

《 *The Palace* 》

DRESSED as a page boy, I walked down the center of the hallway, face intent with concentration, as if I were on a crucial errand for someone important and could not be disturbed. I'd worked my way from the outskirts of the main palace to within a few rooms of the edge of the inner sanctum, delineated by the original castle's wall. Those stone ramparts, rather than being torn down, had been subsumed as the original castle grew in size, so that what had once been the castle's main defense now formed the walls of numerous rooms inside the palace itself. What had once been a gate was now the main door into the inner sanctum, where the throne room and the Mistress' chambers lay.

That doorway would be heavily guarded.

I referred to my mental map of the palace, then slowed as the hallway came to an end. The room beyond was lit with oil sconces set into the ceiling's support pillars, but only down its center. To either side, the room was dark and empty of people, but lined with plants—small trees in

wide pots; scattered smaller bushes with scented flowers in urns. A complex tracery of vines clung to the wall.

I moved through the room without pausing, intent on the hallway beyond. The main entrance to the inner sanctum should be just ahead.

A moment later, the light in the corridor increased. Then the hallway opened up into a high-ceilinged concourse to the left and right.

I slowed, footsteps echoing as I moved farther out into the open space. Potted trees lined either side of the concourse, separated by huge tapestries taking up entire sections of wall between one arching support and the next. The ceiling rose at least twenty feet overhead, the stone supports curving together and meeting at a sharp peak. Windows appeared black with night high above, darker than the shadows.

Someone coughed, the sound loud in the silence of the concourse. I started and turned to the right, where according to the map, the main entrance lay.

The door was huge, banded with iron and polished to a sheen that almost glowed with its own light. It was recessed almost ten feet, and the original arch of what had been the outer gate of the wall could be seen clearly, the stone gray and stained with the exposure to the elements. Banners of all colors were arrayed around the door to either side, each on its own pole. Standing at attention in filed rank before the door were six palace guardsmen, heavily armored. If it hadn't been for the cough, I would have thought they were statues.

Suddenly aware that I stood in the middle of the concourse staring down its length at six trained men with sharp swords, I turned and hurried to where the hallway I'd used to enter the concourse continued on the far side.

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I tried to act like a page boy who'd been awed by the spectacle but had suddenly remembered his duty.

Once out of sight of the guardsmen, the look of awe on my face fell into a scowl.

Fool! Gawking before men who'd only want to kill me if they knew who I really was, why I was really here.

I shook my head but kept moving. A few empty rooms, a few more empty, half-lit corridors. After a moment, when there was no sound of pursuit, I allowed myself to breathe again.

There was no way to get through the main doorway, not with all of those guardsmen watching. There were a few other entrances—for cooks, maids, dignitaries that shouldn't be seen entering through the front—but all of those would be guarded as well. The page boy's outfit wouldn't work there either. The guards checked too carefully.

But there was another way.

I entered a waiting room. Pillows were scattered throughout the room amid low tables. A half empty pitcher of water and a tray of picked-over fruit rested on one of the tables. I lifted a clutch of grapes as I passed, but kept moving.

Then I froze, a grape half raised to my mouth, ears pricked. Someone was approaching. Two men, arguing.

As they drew closer, I realized I recognized one of the voices.

I scanned the waiting room, saw a latticework of carved wood screening off a small portion of the room for privacy, and dove for it. Crouched down low in the corner, I plopped the last grape into my mouth as the men entered the room, still out of sight.

“—don't think I can take another one,” a man said. His

voice shook. "The last one . . . I can still hear her screams. And the way she thrashed in the throne, as if . . . as if it were a bed of hot coals! As if we'd tossed her into a gods-damned bed of hot coals!" He drew in a trembling breath. "I really don't think I can stand to watch another one die. Not if it's like that."

"I agree."

I shifted forward, eyes narrowed. The second man to speak was Avrell, the First of the Mistress . . . the man who had sent me into the palace to kill the Mistress, had provided the map and the clothes and the key. Unlike the other man, his voice was steady and smooth, and soft like warm sunlight.

They were getting closer. But I still couldn't see them, not from this vantage. I pulled myself back against the wall and grew still.

Avrell continued, "You agree that there is no question now, Nathem? That the Mistress is truly insane?"

Silence for a moment, and then, reluctantly, "Yes." A pause. Then with more force. "Yes. Yes, there is no question now. Not after the fire in the merchants' quarter."

I flinched with guilt and shifted uneasily.

"It took the fire to convince you?" Avrell said. "I was convinced when she closed the harbor."

Nathem sighed. "Yes, that, too. How could she order the harbor closed? How can she keep it closed, with resources so tight, winter so close, and now the fire? It makes no sense. We must open the harbor. It's our only chance of surviving the winter."

They stepped into view.

Both wore the dark blue of the priesthood, the robes appearing black in the darkness; they walked without any light. A four-pointed gold star was stitched onto the

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chest of Nathem's robe, signifying his rank as Second. He was older than Avrell, with dull gray hair and an age-lined face; broader of shoulder as well, but he held his back straighter. And yet Avrell appeared the more poised, his hands hidden inside the wide sleeves of his robes. An eight-pointed star was stitched into Avrell's robe—the four-pointed star that adorned Nathem's robe but with four shorter, daggerlike triangles woven in between.

