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BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE CRADLE SERIES



OF KILLERS AND KINGS

**THE ELDER EMPIRE :
LAST SHADOW**

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*To all my fans who would have preferred I delay these books even more: I'm
sorry this isn't **Cradle**!*

Please don't beat me.

PROLOGUE

PRESENT DAY

TARIK CRADLED THE BABY LEAFCRAWLER IN HIS ARMS, GLANCING AROUND THE misty morning for any prying eyes.

The Kameira squirmed in his hands, roughly the size and shape of a green-tinged baby rabbit with the bud of a flower emerging from its head. It would grow into the ability to ensure quick and healthy harvests, so Leafcrawlers were favorites of farmers the world over. Some less scrupulous alchemists could make supernaturally effective fertilizer with their body parts, but the practice was frowned upon by the Guild.

Tarik laughed at himself as he slipped through a gap that one of his friends had knocked in the fence. This Leafcrawler wasn't going to grow into *anything*. Not if the Great Ones were listening.

He wore a black, hooded robe with the Open Eye symbol of the Sleepless stitched onto his chest. He had sewn it himself, keeping it secret except during designated meetings.

They rarely accomplished anything during those meetings. It was mostly a way to complain about the state of the Empire and dream of all the things that would be possible once they were rewarded with Elder knowledge.

But unlike some other sects of the Sleepless, they weren't all talk. Tarik had seen miracles. His faith was strong.

Today, he would prove it.

Beyond the fence was a Greenwarden conservatory: a broad, rounded brick building with a domed roof of glass panels. Inside, the Guild had once kept rare Kameira and exotic plants from all over the world for the pleasure and education of the viewing public.

Now, thanks to the Imperialists, the Greenwardens had been driven out of the lands surrounding the Capital. These doors were chained shut and the windows boarded up. There would be no Kameira roaming beneath the glass sky.

It was perfect for a predawn meeting with no witnesses.

The Great Ones were looking out for Tarik and his brothers and sisters; they had sent a thick fog. On a morning like this, they could hold their summoning ritual on the front lawn and still no one would be the wiser.

Tarik slipped through a side door, where another compatriot had cut the chain and broken the lock. He carried the Leafcrawler inside, into the light of a single candle.

The entryway was filled with glass displays whose contents loomed like Elderspawn themselves in the flickering, shadowy candlelight. There was a stuffed bear, a cluster of reeds concealing a host of glittering eyes, and an alchemically preserved owl-like Kameira large enough to feed on donkeys.

He couldn't read the signs, but he wasn't here to learn natural history anyway. He slipped deeper inside, following the light of another candle.

Tarik found the rest inside the central garden, where the glass ceiling let in a little more light. The garden was filled with low bushes and the occasional tree—nothing that could break line of sight too much. When the conservatory was active, visitors had not been allowed down here. This was where the Greenwardens let the gentler Kameira run wild, living their lives while visitors watched from a walkway that circled the room from above.

It smelled of dew, dying flowers, and the powerful scent of old musk. Animals had roamed here, powerful animals that inherited control over the elements, and Tarik imagined he could feel their power hanging on the air.

It was the perfect place to send up their call.

The other five most dedicated Sleepless in the area—all with homemade robes—waited for him at the center of the garden. They had dug a wide circle into the soft earth, placing six mirrors evenly around the edge.

As it had been Tarik's job to locate a baby Kameira, the others had handled creating the mirrors, each of which had to bathe in the blood of an

unwilling victim every day for at least a week in order to build up the Intent necessary for this ritual. Elderspawn loved the scent of bloodlust.

They all also carried instruments; one woman held a tambourine, a man brought out a set of two hand drums, and Tarik himself had a small flute tucked away in his pocket. These objects had also been cultivated most carefully, handed down from previous generations of the cult with the sole Intent of calling the attention of the ancient ones.

The atmosphere was tense, excited, as Tarik placed the bound and squirming baby Kameira at the center of the circle. It had never looked more like a baby rabbit as it mewled and bleated, the leaves on its head shivering.

The Sleepless didn't speak any more than necessary. They had been waiting on this day for weeks...and in another sense, they had been waiting their entire lives.

They hadn't heard from the main cabal in more than a month, but their last command had been to cause chaos and bring down the Guilds.

Now, Tarik and the others were going to do just that. Their target was another Guild building practically next door to the conservatory: an alchemical workshop of Kanatalia. Unlike the Greenwardens, the alchemists were still plying their trade.

Dawn would see a shift change, those who worked the facility at night leaving as their replacements arrived. It was the time when the most people would be on site.

An opportunity to unleash pandemonium.

The mist outside had grown so thick that it pressed against the dome overhead, preventing him from seeing the sun, but he could still see the morning grow lighter. Dawn must have broken by now. Just to be sure, one of the others checked a pocketwatch and then nodded. The time had come.

They each settled into their position around the circle, standing next to a bloodstained mirror, holding their instruments. Tarik's heart fluttered as though he were about to play his flute for a grand audience.

In a way, he supposed, he was. What audience could be more distinguished than the Great Elders themselves?

When the drumbeat began, it was just ordinary music. Then the tambourine joined, followed by one flute and a bell.

It could have been his imagination, but Tarik thought he heard an unearthly chorus joining in, accompanying their music. The fifth person

joined, strumming a lute, and finally it was Tarik's turn.

As soon as he played the first note, he could tell that the music was more than natural.

The very earth seemed to shiver, the wind howling along, giving their song an eerie echo. The mist had even started to gather inside the dome, thickening so that the more distant shrubs in the gardens looked like nothing more than shadows.

Their music swelled to a crescendo, and it sounded as though it was produced by an entire orchestra. Tarik felt tears in his eyes as the notes came out sweeter and more profound than anything he could produce on his own. This was what it meant to belong to something greater than yourself.

Then, at the center of their circle, the earth exploded.

A dirt-brown worm with a mouth as thick as a child's torso erupted from underground at their call, devouring the baby Leafcrawler in a single gulp. It rose four feet from the hole in the soil, a lump sliding down the inside of its throat as it swallowed the Kameira.

Their music died.

For a long moment, Tarik was lost in shock and startled fear. It had *worked*. They had called and this minion of Kthanikahr had answered.

The Chasm Mouth was not a *friendly* Elder, so to speak. It would not share its knowledge with them. It saw humans as food. But, with the proper preparations, it could be directed.

It twisted its head like a snake, and if Tarik could have made out any obvious eyes on the thing, he would have said it was examining their mirrors warily.

Finally, its rounded mouth twisted into a horrible parody of human speech. "WHERE DO I FEED?"

Tarik fell to his knees. Not just to demonstrate respect, but because he was overcome with awe. "Oh Great One of the Worm Lord, we beg you to feed on those of the Alchemist's Guild only a thousand paces to the east of this location. You will deprive the Guilds of some of their brightest minds, plunging the Empire further into cleansing chaos!"

He was quite proud of that speech. It had taken him three nights to write and memorize.

What he *didn't* tell the Elderspawn was the reason behind their timing. One of their cult had a cousin who worked for the Alchemist's Guild, and the rumor was that Kanatalia was getting a delivery of rare materials today.

A strike today could disrupt their ability to produce potions and elixirs for months.

The cabal would reward them handsomely.

The worm's huge head twitched up, examining something over Tarik's head. "NOT ALONE."

Tarik turned, realizing to his surprise that the mist had thickened. It now looked like a gray wall only inches from his face. And not a wisp had crossed between the six members of the Sleepless; it was as though the presence of the Elderspawn was keeping the mist at bay.

He couldn't imagine that this burrowing worm's powers included summoning or controlling fog, but who knew what logic applied to Elders?

A clash rang out like spilled silverware, and Tarik looked to the source. The tambourine had fallen to the ground.

Of the woman who had played it, there was no sign.

He heard a groan, and then one of Tarik's friends was slumped over his hand-drums. Blood spread slowly from a wound in his back.

Tarik's breath came faster and faster, and the terror he felt now made what he'd experienced earlier feel like nothing. There was something in the mist.

Before he could be the next to disappear, he ran.

Plunging into the mist to escape felt like diving into the ocean to flee a hungry shark, but he had no choice. The Sleepless had clearly been corralled there, surrounded by the fog, and there shouldn't be too many *things* lurking out of sight. If they outnumbered Tarik and his friends, they would have attacked rather than striking from stealth.

So maybe he could escape while it picked off his friends one by one. It was the only chance he had.

The mist was so thick that he could barely see his hand in front of his face. More than once he almost ran into a bush or tree that leaped out of nowhere. Was he getting closer to the exit? He couldn't tell.

He tripped, sprawling to the grass, then looked back to see what had tripped him.

It was a black-clad body with another flute clutched in its fist. The man's throat had been slit.

Tarik choked down a scream.

Here and there, he caught glimpses of black figures moving through the mist. Were those the enemy? Or were they just trees?

A roar that must have belonged to the Chasm Mouth shook the garden, and it was close. Too close. Tarik had been running long enough that he should have been able to make a lap of the entire enclosure; how had he ended up back where he started?

Just as he had the thought, he stumbled through the mist and into a clearing.

No, not *a* clearing. The only clearing. The very place he'd started.

All the other Sleepless were missing, even the bodies, but he wasn't alone. The great worm of Kthanikahr lay dead, collapsed like a tree on the ground, leaking purple blood.

A figure knelt on the Elderspawn's body. It was wearing gray, so close in color to the mist that it was hard to make out the outline of its body. A hood covered the top half of the stranger's face and a mask of cloth covered their mouth and nose.

They pulled a dagger out of the body, purple blood evaporating from it like an illusion. The blade glowed softly silver-blue, like moonlight shining through this thick fog.

The figure tilted its hood slightly, regarding him.

Tarik found enough courage to speak. "Who...who are you?"

The figure spoke in a woman's ice-cold voice. "Take him."

Before the end of the second word, a black bag settled over Tarik's head. He screamed.

It did him no good.

CHAPTER ONE

*The King will open / discover / become the door to us.
He will allow us to escape / live / return.
The Killer is made to slay those like him.
If she survives, she will not allow him to live / reign / evolve.*

—TRANSLATED RAMBLINGS OF AN ELDER-TOUCHED MADWOMAN IN THE CARE OF
THE LUMINIAN ORDER
(TRANSLATION WIDELY DISPUTED)

PRESENT DAY

RAINWORTH WAS A CITY CLOSE TO THE CAPITAL, BUT SHERA ONLY KNEW IT because of their fish. Hawkers on Capital streets had promised “fresh Rainworth fish,” though the fish twenty miles south couldn’t be much different from those caught in Candle Bay itself.

They definitely don’t smell any better, she thought as she hid in the corner of a fishmonger’s shop.

Though she called the building a “shop,” it was the size of a busy warehouse on the Capital docks, with workers gutting and scaling and sorting fish meat on an industrial scale. Fish was big business in Rainworth.

She had curled herself up beneath a table that was stacked with boxes—dry boxes. She wasn’t desperate enough to hide underneath one of the crates dripping with blood. The scent of dead fish wasn’t unpleasant, exactly—they weren’t rotten—but it choked out everything else.

Though the tablecloth covered her, she wouldn't be able to sleep here. That was all right, so long as Yala didn't find her.

Name an Elder and she appears...

Yala's pleasant customer-voice carried through the busy shop. "Excuse me, I don't mean to stop your work, but I'm looking for a young woman..."

Shera tucked her hands and feet further beneath the cloth.

She was uncomfortable here, but at least she was safe. If Yala had come in person, that meant she'd tracked Shera somehow, but she still couldn't know for *sure* that Shera was here. As long as Shera remained motionless, no one should find her.

The tablecloth behind her lifted and Kerian peeked in.

The older Gardener had the dark skin of a native Heartlander, her graying hair tied into a hundred tiny braids in a cultural style that imitated Loreli, Regent of the West. A thin scar ran down the center of her face, from her forehead down through her nose and diving into the shroud of black cloth that covered her mouth.

When Kerian frowned, the scar crumpled up between her brows. She was frowning now.

"What are you doing here, Guild Head?" asked the woman who had recruited Shera as a little girl.

"Guild business," Shera said, curling up into a tighter ball.

The cloth over Kerian's mouth scrunched up as she stared speechlessly at Shera.

"This is a top-secret assignment," Shera said, "so why don't you tell High Mason Yala that her presence is no longer required?"

Kerian glanced around the interior of the table. With a heavy breath, she slipped under the table and into a seated position inside, letting the tablecloth fall behind her.

She wore the skintight black silks that symbolized the Gardeners and Shepherds, the two orders of Consultant that counted on stealth as part of their training. The same blacks that *Shera* was no longer allowed to wear.

Shera's was the same style: it covered her from the tips of her toes up to her neck while the shroud of cloth covered her face up to the nose. But her clothes were gray, meant for blending into Bastion's Veil. And they had the addition of a hood that fell over her head, dangling over her forehead.

She didn't care how it looked, she cared that it set her apart. Yala had ordered it especially for her from the day Shera had bound her second

Vessel and the Guild had named her Mistress of the Mists. Their ancient Guild Head.

Now, the rest of the Guild waited on her orders unless she was gone, in which case they deferred to the High Council of Architects. Though they'd leaned exclusively on the Council for generations uncounted.

Shera planned on being gone as much as possible.

"Guild Head," Kerian said formally, "the Regents are due to arrive at any moment. We would like to brief you on current events before they do."

Shera groaned and leaned her head back against one of the table legs. "Yala can do it."

"The Regents know you. They trust you. And they expressed great excitement that you were acting in your capacity as Head of the Consultants."

Shera groaned again. "I can put on a show for the rest of the Guild when I have to," she allowed. "And I never mind rounding up Sleepless. But I don't see why we *need* a Guild Head at all."

She especially wasn't sure why she had to do it personally. She hadn't asked for the position—surely there had to be others that wanted it. Maybe Kerian herself.

They had lost the Gray Island. Meia could more than carry Shera's share of any battle. As for this conflict between the Guilds...Shera had done her work for the Independent cause by killing the Emperor and freeing the Regents. If you thought of it that way, she had already done more for the cause than anyone else.

She didn't see why she shouldn't be allowed to retire.

...and Lucan was gone.

Shera pushed that thought away and refocused herself on Kerian, who was regarding her with a curious expression.

