent of flour, of yeast and dough.

The scent struck me like a fist and suddenly I was nine again. Nine and cowering in the shadows of an alley, watching a man and woman approach each other, both lost, their eyes vague, in their own gray worlds. The woman had straight black hair, brown eyes like the mud of the buildings after a rain, and a bundle tied too loosely and held too far from her body. The man wore a rough homespun shirt, sleeves rolled to his forearms, old breeches, no shoes. His clothes were coated with white dust . . . with flour. His hands and face were immaculately clean.

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They collided, and in the brief moment they were distracted, I stole two of the rolls that fell from the woman's bundle.

I thought I'd escaped as I retreated to a narrow across the Dredge. I thought I hadn't been seen. But when I turned to watch . . .

The man was leaning over the woman in concern. After a moment of wariness, she allowed him to help her to her feet. When she reached for her bundle, the man knelt and began gathering the fallen rolls. The woman joined him.

Then the man frowned, brow creasing. He scanned the ground, searching, as the woman slid the last roll into the bundle and cinched it closed.

He turned toward my darkness and stared straight at me.

I don't know what he saw. A girl pressed flat against the wall, mud-streaked, clutching two rolls to her chest. That at least. But he must have seen something more, something else, for the frown softened, relaxed. He settled back onto the balls of his feet, hands dangling between his knees.

What is it? the woman asked.

The man held my gaze a moment more, until the woman began to look in my direction with her own frown.

Nothing, he said, and stood.

And before the woman with the straight black hair and the soft brown eyes turned completely toward me, he touched her arm, distracted her.

I fled. I ran deep, farther than I'd originally intended. Because of the man with the white-dusty clothing. Because of the way his eyes had softened. Be-

cause he'd relaxed onto the balls of his feet and dangled his hands, instead of leaping forward to snag my arm, to halt me.

I ate the bread. I cried when I did, and couldn't understand why, but I ate the bread.

I'd followed him the next day, and the next. And eventually he'd begun to leave the bread beneath the stone outside his door when I returned the linen the bread had been wrapped in.

A shadow stepped into the light spilling from the white-dusty man's door. I glanced up. Up into the white-dusty man's eyes—older now, shaded with pain, with weariness. Gray streaked his hair, and wrinkles etched the corners of his eyes and mouth, etched his brow.

But I saw none of that.

Instead, I saw his eyes as they'd been on the Dredge that day, saw them soften as he stared at a girl pressed flat against the mud-brick wall of an alley.

Tears bit at the corners of my eyes. Tears of shame, of need, of hunger. But not hunger for bread or cheese. For something more.

In the depths of the white-dusty man's house, I heard movement. Then the black-haired woman stepped into view.

She held a long wooden paddle before her, charred and streaked with soot. A heap of dough rested on the long end of the paddle, ready to be placed into an oven.

"What is it?" she asked.

I stilled, as I had on the Dredge so long ago. I stilled and caught the white-dusty man's eyes.

He held my gaze a long moment, then smiled.

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“Nothing,” he said.

Something—a pain, an ache—surged up from deep in my chest and forced itself out in a hitching sob. I tried to hold it in, but it was too much, too large. Tears coursed down my face, and I closed my eyes, the sobs coming hard and deep. Not loud sobs. Wet, throaty sobs that forced deep breaths through my nose, my mouth closed tight, trying to hold it all back, to keep it all in.

The white-dusty man simply waited, not moving.

The ache—the pain—released, like the tension in the bundle when the blade finally cuts through the cloth. It released and the sobs quieted. My breath came smoother, deeper.

Someone touched my face, a gentle touch, and I glanced up into the white-dusty man’s eyes again. And this time I saw the gray in his hair, the lines on his face, the age.

His fingers traced down from my forehead to my chin. He tilted my head upward, stared deep into my eyes.

I felt myself trembling, still weak and fluid from the tears. The skin on my face felt tight, my eyes sore.

“You’ve grown,” he said.

Fresh tears burned at the corners of my eyes. It was too much.

And so I pulled away, his fingers sliding down the length of my chin. I stood, back straight, no longer the nine-year-old girl cowering in an alley, no longer a child.