"But these attempts to replace the Mistress aren't working," Nathem continued as they walked slowly across the room. Neither looked toward the latticework. "We've tried . . . what? Seven times now? Something isn't working."

"I don't understand it either," Avrell said thoughtfully. "We're selecting the girls from the Servants as we've always selected them. We've used those with the most talent, those who've shown the most promise and the most skill at using it, but it's as if that isn't enough anymore, as if something *more* is needed." He shook his head, as if confused, but he kept his eyes on Nathem. "This has always been sufficient in the past."

"Yes, but in the past the Mistress wasn't insane!" Nathem interjected. "In the past, we were trying to find a successor because the Mistress was dead!"

Avrell halted. His back straightened, his lips pressed together. He eyed Nathem as the Second continued for another few paces before realizing Avrell had stopped.

When Nathem turned, his brow was furrowed. "What?" he asked.

Avrell said nothing, only gazed hard at Nathem. They'd halted near the table containing the pitcher of water and the remains of the fruit.

Nathem's brow furrowed further, then cleared as realization struck. His head lifted, eyes widened.

"On the Mistress'—" he began. But something seemed to catch in his throat, choked him off.

The room no longer felt open and airy and soft. Now it felt close and tense.

I drew back farther behind the screen separating me from the outer room. Nathem's face was clear through the latticework, even in the darkness.

"You said so yourself," Avrell murmured. "We've tried seven times, used the most powerful Servants, and in all cases the replacement—" Avrell halted, seemed to harden himself even further. "No. Let's be realistic. We can't afford to be anything else. Not now. Winter is too close. In all seven cases, the *women* set to replace the Mistress have died. Good women. Trusting women. Women we've found and raised and trained for this one purpose since they were children. Others have died trying to ascend the throne in the past, but none have died like this." Avrell's voice had risen slightly, but now he paused, collected himself. "Something is wrong. Something is different this time."

Nathem sighed. "The Fire."

Avrell nodded. "The Fire. And as you said yourself, in the past the Mistress has already been dead when a successor was seated on the throne. Even when the Fire first passed through Amenkor. That time, the Mistress was murdered so that another could be placed on the throne. Murdered because the Fire drove the Mistress insane and a successor needed to be named."

"You don't know that for certain," Nathem said sharply. "We only know she was killed. Not why. It was too long ago. There are no records."

Avrell didn't answer. Avrell and Nathem held perfectly

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still, Avrell rigid and imposing, Nathem indignant and stern, their eyes locked. Nathem's gaze searched Avrell's face, searched hard and quick.

Then Nathem rocked back slightly, as if struck.

A subtle move, but Avrell's shoulders relaxed.

"You can't be suggesting—" Nathem began.

"I'm *suggesting* nothing," Avrell countered, and his voice fell in the room like stone.

Nathem paused. "We're sworn to serve her," he protested, but there was no force behind his words. "We're sworn to protect her."

Avrell reached forward to grasp Nathem's shoulder. "We're sworn to protect the Skewed Throne, Nathem. We're sworn to protect Amenkor. Can you honestly say the throne is safe? That the *city* is safe? Think about the fire, about the closing of the harbor. What will she do next? As it is, we may already have waited too long."

Nathem still seemed unconvinced, his brow furrowed in thought.

"And then there's Captain Baill to consider," Avrell said, stepping back, his hand falling from Nathem's shoulder.

Nathem snorted in contempt. "Baill is a fool."

Avrell shook his head. "Not a fool, Nathem. He has never been a fool. He's following the Mistress' orders to the letter. He's filled the streets with his guardsmen to protect the citizens of Amenkor as she requested, closed the harbor as she ordered—"

"But what are we protecting the people from?" Nathem spat. "It doesn't make any sense! Baill has *seen* the Mistress. He *knows* the orders make no sense!"

"And yet he carries them out without question," Avrell said, voice weighted with meaning. He caught Nathem's eye. "Not even a token protest."

After a long moment, Nathem asked, "What do you suspect?"

Avrell drew in a deep breath, held it a moment before releasing it. "I suspect everything, Nathem, but can prove nothing. In any case, Captain Baill is not an immediate concern. The Mistress is. You've seen her wandering these halls. You've heard her muttering to herself, arguing with herself, sometimes in languages neither of us have ever heard. Are any of us safe?"

Nathem dropped his gaze to the table of fruit. "No," he muttered, his voice so low I could barely hear it. Then, louder, more forceful: "No. None of us is safe. None of us has been safe since the Fire. It did something to her, changed her." He squeezed his eyes shut.

Avrell stood silently, hands again folded inside the sleeves of his robe. He waited.

Nathem finally opened his eyes.

His face clouded as he looked down at the table and paused. "I could have sworn . . ." he began, but trailed off.

Behind the latticework, my neck prickled, the tiny hairs at its base rising. I drew back, even as Avrell tensed.

"What?" Avrell said. Like stone again, all the gentleness he'd shown Nathem gone.

Nathem frowned at the table. "I could have sworn I left a clutch of grapes right there."

Shit!

Avrell turned sharply, his eyes darting around the room, hitting the shadows, the corners, the shield of the latticework.

And there they halted.

I stiffened, could barely breathe. Everything shrank down to Avrell's eyes, to their dark blue intensity, to the narrowed, harsh lines that had formed between his eyebrows.

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We held each other's gazes for eternity, for the span of three heartbeats—

Then, in a taut voice, Avrell said, "One of the servants must have eaten them."

