



Chapter 2

I WOKE in my niche deep in the slums beyond the Dredge to vivid sunlight outside, my chest bruised a livid purple-black. I moaned as I rolled into a sitting position, lifted up my ragged shirt, and examined the bruising. Every breath drew a wince, every motion a twinge, yet I prodded the edges of the bruise anyway.

I sat and stared at the basket of potatoes and thought about the round face of the woman the man had killed. The pang of regret returned, but I shoved it aside in annoyance and focused on the guardsman, on the offer to help him.

I frowned and pulled out my dagger, stared at the band of sunlight caught on the flat of its blade.

I didn't need the guardsman. I'd survived without him since I was nine. I'd survived without anyone since Dove and his gutterscum thugs went after that woman and I refused to follow.

I frowned. I hadn't thought of Dove since that night, tried not to feel the ghost of the throbbing bruise on

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my cheek where he'd punched me after I'd told him I wouldn't help him catch the woman. I'd known he wasn't going to simply rob her. He meant to kill her. I'd seen it in his eyes.

I scowled. I'd decided then that Dove had served his purpose. He'd taught me enough so that I could survive on my own.

I hadn't needed anyone else then and I didn't need anyone else now.

I hesitated. Except, of course, the white-dusty man. I needed him, relied on him occasionally. But that was different.

So I rose with a grimace of pain and crawled out into the sunlight through my niche's narrow opening, the guardsman and his offer pushed aside. The potatoes wouldn't last forever. I needed to hunt.

The Dredge is the only real street in the slums of Amenkor, running straight from its depths, across the River, and into the real city on the other side of the harbor. The Dredge is where those from the city proper mingled with those that lived beyond the Dredge, those that lived deeper, like me—the gutterscum. At fourteen, the Dredge was the edge of my world. I'd never stepped beyond it, never walked down its broken cobbles, past its taverns and shops, across the bridge over the River and into the city of Amenkor itself. The Dredge on this side of the River *was* Amenkor for me. I preyed upon its people, on the crowds of men and women who had somehow fallen on hard times and had been forced to abandon the real city and retreat across the harbor.

And the Seeker had been right. Since the passage of the Fire three years before, the number of people in the

slums had increased. Not just people from the city proper either, but others as well, people not from Amenkor at all. People who wore strange clothing, who had different-colored hair or eyes, who carried strange weapons and spoke in accents . . . or didn't speak the common language at all.

But those people were rare.

I peered out from the darkness of the slums now, huddled low, mud-brick pressed into my back. On the street, men and women moved back and forth. I watched each of them as they arrived, caught their faces, scanned their clothing. That man wore tattered rags but carried a dagger at his belt. Yet there was no danger in his eyes. Hard, but not cruel. He carried nothing else, and so he faded from my mind, nothing but a darker blur against the dull gray of the world. Unconsciously, I kept track of him—of all the people—but he'd ceased to be interesting. Not a target; not a threat. Gray.

A flash of fine clothing and my eyes shifted. Not truly fine clothing—frayed edging, a tear down one side of the gray shirt, breeches stained, oily—but better than most. He wore boots, one sole loose at the heel, the nails visible when he walked. He also carried a dagger, hidden, his hand resting over the bulge of its sheath at his side. He walked quickly, tense, and his eyes . . .

But he turned before I could catch his eyes, his torn shirt and loose sole vanishing through a doorway.

He faded.

Gray.

I settled into position next to the wall, wincing once over the bruise on my chest, and let the flow of the

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street wash around me. When the pain had receded, I focused on the street, squinted in concentration, and felt a familiar sensation deep inside.

With a subtle, internal movement, like relaxing a muscle, the sensation rushed forward.

The world collapsed, slowed, blurred. Buildings and people faded, grayed. Those men and women I'd determined to be possible threats slid into washes of red against the background gray, like smears of blood, moving through the flow of the street. Occasionally, I'd concentrate on one person and they'd emerge from the gray, sharp and clear, so I could watch them, consider them. Casual glances would draw others out of the gray, their actions entering the field momentarily, and then I'd lose interest, determine they carried nothing I could eat, nothing I wanted, and the people would return to gray.

The sound of the street blurred as well, voices and footfalls and rustling clothes all merging into a single sound like a gentle wind rustling in my ears. Threatening noises slid out of the sound, catching my attention, until I'd made certain there was no danger. Then they faded back into the wind.