"...you have shouldered a great deal of responsibility on behalf of our Guild, especially for someone who never asked for it. Do you really feel such little attachment to the Consultants?"

"I'm very attached to *some* Consultants."

There were only a few individuals to whom Shera felt she owed loyalty. Kerian was one of them, as was Meia. The Emperor had been one. So had Lucan.

It felt like the list grew smaller every day.

Kerian placed a hand on Shera's knee. "Then for *our* sake, Shera, please play this role. Stop acting like a child and help us. You're the only one who can do this."

Shera threw her head back and took a long, slow breath. She *was* being childish, she knew that, but why should she care? She wasn't bothered by what the others thought of her. And they could handle the Guild.

Deliberately, she blew out those thoughts along with her breath. She let her hand drift down to her right side, where her shear rested in its sheath.

Bastion, the second of her Soulbound Vessels, waited there with placid detachment.

We will cleanse and protect, the Vessel whispered to her. *Cleanse and protect*.

Its message calmed her and helped her focus, which made her glad for the absence of her other Vessel. Syphren was anything but calming.

"Thank you, High Gardener," Shera said to Kerian. She sounded colder than she meant to, but maybe that was the price of her newfound focus. "Let's go."

They emerged from under the table to find Yala waiting for them.

Yala glowered with arms crossed, her gray-streaked blonde hair tied back into a tight tail. Not a single strand of hair escaped. She didn't wear Consultant blacks, but a white cotton blouse, brown skirt, and a leather vest of pockets filled with devices for some profession that Shera couldn't identify.

She had risen from the Masons, not the Gardeners, so she had spent most of her career undercover. Though Shera had difficulty imagining Yala pretending to be anything other than what she was.

"We're late," the High Mason snapped. "May we talk as we walk, Guild Head?"

Shera strode past her. "Now we're waiting on you."

In the weeks since Bastion had Awakened, Yala had been the one most dedicated to Shera's new identity as the Mistress of the Mists. Quite a turn from her previous attitude of treating Shera like an enemy agent who had come to betray the Consultants from within.

But she had her own ideas of what Shera should be doing with her title.

Yala kept up easily, even as Shera and Kerian slipped through a secret door in the back corner of the shop. Shera would have risked exposure by walking around in her uniform, except that everyone working on the

Rainworth docks and in this fish warehouse was employed by the Consultant's Guild. They were either Masons performing a mundane job in order to keep information flowing back to the Consultants or workers hired to keep their eyes open.

Even so, Shera and the High Councilors took a hidden exit.

The door led to a covered alley outside, where a knotted rope rested against the wall of the building next door. All three women scaled it easily, and when they reached the rooftop, the sun was just starting to set. There would be plenty of ways to spot them from the street.

Shera rested a gloved hand on her shear.

Bastion's power had many uses, and she was only beginning to discover them, but the simplest and easiest was the creation of mist. She tapped into its icy power and spread it into the surrounding air, which quickly began to grow thick as though with smoke.

To avoid drawing undue attention to their location, she spread the mist around the entire district of town, slowly thickening it until no one would be able to make out any details on the roof.

"Strange weather we're having," Kerian observed lightly.

"May I begin my report now?" Yala asked. She had no patience for jokes, and Bastion's Veil would help to muffle their voices from eavesdroppers. Not much, as thin as this barrier of fog was, but they should be safe to start.

Shera began trekking over roof tiles. "First, have they made any progress with Syphren?"

"The alchemists are trying something tomorrow morning, but our Readers are convinced it won't work. Blackwatch spikes are invested with Intent so strange that they might be Elder devices themselves. It would be better to consult the Regents."

Bliss, Head of the Blackwatch, had driven a six-inch iron spike through Shera's left-hand shear. Normally that should have broken the dagger, but the Blackwatch spikes were ancient weapons meant to seal Elderspawn and pin them down alive.

The spike had somehow fused with her weapon, quieting it and keeping it dormant. Shera was grateful that Syphren's voice was now gone from her head, but she needed its power back to continue fighting Elders and Imperialists.

“Speaking of your meeting with the Regents,” Yala said, muscling the conversation back on topic, “they said they would arrive at sunset, which gives you little time. You need to know what they will say before they say it. Even without access to the Gray Island vaults, Consultants should be well-informed.”

Without a word, they slipped off a roof onto a conveniently positioned ladder and down into a waiting carriage, which lurched into motion the second they entered.

“First of all,” Yala continued, “since the Gray Island, we have managed to avoid any direct conflict with the Imperialists. As long as they have Champion support, we couldn’t win a military contest anyway. We’ve done better on the public opinion front, but the longer *that* lasts, the more people will panic and look for a single voice of authority.”

On the word “that,” she jabbed her finger upward.

Though Shera couldn’t see the sky from within the covered carriage, she knew what Yala was referring to. Starting a few months before, the sky had been cracked.

It was a single hairline crack that looked something like a frozen black bolt of lightning, but anyone who saw it knew it was unnatural. Elder work.

“Have the Regents made no progress restoring it, then?” Kerian asked.

“Not that we can tell, and I would call that a topic to avoid tonight,” Yala said, giving Shera a sharp glance. “If they have made significant progress, the Regents will bring that up. If they don’t, we can reasonably assume that they are as lost as the rest of us.”

The wound in the sky, as best the Consultants could determine, had been made using the Optasia—the Emperor’s throne. Without access to it, there was little they could do.

“What did we learn from that cultist?” Shera asked.

She had made quite a show when she abducted the cultist Tarik, mostly for the benefit of the Shepherds accompanying her on the mission, but she had passed over the duties of interrogating him immediately. She’d gone to sleep.

Yala folded her hands in her lap. “As we already knew, various cults have banded together under the banner of the Sleepless. The Eyes of Crossing, the Sisters of the Fading Moon, the Lamplighters. All calling themselves Sleepless now, so either this is a coordinated effort of humans to appear united or the Great Elders have begun uniting their people.

“Recently, we have confirmed that the Sleepless cabal are trying to cause as much disruption to the Guilds as possible. All Guilds. Both sides. We speculate, and the Luminians agree, that the Great Elders fear Guild unity.”

At least the Great Elders hadn’t chosen to back the Imperialist *or* Independent Guilds. If they sided against the Consultants, there was no way that Shera and the others could possibly win. If they sided *with* the Consultants...

Then they would have to give up. If the Great Elders supported a cause, then that cause should be abandoned.

Kerian’s eyes closed as though she was afraid she knew what Yala was about to say, which caused Shera to pay closer attention.

“The Imperialists have made overtures of peace,” Yala continued. “In the name of their Imperial Steward, Calder Marten.”

Shera’s lips tightened, but she couldn’t avoid hearing Calder’s name. She would have expected the Imperialist Guild Heads to have abandoned Calder by now in favor of one of their own, but somehow the Navigator had managed to cling to his position.

Not that it mattered what figurehead sat at the front of the ship. What mattered was their peace treaty.

“Are all the Regents coming tonight?” Shera asked.

“Estyr and Loreli are flying in together. Jorin’s location is unknown, but our intelligence suggests that he has hired a Navigator ship under a false name in order to explore something in the deep Aion.”

The Regent of the South was well-known for his curiosity, so he could be after anything.

“Even so, if they have sent both available Regents together, they must consider this important,” Kerian said, with her own significant glance to Shera.

Shera understood, she just didn’t like it. “Are they meeting with all the Independent Guild Heads?”

“They have already consulted the other three,” Yala said. “They are likely to lean toward unification, at least until the immediate threat of the Elders is resolved. By uniting under the Steward, they can help steer him in whatever direction they decide.”

Shera had interacted with the Regents enough to understand the rest of their view. As they saw it, Imperialism without the Emperor was just

delaying the inevitable. The Empire would last at most for the rest of Calder Marten's life, and more likely not even that long. This would give them enough time to put systems in place so the Empire could fall apart gracefully.

"What about the other Guilds?" Shera asked.

"The Greenwardens and Luminians are for peace. The alchemists are against it." Yala stared at her, waiting for her next question.

"What about us?"

"That is for you to decide," Yala said immediately. She'd had that response loaded. "However, the Council of Architects *advises* that we take advantage of the opportunity for a ceasefire."

Shera thumbed the hilt of her shear. "Better to be as close as possible. We can take advantage of any further...opportunities."

Yala's gaze remained firm. "Correct."

It was nice to be on the same page as Yala for once.

As the carriage began to rumble to a halt, Kerian held up a hand to interrupt them. "But of course, we should plan no violent action before informing the Regents. We wouldn't want to blindside our real allies."

Before the carriage had come to a complete stop, the door opened itself. A tall woman stood outside, blonde hair and long black coat blowing in the ocean breeze. Three serpentine skulls floated in orbit around her head.

She grinned and raised a hand.

"Hey, Shera!" Estyr Six called. "That color looks good on you."

Shera grimaced and raised her hood to complete the outfit. She intended to make a sarcastic remark about the grays, but the other Regent was giving her a very formal bow.

"Many years have passed since I last exchanged greetings with a Mistress of the Mists," the other Regent said. "It is an honor to see such ancient traditions returned to life."

Loreli looked like she could be Kerian's daughter. She was one of the original Heartlanders, and her hair was tied into dozens of braids just like Kerian's.

Although, of course, it was the other way around. Loreli's appearance was remembered in art and history the world over, so her hairstyle had gone in and out of fashion for centuries.

Loreli had a rounded, cherubic face, so she would look girlish even for a woman of twenty-five. Much less a woman who had been born before the

Empire. She was shorter than Estyr—about Shera’s height—and compact with well-trained muscle. Her outfit resembled a military uniform, though it was almost entirely white. She was the founder of the Luminian Order, after all.

A silver medallion with a white diamond at its center—the White Sun, symbol of the Unknown God—rested outside her uniform. Shera supposed that must be the original. She carried a white-handled saber belted to her hip, and her hand adjusted it automatically as she lifted from her bow.

Not long ago, Shera had visited the headquarters of the Luminian Order. The entire place exuded an aura of wholesome safety and satisfaction that Shera had immediately distrusted. Loreli seemed like the personification of that aura: formal and serious, but with a warm, compassionate heart beneath.

Shera didn’t like her.

It wasn’t as though she thought Loreli couldn’t be trusted. If her reputation was to be believed, she might be the most trustworthy person alive. But that alone was...unnatural. It made Shera uncomfortable.

So instead of making some comment about how she had been forced into the role of Mistress of the Mists, she shot Estyr a look over Loreli’s shoulder and then addressed the Luminian Regent. “Thank you, Regent Loreli. If you haven’t met already, please allow me to introduce my companions, High Mason Yala and High Gardener Kerian.”

The two High Councilors immediately took to their roles, greeting the Regent more fluidly than Shera had while Shera herself slid up to speak with Estyr.

“The crown weighs heavy, does it?” Estyr asked.

“At least it’s just a hood. If they made me wear a crown, I’d go swim down to Kellarac.”

Shera winced after she said it. Naming the Great Elders in front of this woman was a mistake.

Estyr fired back without missing a beat: “Now, that *would* be a mistake. We nailed him to the ocean floor at the center of the Aion. You’re risking more than death just getting there.”

She gave a wink that said she wasn’t offended by Shera digging up harsh memories, and Shera relaxed.

Yala and Kerian had finished their introductions, and Shera subtly signaled them away. She could handle it from here.

Though she had no doubt they'd spy on her the entire time.

"Regents, allow me to introduce you to the new headquarters of the Consultant's Guild." She gestured to the building in front of them, turning their attention so that Kerian and Yala could sneak away.

The building was the Rainworth Imperial Library.

Shera spoke as they walked up the marble steps and in between the pillars leading to the doors. "This library was once one of a number of emergency shelters intended to help evacuate the Capital, so it had three underground floors equipped to withstand a siege. We've taken them over."

Sometimes, Shera surprised herself with how easily she could slip into client-speak. Her primary client had been the Emperor himself, and she hadn't needed to watch her words with him very often. But for most of the last two years, she'd worked in the Capital chapter house.

"Everything is training." One of Maxwell's favorite sayings.

The doors swung open, pulled by two Miners in their capacity as library staff. The interior was an ordinary—though ornate—functioning library. Most walls were lined with bookshelves, shielded writing-desks allowed for quiet places to read or write, and white-gold quicklamps lit the entire place instead of open flames.

There was only one difference between this library and any other: no one was here to borrow a book. The Rainworth Imperial Library had been closed to the public for a month. Ever since the Consultant's Guild had shaken off Navigator pursuit and made landfall.

They moved downstairs as Shera continued her verbal tour.

"The Miners almost made a suicide pact after we lost their vaults. They're afraid the Imperialists might destroy the centuries of information they've gathered, so they might be the angriest allies we have. If we asked them to charge an Imperial Guild with pitchforks and torches, they'd do it."

Estyr peered into the lower floor as they arrived, which currently served as equipment storage. The floor was mostly open, broken only by the occasional load-bearing pillar, but it was *packed* with everything useful they had managed to scrounge from the Gray Island or bring in from Consultant assets all over the region.

"They think the Imperialists will destroy their information?" Estyr asked. "Not use it against us?"

The place was a busy hive of activity, Consultants both in and out of uniform sorting or digging through piles of tools, but each one took a

moment to bow toward the Regents.

Loreli gave them a sunlit smile and a wave. Estyr ignored them.

“No one but the Miners can get into the vaults,” Shera continued. “Even if they could, it would take a hundred Readers a lifetime to sort it all without our ciphers.”

Loreli nodded as though Shera had said something wise. “The Gray Island defenses are ingenious. It was a terrible location to lose. I’m so sorry I wasn’t there to help defend it.”

It took all of Shera’s willpower to remind herself that the Luminian Regent wasn’t mocking her.

Although she did wonder if the apology was warranted. Two Regents *had* been on site for the battle of the Gray Island, but they had still been driven off by enemy Guild Heads and the arrival of the Champion’s Guild. She wasn’t sure what one more Regent could have changed.

Then again, Loreli was renowned by historians for her tactical mind. Maybe her presence could have turned the tide.

Shera indicated a row of chalkboards nearby, each manned by a young Architect apprentice on a stool. “Fortunately, we were able to recover much of our communications from the Gray Island, either on our Navigator vessel or from remote backup storage sites afterwards.” The Architects all had pads of paper and scribbled furiously whenever a piece of chalk levitated up the surface of the board and scratched out a message.