Nathem frowned in consternation. "Then why didn't they clean up the table?"

Avrell said nothing, turned toward Nathem.

I drew in a slow breath and shuddered. I tasted fear like blood at the back of my throat.

Avrell held Nathem's gaze a long moment, until the frown faded from Nathem's eyes and he sighed, shook his head.

"Something must be done with the Mistress," he said.

Avrell hesitated a moment, not turning toward me, then said, "Something has already been done."

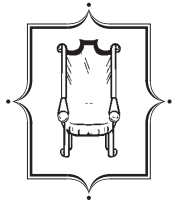
Nathem stood stunned, back rigid, mouth open, eyes angry. But then his shoulders slumped in resignation.

Avrell led him from the room. Against the realization that they intended to murder the Mistress, that events were already in motion, Nathem's concern over the grapes had been forgotten.

As soon as they drifted from the room, I slid from hiding and moved to the corridor. Avrell had known I'd be in the palace tonight, but he wasn't supposed to know where. And now I'd been held up, when I had to be in the linen closet at the time the guard changed. If I wasn't . . .

I shoved the thought aside, jaw set.

Then I began to run.



Chapter 4

"NO. Back off, Varis. Try again." The river pulsed in my head, sweat running down my face in sheets. I barely heard Erick's order, too intent on Bloodmark's shifting movements before me, too focused on his eyes. His face was sheened with sweat as well, his hair plastered to his forehead in tendrils. Anger had locked his jaw rigid. A muscle twitched above his lip. His breath came in heaves through his teeth. We circled each other in the makeshift training yard, the light overhead beginning to fade. The Fire lay dormant inside me. Somehow it knew this was simply practice.

A surge in the currents warned me a bare instant before Bloodmark attacked. Bloodmark's dagger sliced low across my front, trying to gut me. It wasn't a smooth cut—Bloodmark's moves were never smooth—but it was lightning quick and full of violence. I slid back from the arc, moved forward after it had passed, close enough so Bloodmark couldn't maneuver easily, and made to slice across his face.

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He jerked back from the stroke, anger flaring higher in his eyes as Erick barked, "Strike for Varis! Back off and reset. Bloodmark, you're not controlling your slashes! Power means nothing without control."

We began circling again. The anger had settled deeper, so deep Bloodmark was shaking. I'd tagged him five times already; he'd only managed to tag me twice. There'd been three draws. I only needed one more strike to win the bout. In all the weeks of training with him, he'd only won a single bout.

I waited, watching Bloodmark's eyes, sensing his movements. I knew if I waited long enough, he'd attempt a strike.

It didn't take long. It never took long.

He tried to control the lunge; I could see it in his eyes. I stepped to the side, attempted a counterstrike across his torso, under his reach, but he twisted, sidestepped, and cut back. His dagger whipped through empty space and I tried another lunge, but he was being careful now. We feinted and parried and lunged for what seemed an eternity, fatigue beginning to set in, but Bloodmark's anger began to override his caution. His thrusts became more erratic, sharp and loose.

When I thought his anger had built high enough, I exaggerated my fatigue, thrust forward and stumbled, presenting Bloodmark with an opening along my side.

He took it, stepping in close as I'd done before, driving the dagger home sharply. But I wasn't there. Instead, I twisted, fell down hard on my side, and cut upward, tapping his leg lightly with the flat of my dagger. I grinned.

"Strike and match! For Varis." Erick's voice held a note of controlled respect.

Bloodmark snarled, then fell on me with a roar of hatred, hand clutching at my shirt, pulling it up in a bunch as he straddled me. I gasped in surprise. I heard Erick bellow, "Fall back!" and heard his voice approaching, but it came from a distance. Bloodmark's eyes had fixed my attention, his dagger descending toward my chest.

My hand lashed out, caught his wrist and halted it, both our arms trembling. I felt a flicker of rage deep inside, hot and tingling.

"Fall back!" Erick bellowed, voice close now. It sliced through my rage, severed it. The tension in Bloodmark's arm loosened and he made as if to pull back.

I relaxed.

Then Bloodmark hissed, "Bitch," too low for Erick to hear, and the Fire inside me flared up sharply.

Bloodmark's dagger flicked outward, the motion small, and nicked my forearm. I hissed at the pain and my hand snapped out, hitting Bloodmark square in the chest, thrusting him away.

He yelped, landed with a thud, but scrambled up into a crouch in the space of a breath.

"That's enough!" Erick roared, interposing himself between us both. "What the hell happened?"

"The bitch shoved me off her, even though I was moving to get up."

I shot him a dark glare. "He sliced me with his dagger. Drew blood."

Erick's eyes instantly darkened and he turned toward Bloodmark.

"It was an accident," Bloodmark spat. "I didn't mean it."

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Erick hesitated, uncertain. "Don't let it happen again," he finally said. "Either of you." Then he glanced toward the sinking sun. "That's enough for today. We'll continue with this tomorrow."

Bloodmark rose, brushed himself off with a sniff, then headed out into the warren of the slums. But not without a sly glance and a sharp grin back at me before he left.

Erick knelt as I shifted into a sitting position and pulled my arm out to inspect the cut. He frowned down at it. The blood had already dried, the pain gone.

"He did it on purpose," I said, even though I knew it was useless. "Why do you believe him?"

A look of annoyed anger crossed Erick's face and he dropped my arm. "Because he's useful."