I submerged myself in the world of gray and red and wind with a sigh, a world that had helped me survive all these years alone, and searched for my next mark.

An hour before dusk, I leaned back against the alley wall, an apple in one hand. The woman hadn't even noticed the apple was missing. She'd set it down on the edge of the cart to pick up the sack she'd dropped. All I had to do was reach out and take it. It wasn't much, not after an entire day's work. But the pain in

my chest had kept me from trying for anything more difficult, and I still had the potatoes back at my niche.

I'd just turned away, ready to return to my niche, when I thought I saw the guardsman.

It was a subtle movement, thirty paces farther down the Dredge. As if he had pushed himself away from where he was leaning against the corner of a building, turned, and rounded the corner. All I saw for certain was the vague shape of a man's back vanishing behind the mud-brick, into the darkness of the narrow.

A casual movement, but one that sent a prickle down the backs of my arms.

I hesitated, watched the narrow farther down the Dredge. When no one reappeared around the corner, I finally turned and moved back into the warren beyond the street, letting the world of gray and red and wind slip away, shrugging thoughts of the guardsman aside.

But something had changed.

As I made my way back toward my niche, I stared down at the apple and frowned. It was a good apple. Hardly any scabs, mostly ripe, a small gouge in one side that had browned and begun to spoil, but still a good apple. I should be running back to my niche in triumph, should be huddled against its back wall, body crouched protectively around the apple as I devoured it.

But I didn't feel any triumph. I didn't feel anything at all. My stomach was strangely hollow. Not with hunger either. With just . . . nothing.

I slowed to a halt in the middle of a dark narrow. It was still light out—sun glowed bright ahead—but here there was only a dense darkness, like a smothering cloth. I halted in the darkness and simply stared at the apple. An entire day's work.

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The hollowness had started after I'd killed the man, after I'd spoken to the guardsman.

No. The hollowness had always been there. I'd always just ignored it.

But now . . .

I was still staring at the apple when someone said, "Give it to me."

The voice was harsh with violence, a dry, rumbling croak, but I didn't jump. I squinted into the darkness and picked out a figure sagging against one wall. It took me a moment to realize it was a woman, sitting back on her haunches, body piled high with rags. Her hair hung in matted chunks about her face, her skin so wrinkled and ground with dirt it appeared as cracked and dry as mud. Her eyes were tainted a sickly yellow, but were alive and fixed on me.

On the apple.

"Give me the apple, bitch."

I'd seen her before, always huddled in a niche, an alcove, always in darkness. A heaving mound of rags that shuffled from one location to the next. I knew her.

But now, as I looked into the yellowish taint of her eyes, into the blackness at their center, I actually *saw* her. And the hollowness in my stomach took sudden and vivid form.

I recognized those eyes.

They were mine.

I ran, bolted from the narrow into the sunlight with the woman I would become screeching, "Give it to me! Give it to me, you bitch!" behind me. I ran back to my niche and huddled against its back wall and cried. Harsh, bitter tears that only made the hollowness inside me swell larger. I cried until my arms and legs

ached and grew numb, until the sobs faded into hitching coughs. I watched the sunlight through the niche's narrow opening and tried to think of nothing at all, ended up thinking of Dove, of the five years since I'd been on my own, of the woman with the potatoes lying dead in the alley, strangled by the man I'd killed. Tremors ran through my arms, shuddered through my shoulders. Every now and then tears burned in my eyes for no reason and I'd squeeze them tight, the dark, hollow, twisted sensation burning in my chest. I'd pull in on myself, hold myself hard, until the burning receded, until my chest loosened.

Until finally the light outside began to fade and I realized what I needed to do.

I avoided the dark alley where the rag woman had been, skirted it by four narrows. The depths beyond the Dredge seemed somehow darker, dirtier. A boy no more than seven pawed his way through a heap of refuse outside a recessed doorway, buried so deep I wouldn't have noticed him if the heap hadn't suddenly heaved upward. He stumbled from it, sludge streaking his face, his legs, his arms. He held a twisted spoon in one hand like a knife, sank to one knee with a snarl like a dog when he saw me, then bolted for the shadows.

The carcass of a rat dangled from one of the boy's hands. It swung wildly as he ran.