“These are made possible by pairs of invested magnets connected to one another over great distance. When the primary one is lifted, so is the other on our end.”

She nodded to an empty set of cages. “The main cages are on the roof, but we also use Kameira messengers called Flitwhips that we keep in coveys. They can’t go as far as Izyria, but they can make it down to Vandenyas in only four days round-trip.”

“We used specialized Soulbound for communication over great distances,” Loreli said. “They were highly prized. Is that still common practice?”

“We hire the services of three Soulbound with communication Vessels, though only one of them is officially part of our Guild,” Shera responded. “And, of course, we still have the largest network of ordinary messengers in the world.”

She was glad that Yala and Kerian had kept her apprised of all these Guild operations, no matter how the lectures had bored her at the time. If they were going to make her do the job, at least they had equipped her to do it.

Estyr had drifted over to the chalkboards, which caused the young Architects to immediately break into sweat. The skulls drifting around her head almost scraped their boards.

“Jorin would just *love* this,” she muttered.

That sparked another piece of trivia in Shera’s mind. “I can find out for sure, but I think he was the one who created the first set.”

Estyr gave a wry smile. “Of course he was.”

While Shera was being forced to act as a Guild Head, she may as well do her best. She continued showing off the various assets of the exiled Consultants as she worked their way to the back of the room. The more she demonstrated their value to the Regents without giving away too many Guild secrets, the better.

Finally, they reached a door set into the wall. This had once been a food storage closet, but the High Council had emptied and refitted it for secure meetings.

Shera opened the door and gestured the two Regents inside. “After you.”

The round table within had been set with three chairs, with a selection of snacks in front of two of them. Loreli’s seat had a pitcher of chilled water and a selection of fruits, Estyr’s an aged bottle of wine and some smoked meats and cheeses.

The table in front of Shera’s chair was bare. Of course.

Estyr sat eagerly, letting her three Vessels float to a gentle halt lined up on the table next to her. “You can never fault Consultant hospitality,” she said.

Loreli murmured thanks and began sipping her water.

Shera looked at the empty setting in front of her and sighed. “The room is both invested and alchemically sealed against eavesdropping,” Shera said. “Although you may want to make your own preparations.”

Estyr leaned back into her chair, tearing off a piece of a grilled chicken drumstick. “We are.”

Shera tried not to look at the food as her mouth watered.

Loreli swallowed a grape and explained: “By using the room for a conversation we don’t wish to be overheard, we are investing it. It would take considerable power to break through our Intent, and I doubt anyone could do so without us noticing.”

“So we’ll just dive right into it,” Estyr said with her mouth full. “They’ve made us a deal.”

Shera didn’t see why Yala had needed to tell her the Regents’ message before *they* could, but she still played the part of the omniscient Consultant. “Peace between the Guilds. Allbright and Stillwell are onboard, but Bareius is hesitant. He has invested too much of his fortune not to end up on top.”

Loreli tilted her glass in Shera’s direction. “As expected of the Am’haranai.”

“You intend to accept an agreement under their terms,” Shera went on. “We agree.”

“Why?” For no reason that Shera could discern, Estyr closed one eye and watched Shera’s reaction through the lens of her golden wine.

“Conflict between Guilds costs too much, and it’s stupid to worry about each other when the Elders have cracked open the sky.”

Loreli looked deeply grieved by the mention of the fracture, and a brief expression of anger crossed Estyr’s face. So they *hadn’t* made progress on healing the sky. Shera would have to tell...

She had almost thought “tell Lucan.”

I’ll have to tell the Guild, she thought, gripping her thoughts firmly.

Estyr set down her glass without drinking. “What about you, Shera? What do *you* think?”

For just a second, Shera dropped all pretense. “I think we should stay close in case we need to stab them in the back.”

The first Champion nodded once, understanding, and then drained her glass of wine.

Shera had expected Loreli to react like a Luminian Pilgrim: righteous and disapproving. Instead, she cupped her chin in her hand, considering. “If we intend to strike at their leadership, we don’t need any sort of treaty. If that is our plan, let’s act now. Land Estyr on the roof of the Imperial Palace while a squad of Am’haranai infiltrate the servants.”

That was a viable plan. Shera had looked into it.

Loreli continued, “However, I see little advantage there. Our true enemies are not the Guild Heads. Our enemies are, as they have ever been,

the Great Elders.”

“So what does Ach’magut *not* want us to do?” Estyr rested her head in her hands. “That question has always given me a headache.”

Shera was sure the Regents had already looked into the Elder cultists, but she shared their information anyway. “The Sleepless have been instructed to deepen the divide between Guilds. That suggests the Great Elders don’t want us to unify.”

“Does it?” Loreli asked sadly. “Or are they trying to give us no choice *but* to unify? Under one banner, we once again have a single point of vulnerability.”

That thought hung heavy over the room for a long moment as Estyr dove into her pile of cheese.

Shera didn’t understand why they were asking her opinion at all. She guessed they wanted all the Independent Guilds to speak with one voice voluntarily, not because they were coerced by the Regents.

But as long as they *were* asking her, she would continue playing the part. “You’re the experts on the tactics of the Great Elders. If you detect any Elder influence, let us know, and we can draw blood for real. Until you do, I think we should stay close.”

She quoted Maxwell. ““There’s no one more honest than a man with a dagger to his throat.””

Loreli and Estyr traded glances, and Shera was reminded that while they had slept for hundreds of years, they had also lived for at least two hundred years awake. Their bodies were maintained by alchemy and ancient Intent.

Finally, they both lifted their glasses to her in silent accord.

Shera didn’t have a glass to lift, so she drew her shear, which filled the room with the silver-blue light of Bastion’s Veil.

“I’m going to find some food,” Shera said.

CHAPTER TWO

SEVENTEEN HUNDRED AND EIGHTY YEARS AGO

HE FINALLY THOUGHT OF HIMSELF AS THE EMPEROR.

The people he saved had named him years ago. First, they called him Liberator, then Emperor in the hopes that he would lead them. And he would, because he was a different man now. One who could do what was necessary.

The man he had once been could never have destroyed the world.

He hovered in the thin air above the clouds, clutching a still-beating heart in his right hand. He took a moment to survey his injuries: he was surprisingly unscathed. Only a rib that might be cracked, a few minor cuts and bruises, and a broken foot. Most humans who opposed a Great Elder left insane or in pieces.

His partner in rebellion drifted on the wind a few feet away. Estyr Six stared down through the fluffy white islands that were the clouds, a trio of hydra skulls orbiting her head like a macabre halo. It was her power that kept them aloft now, high above the churning devastation below.

A jet of steam blasted into the sky, missing Estyr by only a few yards. She didn't seem to notice. "Did Loreli make it out?"

The last the Emperor had seen of his daughter, Nakothi's dread Handmaidens were devouring her army piece by piece. He couldn't imagine her—or anyone—making it out alive. "If she did not, then we must shoulder her responsibilities as well."

And may her soul fly free.

The sheer scope of the destruction made him wonder if he and Estyr were the only living humans left for a thousand miles. The earth shook and rolled like the sea in storm, fire boiling up from below. The ocean rushed in from all sides, meeting magma in explosions of steam. Towering cathedrals toppled, crashing into fortresses and smashing homes to dust.

The death throes of Nakothi, the Dead Mother, had destroyed this land. Were still destroying it, in fact—the Great Elders did not die easily. Miles to the west, her great body heaved, breaking mountains. A single hand big enough to blot out the sun thrust into the sky, reaching up as if for salvation. Her pained screams cut through even the cracking of a shattering continent.

Estyr swept a chunk of charred blond hair out of her eyes, watching Nakothi die. Her clothes and hair were singed, her skin almost invisible beneath a layer of scrapes and slices. Toward the end, she had fought on the front lines against the Mother's dead legions. The Emperor had been more concerned with Nakothi herself.

“What are we going to do when they’re gone?” Estyr asked.

“The war is not won yet,” he replied. “Her kind still rule.”

Through a break in the clouds, he watched a clutch of lesser Elders gather on a rooftop. They clacked their mandibles together or waved luminous tentacles at the sky. Begging for help or for vengeance, he didn't care. They would find no satisfaction. He smiled to himself as a wave of steam washed over them, cooking them alive.

“When it is over,” Estyr continued, “what do you have planned? You want to pick up the whip yourself?”

She knew the answers. They had discussed this often enough. She looked to him for reassurance. He could have given her what she wanted, repeating the comforting half-truths and the slogans they had practiced together for years.

Instead of assurance, he decided to give her the truth. Truth that he alone had discovered.

“The Great Elders do not die, Estyr.”

She waved to the flailing giant in the distance. “She's making a big show for nothing, then.”

“I know you must have suspected,” he continued. “They do not live as we understand it. Destroying them will give us some time in which to rebuild, but destruction alone will not save us. In one century or a hundred, the Great Elders will rise again.”

Estyr turned back to him, and the skulls around her head spun with such ferocity that they blended together into one off-white circle. “Then we will destroy them again. And *again* and *again* and *again*, until it sticks. Or until they learn who owns this world.”

The fire in her voice raised his spirits. If he could inspire all of humanity with one-tenth of her resolve, they could scour this world clean of Elder-spawn inside a year.

But that would never happen. Estyr Six was one in ten million, and the common man could never rise to her level. Which was why he had devised a plan.

He lifted the heart in his right hand.

She seemed to notice it for the first time. “Is that your solution? What is it?”

He answered her simply. “A heart of the Dead Mother.”

“Is *that* why you fought alone? You wanted to...keep a piece?” The fury in Estyr's voice burned hotter than the magma below.

“I have Read it, Estyr,” the Emperor said.

The reptilian skulls spinning above her froze. Her eyes widened. “How? The others lost their minds.”

“Indirectly. I Read the ground on which it sat, the wind that surrounded it, the men and women it had driven insane. Finally, when I had acclimated myself to its nature, I was able to Read Nakothi's heart.”

It had taken him days, during which the injured Mother had raged, her armies spilling out over the land like a plague. All of his concentration had to go into preserving his mind; he had to forget the thousands dying in his name all over the continent.

Until, at last, he found the secret.

“One question haunted me. How can we oppose the Great Ones as mortals? Do we leave the truth to our children? To our children's children? When the terror of the Elders fades to myth, and our enslavement is nothing but a legend?”

The gray-green heart pulsed in his fist, slowly weakening.

“With this, I will become timeless as they are timeless. I will rule over an undying Empire. And when the Elders return, they will find that the children they once bound have grown into warriors.”

Estyr slipped her hands into the pockets of her jacket. She was careful to keep her expression from her face, but he could read her Intent radiating

into the air: shock, exhaustion, awe, and horror bled off of her in waves.

"How?" she asked.

"I will bind myself to the heart," he said. "When it is my Soulbound Vessel, Nakothi's life will be my own."

She waved that answer away. "No, *that* I understand. I mean your Empire. If you want to build an eternal Empire, then it has to be stronger than what we had. How will you outdo the Elders?"

His vision burned inside of him, desperate to be spoken.

Until now, he had never understood how much he had yearned to tell Estyr his plans. To share the Empire with her.

"The greatest weapon of the Elders is human ignorance. When we first began to observe the world around us, we discovered Reading. *We* created the Soulbound. *We* crafted instruments of deadly Intent that can bring down even the Dead Mother herself. To know the universe is to control it, and by the time Nakothi and her brood awaken, they will discover that humanity rules even them."

"You sound like Jorin," she said wryly. "He always believed books would save us all."

"He is a wise man," the Emperor replied. Then he gave her time to think.

Estyr Six bobbed up and down in midair as she thought, letting her power take her in circles like a kite on a string. The Emperor waited in anticipation, Reading her feelings through her Intent. No other Reader was capable of working so subtly, of picking up such tenuous signals through such an unreliable medium as air.

But he was not like any other Reader.

Finally, Estyr gathered her resolve: her Intent sharpened like a well-honed knife. "I'll trust you," she said. "I decided that ten years ago, in the mines. I'll fight for you, I'll help you gather the others, and I'll bring them under your banner." She smiled, crooked and playful, a remnant of the Estyr before years of rebellion. "And on the day I die in battle, I hope to see you young, healthy, and wearing a crown. I don't believe in this plan of yours...but I believe in you."

Dropping down to one knee on top of a cloud, Estyr Six knelt before her Emperor.

Never had the Emperor felt such relief. He had made himself more vulnerable here than he had before any other human, and she had not turned

aside.

But there was one more thing he had yet to share.

"I can offer you more than that," he said. He shook his fist, letting drops of Nakothi's greenish blood dribble down into the burning sea. "This is not the Dead Mother's only heart."

Estyr looked up, a shadow growing over her face.

"I am the Emperor now, but I need not rule alone. You can stand with me, and Jorin, and Alagaeus, and Loreli if she still lives. And any others we choose, throughout the centuries. We can unlock the secrets of the Elders together!"

To his surprise, her Intent softened. He had expected an aura of excitement, or even anger and disgust. But she laughed.

"What would I do without a war? Can you picture me lifting crates of food? Building houses? I wouldn't even know what to do with myself. And Alagaeus is more likely to burn everything you build to the ground. No. Maybe Jorin will take you up on this, but I'll live out my days and be done."

She flew off to the east, in the opposite direction of Nakothi's mountainous death, away from the Elder's grievous howls. Caught up as he was in her power, the Emperor was dragged along behind Estyr like a raft behind a ship.

For an instant, irritation and rejection seared him like he'd swallowed acid. He could break the binding of her Intent with his own and snap her power's hold on him. That might rob her of her powers entirely, turning her Vessel into a trio of ordinary skulls.

He shook the thought away, sickened that it had occurred to him for even a moment. Not only would he instantly plummet to his death if he tried anything of the sort, but Estyr had remained loyal for years. She was as much a part of this rebellion as he was; some would say more so.

No, he would stay quiet on this heart business for now, but he had no intention of allowing her to remain mortal. There were other Elders. Other opportunities to change her mind. Other secrets of the universe that might yield new and exciting possibilities that she *would* open up to. He could wait until she agreed.

After all, he had plenty of time.