I glanced down at the bread, at the cheese still bundled in the cloth. Then I looked the white-dusty man—the baker—in the eye. I held up the bread a moment, and said in a tight, strained voice, “Thank you.”

The baker smiled and nodded, the wrinkles around

his mouth and eyes more pronounced. "You're welcome."

I hesitated, felt the wash of heat and the smell of baking bread against my face, then turned and walked away.

I headed back to my niche. I squeezed through the opening, felt the mud-brick scrape my back, my hips, as it always did now. I sat, drew my knees up tight to my chest, the baker's bundle set aside, and dropped my head.

I did not cry. Instead, after a long moment of silence, I simply sighed, raised my head, and reached for the bread.

†

Erick found me in my niche a few days later.

"Varis?"

I hesitated. I didn't want to speak to him, didn't want to see him.

But I still needed him.

"I have another mark for you and Bloodmark."

My eyes narrowed. He knew about the mercenary.

I moved to the edge of the niche, crawled out into the sunlight, then stood.

Erick stood on the far side of the narrow, back against the wall, arms crossed on his chest. He watched me carefully.

"I've searched for you on the Dredge," he said. When I didn't answer, he added, "Bloodmark hasn't seen you there either."

At Bloodmark's name, I tensed. "I haven't been to the Dredge." I couldn't keep the anger from my voice.

Erick hesitated, asked carefully, "Why not?"

I caught Erick's gaze. "Does it matter?"

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Erick stiffened, and his eyes hardened. His hands dropped to his sides. "No. It doesn't matter to me at all."

I flinched inside.

"I have a new mark—two, actually," Erick said shortly, angry now, too. "A man and a woman, Rec Terrell and Mari Locke. The man is thick-shouldered, husky, bald. He had a pierced ear, but the stud he wore was torn out on the left side. All that's left is a mangled lobe. The woman, Mari, has short black hair, a rounded face, broad hips. There's a scar on her forearm, almost healed, very faint. Someone sliced her up. The Mistress wants them both."

Erick turned, began walking away.

"Wait."

Erick paused but did not look back.

I bit my lower lip, thought of the white-dusty man, thought of telling Erick about him. But then I thought of Bloodmark, of the mercenary, of Erick saying nothing, doing nothing, and the anger returned.

Instead, I asked, "Why?"

Erick turned, enough so I could see the confusion in his eyes. "What do you mean?"

I didn't know. Why are you still using Bloodmark? Why did you walk away the night I killed Tomas? Why did you let Bloodmark win?

"Why do you do this? Why are you a Seeker?"

His forehead creased as he frowned. "It's . . . what I know how to do, what I was trained to do. It's what I've always done."

He hesitated, as if uncertain he'd answered my question, or uncertain of his own answer. Then he turned and left.

I should have asked him something else.



I never would have spotted Mari if she hadn't reached for the cabbage.

I was standing near the wagon, the ebb and flow of the Dredge washing unnoticed around me. I'd come out of habit, having nowhere else to go. I didn't need food. I had enough in my niche for a few days. And I wasn't looking for Rec or Mari. Let Bloodmark have them. Erick didn't seem to mind.

And so, when a woman reached for the cabbage and I saw the faint scar tracing down the length of her forearm, it didn't register. Not at first.

I glanced up at her. Rounded face. Short black hair. Brown eyes. A lighter brown than I'd seen on the Dredge before, streaked with yellow.

She met my gaze, smiled tightly, nodded, then turned.

I nodded back, belatedly. I thought, vaguely, that she reminded me of someone. Of the woman the man had strangled, the one with the basket of potatoes?

I frowned.

Then it struck. Mari. My mark.

I jerked away from the wall, glanced sharply in the direction Mari had moved. The world slid to gray and wind and red, and I began searching the washes of red to find her.

She wasn't there.

I frowned, let the world return to normal. I stared down the Dredge—

And saw her. She'd halted before another wagon, this one loaded with carrots. She was talking to the wagon's owner, a bunch of carrots gripped in one hand.

My frown deepened. Keeping her in sight, I slid be-

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neath the river again, slowly. Everything slid to gray except Mari.

I let my focus on Mari relax . . . and she slid to gray as well.

I bit my lower lip.