That was me, digging through the garbage, snarling.

My chest tightened again, but I shoved the sensation back, began moving faster. The light was beginning to gray into dusk. There wasn't much time.

I slid up the Dredge, keeping to the walls, to the alleys. I watched the people as I moved, suddenly con-

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scious of my clothes . . . no, not clothes. The farther I moved, the more it became obvious I wore nothing but dirt and slime, the Dredge draped over my bones like lichen. I felt myself shrinking and I drew in upon myself, twice halted to turn back—once when a woman stared at me with blatant shock and disgust, and once when a boy spat at my feet, laughing loudly when I jerked back in a cower.

He might not have laughed so loudly if he'd known my hand was on a dagger beneath my rags.

I pushed on, until I crouched in the darkness of a narrow that looked out on the fountain, at the crumbling stone of a woman, one arm raised to hold an urn on her shoulder. Her other arm had once been poised on her hip, but it had been broken off years before so that only a jagged piece jutted out from her shoulder, and only the tips of her fingers remained at her waist. Water had spilled from the urn into the surrounding pool, but now the pool was empty except for dark patches of mold, the mouth of the urn stained with water residue.

I settled back against the narrow's wall. I'd been here before, when I was younger, many times. But the memories were vague, blurred with sunlight. The light glinted off the water in the basin, sparkled with childish laughter. Closing my eyes, I could feel the water from the urn spilling down into my hair, could taste its coolness as it washed down into my mouth. But everything was too bright, too blurred.

I felt a woman's hands touch my shoulders, reach beneath my arms to bring me up out of the water—

"I never expected to see you here."

I opened my eyes and stared up into the Seeker's

face, half seen in the dusk. He'd spoken gently, and now frowned as he looked down at me.

"Is anything wrong?"

I wiped at the tears. "No."

His frown deepened, as if he didn't believe me. His stance shifted and the cold, hard danger that edged his eyes softened.

For a moment, I thought he'd reach out and touch me, touch my face. I felt myself cringe back, hand on my dagger, even as something deep inside tried to lean forward. And he did reach out. . . .

A small sack dangled from his outstretched hand.

"Take it," he said when I hesitated.

My dagger clutched hidden against my side, I reached out and took the sack, stifling a surge of disappointment. The sack was heavy, bulged with strange shapes.

I opened it. There were oranges inside. Good oranges—skins firm, unblemished. And a chunk of bread. And cheese.

My eyes teared up, burned so fiercely I had to squeeze them tight. And my stomach seized.

I thought of the rag woman, of the boy with the sharpened spoon and dead rat, and asked hoarsely, "What do you want me to do?"

The guardsman sank down into a crouch before me, the sky dark behind him. "I'm looking for a man, black hair cut down to here, about this tall. His face is thin and sharp, like . . . like a hawk. And his eyes are dark and sharp, too. He carries a knife with a hilt shaped like a bow, sort of bent backward so it curves slightly around the wielder's hand. Just watch for him. If you see him, follow him. See where he goes, where he

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hides out. Then come find me. I'll be here at dusk every day."

"Every day?" I reached into the sack, grabbed a chunk of bread and crammed it into my mouth.

The guardsman hesitated, as if still uncertain about what he proposed. His eyes were squinted, even in the moonlight. Then he shook himself. "If I'm not here, one of the other Seekers will be here . . . another guardsman like me. Tell him to give a message to Erick. They'll know who I am."

I nodded, mostly focused on the food. The bread was gone, and not much remained of the cheese. I was saving the oranges. They were rare. I'd only seen them once or twice on the Dredge, and even then they'd been half spoiled.

"What's your name?"

I froze, eyes wide, mouth clamped shut. I breathed in raggedly through my nose, and my heart thudded in my chest. The taste of cheese burned against my tongue.

After a moment, I swallowed, the cheese going down like a large stone. I coughed against the pain, then coughed harder against the pain the coughing awoke in my chest.

Erick watched me carefully. "Do you even have a name?"

I had a name, but no one had used it in over eight years, not since my mother had died. No one had cared. Not the woman who'd taken me in at age six; not the street gang led by Dove that I'd eventually fled to after that. No one.

I dropped my head, stared down into the open mouth of the sack, into the darkness where the oranges rested.