CHAPTER THREE

I have never met anyone more paranoid than the Head of the Alchemist's Guild. We should learn from him.

—KERIAN, HIGH GARDENER

PRESENT DAY

IN THE SOUTHEASTERN CORNER OF THE RAINWORTH IMPERIAL LIBRARY, INSIDE A room that had been built as a reading nook, Shera found Darius Allbright and Meia playing with blocks.

Meia sat at a desk, twirling a block in her fingers, frowning at the model of the tower that stood two feet tall on the desk. Her hair was pulled back, and with a tightly pinched frown on her face, she resembled her mother Yala.

She wore her Consultant blacks, but her shroud was pulled down to hang around her neck, leaving her lips and nose bare. At the moment, her eyes were human blue instead of Kameira orange, and she wasn't flexing her fingers to prevent her nails from sharpening into claws, so she wasn't angry. Just focused.

Darius wore a relaxed suit, with his white jacket tossed over the back of his chair. He leaned against the wall, regarding the tower as well.

She couldn't make out his expression because he didn't have one. The entire front of his face was replaced by a black circle of nothingness.

Normally he wore a hood, so he could pretend that the darkness covering his face was just a shadow. It was more disconcerting to see him without one. His ears were normal, his hair a messy human brown, but his neck disappeared into a flat circle of pure darkness.

That circle turned toward her, and Darius' voice emerged from it, not muffled at all by the Elder curse hiding his mouth. "Shera! Have you come to solve all our problems?"

Shera looked to the tower they'd built with tiny wooden bricks, taking in the shape, the relative height, and the surrounding structures. "The Lilac Tower?"

"Rose Tower," Meia grunted. "They won't use Lilac because the meeting's in the morning. It will be in shadow."

The meeting with the Imperialist Guilds was in a week's time. Both sides had agreed that it should take place as soon as possible, though that presented unique security challenges.

On behalf of the Independent Guilds, the Luminian Order was providing open security while the Consultants provided security from the shadows.

On the Imperialist side, the Imperial Guard would be performing their usual duties as open security while the Champion's Guild provided security that was *even more* open.

It was a logistical nightmare, and these two were responsible for organizing it. Subject to the approval of the Regents and the Architect's Council, of course. Shera would have pitied them, but it was finally their turn to learn what it was like to work with multiple Guilds breathing down their necks.

Meia sighed and pushed herself away from the desk, turning in her chair to look fully at Shera. "We have made *some* progress. Everyone agrees that we can't have you all in one room. That would be at least sixteen Imperial leaders, twelve or more of whom are Soulbound."

That had been the obvious problem. If all the Guild Heads, Calder Marten, and the Regents had all shared a room with the Witnesses as arbitrators, the room would be packed with volatile Soulbound. If it came to blows, there would be a bloodbath.

And if, by some horrible twist of fate, the Great Elders managed to strike at that time, they could kill every major leader in the Empire in one stroke.

That was an unacceptable risk, and Shera was glad that the Imperialists had seen as much before everyone sent a proxy.

Darius picked up the conversation. “They have agreed to three representatives apiece, not counting the neutral Witnesses. For us, that means one Regent and the leaders of the two most prominent Guilds.”

“So Nathanael Bareius and me,” Shera said. At least she wouldn’t be the weakest person in the room; Bareius famously relied on weapons and bodyguards. He was not a Soulbound. At least so far as the Consultant’s Guild had been able to determine.

“What about their side?” she asked.

“Take a guess,” Meia said sourly.

“Calder will insist on being there.” His ego wouldn’t permit anything less, and the Guild Heads pulling his strings would be forced to allow it. Unless they wanted to publicly admit that he was nothing more than a mask they wore. “As for his Guild Heads...”

He would need people who represented influential Guilds, were popular, and might protect him against Estyr Six. That left his options very limited. Cheska Bennett was Soulbound to her ship, which would do her no good in a tower inside the landlocked Imperial Palace, and Bliss was notoriously unreliable.

“...General Teach and Baldezar Kern,” Shera said. It wasn’t so much a guess as the only viable option.

Either of them could crumple her into a ball with one hand and swallow her whole.

Meia frowned at the model. “If everything goes up in flames, we need to get you and Bareius out. There are four exits, and I don’t like any of them.”

Shera was familiar with the Rose Tower. Not only had she practically grown up in the Imperial Palace, there had been a replica of the historic tower in the Consultants’ Garden.

“East window,” she said. The stairs down would be blocked, the west window led deeper into the Imperial Palace, but the east window was positioned next to the outer wall of the Palace Complex. “We secure an escape route at the bottom. If the worst happens, I grab Bareius and jump out.”

Meia gripped a wooden block until Shera could hear it splintering. “That’s the only theory we have, but what good does it do us? If Teach

draws her sword, either Estyr stops it or you're already dead. You won't have the chance to jump."

She carefully set the broken block down onto the table and took a steady breath. "I would like to go with you."

"I wish you could," Darius said. "I'm worried she's going to snap and lunge at Calder Marten with her knife out."

Meia gave him a look that was equal parts shocked and angry, but Shera thought it was a fair concern.

"If it makes you feel better, I don't *often* snap and murder Guild Heads," Shera said. "Only the once."

Darius' shadowed face tilted downwards, and she got the impression he was scanning her for weapons. "You haven't freed Syphren yet, I see."

The Regents had promised to take a look at Shera's Vessel, but they hadn't had time to stay and examine it after their meeting. Jorin would be the best one to give her advice anyway, they'd said.

Until then, she would rely only on Bastion.

Syphren's absence was at the same time a relief and an itch she couldn't scratch. On the one hand, she didn't have its power around in case she needed it, and that made her feel vulnerable. On the other hand, she didn't have to deal with its constant homicidal urges. Bastion was much easier.

"Not yet, but I'm looking to have it unsealed before the meeting." If she was going to be trapped in a small room with the Head of the Champion's Guild, she wanted to be able to defend herself as effectively as possible.

"It...might be better if you didn't," Darius suggested.

She shrugged. "There's no point in worrying until we get the nail out."

Once again, she wished she could read his face as he slowly nodded.

Meia turned her attention back to the tower. "Here are our advantages: Shera's capabilities are unknown to the enemy. As far as we're aware, they don't even know about Bastion. Second, Bareius will surely go into this with some alchemical weapons hidden on him. Third, Estyr Six is an unstoppable one-woman army."

"On the darker side," Darius said, "if Teach and Kern come to blows with Estyr, the entire tower's coming down. Everyone else will die. And Calder will be armed with the weapons of the Emperor himself, may his soul fly free."

The solution was so clear that Shera was sure they had considered it already, but she had to put it forward nonetheless.

“We have to get everyone to disarm.”

Neither of them liked that.

“A Soulbound disarming is not like a soldier checking his gun at the door,” Darius said. “You’re leaving part of yourself outside. We can’t be certain anyone will agree to that.”

“You’ll be helpless.” Meia’s tone suggested that her mind was made up.

Darius continued. “Bareius probably *won’t* disarm no matter what he says, and Estyr...will she let herself be that vulnerable? Even in the art, she always has her Hydra skulls.”

“Teach and Kern are almost as dangerous without their Vessels. That’s why you need me there. In a mundane fight, I can keep them off you.”

Those weren’t arguments about the viability of the plan, Shera noted. They were objections about its difficulty.

“At least if they do come to blows, the tower won’t collapse around me. And you will have a better chance at positioning a team around the base of the eastern window.”

They continued objecting for another two solid minutes, but finally Shera cut them off. Her newfound authority had to be good for something besides disrupting her sleep schedule.

“Everybody disarms. Put together a proposal and send it to the Regents first and then the Imperialists. If we can’t convince them, then that’s that, but I think they’d love to reduce the chance this whole meeting blows up.”

Darius rubbed his neck. “We have boxes that can be used to seal Vessels. For the sake of fairness, we can work on new ones, collaborating with the Magisters and the Witnesses. That way no one should be able to pull a trick on the Vessels themselves.”

They all three watched the model tower as though they expected it to crumble at any second.

“I don’t like this,” Meia said at last.

Darius’ head moved up the wall, and up, as though he tracked something with his eyes that no one else could see. “The shadows stir...” he said distantly. “The Great Elders are planning something. They have a hand in this, and I don’t know if we’re playing into it or against it.”

That was exactly Shera’s concern, and hearing the words coming from someone with a void-shrouded face only made them more ominous.

“I have enough to worry about without the Elders,” Meia said. “If Calder brings some kind of protection, even if he wears the Emperor’s old

clothes, then Shera will be the most vulnerable person in the room.”

Shera sighed, wishing she were tucked away in a soft, dark, warm corner somewhere. “The Guild won’t fall apart if I’m gone. If the only thing we’re risking is my life, that’s a cheap bet.”

Meia looked up at her, confusion and hurt plain on her face. “How many friends do you think I have left?”

No more than I do, Shera thought. And I’m afraid we’re about to lose some more.

But she didn’t say it.



On the morning of the meeting with the Imperialists, Shera was woken early by a knifepoint in the ribs.

She was tempted to take the cut and roll over anyway.

Ayana’s harsh, rasping voice was miserable to hear first thing in the morning. “Get up, Guild Head.”

“As Head of the Consultant’s Guild, I hereby order you to come back at dawn.” The Independents had taken over and fortified a hotel on the outskirts of the Capital. It would only take an hour to reach the Rose Tower, and the meeting wasn’t until nine o’clock. There was plenty of time.

Ayana jabbed her again with the six-inch knife blades that grew from her hands in the place of fingernails. “You have a meeting with Nathanael Bareius. *He* hasn’t slept at all.”

As always, Ayana looked like a vengeful ghost, with her long white hair, her baleful stare, and her iron claws. To complete the nightmarish picture, she was here to wake Shera up.

Shera grumbled, slowly pushing herself to the edge of the mattress. “He uses the most powerful stimulants known to alchemy.” She doubted the Head of the Alchemist’s Guild relied on anything so mundane as coffee.

“Are you getting up? I have to get back out there. Your little *Gardeners* are trying to start a war with his assistants.”

Shera groaned and flopped out of bed. The imitation Gardeners that Maxwell had trained and the Magisters had stolen stuck to Shera like a second skin since she’d brought them into battle on the Gray Island. They

seemed to think she'd adopted them, and now that she'd been elevated to Guild Head, they practically worshiped her.

"Weren't we going to scare them off with some real training?" Shera stumbled over to the bathroom. This was one of the most expensive hotels in the Capital, complete with heated water on command. There was a hot shower inside the room, which was alone worth the price it commanded per night.

She pulled the chain, opening the channel to the hot water, and clumsily peeled off her nightgown without bothering to close the door.

Back in the other room, Ayana stabbed a fruit from a bowl with one of her finger-blades. "They love the training. They're not good at it, but they're happy to do it and ask for more. That's more than I could say for some *real* Gardeners." She took a quick bite of fruit. "Speaking of Gardeners, most of them know that it's common courtesy to wait until your guests have left before you disrobe."

The water was only lukewarm, but Shera dunked her head in. "You're not my guest," she said, raising her voice to be heard over the water. "And it would be very courteous of you to leave."

"I'll come back in ten minutes to check on you," Ayana warned. "Assuming I can keep your baby Gardeners from killing any alchemists."

After the older Gardener left, Shera tried to relax in the warming water, but Ayana's words kept rattling around her head.

If her adopted pseudo-Gardeners really *were* trying to start a fight with Bareius' people on the morning of the negotiations...

Shera marched downstairs only five minutes later, wearing her hooded gray suit as Mistress of the Mists and with her hair still wet from the rushed shower.

She found, in the opulent lobby of this luxury hotel, a standoff between her allies.

Nathanael Bareius, a bookish man with slicked-back hair and thick-rimmed glasses, wore a silver suit that looked as though it had been polished clean. He stood rubbing his hands, watching the situation with what Shera might call glee.

A man stood behind him in the exact same outfit, down to the glasses, but while the appearance made Bareius stand out, it seemed to have the opposite effect on this man. He faded into the background as though he had been camouflaged to match the wallpaper.

They stood behind a line of young alchemists, who were distinct in their standard alchemical uniform of bulging glass goggles and stained leather aprons. Even many of the Consultant Architects who specialized in alchemy wore the same equipment over the black clothes that represented their Guild.

The alchemists were blazing like lit powder, shouting and brandishing weapons. Some of the tools were obviously dangerous, like the modified pistols with ominously smoking bottles built into them. Others were less threatening to the eye, waxed paper tubes or glass vials that the alchemists waved as though about to pour them into other containers.

On the opposite side of the lobby, as though separated by a mutually agreed boundary, stood Shera's imitation Gardeners. There were only twelve of them left after the events of the Gray Island, but they still outnumbered the alchemists.

They wore black relieved only here and there by spots of dark gray, enough like real Gardeners. Some of them had large knives strapped to their belts in emulation of true shears. However, *unlike* real Gardeners, they were shouting back and waving their knives in the air.

Ayana was whispering into the ear of one of the baby Gardeners, Tobin, and from Shera's angle at the top of the stairs, she could see that an iron fingernail was driven into the man's side.

Shera wouldn't have been able to guess what the conflict was about for a thousand goldmarks, but she could easily tell why Ayana couldn't defuse it. Between her appearance and her voice, Ayana looked and sounded like the ghost of a woman who had died after slitting the throats of everyone in her family.

If Ayana tried to address everyone, the alchemists were more likely to react out of fear than comfort.

So Shera stepped up and tapped Bastion's power.

The shear leaped to obey, disturbed as it was by combat. It wanted only peace, a wish that Shera could fully understand at the moment. If there were peace, she could go back to sleep.

Clouds of silver-blue mist bloomed around Shera, tumbling down the stairs and crashing like a wave into the pseudo-Gardeners.

She didn't send enough of Bastion's Veil to hide anyone from view, but she didn't need to. The shouting stopped instantly.

Shera kept her voice icy and spoke from beneath her hood, playing the part of the Mistress of the Mists. “Explain.”

One of the aspiring Consultants dashed up the stairs toward her, trying to explain directly, but Bareius shouted up.

“My apologies, Shera, my apologies! I’m afraid I wished to come knock on your door, to see if we could have a private word between one Guild Head and another, and your underlings were *understandably* very concerned for your safety. My young recruits were themselves perhaps a little too hot-headed and as you can see...the result was quite embarrassing, I’m sorry. I’m certain it would never have gone any further, though. I abhor violence.”