All of my marks had been red before, dangerous and deadly. Some had had smells, but all had been red in the end.

Mari was gray, and smelled of nothing but sweat and the Dredge.

She finished with the carrot monger and began moving away.

I hesitated, chewed on my lower lip a moment more, then followed.

The depths beyond the Dredge began to shift, as they'd done when I'd followed the hawk-faced man. Except now, five years after the Fire, the decay had crept closer to the Dredge itself, like a blight on the city and its streets. Mud-brick slipped to crumbling granite. Streets narrowed to alleys, then narrows, shortened and filled with heaps of decaying filth. Mildew thickened to slime, streams to sludge. The reek of the Dredge deepened, stank of piss and shit and rot. The light darkened, as if the depths of the Dredge were sucking it away, swallowing it as it swallowed everything that lingered too long, that hesitated. Soon, everything north of the River would be subsumed. I could see it happening, could feel the blight of the city on my skin.

Mari began to slow, and the sun began to set, the gray of dusk seeping between the stone. I fell back, crouched behind mounds of filth, behind heaps of fallen stone.

Then Mari turned into an empty doorway.

I glanced up at the sky. The light was fading swiftly, darkness descending like cloth, smothering and complete. In moments, the depths swallowed the last of the sunlight and stars pricked the sky.

I moved forward, edged up to the doorway where Mari had vanished. I stared into the blackness, focused.

An empty room, small, with three doors opening onto their own darknesses.

I stepped inside. Dust covered the floor, disturbed by tracks leading toward the central door straight ahead. Beneath the dust, a mosaic of colored clay tiles could be seen, most cracked, a few missing altogether.

I moved to the central doorway, noticed the flicker of firelight off to one side, through another doorway.

I halted at the edge of the second door.

Mari stood near the fire in the center of the room, the cabbage and carrots laid out on the floor beside her. She shifted a pot over the flames, face already sweating from the heat, then squatted down and began chopping the carrots.

Someone grunted.

Mari froze, the knife in her hand trembling. Her eyes were wide in the firelight.

In the corner, a heap of blankets moved, were thrown aside. A man propped himself onto one elbow. His ear was mangled, like a piece of gristle someone had chewed on and spat out.

His gaze wandered, bleary with sleep, then settled on Mari.

He stilled, grew suddenly focused. The bluriness faded, hardened into something terrible, something cruel.

“Where have you been?”

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I drew back from the doorway, sweat prickling the back of my neck. His voice was dark—soft and fluid and dark.

Like Bloodmark's voice.

I no longer wanted to be here.

I heard a rustle of movement, then drew in a deep breath to steady myself and glanced back through the door.

Mari had turned back to the carrots. But her knife was no longer steady as she cut. "The Dredge," she said. Her voice shook.

Rec shifted, stood.

"And what were you doing on the Dredge?"

She didn't answer.

He moved behind her. His hands fell onto her shoulders and she drew in a sharp breath, her shoulders tightening, her body going rigid. She held the knife before her, pointed down, the blade halfway through a slicing of the carrot.

But the carrot was forgotten. Her eyes were locked straight ahead, strangely terrified and blank at the same time. Her lips were pressed tight together, trembling.

Rec leaned forward, one hand moving to her neck, to her shortened hair. His fingers closed into a fist in the tresses, pulled back sharply.

Mari gasped, sobbed, her chest heaving. Tears formed at the corners of her eyes.

"What were you doing on the Dredge?" Rec whispered into her ear.

Mari choked on her own words, her head pulled back, her neck exposed. "Food." Rec jerked her hair hard. "I got us food!"

Rec leaned back, but didn't release her hair. He

knelt. His free hand shifted from her shoulder, reached down the length of her arm for the knife.

Her body jerked. "No," she gasped. So low I could barely hear it. "No. You said *never again*," she sobbed, eyes closing. "Never again." Tears coursed down her face.

"Shhh," Rec said. His hand closed about hers.

"No," she breathed, shaking her head.

"Shhh. Give me the knife."

I gripped the dagger in my hand hard, hunched forward, my free hand holding the edge of the doorway. But Rec was too far away, was faced toward me.

He'd see me the moment I moved into the light.