A stinging sense of shame and something else coursed through me, burned against my skin. The same something that had leaned forward when Erick reached out with the sack of oranges, that had withdrawn in disappointment. Erick couldn't see it. Not in the darkness. Not behind the fall of my hair.

He sat back on his heels. "It doesn't matter, little *varis*." He paused, and when he spoke again I could hear humor in his voice. "*Varis*. Do you know what that means?"

I shook my head, still not looking up.

"It means hunter." He chuckled softly to himself. "I think that's fitting, don't you, *Varis*?"

I lifted my head, just enough so that I could see him, then nodded.

He smiled. "Good."

Then he rose and walked down the narrow. Not fast, but steady.

I watched until he slipped into the shadows, then gripped the mouth of the sack of oranges tight.

Varis. Hunter.

I began to sob.

I had a name. Again.

†

The flow of the street had changed the following day. Not because it was different, but because I was different. I wasn't looking for a loose bundle, a momentarily forgotten basket, a stray piece of bread. Now I watched the people's faces.

Leaning against a narrow's wall, half in shade, moving as the sun rose so that I stayed in the shadows, I scanned everyone, looking at the eyes, at the hair, at

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the nose. Scars and blemishes, jowls and scabs—they all took on new meanings.

By midday—the sun so high there were no longer shadows—my stomach growled and I realized I'd spent the entire morning looking for the man Erick had asked me to find, the hawk-faced man. The initial excitement had ebbed, and with a strange sense of disappointment, I began to focus on bundles.

I slid into old patterns as smoothly as the sunlight slid into dusk.

The next day was the same. And the next.

By the end of the fourth day, I no longer searched for the hawk-faced man. The oranges were gone, and the potatoes. I hadn't seen the guardsman on the Dredge at all, didn't dare return to the fountain to ask for more food.

I saw the hawk-faced man ten days later.

Clouds drifted across the sky, casting the Dredge into gray shade every now and then as they passed over the sun. I stood at the mouth of an alley, eyes narrowed at the woman across the street. She was haggling with a man pulling a handcart. The cart was loaded with cabbages.

The woman had set her bag on the ground.

I glanced around the Dredge. It was crowded, the weather mild for midsummer. People were moving swiftly. Most were smiling.

I had just pushed away from the wall toward the woman and the cart handler when a strange movement made me pause. It was subtle, like the change in light when a cloud passed, but it didn't fit the rhythm of the street.

I frowned and let the world slip into gray and wind.

A moment later, I caught the movement again, closer, and then I saw the wash of red among the gray.

It slid into focus almost immediately. A boy-not-yet-man.

I scowled, growled like a dog sensing another dog on his own territory as I shifted into a better position. My hand touched my dagger briefly. I'd seen this boy-not-yet-man for the first time right after the Fire, had seen him many times since; too many times. Lanky brown hair, wicked eyes, thin mouth. A birthmark shaped like a smear of blood at the corner of one eye marred his smooth, sun-darkened face. Clothes like mine—matted, torn, and stained with the Dredge.

Gutterscum, just like me. Competition.

And he'd targeted the woman yelling at the cart handler. *My* mark.

I felt a surge of resentment, bitter, like ash, felt the hairs at the nape of my neck stiffen.

Without thought, I pushed forward through the crowd, focused on the woman and the cart handler. As I moved, I felt the anger tighten in my chest, tingling in my arms, and I narrowed the focus even further. The woman raised one arm, pointing toward the sky as she yelled. Her other arm clutched the ends of the shawl draped around her head. The cart handler shook his head, both hands still firmly gripping the handles of his cart.

He'd just drawn in a deep breath when my focus suddenly . . . altered.

It was like standing neck-deep in the River that ran through Amenkor to the south, near the palace—sunlight harsh on the water, noise from the shops and streets along the banks strangely heightened as they

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hit the waves, somehow sharper, clearer. It was like standing there, neck-deep—

And then ducking beneath the surface, into darkness.

I felt myself slide from the world of gray and red and wind I was used to into something else, something deeper. The gray darkened. Eddies of movement I'd barely noticed before smoothed out into nothing but shadowed blackness. The background wind died out completely, only the sounds of the woman and the cart handler and the boy intruding. And these sounds were crisper. Movements grew taut, and slowed subtly.

I glanced toward the boy, toward the woman, toward the bag at her feet, and with the new sense of awareness *knew* what would happen.