Behind him, his assistant quickly hid a look of astonishment.

“He said he was going to meet with you if he had to blow your door down,” Benji—one of her false Gardeners—muttered from one stair beneath her.

“I believe he would,” Shera responded under her breath. She had only met with Bareius personally once, but she got the impression of a man who was used to getting everything he wanted immediately. As expected of the richest man in the world.

Louder, she said, “I’m here now. Would you like to talk?”

“More than anything, my dear, more than anything! Furman, clear out a room for us!”

His assistant bowed and pointed toward a tall, ornately decorated door at the side of the lobby. “Already done, sir.”

Shera walked downstairs, following Bareius and Furman into the room at the side, which was devoid of furniture as well as people. She waved down Benji and the others when they looked like they would follow her.

The *real* Consultants were already in position.

She doubted anyone else had noticed, but Ayana had vanished in the fog, and Shera was certain that the former Gardener instructor had slipped out the door and was lurking outside one of the meeting-room windows.

The door shut, leaving Shera with a preening Bareius. And Furman. He seemed to count no more than Bareius’ shadow did.

Away from the others, Shera put on a show of relaxing. She had behaved without respect around the Guild Head before, and he might notice a discrepancy in character.

Inwardly, she didn’t relax at all.

“It’s too early for this,” she grumbled.

“Oh, but how could anyone sleep at a time like this? I *did* grab an hour here and there, but I was almost too excited to do so. Furman! Hand me the jar!”

The assistant instantly produced something that looked like a tiny jam jar filled with a viscous red liquid. Bareius pinched it between two fingers, holding it up proudly for Shera’s examination.

“This,” he said, “is our security measure.”

He knew she didn’t know what it was, and he was clearly going to explain, so she asked a different question than the one he was fishing for.

“Why show it to me? Security measures are best kept a secret.”

He laughed as though she had made a joke, and Furman chuckled uncomfortably behind him. “You and I will be the only *ordinary* mortals in this meeting, won’t we? I have prepared this countermeasure for the two of us, in the unfortunate instance that events turn to violence, and I would never *think* of dosing you with something without your knowledge. I couldn’t think of a way to do so anyway.”

He gestured with the tiny jar. “*This* is what’s known as a broad-spectrum augmentation elixir. It requires rare and expensive ingredients, is *extraordinarily* difficult to produce, and these two doses that I have brought with me today are the only successful results from a batch of two hundred. But I think today’s events are of sufficient import, no?”

At this rate, the sun would rise and then set before the head alchemist got to his point. “What does it *do*?”

His smile gleamed brighter than the slick lenses of his glasses. “It turns you into a Champion.”

Shera’s eyes widened, and her breath stopped.

“...for a few hours. With limited capabilities. And some rather inconvenient restrictions.”

Shera wanted her moment of astonishment back.

“We have limited physical material from Champions to work with. They don’t seem to trust us for some reason, and voluntarily donated samples preserve Intent so much better than those taken involuntarily. Or from corpses.”

He shook himself like a dog shaking off water. “What was I going to say? Furman! Get me back on track.”

“Yes sir.” Even the man’s voice was unobtrusive. “We can’t reliably produce more, because the formula is incomplete and difficult to reproduce even for us. But it will make you faster, stronger, and harder to kill for a few hours at the expense of feverish flu-like symptoms for several days afterward.”

“I accept,” Shera said, holding out her hand.

She would have the sample Read first. Lucan could tell her...

She stopped her thoughts as the wound opened again.

She knew enough about Reading to know that Intent didn’t easily cling to liquid, but if they had cobbled this together in order to kill her, either a Reader or a Consultant alchemist would be able to warn her.

Bareius pulled the jar back, out of her reach. “I’d love to hand it over right now, *love* to, but there are a few caveats you should hear first. For one thing, you should take it immediately, because it requires some time for your body to acclimate to its effect.”

So I won’t have time to get it analyzed, Shera thought. *Convenient.*

“Second, while the *existence* and *nature* of this elixir is no secret—we host open lectures describing the makeup of a weaker version for educational purposes—this product’s formula is as different from that one as a cat is from a catfish. I’m afraid I’m going to have to insist that you take it here, in front of me.”

Shera looked from him to Furman and back. “Is this alchemist humor?”

“It is not, I’m afraid! Though we work primarily with liquid solutions, alchemist jokes tend to be very dry.”

Shera kept her hand out. “Give it to me. I’m going to have it Read and analyzed before I take it. You know that. No point in pretending.”

“Unfortunately, my dear, I have to insist—”

Mist billowed out from Shera’s dagger, still sheathed at her waist. “I’m telling you now, for the sake of our cooperation, that I’m taking that jar from you.” She felt no anger; she was simply informing him of a fact. “If it’s poisonous, I will kill you. Too late to take it back. If it is what you say it is, I might still drink it.”

Bareius threw back his head and laughed. “I like you, Shera, I really do, but I *don’t* like being threatened, so I have prepared myself. Furman!”

The assistant whistled, and the plaster of the ceiling crumpled inwards.

A mound of pale flesh fell to the floor in the center of the room. It was an amorphous mound of limbs Shera couldn’t identify, landing in a limp

pile.

And it was clearly dead.

Blood leaked from it at several points, it didn't so much as twitch upon slamming into the floor, and Ayana was kneeling on top of it with her shears driven into its sides.

Shera sometimes forgot that Ayana *could* use her shears. The knives growing from her fingers should have prevented her from using regular daggers in any normal way, but somehow when Ayana gripped the hilt, her finger-blades surrounded her hand in a harmless cage.

The thick-bladed daggers of ancient Consultant bronze emerged from the pile of flesh, and Ayana wiped them clean on the creature's hide. She met Bareius' eyes with her own pink, disconcerting gaze.

"*Forgive me,*" Ayana hissed, drawing out her harsh, ghostly voice. "Does this...*dead thing* belong to you?"

Nathanael Bareius shivered.

Then he shivered again, more dramatically.

"Well, consider your point made," Bareius said. He extended the potion out to the side. "Furman, give her the jar!"

The assistant hurried over, and Shera plucked it from his hand.

CHAPTER FOUR

FIVE YEARS AGO

SIX MONTHS AFTER THE EMPEROR'S DEATH, THE CAPITAL MOANED LIKE A DYING beast.

Shera stood on the corner of a tall building, looking out over the vast, sprawling body of the largest city in the world. The moonlight covered the new layer of smoke that hung in the air; half the structures she could see had some kind of fire damage, and all of them were boarded up or secured in one way or another.

Pairs of Imperial Guards marched down the streets, their Kameira limbs standing out even more than their red-and-black uniforms. A taloned woman with tufts of feathers behind her ears and her partner, a man with reverse-jointed knees and shining green eyes, looked as though they had been on patrol with no break for weeks. Their uniforms were singed and almost ruined, their short sword chipped and held out. The man rested his hand on the butt of a pistol, and judging by his twitching eyes, he was looking for any excuse to use it.

A door cracked open near them, and the Guard whipped the gun around, shouting at the citizen to return inside. The door slammed shut, dislodging a shower of charred wood from the doorframe. Neither Guard relaxed for another twenty seconds, scanning the street around them in case the careless citizen had really been the distraction for an ambush.

There was no ambush. Shera would have found it already.

A Shepherd slipped out of the shadows next to her, dressed in Consultant blacks that more or less matched her own. "Our preparations are complete," he whispered, and she nodded.

She continued staring over the city where she had been born, watching its decay. One knife-thrust had done all this.

Well, one thrust and a careful side-to-side sawing motion to make sure she caught the heart.

"Gardener?" the Shepherd whispered again. "We don't have much time."

Shera rested her hand on her left-hand shear, glad she wasn't a Reader. She didn't want to feel whatever noxious cocktail of Intent was bound up in the blade that had killed the Emperor of humanity.

In fact, sometimes she imagined she could feel something from the blade anyway.

"Let me know when they ram the gates," she said.

"Gardener..." The roof beneath them trembled under a great impact.

Shera groaned. "I get it, let's go. Assume primary positions, prepare to signal the Masons, and move the decoy into place. Start the cleaning crew in the attic."

"The cleaners are on standby until the area is secure, Gardener."

"Get them started. They'll be fine."

The Shepherds assigned to cleaning duty usually had no experience in combat and certainly wouldn't be equipped for it. Standard procedure suggested they should be kept in reserve until the fighting was over, but there would be no fighting.

She was following Guild doctrine today, so she had prepared three possibilities: a primary plan, a backup plan, and an emergency plan. None involved open battle. At least, not from the cleaning crew.

And the faster this towering Capital home was cleaned, the more impressed their client would be.

She finally turned to face the opposite side of the building, where she looked down over the mansion on which she stood. It belonged to one Alberrett Kingson, a distant descendant of the Emperor himself. The grounds surrounding them were massive by Capital standards, filled with a lush garden that would block the view of the surrounding city from anyone on ground level.

The outer gate had been torn open, most of the manicured bushes torn down and burned or woven into makeshift shelters for the ragtag mob that camped on the home's doorstep.

There were eighty-six malcontent men and women down there. Some were survivors of the original band that had faced Alberrett's security, and some had joined in after they saw the gate of a towering mansion broken open.

The siege of the Kingson household had lasted two days and was well into its second night, but it was about to break.

Now a team of men carried a massive trunk of a battering ram between them, its far end carved into a fist. According to the Shepherds and Masons who had investigated, the ram had been looted from a military museum, and was therefore heavily invested with the Intent to break down barriers. Stronger Intent than that which secured Alberrett's doors.

Luckily for him, he'd already hired the Consultants.

The furious, desperate men, goaded by the cries of those behind them, pulled the ram back. Shera crouched on the roof in the shadow of a gargoyle. With three fingers, she signaled another nearby Shepherd.

Instantly, six smoking flasks flew out from the roof in smooth arcs, landing all around the mob. The Capital citizens shouted as the flasks shattered on the ground, releasing billowing clouds of pink-tinged smoke. One started swinging wildly with a knife, two fired pistols blind, thinking they were under attack.

Seconds after inhaling a breath of the alchemical smoke, the first rioter fell to his knees, before toppling to the ground.

The others followed suit, dropping weapons from limp hands. The massive battering ram fell as the men holding it lost strength, the ram itself collapsing onto three of them. The siege weapon would need to be moved before those three suffocated under its weight.

Shera unfurled a silk rope from the roof and slid down four stories to the ground. Only two members of the mob still stood, cloths over their mouths and noses.

"Good work," Shera said to the Masons once she touched down.

The two undercover Consultants that had joined the mob saluted her. After she acknowledged them, they walked over to the battering ram, pushing it off the chests of the men who had fallen beneath it.

The cloths over the Masons' faces were invested and treated with alchemy to make their breathing safe, as was the shroud of cloth over Shera's face, though the cloud had already begun to disperse.

Black-clad Shepherds scuttled out of the shadows like spiders, dragging away unconscious rioters. Shera's orders: their primary plan called for no gardening. These people would be dumped into alleyways, groggy and with little memory of the last several days.

The client would see the mob outside his house gone and his security redesigned and rebuilt by experts at the Consultant's Guild.

Shepherds would keep an eye on the redistributed citizens for a few days, making sure they had no further plans of organized violence. Even if they did, so long as they didn't plot anything against Alberrett Kingson or another client, the Consultants would leave them alone.

Of course, it would have been cheaper to kill them. In fact, that had been Yala's order to Shera at the beginning of this assignment.

"Impress them," the High Councilor had demanded. "The Kingsons are one of the few remaining families with any influence. Show them how firm the Consultants can be."

Leaving the rioters alive was more expensive, more difficult, and would get Shera in trouble with the High Council. She had been tempted to travel the easy road, as usual, but something needled at the back of her mind this time.

These people weren't useless or irredeemable. They were just scared. If she *could* spare them, she should.

Some might say that this whole situation in the Capital was Shera's responsibility, but she didn't see it that way. If anyone was responsible, it was the Emperor himself, who had relied on her to kill him. Or the High Council of Architects for accelerating her timeline.

These people were here not because of the mistakes they had made, but the mistakes of others. She'd give them one chance.

One.

The Shepherds had already hauled off several unconscious bodies, leaving Shera looking around at the half-burned shrubs and piles of garbage strewn over what had once been a garden. The soil was churned up from the dozens of people who had camped here for days.

There were far more sleeping rioters than Shepherds, so the Consultants would have to make multiple trips. The plan allowed over an hour for the

transport of bodies, including dump sites within ten minutes of this mansion.

She took a deep breath, the lingering sweet-chemical scent of alchemy making her faintly lightheaded even through her shroud. She savored the flavor as a taste of a job well done, enjoying the first notes of satisfaction and relief.

Everything had run smoothly without a single disruption. They hadn't needed the decoy, the backup plan, her secondary team, or any gardening. Best of all, she didn't have to carry any of these bodies. If only all her missions over the last six months had gone so easily.

Her relief lasted until the piping trill of a red-ringed sparrow cut through the groaning background noise of the smoldering Capital.

Every Consultant heard it at once, and none of the Shepherds froze. They dropped the bodies they had carried, all dashing for a hiding place. The Masons that had once been part of the rioters collapsed to the ground, feigning unconsciousness.

Shera did the same instinctively, throwing herself to the ground behind a pile of firewood. Her hand brushed the hilt of her left-hand shear, and she shuddered as an eager buzzing passed up her wrist. She jerked her hand away.

For this mission, the team leaders had each been given an invested whistle that was designed to signal nearby Consultants. The red-ringed sparrow's cry was the sign of enemies approaching.

Shera knew that there was no predicting the Capital's traffic even in the best of times, but the streets were *supposed* to have been clear.

She spent a moment resenting the nonexistent sparrow whose cry had alerted her, even as she palmed a spade. The triangular blade sat in her hand, ready for throwing.

Then she waited for the enemy.

With the outer gate broken open, the front lawn destroyed and littered with bodies, and the front doors cracked, Alberrett Kingson's mansion was open and vulnerable to the night. Drawn by its weakness, predators soon approached.