I clenched my jaw as the muscles in Mari's arm—muscles so tensed they seemed like cords beneath her skin—relaxed.

The knife began to slip, but Rec caught it.

Mari let out a sob—of pain, of despair, of weakness—and her arms dropped to her sides.

Rec drew the knife up to her face, let the blade touch the skin of her cheek.

Mari drew in another hitching sob, but her arms stayed lax at her sides. All of the tension had left her body. She lay slumped, head back, neck exposed, supported by Rec's body.

"Next time," Rec began, then casually stroked the knife down Mari's cheek, drawing a thin line of blood, "tell me where you're going before you leave."

Mari sucked in breath through her teeth as the knife cut.

Rec stood, let her hair free with a sudden shove forward. He dropped the knife to the ground beside her, the blade clattering on the stone floor. "What's for dinner?" he asked as he moved away.

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Mari stayed hunched over, her shoulders shuddering, her face hidden.

After a long moment, her shoulders stilled. She sat back up, cheeks wet with tears but drying, and reached for the knife. She cleaned it, her eyes vacant and empty, drawn inward, the muscles of her face set. "Stew," she said.

Her voice had changed, had hardened.

Rec grunted. "Best get at it, then," he added, crawling beneath the blankets again. "Wake me when it's done."

My grip on my blade tightened, relaxed, then tightened again. But I shifted back away from the doorway.

I couldn't take them both.

And Mari was gray.

I sat back on my heels a long moment.

I needed Erick. Needed to *talk* to Erick.

I glanced into the room once more before heading toward Cobbler's Fountain. Rec was still wrapped in the blankets in the far corner. Mari knelt near the fire, staring down at the knife, blood and sweat dripping from her jaw.

†

Erick was not there.

I glanced at the night sky, at the stars. It was past dusk. I'd moved fast, but apparently not fast enough. Erick had already gone.

I sat back against the alley wall, stared out at the fountain.

The woman with the broken-off arm stared down at me, one arm still clutching the urn. I stared at her face as Erick had done weeks before, looked into its time-worn features.

I heard water, heard laughter, felt the warmth of sunlight against my face.

At the mouth of the alley, I stood, began slowly moving forward. Until I stood at the edge of the empty pool, looking down at its cracked bottom.

Except the pool was no longer empty. Not in my memory. It was full. Sunlight on water glared into my eyes and I blinked, felt warm hands catch me up under my armpits, lift me high and naked over the pool's edge. Cool water shocked through my feet, up through my legs, as I was dipped into the fountain. I screamed. A childish scream of delight. A six-year-old's scream. I kicked before my feet touched bottom, splashed water into my mother's face.

She had soft features, blurred somehow with the sunlight off the water, with the haze of memory. But I could see her eyes. Dark eyes, brown, almost black, with tiny flecks of green. They reminded me of the strangled woman's eyes, the one with the potatoes.

She jerked back from the spray, laughed with a slightly scolding tone, then set me firmly on my feet on the pool's stone bottom and released me.

I immediately knelt and began splashing with my hands, shrieking as she splashed back. I slogged away, stumbled on the uneven bottom, fell—

And submerged beneath the water. It closed over my head, enveloped me, cool and fluid, filling up my ears, my nose. The noises of the fountain's circle, of people talking, of children shrieking, of my mother's laughter, dropped away to a dull roar, like wind. The bright glare of the sunlight grayed. I'd clamped my mouth shut instinctively, but I'd kept my eyes wide.

The whole world grayed, grew muted.

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Something inside me slipped. In the terror of the moment—a child's terror, riddled with exhilaration as well as fear—something deep inside . . . tore.

And something was released, surged forward. . . .

And then my mother's hands grabbed me, lifted me free of the water. I spluttered, felt water draining from my ears, from my nose. I blew out a rushed breath, water sheeting down my face, my hair plastered to my scalp, to my neck. I gasped in a breath too quickly, coughed hoarsely.

My mother pounded my back. *Are you all right? Breathe, baby, breathe. Come on. Breathe.*

Her voice sounded muted, unnaturally calm, yet edged with suppressed hysteria.

I gasped again, drew in another breath, then another. The spasms in my chest eased.

My mother lifted me from the pool, tucked me to her side so that my head rested against her shoulder, so I could see behind her.