I didn't hesitate. I swam through the crush of people on the street, brushing an unseen arm, a shoulder—both sensations transitory, like brushing against unseen weeds beneath the river's surface—and then I was at the back of the wagon full of cabbages.

The cart handler glanced toward me as I mimicked a lurch forward, as if I'd been jostled from behind. My hand slapped onto the edge of his cart to steady myself. He glanced toward it with a suspicious frown. The woman never looked in my direction at all.

Then I was past the cart, the woman's sack clutched loosely in my other hand.

I slid into the nearest narrow, crouched down near its opening, sack resting at my feet, and turned to watch with a half suppressed grin. The anger had passed.

The boy was only ten steps from the woman and the cart when he finally noticed the sack was missing. He

froze in the middle of the Dredge, so sharply someone stumbled into him from behind. His gaze jerked from side to side. His eyes narrowed viciously. His mouth tightened to a frown.

Then his eyes latched onto mine.

I grinned. I couldn't help it.

Somehow, his eyes narrowed more, became blacker, and I felt the elation inside me curdle and sour, the strange new focus shuddering away at the same moment, making the sourness worse. The real world rushed forward, the sounds of the street loud. My grin faltered.

I gripped the sack and stood, turning to head deeper into the alley. I didn't know what was in the sack, but I no longer wanted to wait on the Dredge to find out either.

I'd reached the deepness of the alley, the sourness twisting into nausea, when someone grabbed my arm and spun me around.

I reacted on instinct, my dagger out and ready before I realized it was the boy-not-yet-man. Except this close, with his own dagger drawn, he seemed much less boy and more man. We'd never been this close, never spoken except through scowls and heated looks.

He reminded me of Dove.

He stepped back, his breathing hard, anger harsh in his eyes. The red birthmark at his eye appeared black in the light from the mouth of the alley. He said nothing, only glared. After a long moment I drew in a deep breath to steady my shuddering heart and said shortly, "What do you want?"

"I want my sack."

I snorted, felt the strange nausea deepen. I tasted

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bile at the back of my throat, felt a cramp shudder through my stomach. I grimaced. "It isn't yours," I said through the pain.

"But it will be," he said harshly. He didn't get to continue. I gasped at another cramp, dropped the sack as I hunched over my stomach and sagged convulsively to my knees. The boy jerked back, wary and confused, then lurched forward to retrieve the sack as I collapsed to my side, my knees pulled in tight. The bile was like fire, scorching my throat, and the pain in my stomach radiated through my chest, alternately hot and cold. I sensed the boy leaning over me, felt his breath against my face as he spat in a whisper, "Don't mess with me, bitch," and then he was gone.

I saw a retreating shadow and forced myself to concentrate. "My name is Varis," I murmured to myself as the sunlight at the end of the alley came into view, a white blur interrupted briefly by the boy's form.

I was still focusing hard on the light, the strange pain just beginning to fade, when I saw the hawk-faced man. He walked across the mouth of the alley without glancing inside, there and then gone. I might never have noticed, except I was concentrating so hard on remaining conscious. In case the boy decided to come back. Or in case something worse came along.

I lay stunned for a moment. Long enough for the sunlight at the mouth of the alley to fade as a cloud began to pass.

Then I rolled onto my knees. A wave of reawakened nausea poured through me and I dry-vomited, nothing but a sour taste flooding my mouth. When it passed, I staggered to my feet, using the wall for support, and made my way to the mouth of the alley.

I didn't expect to see him. I'd taken too long getting to the street. But he'd halted about twenty paces away, back toward me. I watched as he scanned the Dredge, as if searching for someone. Then he turned and I saw his face clearly.

He fit the guardsman's description of the hawk-faced man. Black hair, dark eyes, thin face, sharp nose. I couldn't see a knife, but I knew it was him.

He scanned the Dredge one more time, eyes narrowed, then moved into the alley farther up.

I shoved away from the wall to follow, but another spasm of pain hunched me over on the edge of the Dredge, heaving again. The people on the street flowed around me, leaving a wide space, as if I were diseased. I leaned against the near wall until the spasm passed, then stood.

I felt sweaty and chilled at the same time. I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and began a cautious stagger toward my niche. I didn't feel well enough for any more activity on the Dredge. The hawk-faced man would have to wait.