"He hates me. And he's vicious."

"And you aren't?" Erick countered, standing. He motioned to my dagger. "What about that? A guardman's dagger. We don't part with them lightly. How did you get it?"

A surge of fear stabbed deep into my gut. For a moment, I was eleven again, felt the ex-guardsmen's fingers dig into my arm like spears and wrench me into the alley, crushing me to his chest. I had no time to react, no time to scream.

Got ya, little one, he'd breathed, the words a rumble in his breast. *Got ya*.

And then he'd laughed.

I looked up into Erick's eyes, the fear hardening into anger. "He wasn't a guardsman." I pointed to where the Skewed Throne symbol was stitched into Erick's shirt in red. "The stitching had been torn out."

Erick frowned. "A deserter, then. Did he have a scar along one cheek? From the corner of one eye down to the jaw?"

I nodded, pulled my knees up to my chin, not looking at Erick. I could smell him—the man that had taken me back then—could smell the stench of ale, of dirt, of the Dredge and things deeper. I could taste the mold of his shirt as he cupped one hand on the back of my head and pressed my face into his shoulder.

Don't tremble, he'd breathed, voice as soft as rain. Don't tremble.

I shuddered, heard Erick kneel down in the dirt of the old courtyard beside me. I felt him hesitate. Not because he didn't want to hear, but because he wasn't certain I wanted to relive it.

"Tell me what happened."

I squeezed my eyes shut, stifling a sob as I laid my head on my knees, facing away from him. I sat that way a long moment, then felt Erick's hand on my shoulder.

He tried to pull me in closer to him. I resisted at first, then shifted back and leaned into his chest, still turned away.

When I finally spoke, my voice was muffled, distorted with the effort not to cry.

"He caught me in an alley," I said. "Crushed me to his chest so that I couldn't breathe."

And that was all it took. I was eleven again.

And the ex-guardsman had me.

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I could not see where he took me. I struggled at one point, but he only crushed me harder, all the time

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whispering, chest rumbling, breath coming in short, anticipatory wheezes. "Don't tremble, little one. Shhh. Shhh. Not far. Not far now." Then a low laugh, almost inaudible. "Not far."

Grunting, and sudden jolts, as if the man were fighting his way up stairs. Then he turned and crushed me between himself and a wall, one arm—the one holding my head—retreating. I jerked my head back from his shirt, gasped in a deep breath with a small cry of desperation, the air still filled with the stench of the Dredge, but with traces of night air as well. The man cursed, jerked hard on something unyielding that finally gave with a rotted crash, and then the hand was back, pressing even harder, and the flash of night sky vanished and I tasted rot and darkness again. He lurched back from the wall and now his wheezes were gasps, sharp and uncontrolled. His voice had deepened, grown dark and harsh. Now I could hear the death in his voice. No words, no hushes, only guttural needs.

And then the man shoved me away from him, drove me from the crushing darkness of his shoulder into a mud-brick wall. My breath rushed from my body even as I tried to gasp it in. My head cracked into stone.

The world swayed as I crumpled. I could see the stars, the moon, the narrow ledge where we had stopped. The wall I'd hit formed a second floor, smaller than the first, the ledge around its edge only five steps wide. Large enough for the gasping man to crush me where I'd fallen, hand pressed hard against my chest. He hit me, grunting as his fist connected, my head snapping to the side so that I looked along the ledge and over its edge. Dazed, the man moving atop

me, scrabbling at my clothes, ripping them, I saw the city of Amenkor across the harbor. Not the Dredge and the slums, but the real city. I could see the waters of the bay, flecked with edges of moonlight. I could see the docks, the masts of ships, the strange angles of the rooftops and buildings as they rose slightly toward me. On the far side of the city, the layers of the palace glowed with firelight, faint and unearthly. I could feel a breeze from the water, clean and pure.

The motions of the man didn't register. Mind foggy, I stared at the water. I knew what was happening, what was going to happen. I'd seen it before, in the slums beyond the Dredge, in narrows and niches and empty holes. I'd heard screams, seen knives drawn, seen blood flow. I'd lived eleven years beyond the Dredge, spent one of those with Dove and his street gang of gutterscum, just long enough to learn how to survive on my own, how to steal without getting caught. I'd become numb to the death, to the disease, to the depravity. I felt nothing. Yet I was crying.

Then, through the haze of pain and numbness, through the night and the tears, I saw the horizon. The moon was high, but in the west, the horizon shimmered with white light, as if the sun were beginning to rise.

Except the sun rose in the east.

I frowned, and for the first time that day, the world began to fade to gray. The man crushing me to the rooftop slipped into a smear of red, his grunts as he struggled with his breeches slipping into the rush of wind. The world collapsed to the brightening line of white on the horizon, spreading north and south, growing in a long arc until it filled the night. It rushed

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out of the west, faster than the sunrise, a pure, brilliant white. And as it came closer, as the night brightened, I suddenly recognized it.

The White Fire from the legends.

It was exactly as the street-talkers had described it. A wall, filling the horizon, the flames reaching high, higher, reaching into the heavens, swallowing the stars as it came. Relentless, and so terribly swift.

The man atop me froze as the Fire entered the bay and scorched its way across the moon-flecked waters. The shadows of ships on the water and along the docks appeared against its whiteness and then were consumed by it as it swept forward. The docks were swallowed by it, and then it struck land and began sweeping through the city. As it rushed toward us, as it engulfed building after building, street after street, I heard the man atop me draw in a choked, horrified gasp.