The world was still gray, the sounds of the fountain still muted, as if I were still underwater, submerged.

Come on, my mother said. The edge of hysteria had left her voice, but now it sounded exhausted. You've had enough fun for today. Time to head home.

I clutched at her shoulder as she began moving away, trembling slightly, face pressed tight against her shoulder. But something in the gray of the world caught my eye, held my attention.

I lifted my head, and into her shoulder murmured, *Look, Mommy. Look at the red men.*

At the edge of the empty fountain, someone grabbed my shoulder and I spun with a snarl, the harshness of the sunlight, of the water, of the gray and

wind and red men, jerking back to darkness and stars and damp, night air.

"It's me!" Erick barked, stepping back out of my dagger's range swiftly, one hand held out before him to stop me.

I halted, breathing hard, heart thudding. Then I blinked.

I'd dragged the grayness of the memory back with me. And beneath the river, Erick was a swirl of gray and red mixed together.

The sight was shocking. I'd never seen someone with mixed colors before, didn't know what it meant.

"I thought you heard me coming up behind you," he said, relaxing his stance. His hand dropped to his side.

Our eyes met, and something he saw in mine made him take another step back. "No," I said, then drew in a deep breath and pulled myself together. "No, I didn't hear you."

He hesitated at the anger in my voice, at its harshness. After a long considered moment, he said, "So you've found them."

"Yes."

He nodded. "Take me to them."

He turned, began heading toward the depths.

I straightened. "No."

Erick halted.

When he turned back, his eyes had gone blank, expressionless. "What do you mean?"

I narrowed my eyes, shifted uncertainly. "Not until we talk."

A flicker of surprise crossed his face. But then it blanked again. "Why now?"

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"Because things have changed," I said without thought, and then realized what I'd said was true. Not because of the sense of betrayal that still burned inside me; and not because of the mixed gray and red of the river.

I drew in a steadying breath. "I'm not the girl you found vomiting over the dead body of that man."

Erick smiled tightly. Then the smile faded and shifted, and he seemed to really look at me, to see me standing there at the edge of Cobbler's Fountain in clothes he had given me—still worn, still tattered here and there, but not rags. I no longer crouched, no longer flinched away when someone reached toward me, no longer stayed in the alleys and narrows as much as possible when hunting. My head reached up to his shoulders, not his chest. And I walked the middle of the alleys and narrows now, walked the middle of the Dredge.

"No," he said, "you're not that little girl anymore."

We stared at each other a long moment, and somehow in the silence the heat of my anger faded away.

"So," Erick said, turning fully toward me, "what do you want to talk about?"

"The Mistress."

Erick frowned. "What about her?"

"You said that she picks the marks, that you only find them and kill them. That's what you do, what you were trained to do."

Erick's frown deepened. "Yes."

"You never ask yourself what the marks have done? Why the Mistress wants them dead?"

"No. I told you before. I don't need to know. The Mistress wants them dead, that's all that matters."

“What if she’s wrong?”

Erick shook his head. The frown was gone. “She can’t be wrong. She sits on the Skewed Throne.”

“But—”

“No,” Erick said with force. But there was strain in his eyes, doubt. “She can’t be wrong. Saying she’s wrong is the same as saying the Skewed Throne is wrong. They’re the same. If she’s wrong, then—”

But he halted, a flash of fear crossing his face—a fear that he quickly suppressed. A fear I didn’t think was new, just as the doubt wasn’t new. I’d seen both before, in his eyes after he’d backed down from Bloodmark, and again at the bridge leading to Amenkor.

“No,” he said again. “The Mistress is never wrong. The marks deserve to die.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” Erick said impatiently, not looking at me. “I don’t think about it beyond that. I believe in the Mistress. I have faith in the Skewed Throne. There’s a reason the marks need to die, one that only she needs to know. I don’t. I’m not that important.”

The doubt I’d seen in his eyes a moment before had crept into his voice. And I heard the lie. He did think about it, had been thinking about it, at least recently.

His faith in the Mistress, in the Skewed Throne, was wavering.

I hesitated, then said quietly, “Mari isn’t a mark.”

He looked at me sharply. “Why not? How do you know?”