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I spent the rest of the day and most of the night passing in and out of consciousness at the back of my niche. Shudders coursed through me, so violent at times my head cracked against the worn mud-brick, my arms flopping uselessly at my sides, spittle drooling from my mouth. Once, I bit my tongue hard enough to draw blood.

When the spasms passed, I lay back against the stone and cried, so weak I could barely raise my arms. The sobs racked my body as painfully as the spasms,

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but I couldn't seem to stop. I didn't understand what was happening, didn't know how to stop it.

Eventually, I realized that the spasms were taking longer to come, lasted a shorter time, and weren't so harsh. They decreased, until finally I rolled onto my side, tears running down my face, and stared out at the moonlit darkness beyond my niche, the last tremors tingling down my arms.

There, in the moonlit darkness, I saw the world of gray and red and wind. Whatever had happened on the Dredge that afternoon, whatever had pushed me deeper into the grayness, had caused this. I'd gone too deep. I'd pushed myself so far beneath the gray surface of the river I'd almost drowned.

I closed my eyes and drew myself in tight, even though every muscle hurt. I'd never felt so . . . drained.

I breathed in with slow, careful breaths, slipping toward true sleep. My last, cold thought was that I'd have to be more careful when using the river, the world of gray and red and wind.

I didn't want to drown.

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The next day I placed myself near the alley where I'd seen the hawk-faced man. Before settling in, I checked for the cart handler and for the boy-not-yet-man.

I frowned. He wasn't a boy-not-yet-man. Not now. I'd seen that yesterday, seen it in his eyes.

I shook myself, feeling a backwash of weakness slip through me, and refocused on the crowd. Neither the cart handler nor the boy-not- . . . nor Birthmark were in sight.

I frowned again, thinking of how his eyes had nar-

rowed when he'd seen me with the sack, how *black* they'd become.

Not Birthmark. Bloodmark.

"Varis and Bloodmark," I said out loud, then grimaced.

Bloodmark wasn't in sight. And neither was the hawk-faced man.

I sighed and sat back against the wall of the alley to wait.

The hawk-faced man didn't show until almost dusk. I'd snagged two scabrous apples, a potato as hard as a rock, an entire loaf of bread, and was almost ready to give up when I saw his sharp features heading toward me.

I faded back into the narrow, moving casually, watched him as he passed. His gaze followed the people on the Dredge, eyes flickering swiftly from face to face, mouth flat. He clenched his jaw as he moved, the muscle just beneath his ear pulsing. His clothes were well made, but fading now, stained by his stay in the depths. Mud coated his boots.

Tucked into his belt was a dagger, the hilt curved like a bow.

I glanced sharply again toward his face the moment before he stepped beyond the narrow, memorized it—the faint pockmarks on his cheeks, the lines at the corners of the mouth and eyes—then shifted forward to the corner to follow him.

He paused at the mouth of the alley, just as he had the night before, and searched the crowd. After a moment I realized he was waiting—for someone, for dusk, for the right moment, perhaps.

Then he scowled at the crowd, glanced toward the

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cloudless sky just beginning to darken toward night, and entered the alley.

I waited five breaths, then took a deeper breath to steady myself, and followed.

Daylight fled as the hawk-faced man moved deeper and deeper into the depths beyond the Dredge. I kept close enough I could see his dagger at first, but far enough back I didn't think he'd notice me. The texture of the Dredge changed the farther we moved, worn mud-brick darkening to decayed stone. The faint scent of dampness and mildew and piss that coated each narrow deepened into reeking slime and shit. The water that slicked through the gutters thickened into sludge, and corners and niches rounded with packed, collected refuse.

Twice the man halted, looking back as I slid against a slime-coated wall and grew still. Both times he stood silently, face hidden by the darkness of night, lit only vaguely by the moonlight. I held my breath, aware that now I followed only a silhouette of the man I'd seen on the Dredge, and hoped that he saw nothing behind him but rotting debris from a thousand discarded lives.

Eventually, he'd turn and continue, and after a moment I'd push away from the wall and follow.

Finally, he halted before a bent, iron gate leading into a narrow courtyard black as pitch. The stone wall of the courtyard lay half crumbled in the alley, the curved arch above the gate completely collapsed. He slid through a gap in the twisted bars and vanished in the darkness beyond.