Only then did I realize that there was no sound. The Fire was utterly silent.

In the moment before the Fire engulfed us, the instant before it descended onto the roof, I felt the clench of terror. My heart halted, my body tensed—

And then it was upon me, passing through me. I felt it scorch deep down inside me, deeper than the fear, deeper than the terror, deeper than anything I'd ever experienced before. It burned through everything, left everything exposed.

Through its whiteness, I saw the man atop me, saw his frayed clothing, his torn shirt. Something had once been stitched to the breast of his shirt, a symbol, the holes where the stitching had been torn out ragged and unraveling.

The Skewed Throne.

He'd once been a palace guard.

I glanced up into his face, frozen against the whiteness. His eyes were wide in shock, his attention turned inward. His mouth had parted, as if he'd been punched. Grit lined the corners of his eyes, his mouth, and mud streaked his hair.

I felt anger uncoil like a snake. Deep anger, resentful anger.

And then I saw the dagger.

The man's shirt was undone, the dagger exposed. Without thought, with a swiftness I'd learned long ago in the depths beyond the Dredge, a swiftness that had been honed while in the company of Dove and his gang, I snatched the dagger from its sheath.

And then the Fire passed beyond us. Night slammed down, harsh and hurtful.

There was a moment of stillness, filled with the man's tattered gasps, one hand still pressing down hard onto my chest, the other still tangled in the ties of his breeches.

Then the terror in his eyes faded as his attention shifted back to me. Shock twisted back into a snarl. His hand clenched on my chest, fingers digging deeper—

I slashed the dagger across his chest. A black ribbon of blood appeared, slick and smooth, and he lurched back. I didn't give him time to react further. I slashed again, the motion awkward and childish but purposeful. It caught his arm, a gash opening up, blood gushing outward, splattering hot across my face and neck. I slashed again, catching him in the thigh, and this time he screamed. A hideous, wet, animal scream that shattered the night.

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My last slash caught him in the throat. Blood flooded down his neck and he lurched farther back, one hand jumping to the wound, the other grasping at air as his back slammed against the wall he'd thrown me against earlier. He hung there, mouth gaping wide, blood slicking his shirt, until he slipped down the mud-brick and sat. His mouth began to work, opening and closing, and still the blood flowed. Guttural, rasping sounds emerged, ragged and torn.

I rolled into a huddled crouch. He grasped at me with his free hand, fingers closing on air. Blood coated the hand at his throat, until it glistened wetly in the moonlight. His grasping hand shuddered, its motions slowing. It began to lower, fingers still clenching, until it rested on the ground. And still the fingers spasmed. The muscles in the arms relaxed and the hand slid from his throat, leaving a second trail of blood down his shirt, a mark on his breeches. Blood dripped from the fingertips.

The guttural, rasping sounds continued, then degenerated into wheezing gasps of air.

Then these ceased as well.

And I fled. Back to the depths. Back to the Dredge.

Back to my niche, the dagger still clutched in my hand.

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In the courtyard, Erick wrapped his arms around my shuddering form and drew me in close, rocking me back and forth. The motions were awkward, as if he were unfamiliar with how to hold someone, how to comfort them. But I barely noticed, too absorbed in the memory of the Fire . . . and what had come after. I leaned into him and cried soundlessly.

I hadn't told him everything. I hadn't told him how the Fire had left part of itself behind, inside me, curled and dormant, how it flared up in warning when I was threatened. I didn't tell him that sometimes the Fire still burned.

After a long while, he gripped my shoulders and drew me away so that he could look into my eyes.

"He's dead now, Varis."

I nodded, sniffing, wiping at the tears streaking my face with both arms. "I know."

Erick stroked my hair, squeezed my shoulder once before standing. "Good." He glanced out into the night. The sun had set, the slums now dark except for the starlight. He sighed and turned back to me. "Are you going to be all right?"

I nodded again.

He hesitated, as if he didn't believe me.

I gathered myself and stood before him, looking him in the eye. "It happened almost five years ago. I'll be fine."

He held my gaze, searching, face grim, but finally nodded. "Then I'll see you tomorrow. I may have another mark by then. Someone for you and Bloodmark to search for. Together."

I grimaced but said nothing.

We never searched for the marks together.

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"Have you found him yet, *Varis*?"

I started, Bloodmark's voice emerging from the night shadows at my back. He'd twisted my name, Varis coming out as a vicious hiss, with a tone like that of the wagon owner so many years earlier who'd

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called me a whore. And somehow, Bloodmark's voice had the same force as that wagon owner's kick, sharp and bruising.

Bloodmark laughed when he saw me start, then settled into a crouch behind me that was uncomfortably close.

I shifted forward. My hand rested on my dagger.

"So have you found him? The 'pug-nosed man'? Is that what you call him?" Even whispered, Bloodmark's tone was mocking.

I frowned in annoyance, then lied. "No. And I call him Tomas."

I'd seen him the day before, but not on the Dredge. In one of the narrows. I'd tried to follow but had lost him almost immediately. He'd had no scent, like Garrell, and there were too many doorways, too many paths he could have taken. If the mark was out of sight, I couldn't find him using the river unless he also had a scent.

And I did call him the pug-nosed man.