Shera heard them coming before she saw them, whooping and laughing as though they had nothing to fear from the smoky streets. The first to emerge from the moonlit haze was a bald, skinny man who wore no shirt

beneath a leather vest. He wore a pistol on each hip and carried a length of lead pipe, wearing a twitchy grin.

He lit up when he saw the broken gate and the bodies inside, shouting back to the people following. “Hey now, we got a ripe one!”

Between the darkness, the drifting smoke, and her restricted view from behind a pile of firewood, Shera found it difficult to get a proper count, but she estimated there were eighteen in this band altogether.

The news-sheets would have called them a “street gang,” but Shera had started to think of them as packs.

Unlike the mobs of ordinary Capital citizens that found outlets to their fear and anger in violence, these packs of scavengers would be a mix of former criminals, soldiers, or Guild members that had foraged up some weapons and knew how to use them. They could overwhelm any individual Imperial Guard patrol, but not the Guard as a whole, so the Guardsmen and these packs tended to give each other a wide berth.

In effect, packs like these now roamed the Capital as they wished.

They would have been included in the preliminary report the Shepherds and Masons had provided before the mission even started, but there was no predicting the path of such a pack with any certainty.

The sparrow whistle had done its job; her scouting team had picked up on this pack and determined that they were too big to deal with separately, so they had given her warning.

She still hung onto hope that they would leave on their own. It wasn’t too unreasonable, she thought.

The first few of the pack to arrive instantly dropped to their knees and began stripping the unconscious rioters of anything that looked valuable. “Still alive,” one called.

A grim-looking man wearing a wide-brimmed hat and a bandana over his mouth stepped up, surveying the scene. He had a pistol on his left hip and a formerly decorative cavalry saber in his right hand. His red, black, and gold uniform was worn and dirty, and looked like it had been cobbled together from different Imperial army units. He had been a soldier, maybe as recently as a few months ago.

“They’ve been staying here for a day or two,” he said. “What put them to sleep tonight?” He looked warily from downed tree to pile of firewood to ragged tent; anywhere that might hide enemies.

There was at least one Shepherd hiding behind each of them.

He didn't notice them, so at least he wasn't a Champion in disguise or some kind of alchemically enhanced warrior.

A murmur of response and a few quick jokes spread through his followers, and this time Shera counted seventeen.

"Alchemy," a hooded woman declared.

He nodded. "Strip them, then we leave."

Shera breathed more easily.

The Shepherds would have to work hard to avoid the pack of criminals moving all around the yard, but they lived for chances to show off their skills. By dawn, they would be bragging to each other about how they had slipped between six men unnoticed with only a broken twig for cover.

Then the soldier slammed his cavalry saber into the ribs of a sleeping looter, and Shera's blood began to freeze. The other members of his pack joined in, some with more relish than others. The man wearing only a vest laughed again as he clubbed a skull with his length of pipe.

She didn't know why they had decided to kill the unconscious men. The leader had given no order; it was as though they had made the decision as one. Like some hive of Elderspawn that shared a mind.

Though they didn't know it, they had changed her plan.

Not only were they wasting the effort she had spent to keep these people alive, there were Masons hiding within the ordinary unconscious citizens.

She did another quick count. Fifteen enemies.

That would have to be few enough. A woman with a sharpened knitting-needle was approaching a man that Shera knew to be a Mason faking sleep.

Shera braced herself, lifting a small brass whistle to her lips. She took a deep breath, then blew.

The cry of a winter-feather robin echoed out, sounding deafeningly loud to the Consultants. To anyone else nearby, it would be no louder than an ordinary whistle.

But they would still hear it.

She instantly rolled away from her last known position, her caution justified as a pistol-shot rang out and sent wood chips spraying around her. She slipped out of the wood-pile and behind a bush, ducking another shot, rolling behind a tent where a Shepherd already crouched.

The other Consultant, a young woman, signaled a question. *Attack signal?*

Shera shook her head. She had whistled for backup without triggering the nearby Shepherds into action.

Their best chance was to wait for the scout team to get into position. Which should be any second now.

Shera was confident that she had at least a few more seconds before the pack guessed where she was. They were shouting, screaming at her to come out, and they would corner her in only a few moments. But she had a few seconds of safety.

Another shot rang out, and her leg erupted in pain.

The agony whited out her senses for an instant, but she only let out a grunt, shoving herself backwards on her uninjured leg. A quick, habitual glance through watery eyes told her that the ball had torn a chunk out of the meat of her calf. Could have been worse, but her mobility was gone.

The Shepherd was already wrapping Shera's leg in a stretch of cloth as she leaned away from the newly formed hole in the tent.

"Come on out," the soldier called. "We'll keep firing till we get you."

Not a precise shot, then; he had just gotten lucky. Unless that was what he wanted her to think. Shera confirmed nothing, raising the whistle to her lips.

Her thoughts grew colder and colder until she felt only distant pain in her leg...and frustration. They could have left.

Then the former soldier and his twelve or thirteen remaining men could have walked away alive.

She blew the whistle twice, then rolled out from behind the tent.

As she'd expected, the soldier had a newly reloaded gun pointed in the direction of the tent, but his eyes were wide over his bandana. As he tracked her position, shadows rose from all around the garden.

A Mason lying on the ground came to life suddenly, startling the needle-wielding woman, disarming her and plunging her own needle through her throat.

A Shepherd put a knife into the eye of the pipe-wielding man at ten paces.

Another shadow wrapped garotte wire around a woman with a crossbow, crushing her windpipe as her finger spasmed on the trigger. A bolt launched into the night air.

All around her, Consultants killed. But they weren't true killers.

Some Shepherds missed the mark, knives scraping on ribs or flying wide. This was why Shera had hesitated to call them to action. Shepherds and Masons were spies, not assassins.

There was only one true Gardener among them tonight.

And Shera wasn't counting herself.

Lucan, leader of the scout team, vaulted over the fence before Shera's signal faded from the air. He was clad head-to-toe in black, even his hair and skin dark, his bronze shears gleaming as he spread them like a pair of razor-edged wings.

In one smooth motion, he spun between four gang members. Four sprays of blood fountained into the darkness.

A silver spade flashed in the moon as Shera threw, sparing one of her Shepherds a club to the face. The pack member with the club glanced down, looking at the knife embedded into her shoulder, and the Shepherd finished the job with a thin needle to the woman's neck.

That was the spade Shera had planned to use to save herself. Now the soldier's finger tightened on the trigger.

Too late.

Shera stared into his eyes, unsurprised as Lucan's bronze dagger took the man's hand off at the wrist.

As a rule, daggers didn't do that.

Cutting through bone, even at the joints, was the work of an axe. Or a saw.

But Intent could accomplish amazing things given enough time, and the shears of the Gardeners had been handed down from assassin to assassin for thousands of years. The pistol-clutching hand spun to the ground as Lucan passed his blade across the man's throat.

He was flicking blood from both his knives as he approached Shera, concern in his eyes. Behind him, the only ones left standing were members of the Consultant's Guild.

"How badly are you hurt?" he asked.

Shera shoved herself up to a standing position on her good leg, still grimacing at the pain. "Enough to get us off duty for a while."

Half a year since killing the Emperor, and she had spent barely a handful of nights on the Gray Island. She was looking forward to the time off, though the ride back to the Island would be a nightmare with an open flesh wound.

Lucan did brighten at that prospect, though no one else would have been able to tell his expression behind the shroud covering his nose and mouth. “Perfect chance to get a look at their archives.”

Lucan had a question stuck between his teeth, and he hadn’t stopped fiddling with it for half a year.

Why had the High Council wanted Shera to kill the Emperor ahead of schedule?

Shera wondered herself, but she had long since resigned herself to never knowing. The deed was done anyway; there was no taking back her dagger-thrust now.

But Lucan had been dying to dig through the Miners’ archives, sure that they would hold the answers. Or at least clues, directions he could use to Read the truth.

The problem was that the entire world was in chaos after the Emperor’s death, which meant tens of thousands of people out-bidding one another to hire the Consultants. He had worked, if anything, even harder than Shera these last months.

She didn’t want to go back and do research. She wanted to go back and relax. With him.

She placed a hand on his arm. “Don’t spend *all* your time in the library.”

He gave her a smile that she could barely see through his mask. “Of course not.” She gave into the pain of her injury, leaning against him as Shepherds and Masons cleaned up the yard around them, moving corpses and sleeping rioters alike.

“...I have to Read the rest of the island too.”

Shera almost stabbed him.

CHAPTER FIVE

Peace is always temporary. But then again, so is life.

—FROM THE FIRST JOURNAL OF ESTYR SIX

PRESENT DAY

THE REGENT JORIN MAZE-WALKER SQUINTED UP AT THE VIAL OF VISCOUS RED liquid. “It’s a wriggling knot, but I’d name it safe as springwater.”

Shera stared flatly at him.

“Its...my oath to eternity, it’s *safe to drink*. Am I not using *words*?”

Irritably, he tossed her the vial. She snatched it out of the air, but she had a question of her own. “What are you wearing?”

Instead of his usual darkened shadeglasses, he had a rough blindfold wrapped around his face. Where he would normally carry a bandage-wrapped sword on his back, now he had a cello case slung over his shoulder. She was certain that it contained his sword.

His clothes were well-used, but not rags; the sort of attire that anyone in the Capital might wear. The sort of outfit that Shera would have chosen for her disguises, usually, and that Meia and Lucan would have mocked her for.

She liked to use whatever was closest to hand for her disguises, because most strangers wouldn’t look carefully at her anyway. She wished Meia and Lucan were there to see Jorin now.

“Are you disguising yourself as a blind, homeless musician?”

“I’m all mummied up as anyone *but* Jorin Curse-breaker.” He adjusted the blindfold and hitched up the strap on his cello case. “It won’t burn us if we’ve got one extra Regent in our pocket.”

“One?”

When they had told the Imperialists that only one Regent would be in attendance, she had known they were lying, but she had hoped they were lying *more*.

“Rebels are buzzing up a hive in Axciss. I’ll tell you one thing Loreli can’t resist, and that’s a cry of distress. She booked a Navigator last sunset, and she won’t be back to these shores for at least two moons. Left her trust with us.” He pointed a finger at Shera. “And *her* disguise was worse than mine.”

Personally, Shera thought Loreli could have waited one more day before running off to another continent, but it was too late to ask her opinion now.

Jorin waved vaguely to the potion in Shera’s hand. “You should drink that down rabbit-quick. You’ll be rattling like a lifeboat until it settles in, and quicker started, quicker done.”

He swept her a bow and drifted away, joining the crowd.

They had been talking along a side street of the Capital; not the most secret location for a clandestine talk, but Shera had seen worse. All-but-invisible Shepherds watched her from nearby rooftops, keeping eavesdroppers clear.

Shera downed the potion in one gulp before following the Regent. It tasted like acid and cherries with a little blood mixed in, and she immediately wanted to forget the flavor. She tucked the empty vial away into her pocket for later disposal.

Immediately, dizziness settled onto her like a cloak. Enough that it would be hard to fight, though based on Jorin and Bareius’ instructions and her own experience with potions, the sensation would wear off as the actual effect took over.

Shera’s hand dropped to her right-hand side, where Bastion’s peaceful voice comforted her. It was a calm, steady sensation, but she would have to give it up during the negotiations. She already felt restricted at the thought, which surprised her, as she’d only been Soulbound to this Vessel for a few weeks.

She rejoined the Guilds, waving them on. At her signal, the parade of Independent Guild members resumed.

Marching through the gates of the Imperial Palace.

Hundreds of wary eyes watched them from windows on the Capital streets, but only a handful had gathered to watch them. They hadn't publicized their route beforehand.

Inside the Palace itself, though, thousands had gathered.

The Imperial Palace took up much of the Capital, and it was sometimes called a city unto itself. Shera had experienced herself that the staff who grew up inside the Palace had virtually nothing in common with those who grew up in the Capital proper. Some in those two populations never mixed at all.

And the people of the Palace were...not angry, exactly. But they did not look happy.

Frightened-looking groups and families clutched each other, watching the Independents enter while muttering. Their voice struck Shera as ominous. It felt like the rumble before a crowd became a mob.

As Shera watched the Guilds pass, Meia slipped up to the side and began muttering into her ear. "We have people infiltrating the crowd. Primary and secondary exit plans are secure."

Their primary exit plan was Shera jumping from the top window carrying Bareius, and the secondary and emergency plans were worse.

"Does everyone know their places?" Shera asked softly.

"We've made them memorize every step."

The Imperial Palace was crossed with a network of emergency tunnels, and the Consultants had secured several exits around the Rose Tower. She had to make sure that everyone among the Independents, not just the Consultants, knew where their nearest exit was in the event of sudden violence.

She missed the days when she only had to worry about herself. Especially since *she* wouldn't give up a secret. The Imperial Guard thought all their tunnels were still secure, and they had to continue thinking so until Shera and all the others were miles gone. The more people who shared a secret, the less chance it would last.

Then again, they might not need to escape at all. She had to stop assuming they would have to run.

Meia vanished again, leaving Shera to look out over their procession.

The alchemists were in the lead, led by Bareius and Furman. They were half actual alchemists and half private army that Bareius had hired to

defend him in case of an attack. Or to *cause* an attack if the Imperialists didn't give him sufficient excuse.

That was just a hunch of Shera's, but she had made sure that a heavy dose of his recruits were secretly her Masons.

As Bareius passed her, he gave her a long look up and down, then an exaggerated wink. He was indicating that he knew she'd taken the potion... she hoped.

Peace talks might stall if it was discovered that Bareius had unexpectedly committed "suicide."

The Luminians were after the alchemists, a mix of white-clad Pilgrims and silver-armored knights that practically radiated righteousness.

Actually, not so many knights. Most of the Luminian Knights had been scattered around their route to match the Imperial Guard in security.

The Guards looked as menacing as always—more menacing in appearance than she had found them to be in practice. Kameira limbs jutted from red-and-black uniforms or ornamented stern faces. They covered every entrance along their planned route through the Imperial Palace, with four or five of them for every lone knight.

And in the shadows, Consultants covered *them*.

The Greenwardens were next, and even in her capacity as one of the Independent Guild leaders, Shera had precious few interactions with them. Their Guild Head, Tomas Stillwell, was a pleasant man with a gentle smile and tousled auburn hair who always spoke as though soothing an animal. A green vine with wide leaves grew all over his body, looping around him and providing some shade for his wheelchair.