I almost said, *She’s gray*, but caught myself. “I’ve watched her.” I saw Rec drawing the knife down her cheek, saw her eyes, the defeated slump of her body, her lax arms.

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Erick's eyes narrowed. "The Mistress . . ." he began, but trailed off. He stared at me hard, considering, then drew himself straight. "Show me."

†

We didn't speak on the way into the depths. I led, moving fast, not hiding, not lurking, moving with purpose. Erick followed behind me, hissing once for me to slow. But after that he seemed to catch my urgency, sped up, enough that I could feel him at my back, so close he could reach out and touch me, push me.

But I felt as if I were already being pushed. I'd felt it as soon as we'd left Cobbler's Fountain. A pressure against my back, tightening my shoulders, prickling the skin.

So I moved faster. Until the night air burned in my lungs, harsh and loud and cold. As cold as it had been the night of the White Fire. Sharp and piercing. I heard Erick breathing hard behind me, heard him gasping at the pace.

But the pressure didn't relax.

Instead, it grew.

We were close—so close—when I felt the ice-rimmed hand press hard into my chest and heard the first scream. A woman's scream. High-pitched, desperate, and filled with shuddering, as if she were struggling, as if she were fighting.

I stopped cold, Erick staggering to a halt behind me, one hand on my shoulder to steady himself.

It felt eerily real against the icy pressure of the hand on my chest.

"Gods," he gasped, dragging in a deep breath. "Where is it coming from?"

I didn't answer. I knew.

I bolted forward, barely aware that Erick stayed right behind me. The scream filled the air, escalated, then dropped in pitch, fading, although still strong, still desperate. It was falling down into sobs, struggling down, trying not to give up hope.

I was at the doorway, colored tiles beneath my feet.

I was at the inner room.

I halted at the door, caught myself at its edge. Rec's body lay half off the blood-soaked bed, his torso twisted, one hand stretched out before him, reaching. The spilled contents of the stewpot created a glistening sheet of wetness in the center of the room. Two figures struggled on the far side of the fire—Bloodmark and Mari. I saw all of it in a heartbeat.

But Erick moved faster.

Bloodmark had hold of Mari's wrists, one in each hand, one grip loose and cumbersome because he still held his dagger. Mari struggled, but there was already blood on her chest, seeping from a deep gash in her side, and another higher up, near her neck, above her breast. Her arms had grown weak, and she was sobbing, her head shaking back and forth.

Bloodmark snarled, let go of the Mari's wrist with the hand that held his dagger, and plunged the blade twice more into Mari's chest. Deep strokes. Penetrating strokes. Each followed by a visceral grunt. Spitte flew from his mouth, his teeth clenched.

And then Erick hit him, body to body. Hit him so hard they flew across Mari, struck the granite floor and rolled. Bloodmark's eyes opened wide in terror. His arm flailed, scored Erick hard along his back with the dagger. Erick hissed, lurched back, away, and

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Bloodmark jerked into a crouch, coming around fast, like an adder.

All of us froze. Erick on the floor, on his side, ready to move, his glare focused on Bloodmark. Bloodmark in a crouch three paces away, breathing hard, dark eyes fixed on Erick. The terror in his face was gone.

Mari gasped, a sickeningly wet gasp. Her arms had fallen to her sides.

As I watched, she tried to roll over, pushing herself weakly up onto her side so that she faced me, her back to Erick and Bloodmark. Her eyes met mine and she sobbed, the sound shuddering in her chest.

She hunched forward, drew her hand up close to her face. It dragged on the floor, trailed through blood, flopped weakly beside her mouth.

She paused, gathered herself with a single breath—
And tried to lift herself up.

I watched her eyes close with the effort, watched the muscles strain, her arm tight, her chest tight, her teeth clenched. I watched sweat break out on her face, watched her eyes squeeze tighter, her neck muscles taut. Her shoulder lifted an inch. Her arm began to tremble. . . .

And then she collapsed, breath expelled in a ragged, hopeless sob. She cried into the floor, shaking, mouth flecked with spit and blood.

She drew in another breath and opened her eyes. She stared straight at me, seemed to be gathering herself for another try, her eyes intent, her palm flat against the stone before her.

And then she died.