I huddled against a wall twenty paces away and watched the gate, breath barely a whisper. Somewhere,

a dog barked, the sound vicious, and a rat scratched its way through the crevices and stone of the wall behind me. I glanced down the alleyway in both directions, saw no one, and frowned at the gate again, at the utter blackness beyond the gaping mouth of the doorway.

I wanted to follow, but when I stood to slip across the alley the hairs on the nape of my neck tingled, shivering across my shoulders. Deep down in my gut I felt the cold, shuddering stirrings of the Fire. Barely a tendril of flame, just a hint of warning.

I hesitated, drew in a deep breath—

And then headed away from the courtyard, back toward the Dredge, back toward my niche.

I knew where he'd gone. The guardsman . . . Erick . . . would have to be satisfied with that.

I ignored the fact that my arms were trembling. And that the tendril of Fire did not die.

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At dusk the following day I found my way back to Cobbler's Fountain. Erick was waiting.

"Have you found Jobriah?"

"The hawk-faced man."

Erick laughed. A laugh that sent shivers through my arms. "The hawk-faced man. I like that." Then he seemed to harden, eyes intent, mouth tight. The scars that marked his face stood out in sudden relief. "And can you take me to him?"

I nodded, wary. He didn't seem like the man who'd brought me oranges. This man stirred the tendril of flame that still curled in my gut.

"Good. Take me there."

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He made no move to touch me, but when I rose, I veered away from him.

We slid off the Dredge, into the back streets, and headed deep. Worn mud-brick shifted to decayed stone again, piss and filth to sludge and shit. Erick said nothing, just stalked behind me as I shifted from shadow to shadow. He made no attempt to hide, seemed annoyed at my scurrying crouch, but he did nothing to stop me.

By the time we reached the street outside the broken iron gate night had fallen completely and the tendril of flame in my gut had grown to a white Fire. I huddled at the corner of the narrow I'd used the night before. Erick stood at its entrance.

"The gate," I said in a hushed voice and turned to look up at the guardsman's face.

A footfall echoed down the street and without a sound Erick slid back into the narrow. He'd lowered a hand to draw me back as well, but the gesture was unnecessary. I'd already moved.

He cast me a brief, considering look, but then the man on the street caught his attention.

It was the hawk-faced man. Jobriah.

As he had the night before, he paused at the entrance to the gate, then ducked through its bars into the darkness beyond.

Erick shifted forward, body rigid with tension. He surveyed the street, listened to the sounds of the night—a gust of wind, distant clatters of movement, nothing close.

Then, without a word, he walked across the street and ducked into the courtyard, as silent as the night.

The white Fire in my gut flared briefly at the sud-

denness of his movements, then settled back down. But it didn't die.

I fidgeted at the mouth of the narrow in indecision. Erick hadn't said anything about staying, hadn't said to wait. I'd found the hawk-faced man. My job was done.

I turned to go, and heard another footfall on the street.

Stomach clenching, the Fire twisting its coldness deeper into my chest, I crouched down at the base of the wall and held my breath, waiting.

Another man appeared. In the darkness all I saw was a fat face, large body, sunken eyes. The white Fire surged as he stalked into view, so intense I shivered.

He stepped into the courtyard, pausing only to squeeze his body through the narrow opening.

I straightened from my crouch, placed my hands against the decaying stone of the wall, and bit my lip.

Erick knew about the hawk-faced man, not this other.

But he was a guardsman, a Seeker. He could take care of himself.

I turned to leave, the tingling Fire surging through me, and thought suddenly of the woman the man had killed. I'd stood at the entrance to the alley and listened to her struggling as he strangled her. I'd heard her gasps, his grunts, heard her body slide to the ground. I'd done nothing.

In the darkness of the narrow, I saw her body staring blankly up into the night, leg bent beneath her, hair lying in the trickle of filth running down the alley.

She reminded me of the woman Dove had gone after.

And she reminded me of my mother.

I turned, fought down the taste of sourness at the

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back of my throat, and sprinted across the street for the courtyard. My knife glared dully in the faint light before I slid through the iron bars into the blackness.

My eyes adjusted, but I still couldn't see anything. I crouched down in the dirt just inside the gate, drew in a trembling breath, and let the world slip into gray and wind.

I caught a wash of red sliding through a doorway at the far end of the courtyard—a fat wash of red—and then it vanished behind the walls of the building.