I felt Bloodmark staring at my neck, felt my skin prickle, but I did not turn. I kept my attention fixed on the Dredge before me, shifted uncomfortably again.

"Liar," Bloodmark said softly. I could hear the smile in his voice. It sent a shudder down my back, forced me to turn and look at his eyes, cold and empty in the darkness. His birthmark was black in the moonlight.

He held my gaze without flinching. His smile widened slightly.

He *knew*—knew that I'd lied, knew that I'd found the pug-nosed man . . . or at least seen him.

I felt the faint sensation of a hand pressing against my chest, the sensation limned with the frost of the

Fire. It closed off the base of my throat, made it harder to breathe, to swallow.

I pulled away from Bloodmark's gaze with an effort, focused on the street ahead.

Bloodmark did the same, shifting far enough forward I could see his face out of the corner of my eye.

"What are we watching?" he asked, and this time he was genuinely curious.

My eyes flicked toward the white-dusty man's door involuntarily, toward the loose stone to the right of the doorway, and I saw Bloodmark's gaze shift, saw him frown as he settled back slightly.

The sensation of the hand against my chest grew. I suddenly didn't want Bloodmark to know about the white-dusty man, didn't want him to know about the bundles of bread the white-dusty man left beneath the stone outside the door if I left a length of linen there . . . and lately I'd needed to leave the linen more and more often. The slums were becoming even more crowded, the food more scarce. People were being less careless, had become more wary. If not for Erick and the white-dusty man . . .

I stood, startling Bloodmark enough he had to catch himself with one hand. His eyes flashed and his frown deepened. I stifled a brief surge of satisfaction at his reaction.

"Nothing," I said down to him. "Nothing at all." I suddenly didn't want Bloodmark anywhere near the white-dusty man's house.

I turned, retreated back into the alley, leaving the white-dusty man's empty doorway and Bloodmark behind. But I paused at the end and looked back.

Bloodmark still crouched near the alley's entrance,

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his gaze fixed on the white-dusty man's door. Though distant, I could see the frown on his face, the calculating, narrowed look around his eyes.

The hand of frost pressing against my chest flared, then died as Bloodmark shifted toward me. His frown dropped away and in a teasing voice that echoed strangely in the alley, he said, "Shall we hunt 'the pug-nosed man' tomorrow, Varis?"

Then, in a darker voice, "Yes. Yes, I think we shall."

†

I saw Bloodmark twice the next day. Each time he stood across the Dredge, back against a wall, arms crossed over his chest. His birthmark stood out a startling red in the sunlight. Each time he grinned and nodded, then pushed away from the wall and joined the flow of the crowd, turning into the nearest alley with a backward glance.

The pressure of the cold hand against my chest returned, tightening the base of my throat. But I pushed it down and focused on a loose bundle, a forgotten sack, a wagon of produce that couldn't afford to miss a single apple or potato. Not now. And I watched for Tomas.

Toward midday, a low rumble rolled through the sky and for a moment people paused, looking up.

The leading edge of a bank of black clouds was just beginning to emerge from the west. As I watched, it began to obscure the sun.

The light shifted, grew gray. When I glanced back down at the Dredge, people were moving swiftly, bundles tucked close, shoulders hunched. Desperation fought with weary resignation on their faces.

I sighed. So much for finding more food.

I scanned the thinning crowd as the light darkened further, but didn't see Bloodmark. With a last look at the sky, I turned into an alley and moved deeper into the depths beyond the Dredge, toward the narrow where I'd seen Tomas earlier.

By the time I settled into a crouch beside a heap of crumbled stone, it was raining. Heavy at first, it tapered off as the leading edge of the storm swept past, trailing wisps of whiter clouds beneath it. I let the water wash down my face where I crouched, felt it plaster my hair to my neck, my clothes to my body. The trickle of sludge that traced down the narrow's center grew to a stream.

I scanned the alley, then shifted against the slick mud-brick at my back and relaxed. Time to wait.

A few hours later, I heard a chunk of mud-brick skitter across cobbles. I lifted my head, glanced down the narrow through tendrils of hair dripping water. But the narrow was empty.

I thought about slipping beneath the river. Not far, just beneath the surface. But exhaustion had sunk into my muscles—from lack of sleep the night before, from the wait. So I shifted position instead, dismissed the muted skitter of stone against cobble.

I had just resettled, was about to drop my head forward again, when the prickling frost of the hand returned to my chest. Lightly, like ice rimming the edge of a hand-shaped puddle.

I froze, eyes still on the narrow. When nothing appeared immediately, I let my hand drift to my dagger.

Movement. So close I stiffened in shock, hand still inches from my dagger. But the figure that stepped

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from a shadowed doorway only paused briefly at the edge of the narrow, then began moving away.

My hand fell onto my dagger and I shifted forward, weight now in my toes. I steadied myself as I watched the figure through the sheets of wind-gusted drizzle. Because of the icy hand against my chest, I thought at first it was Bloodmark. But no. This man was too tall, too broad of shoulder.

He halted suddenly, shoulders stiffening as if he'd heard something, then turned.

It was the pug-nosed man. Tomas. His nose had been broken, crushed and flattened against his face. He scanned the narrow, dark eyes intent, brow furrowed with suspicion.

His gaze had just settled on where I crouched when the hand against my chest flared with ice and a shadow dropped from a window onto the pug-nosed man's back.