All Greenwardens wore those living vines as a badge of honor, though Shera didn't know if they were the product of Awakened objects or some kind of alchemical technique.

Finally, there came the Consultants.

All three of them.

The power of the Consultant's Guild was not in what was seen, but what was buried beneath the surface, and they had decided to embrace that fact. Shera would represent them in the negotiations and the three High Councilors would represent them among the other Guilds. Their small size would make them stand out and would project confidence and an air of mystery.

Shera had approved of the decision because it meant more of the Guild could be assigned to actual security.

Kerian, Yala, and Tyril all wore their blacks with no shrouds over their faces. Instead, they had adopted the professional smiles of those dealing with unpleasant clients.

Shera fell in behind them, hoping to talk with them before the negotiations began, but she heard a sudden brisk wind.

Estyr Six landed beside her, which caused a much more pleasant surge in the surrounding crowd. Her long hair fluttered and settled against her back as the three skulls circled her in a lazy orbit.

"We'll get there a few minutes before the Imperialists," Estyr reported. "They're trying to make us wait, but it gives us the advantage. We can make them walk through us."

Shera eyed her. "Is that necessary?" She hadn't expected Estyr to be someone who played games.

"Anything that might give us an edge."

The three High Councilors had sped up to give Shera more time with the Regent. Or possibly to avoid having to face Estyr.

"You must have done this kind of thing before," Shera said.

Estyr gave a wry grin. "A few times. Hammering out the Empire was more than just slamming Nakothi through a continental shelf."

"What do you think our odds are?"

Estyr walked alongside Shera, but as she spent a handful of seconds thinking, she seemed to forget to move her feet. She drifted along instead, hovering only half an inch over the street.

"I like our odds. A little blood spilled on both sides, but not so much that it can't be cleaned up. I've seen worse than this ended with a treaty." Her footsteps resumed, and she added, "*If* we're dealing with people."

Shera nodded grimly. Everyone had the same concern. If the Great Elders were involved, there would be no good ending.

"What sort of signs are you looking for?"

"Depends on who we're dealing with. Urg'naut can be subtle, but he tilts minds one way or another. None of his Shades will show themselves to me, so he'll have to work with brainwashing. It's hard to detect, but it's weak. Ach'magut is dead again, but who knows what he has or hasn't foreseen? Kellarac likes to buy people. If we suspect someone of reporting

to him, we can track down their behavior, see if they have any cult connections or if they've stolen any private artifacts."

Estyr patted Shera on the shoulder. "Don't worry. I've got a nose for this sort of thing."

Shera wasn't used to people comforting her.

"They can't hide from me," Estyr muttered, and Shera got the impression that the Regent was talking to herself. "I'll tear them to pieces with my teeth. For every drop of human blood they spill, I will spill an *ocean* of their kind until the stars themselves drown."

For a moment, Shera thought she heard a roar from the three skulls floating over Estyr's head. The Regents seemed like she was in a trance, her eyes blazing like blue lightning, fists clenched at her sides.

Shera was in awe. She could practically *taste* the blood this woman had spilled. So *this* was what a legendary warrior of the Empire was like.

For once, Estyr really did remind her of the Emperor. When he had become lost in the old war or when he got too excited talking about the Elders, he had let his hatred overwhelm him, and the same anger radiated from him that shone from Estyr now.

The Regent caught herself, flashing Shera an embarrassed grin. "Did you catch it? That's a quote from Tedric's *Heart Like a Churning Sea*. My character. I went to see it probably...two hundred and fifteen years ago now? They got one of my *actual* descendants to play me, and I have to say I cried."

A hand slipped into Shera's pocket, and she caught a quick glimpse of it.

Kerian's hand.

Subtly, Shera reached into her pocket and withdrew a folded piece of paper. It said, "*The Candle Bay Playhouse does a rendition of Heart Like a Churning Sea every summer.*"

"You know," Shera said, "they still perform that play."

"Really? Huh. Most of them don't stick around so long."

"Every summer. It's a classic."

"You don't say? We should go sometime. I could tell you what parts they made up."

The Rose Tower was seven stories tall, identical to five others around the edge of the Palace. It stood against the wall separating the Imperial

Palace from the mundane Capital, the tower a rectangle of white with several tiers of red tiles on the roof.

There was an arrow-slit on every floor and more on the roof, all now manned by a mix of Guards and knights. A slim, nimble climber could slip in through one of those openings.

As a girl in the Garden, Shera had been trained to infiltrate one of these towers without being spotted, though in the light of the morning sun doing so unseen would be impossible.

The crowd lining the streets was noisier here, but still not cheering. It was the restless cry of a bunch of bored people, though here and there she heard voices raised in anger.

The Independent Guilds were not loved here, in the heart of the Empire. No surprise.

When they arrived, Estyr directed the Guilds to fan out to either side of the entrance. Not only would this let them spread out to take advantage of their display of force, but it would mean that the Imperialists would have to arrive and request permission to enter their own tower.

It wasn't long before the enemy arrived.

Not the enemy, Shera reminded herself. *Potential allies*.

"An enemy is always a potential ally," Ayana had taught her. *"And the other way around."*

Calder Marten walked at their head, and she was somewhat surprised to see that he hadn't come in a carriage or a litter. His red hair was neat and combed, his short beard trimmed, and he had adopted an appearance of poise and confidence.

He had chosen not to dress like the Emperor, which she respected. He wore much the same thing she had seen him in before: a long, brown coat over a white shirt and blue pants. The clothing of a Navigator captain.

Instead of a hat, though, he wore a crown. And not the fake silver crown that his body double had worn at the fake coronation the Imperialists had hosted a week or two before. *The* crown, the symbol of the Emperor's rule, the one he had used to warp the minds of dozens of Consultants on the Gray Island.

She had to wonder if that was a deliberate threat directed toward her. If it was, he would find that she was more than capable of answering threats today, even unarmed.

The dizziness from the potion had started to recede.

To one side of him stood Jarelys Teach, and it didn't seem that the years had touched the Head of the Imperial Guard in any noticeable way. Maybe that was one of the benefits of having the heart of a Bonereaver.

Her blue eyes were hard as iron as she regarded Shera, her short hair like a helmet against her skull, and the red-and-black armor she always wore had been well polished.

Shera knew that Teach held a grudge. She could see it in the woman's eyes.

It made her feel...complicated. She felt guilty for the personal impact that the Emperor's sudden death had made on Teach, who had never been anything but kind and helpful to Shera.

On the other hand, she felt no guilt for her actions.

She had needed to move swiftly, so she had moved swiftly. In the face of the Emperor's life or death, her promise to Jarelys Teach had meant nothing.

The Head of the Champion's Guild stood on Calder's other side, though Shera only recognized him from his description. He was a bear of a man, slightly shorter than Calder but twice as broad, his limbs thickly packed with slabs of muscle. Silver winged his black hair, and he wore a set of armor himself.

Unlike Teach's armor, his was neither colored nor polished, a utilitarian slate-gray metal that looked like it had seen its share of beatings.

In one hand, he carried a leather satchel, which Shera was sure contained his Soulbound Vessel—reputed to be the helmet of his armor, which allowed him to enter a powerful, berserk state—and his trademark pair of maces.

If anyone could protect an unarmored Calder from Estyr Six, it would be these two. At least as long as no one had their Vessel handy.

The three delegates stood in front of a column of the Imperialist Guilds. Seeing them head-on, Shera couldn't spot every Guild in whole, but she saw the dark-coated Blackwatch standing in regiments, glimpsed a few Navigators craning their necks to see around their fellows, and caught a Magister leaning on his staff and staring at her.

Glaring at her, really. She couldn't blame the man. She'd killed their Guild head.

The Imperial Guard were impossible to miss, being both the most numerous and spread everywhere. Women with the eyes of eagles stood

next to men with clawed hands, and all of them looked over the Independents with wary caution.

As the Imperialists arrived, a cheer followed them from the crowd, who threw confetti and flowers into the paths of their heroes.

Shera was suddenly overcome by the desire to see the Imperialists marching into a city hostile to *them*. The Gray Island, maybe, if it was back under Consultant control.

Though that didn't really work. Consultants didn't shout.

Estyr Six stepped out in front of Shera and Bareius, who flanked her on either side. Instantly, every eye at the base of the Rose Tower turned to regard the Regent.

She jerked her chin at Calder, who straightened like a schoolboy hoping for praise from his instructor. "You sure you want to wear that? You'll have a hard time hearing anything we say."

It took Shera a moment to realize that Estyr was talking about the Emperor's crown. She could see how a Reader might have trouble concentrating on any conversation in the present with centuries of the Emperor's Intent pressing down on his awareness.

"Thank you for your concern," Calder said easily. "It's nothing I can't handle."

That was a flippant tone to take with a Regent, and Shera half-hoped to see Estyr throw him over a building for it, but she didn't seem to care. "Fine with me, just don't pass out."

Dismissing Calder, Estyr turned to General Teach. "Teach, I heard you gave Jorin a beating with his own sword."

The way Shera had heard it, the two swords had clashed and *everyone* had been lucky to escape with their lives, but she respected Estyr giving face to the Guild Head.

Although Teach had paled, and her voice trembled. "No, I didn't...I mean, it was hard-fought. I had lots of...help."

Shera thought she heard a gulp.

What had happened to Teach? She had vanished in an instant, replaced by this *impostor*. Shera had only seen Teach shaken on the day of the Emperor's death and on the rare occasion when he had to reprimand her in front of the Gardeners.

Teach wasn't a coward. She wouldn't be shaking like a leaf out of fear for herself. Did Estyr have a hostage? Was she speaking in code?

The truth finally dawned on Shera: this was *reverence*. Teach had come face-to-face with a girlhood hero and she hadn't been prepared for it.

Estyr pretended not to notice, turning to Baldezar Kern. She bowed her head to him. "Champion."

He returned the greeting. "Champion."

After the greeting of mutual respect, they took a moment to size each other up. She couldn't know if they were using Reader senses to evaluate each other's Intent—she wasn't even sure if Kern *was* a Reader, though he was certainly a Soulbound—but before they'd finished, Bareius thrust himself into the moment.

"Baldezar! Jarelys! How long has it been?" He gestured behind him, as though to a servant. "Furman, tell me...ah, right, he's not here. That's annoying."

Nathanael Bareius had built up hundreds of business contacts all over the world. He *had* to be better in negotiations than this, but he seemed to beg for a knife between the ribs with every word.

Teach's expression told Shera she agreed. "Don't push me, Bareius. I don't want to break peace between the Guilds just to kill you."

It was a shame that the alchemists were the richest and best-connected Guild in the world, or Shera would have served up Bareius on a platter and continued negotiating from there.

It might put them on better footing.

"It's just business, Jarelys!" he assured her. "Don't let it get too personal. If it *has* to be personal, then let it be for the right reasons! Remember the *good* times."

It was Baldezar Kern's turn, and he managed to fit an unnatural amount of menace in a perfectly bland expression. "The night after the Emperor's death, eight out of ten of the alchemists supporting my Guild canceled their contracts. I know why."

Shera and Estyr both turned to look at their supposed ally, and while she couldn't speak for Estyr, her gaze was no friendlier than Kern's or Teach's.

Shera had no doubt that the Consultants had known about Bareius pulling his alchemists away from the Champions, but *Shera* hadn't known. She hadn't been Guild Head long enough to be briefed on everything the Guild had done for the last five years.

But someone had let their responsibilities slip, because *this* she should have known.

If she had realized that every single member of the opposition had a personal grudge against Bareius, she would never have agreed to stand next to him.

In fact, she took a step away, just to demonstrate her lack of support.

Even Bareius' self-confidence couldn't stand up to them, because he withered under their gazes. "That was...bad business, I admit, but everything's on the table now, isn't it?"

Shera wasn't sure what that meant.

"These are all discussions we can have once the ink dries between us," he finished, and Shera thought she heard a note of pleading.

Calder held up a hand, and Shera remembered that at least Bareius hadn't offended *every* Imperialist leader. "There's bad blood all around. For now, we should set it aside and work together, or it will lead to a worse end for all of us."

As though by chance, he ended the statement looking into Shera's eyes.

To her surprise, she respected what she saw there. She sometimes thought of him as an impetuous narcissist too irresponsible for his age. A reckless child playing with forces he didn't understand.

In the moment, she was reminded that he had faced down the Handmaiden on the Gray Island just as she had. He had seen the Great Elders. He knew what was really at stake here.

Meeting his gaze, she nodded.

If he could work together for peace, so could she.

Bareius applauded the sentiment. "Well said! Now, shall we? *Furman!*"

This time, the man was actually calling his assistant. Furman stepped forward from the alchemists, adjusted his glasses, and gave a signal.

Shera didn't recognize the signal and didn't have any idea what it meant, but apparently everyone else did, because the Independent Guilds split right down the middle and left a land clear for the Imperialists to approach. If they wanted to enter their own tower, they would do so with the leave of the Independents.

It was a powerful demonstration, but Shera had to wonder when they'd had the time to memorize signals or practice coordinated movements. She was glad she hadn't been a part of it.

Teach clearly didn't like it. She would see this as a trap, though there was no way Shera or the others could pull the trigger first in this scenario. If

a fight broke out, it would be just as devastating for the Independents as the Imperialists.

The Head of the Imperial Guard gestured, and her people rushed forward, lining the way into the tower.

To Calder's credit, he started walking without waiting for the Guards to get into place, golden crown gleaming in the morning light and coat billowing beside him.

She had always intended to kill Calder Marten after the peace, whenever it would be convenient to replace him with a more qualified Emperor. But her brief impression of him here led her to reconsider.

This was her chance to figure out whether she could work with him.

The man whose wife had killed Lucan.

Though Estyr was supposed to lead Shera and Bareius in, Shera took the lead, falling in step with Calder. He looked to her with surprise.

"When this is over," Shera said, "we need to talk."

"Yes, I'd say we do." There was an ironic tone to his words that she appreciated. "I'd like us to find a way to work together. Ideally without you holding a knife to my back."

So he had recognized the implied threat of having the Consultants on his side. Well, at least he wasn't an idiot.

She tried a classic Gardener joke. "Would you prefer a knife to your front?"