I held my breath, concentrated on the eddies in the gray that I'd barely noticed before—eddies that now showed me the vague forms of rocks, the dead husk of a tree in one corner—and ran across the courtyard to the edge of the door. I glanced inside. Nothing. But a strange lightening of the gray outlined another door. The lightened gray flickered.

I frowned, then let the gray and wind slip.

Candlelight flickered through the doorway from a room deeper in the building.

I picked my way across the small room, careful of the debris of crumbled stone that littered the floor. Boot prints stood out in the dust, many overlapping each other. They all led to the inner doorway. I tucked myself low at the doorway's edge, took in the inner room at a glance.

It was much wider than the outer room. Deeper. The candlelight came from a table set against the wall at its farthest reaches, where the hawk-faced man stood, looking at something on the table, one hand clutching a wineskin that sloshed as he moved. His shadow reached back into the blackness of the rest of the room, long and thin. Blankets lay in a heap next to the table.

I saw no one else in the room.

Before I could frown in concern, Erick stepped out of the shadows. In two long, silent strides he came up behind the hawk-faced man and reached around, knife in hand, ready to slit his throat.

It would have been a quick, decisive stroke, except the hawk-faced man shifted, raised the skin to take a drink.

The cut intended to slit his throat drew a deep gash across the base of the man's chin, so deep it exposed the bone along the man's jaw as he gasped in shock and jerked backward, stumbling into Erick.

The two fell, blood sheeting down the hawk-faced man's chest, a flap of flesh dangling beneath the exposed jaw. Erick cursed, heaved the man off his chest with enough force to crack Jobriah's head into the table. The candlelight jerked. The man screamed again—a low, horrible scream, like a strangling dog—and dropped to his knees before the table. The wine-skin thudded to the floor as he clutched at his chin, blood coating his hand, spattering his arm.

He moaned, rocking forward and back, eyes dazed, as Erick rose from the floor and circled around behind him. Erick's eyes were flat with purpose, the spatters of the hawk-faced man's blood on his face black in the shuddering light.

Erick had just knelt on one knee behind the man, had shifted and leaned forward as if to embrace him, knife bared and black with blood, when I caught movement at the edge of the candlelight.

It was the fat man.

He never saw me.

I sprinted across the length of the room, watched as

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the fat man raised his dagger above Erick's back, ready to drive it down into the base of the guardsman's neck. I saw Erick reach around the hawk-faced man's chest and slide his dagger between the man's ribs. The man stiffened, gagged as blood began to pour from his mouth, his hand falling away from his chin and the dangling flesh there.

Then Erick heard me, turned just as I slammed into the fat man.

We plowed into the stone wall, the fat man grunting in surprise, stumbling over his own feet. Then the grunts turned from surprise to pain and I realized I was stabbing him with my dagger, over and over. I could feel blood against my hand, could hear it pattering against the stone, against the floor as we fell in a wild heap. I opened my mouth and screamed into his startled face, saw the startlement turn to rage, to hatred, saw the shock slide to determination as he shifted to get the arm with his own dagger into a position to gut me.

Before he had a chance, one of my wild thrusts plunged into his neck. I felt it slide in, deep, felt the blade nick the bone of his neck, scrape and slide deeper, felt the thick folds of his skin against my hand for a brief sickening moment before I jerked the blade away.

His eyes widened, and like a suddenly broken spiderweb, his arms and body slumped to the ground. Blood seeped from the wound, but not like the hawk-faced man's blood. This blood came slower.

I was still screaming, still stabbing. Then Erick's arms enfolded me and pulled me away from the dead fat man, pulled me away and carried me across the

room to the shadows, where he sat and held me, murmuring in my ear until slowly, slowly, my screaming faded down into sobs.

“Shh,” he breathed in my ear. “Hush, Varis. Hush.”

He held me until even the sobs faded, until I lay in a heap against his body, drained.

Eventually, he set me aside, carefully, and moved back toward the bodies. He rolled the hawk-faced man over, marked the man’s forehead with the Skewed Throne, then did the same to the fat man. He collected the blanket by the table, the wineskin, and the candle.

He wrapped me in the blanket, which smelled of old sweat and grease and fire, blew out the candle, and carried me out through the courtyard, through the bent iron gate, and into the night.