The two men went down in a heap, Tomas grunting in surprise. I jerked forward, then forced myself to stop.

Bloodmark had crushed the man to the ground, had him pinned with one knee, as Erick had pinned Bloodmark so many weeks before. Except the pug-nosed man's right arm was trapped beneath his chest.

As I watched, Bloodmark raised one arm, dagger held in one grip, and stabbed the pug-nosed man in the back. Once. Twice. Both strikes were high, in the shoulder muscles.

It happened in a strange, rain-muted silence, the narrow glistening with dampness. The only sounds were a low gasp from Tomas when Bloodmark's dagger struck. Then Tomas seemed to relax, shoulders sagging.

Bloodmark hesitated, dagger raised for another strike. After a moment, he shifted his weight.

The pug-nosed man heaved, pushing up hard with the arm trapped beneath his body. Bloodmark hit the side wall, head thudding against stone, then collapsed.

As smooth as a rat, the pug-nosed man stood and spun. His hand closed around Bloodmark's throat, then lifted the gutterscum's body as if it were made entirely of cloth and shoved him hard into the stone wall.

"You fucking little pissant urchin," the pug-nosed man snarled. "Did you think you could *rob* me? Huh? I have nothing you can gods-damned steal!"

Bloodmark's eyes widened as the man's hand tightened, and an instant later the gutterscum's hands flew to Tomas' arm, grasping at the muscles there.

Bloodmark had lost his dagger.

I saw the pug-nosed man's shoulders flex—even after Bloodmark had stabbed him there—and then he jerked Bloodmark away from the wall, lifted him higher, so his feet were no longer touching the ground, and shoved him back.

Bloodmark gasped again. The pug-nosed man's hand was now shoved up under his jawbone, half hidden in the folds of Bloodmark's flesh. The palm lay against Bloodmark's throat, and as I watched the pug-nosed man began crushing Bloodmark's windpipe.

Bloodmark's eyes flew even wider and his mouth opened, worked hard for breath. His fingers began to tear at the pug-nosed man's arm, gouging at the skin, drawing blood. Tomas snarled again, tightened his grip.

I hesitated. On the edge of the narrow, Tomas and

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Bloodmark a mere twenty paces away, I hesitated. I felt Bloodmark leaning in close as I lay helpless in the alley racked with nausea, smelled his breath, garlicky and stale, as he breathed, *Don't mess with me, bitch*. I saw him at the end of the alley the night before, his gaze on the white-dusty man's door, eyes dark and intent and unforgiving. I felt the nick of Bloodmark's blade during the bout, saw his self-satisfied grin as he retreated.

I hesitated and thought of Erick, how I'd felt when Erick had glanced up from kneeling on Bloodmark's back and I'd realized he'd meant to use Bloodmark. Erick was mine. I didn't want to share, didn't want to lose him. Erick didn't see how vicious Bloodmark was, didn't see the hatred in Bloodmark's eyes when he looked at me.

Tomas could solve that problem. All I had to do was walk away. I could pick up Tomas' trail again later.

My eyes narrowed as I watched Tomas push even harder, hand flexing as he shifted his grip.

My own hand tightened on my dagger, then relaxed. I began to turn away.

Then Bloodmark's feet began to kick, thudding into the slick stone at his back in a feeble, erratic rhythm.

I'd moved the twenty paces before I realized it, stood at Tomas' back in less than a heartbeat. He never heard me, too intent on Bloodmark's face, now beginning to turn red. My dagger slid up into his back, low, exactly as Erick had taught me. It was the only possible strike. Tomas was too tall for me to reach his throat, his body too close to Bloodmark's for me to get a clear cut in front.

I backed off instantly. In my head, I heard Erick's

voice, from the training sessions in the courtyards and darkened rooms beyond the Dredge: *It won't kill instantly, but they're dead just the same. They're walking dead men and they won't even know it. But they're usually pissed.*

Tomas grunted. It shouldn't have hurt that much— if done correctly, he'd never know he'd been stabbed— but I'd purposely tugged it as I removed the dagger so that he'd feel it. His head jerked toward me. Then he snarled and dropped Bloodmark.

Bloodmark gasped, sank forward onto his hands. His arms gave out and he collapsed to his chest, face pressed into the rain-wet sludge as he hacked in deep, harsh breaths.

I shoved Bloodmark from my mind, concentrated on Tomas. He'd turned toward me, reached around with one hand to feel his back.

It came away slick with blood and rain.

"You little fucker," he muttered. He glared at me, eyes so hard with hatred I stepped back. But I didn't hide, didn't cringe. I held my dagger before me and waited, weight balanced.

Tomas grinned. "Courageous little bitch, though."

He stepped forward and his eyes widened in shock as he staggered. He reached out to steady himself with one hand, managed to stumble a few steps farther. He leaned heavily against the rain-slick wall, trembling, breath coming in deep, wet gasps. Water trickled down his face, dripped from his upper lip and chin as his gaze fell on me again.

His eyes were no longer hard. They were surprised, and strangely confused.

"What did you do to me?" he gasped, swallowing with pain.

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He stood a moment more, bent slightly forward, wavering as he tried to keep his balance. Then he sagged to his knees, and like Bloodmark, fell forward onto his chest, his arms loose at his sides. He landed in the little stream of sludge near the center of the narrow and water began to fill his mouth, before pooling and escaping around his body.

I relaxed, stood straight.

Bloodmark coughed. "He was my mark," he muttered, voice broken and hoarse.

I frowned at him where he lay on the cobbles, too weak to rise. "Not anymore. Stay here. I'll get Erick."

"Wait!" he barked, but then broke out in ragged, hacking coughs. He tried to rise as I passed, but barely got his chest off the ground before collapsing again.

I ignored him, too pissed to care.

†

I found Erick at Cobbler's Fountain, standing at the edge of the circle. It was still raining. He wore a cloak—as almost everyone I'd seen outside in the rain this close to the real Amenkor did—the hood pulled over his head.

He straightened as I approached. "What's wrong?"

"Tomas is dead."

He nodded. "And did you mark him?"

"Bloodmark tried to kill him."

Erick tensed. Through the rain dripping from the front of his hood, I saw his expression harden, his jaw set. "Show me," he said.

I led him back to the narrow, the light darkening beneath the clouds even further as night fell. The drizzle slowed, then halted, and overhead the clouds began to

tatter, shredding like rotten cloth. The moon appeared. The air smelled crisp and fresh and I breathed it in deeply.

Tomorrow the Dredge would reek.

I noticed Tomas' body had been moved the instant I entered the narrow. I halted, Erick pulling up sharp behind me, his hood down.

"What is it?"

I drew breath to answer, then spotted Bloodmark.

He sat on his heels, back against the wall, a few paces farther down the narrow, almost hidden in the darkness. He turned as he saw us, face hard with anger.

"He was *my mark*," he said.

I lurched forward, knelt beside Tomas' body.

Bloodmark had rolled him onto his back, had beaten Tomas' face to a bloody, fleshy pulp. One ear had been ripped free and dangled loosely against the cobbles. Bruises lightly touched his neck but had not darkened. One side of his head had been crushed in, as if kicked. Or struck with a loose mud-brick.

And carved into his forehead was the Skewed Throne. The cuts were brutal and deep, exposing bone.

I choked on anger. The hot, flushed anger I'd felt staring down into the man's face in the alley off the Dredge. The same anger I'd felt as I sliced the Skewed Throne into Garrell's forehead.

I glanced up at Bloodmark and saw him draw back, eyes widening. I stood, stepped over Tomas' body.

"He was my mark!" Bloodmark barked, jerking upright, back scraping against the mud-brick.

I'd taken a single step forward, hand already on my dagger, when Erick stepped between us, his hand

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latching onto my shoulder, halting me. He faced Bloodmark, his back to me.

"Did you kill him?"

Bloodmark hesitated, hand going to his throat. The bruising from Tomas' grip had already darkened—a deep, ugly purple that appeared black in the moonlight.

"He was going to kill me," Bloodmark said.

Erick let me go, took a menacing step forward, and Bloodmark skidded farther down the wall.

"But did you kill him?"

Bloodmark shot a hateful glare at me. "No."

"Then he wasn't your mark!" Erick spat, and turned. He studied me for a moment, then stepped up next to me and stared down at Tomas' body.

He frowned. Anger darkened his eyes as well, mixed with something else. A hint of doubt. As if he were beginning to reconsider using Bloodmark. He knew I would never have beaten a mark, knew I would never have slashed the Skewed Throne so deeply into a mark's forehead.

A shiver of icy hope shot through the hot flush of my anger.

"Why did you try to kill him?" Erick asked finally. There was no doubt in his voice now, only anger.

Bloodmark had relaxed slightly, but tensed again. "Because he was the mark—"

Erick turned and with a single glare cut Bloodmark off. "No. You're only supposed to find them, then find me." He began to move forward, reached as if to grab Bloodmark's throat with one hand. But at the last moment he slapped his palm against the stone to the right of Bloodmark's head.

Bloodmark flinched, his hand still raised protectively to his throat.

"You only *find them*," Erick said in a low, angry voice. "Understood?"

Bloodmark snapped a narrowed glance toward me. But then something shifted deep inside his eyes. The glare sharpened, grew sleek and edged, like a honed blade.

Eyes locked on me, he asked, "The Mistress wanted him dead, didn't she?"

Erick pulled away, frowning. "Yes."

Bloodmark turned his gaze directly onto Erick and said with a confident, mocking smile, "Then it doesn't matter who kills him. He was my mark. It was my choice."

Erick's frown deepened, his own words thrown back into his face. He said nothing for a long moment, the air between them heavy with tension.

Then Erick pushed away from the wall. "And it almost got you killed."

I felt an acid surge of disappointment.

Erick turned away, dismissed Bloodmark without a sound. He began moving toward the end of the narrow. I couldn't believe he was leaving.

Bloodmark stepped forward, away from the wall, his hand dropping from his throat. "My choice," he said to himself, under his breath, as he watched Erick retreat.

Erick halted, back stiff. His gaze found mine.

His eyes were confused, uncertain, his face taut with anger. He knew Bloodmark was dangerous—I could see it—but he did nothing.

He must have seen the betrayal in my face for his

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shoulders sagged. He dropped his gaze and continued on toward the Dredge without a word.

Behind him, Bloodmark looked at me, eyes smug and defiant.

A cold, hard stone of hatred solidified in my chest, just beneath my breastbone.

When Bloodmark turned and left me alone with Tomas' body in the rain-soaked narrow, the stone remained.

I should have let Tomas kill him.