"It's better where I can see it," he responded.

Shera hadn't found that to be so. People seemed happier when they died unexpectedly than when they saw the threat coming.

"Is it?" she asked.

"Maybe not," he allowed in a wry tone. "But if you have to kill me, I want it to be because I deserve it, and not just because you don't like me."

She gave him a weary smile to show she understood, but dropped it when she remembered he wouldn't see it beneath her hood and veil. An expression wouldn't do; she had to say something.

"We might be able to work together after all." At least, she might not be so quick to draw shears at the first opportunity.

In the end, he hadn't been the one to kill Lucan.

She had blamed him at first, but Meia had slowly convinced them that he wasn't directly responsible. He had still caused her more than enough

headaches that she could easily justify slitting his throat...but maybe she didn't *have* to.

As they spoke, they passed beneath the arch of the doorway into the Rose Tower. A strange welcome party awaited them on the bottom floor.

A series of blue-white stone boxes had been arranged on the floor in a variety of shapes and sizes, lids sitting neatly next to them. They had been carved with images of armored soldiers with shields raised.

Behind the boxes was a Magister attendant a little younger than Shera, her short staff decorated with blue jewels that caught the light, her robes cut in a modern style that would have been filed in the Mason costume archive as belonging to a well-to-do Heartlander woman.

The attendant spoke a little too sweetly, as though to children. "We created these sealing boxes especially for this occasion in conjunction with the Luminian Order. You will place your weapons or Vessels inside a box of your choosing, which will then be labeled and kept in the care of our non-partisan guardians."

Which, of course, brought Shera's attention to the guardians.

The first to grab her eyes was the massive Stonefang, a scarlet-striped dog Kameira the size of a prowling lion. It eyed the boxes hungrily, as though it couldn't wait to feast on the contents, though Shera knew the truth was the opposite.

Stonefangs were highly protective of their nests and almost impossible to kill, so they could be easily trained into relentless guardians of treasure. There were a handful of specific ways to overcome such guard dogs, but any untrained or ignorant intruder would be torn to pieces.

Two pairs of Witnesses waited against the far wall. Witnesses always worked in pairs, one a Chronicler responsible for memorizing and transcribing information, and one a Silent One responsible for the Chronicler's protection.

Chroniclers always carried a row of candles on their belt, the wax alchemically treated to store Intent more efficiently. Simply by burning the candles, the Chronicler could relive their own memories for almost infallible recollection.

Finally, a Champion stood at the end of the row of boxes. She was built like a guard tower, with a huge two-handed sword on her back and the Golden Crown of the Champions in gold over her heart. The Consultant's

Guild had tried to bribe this Champion as soon as she was hired for the job, only to find that she was truly dedicated to her neutrality.

She wore a blindfold that was so similar to Jorin's disguise that Shera wondered if he had gotten his inspiration from her.

The attendant spoke again. "Your weapons will be released when the Head Witnesses certify that the negotiations have concluded. If this is acceptable, the first pair of you may select your boxes now."

In *this* process, Estyr had agreed to go last. She hadn't shown any fear about giving up her Vessels that Shera had seen, but everyone else on their side had all suggested that the Regent should stay armed as long as possible.

So Shera moved forward and Calder joined her again.

He gestured behind him. A moment later, a young man hurried forward with a long wooden box in his arms. No doubt it contained Calder's Awakened sword, and Shera almost rolled her eyes beneath her hood.

There was the self-important Calder she had expected.

Carry your own sword.

The attendant looked to her. When she unbuckled her belt and placed it inside a relatively small box, along with Bastion, she felt a brief pang of alarm.

She would be more than disarmed. She had already lost a piece of herself in Syphren, and now she was willingly parting with another.

Be calm, Bastion sent to her.

The Magister attendant gestured, and the stone lids floated up and scraped into place. The Chroniclers placed a hand to their candles, either committing to memory which box was which or pretending to do so.

Teach and Bareius walked up next. Teach acted like she was severing her own arm as she unbuckled the sheathed Tyrfang and lowered it into a long box, keeping physical contact with the weapon as long as she could.

The Head alchemist showed empty hands. "I apologize, everyone, but I have come unarmed. Search me, if you doubt me."

Unarmed. Shera almost laughed.

He had a dose of the Champion augmentation for himself, she knew. She was starting to feel a trickle of energy in her limbs, and if he had taken his before she had, then his potion would already be in full effect. As long as it worked as well as he claimed, he would be able to pull the pair of Witnesses apart limb from limb.

Kern or Teach could still stop him with relative ease, but even so, you could hardly call him *unarmed*.

The Witnesses inspected him, presumably Reading him as they patted him down, and pronounced him clean.

“I admit,” he said, “I’m a little wounded by your lack of trust.”

He even managed to sound offended.

Estyr only moved toward the boxes when Kern did. The Head of the Champion’s Guild lowered his leather satchel into a box the size of his chest, letting out a relieved breath as he did so. Unlike the others, he seemed like he couldn’t wait to be rid of his weapons.

Estyr didn’t seem to care one way or another. She flicked a hand toward the largest box, big enough to hold her entire body, and the three reptilian skulls zipped toward it. They landed side by side, but Estyr had already turned away. She didn’t watch the Magister attendant seal the boxes up, instead slipping her hands back into her pockets and walking to the stairs leading up.

But Shera had spent a little time around Estyr. She recognized the tightness of the woman’s jaw, the tension in her stride.

Shera suspected that Estyr wasn’t as comfortable leaving her Vessels behind as she pretended. She just knew the value of appearing unruffled in front of her enemies.

Shera could respect that.

The room at the top of the Rose Tower was a large square that usually contained a long table, a series of chairs, and some decorative plants. As Shera’s Architects had predicted, the Imperialists had cleared out the room for this occasion, leaving the floor bare from wall to wall.

The western window was open, but the eastern window had been shuttered against the morning sun, letting in light only through the slits. There was a bit of a breeze, but Shera couldn’t help but wonder if the Imperialists had chosen this tower because it was just a *little* too warm.

If so, the joke was on them. Shera may not have been happy about her new gray outfit, but it was wonderfully cool.

Calder’s long jacket didn’t have the same advantage, because he immediately let it slip to the floor before stepping into a white circle painted on the floor. There were three such circles on either side of the room, where the participants were meant to stand during the debate.

He had taken the center circle on his side, and Estyr stood opposite him. Shera lined up next to her, as planned.

She knew what the circles represented. This was one of the ancient forms of negotiation, meant to appeal to Estyr. Many of the Guilds had been originally formed by meetings held in this way.

But she still didn't see why they couldn't have chairs.

Calder was flanked by the armored Kern and Teach, looking in his ruffled white shirt like a young noble escorted by his two guards. Shera stood to Estyr's left, Bareius to her right, and Shera wondered what *they* looked like from the other side.

Like Estyr Six accompanied by two unimportant nobodies, she imagined.

Two more women stood in the room, standing between the two teams against the far wall as though trying to meld into it. Azea and Calazan Farstrider were Izyrian twins, tall and wiry with pale hair and wide, unblinking stares.

The Heads of the Witness' Guild were famous for performing the roles of both Chronicler and Silent One interchangeably. They both wore cloths over their mouths—like the Consultant shrouds, Shera noticed—and candles at their belts. Both wore loose-fitting pants and shirts that were tied at the wrists and ankles, leaving them free to fight if necessary.

As they were both Silent Ones, neither ever spoke. At least not in front of outsiders. It would be pointless to address them, but Shera nodded in acknowledgement of their role. One of the sisters returned her nod.

The Witnesses provided accurate, impartial descriptions of important events in Imperial history. In a sense, the Farstrider sisters were the most important people in the room; their report on this meeting would shape the opinions of everyone else in the Empire.

"Farstrider sisters," Calder called. "On behalf of the Imperialist Guilds, I'd like to thank you for being here."

Idiot, Shera thought.

The twins stared at him together. There was a theory that the Farstrider twins had tied their minds together using some Soulbound power or that an Elder attack had blended their thoughts so that they were one soul in two bodies.

It wasn't true. Consultant reports confirmed that when they were alone with each other or with trusted members of their Guild, they were perfectly

distinct individuals like any other set of siblings.

Looking closely, Shera could see the subtle differences in timing as they matched each other's motions with the grace of long practice. It was an act to discourage others from addressing them as individuals.

If Calder thought he had won their favor by speaking to them while they were working, he was very much mistaken.

The second the door slammed shut, Estyr spoke. "All right, let's save some time. We're willing to pretend to follow your Imperial Steward as long as he's not named Emperor and the regional governors are fully supported."

The Imperialists would be expecting as much. The regional governors did most of the work of ruling the Empire anyway—they had for centuries—and the Regents wouldn't back down about their support.

They *might* compromise on Calder Marten's title. Even if he called himself the second Emperor, it would be in name only, and history would remember him as little more than a footnote next to *the* Emperor.

"In return," Estyr continued, "Jorin and Loreli and I will step down from rule. In a couple of years, if you've given the governors everything they need and there's nothing wrong with the sky, we'll go back to sleep. Deal?"

There would be dozens of details hammered out over the next few weeks between lawyers and Witnesses and Guild representatives, but Shera was confident that the final agreement would look similar to what Estyr proposed. The Regents didn't even *want* to rule, and it was in everyone's best interests to cooperate against the Elders.

Teach lifted her chin, and it seemed like she'd finally mastered herself in front of her childhood hero. "We need you to endorse Calder Marten as Emperor. We will support the governors. If we fall apart in the end, so be it, but we must first give the unified Empire a chance."

That was within their expectations, and Estyr responded easily. "That's what I'm doing."

Maybe he'd felt left out, because Calder Marten straightened his back and spoke. "We also need guarantees that your Guilds will continue to work together with ours. The Consultants and the alchemists especially play a vital support role, without which some of the other Guilds will cease to function."

Bareius seemed as though he had been waiting for this topic, leaning over his painted circle in his eagerness to speak. “That’s a critical concern, *critical*, and with it comes the question of hierarchy.”

Shera was becoming convinced that, no matter how rich the man was, they should have never allowed him in this room.

“Not that I’m a man of pride myself, but the current circumstances suggest that our Guilds may be seen as *subordinate* to those that pledged their loyalty to you, which would be a truly uncomfortable notion.”

Judging by the look on General Teach’s face, both sides might soon find common ground in their distaste for Nathanael Bareius. “We’ve had a number of proposals drafted up. We can’t undo the damage that we’ve done to each other in the news-sheets, but we can agree to make public proclamations emphasizing the efforts your Guilds make toward unification or mutual defense.”

Which would, of course, put the burden of *making* such efforts on the Independent Guilds.

Shera looked over to the Witnesses, sharing a look with one of the sisters. They quickly glanced back to Teach, their hands moving in unison down to their candles.

Which signaled to Shera that they were catching everything verbatim. She had expected no less from the Head Witnesses, but she appreciated the reassurance.

It was the Independents’ turn to add a demand, which Estyr noticed and pounced on. “We also need the Gray Island back. There’s more to it than just the Consultant’s Guild headquarters.”

The Imperialists had no doubt already found the Regents’ coffins, but they might not know what they had. The Regents needed the island back before all its ancient secrets were uncovered.

But that wasn’t their most important demand, and Shera was surprised no one had said it aloud.

Well, Shera hadn’t spoken yet. Let her be the one to keep them on the right track.

“The Great Elders are moving,” she reminded everyone.

Baldezar Kern’s arms were crossed in front of him, and his armor scraped against itself as he unfolded them, nodding to her. “We’re all locked in the same burning house.” His voice was calm, almost fatherly. “It benefits no one to fight while the flames rise.”

The Champion had begun to sweat slightly, but it didn't make him look nervous. If anything, he looked like a boulder placidly ignoring the rain.

Calder, by contrast, couldn't stand still against the heat. He rolled his sleeves up as he spoke. "More than anything else, even if we bicker and squabble over details, we have to make an agreement of honor between those of us in this room: we *must* join together in mutual defense."

What happens if we can't?

Shera shivered at the thought, though she was still largely hidden by her hood. What if they didn't come to an agreement today?

Then they would need to end the conflict as quickly as possible. The Consultants would bare their blades for real, and the Regents would wage war to the full extent of their powers.

In the best-case scenario, they would win quickly and remove Calder as a point of vulnerability to the Elders. But even so, the Empire would be weaker for it.

Was that the Great Elders' plan?

While she was still thinking, Shera felt a strange breeze brush against her elbow. She glanced to her right and saw that the ends of Estyr's hair had begun to drift upward.

Estyr was staring at Calder. "What happened to your arm, Steward?"

At the Regent's words, Shera focused on part of his arm that had been covered by his sleeve. There was a bit of a wound exposed, like a reddish burn scar.

"Ah, this. Yes." Calder had the distinct air of a man trying to think up an excuse, which made Shera's stomach drop. "I have nothing to hide from you, Regent, and I would love to get your guidance on this...mark...after the meeting is over."

"Roll up your sleeve," the Regent commanded.

Shera focused on Calder as he looked around the room as though for any way out. There was only one thing Shera knew of that would grab Estyr's attention like this: the Elders.

Shera had seen Calder fight against Elders. Meia had vouched for his character. He *couldn't* be a tool of the Great Elders. They would have seen it.

His wife is one of the Sleepless.

Calder didn't roll up the sleeve. "As you suspect, I *did* receive this from an Elder. But he has no influence over me, I assure..."

He lost his breath as Estyr's hair and coat began to blow in the beginnings of a storm. Even separated from their Vessel, a Soulbound didn't lose *all* their power, and Estyr's rage was stirring up the tiny remaining fraction of her gifts. She looked like she was about to leap on Calder and tear him apart.

Shera felt sick. *If he's a tool of the Great Elders...*

Then peace might have never been possible in the first place.

The Regent's voice echoed through the tower like a great bell. "Do you know who blinded Kell'arack? Who circled his head in bands of steel and drove spikes through his eyes, nailing him to the floor of the Aion Sea?"

As Calder trembled, Estyr pointed to his arm. "*That* is the mark of Kellarac. He placed it on his favorite slaves."

In this ancient arrangement, a delegate leaving their circle meant abandoning peace for war. Estyr strode over it now, locked on Calder like an eagle on its prey, and Calder scrambled backward to get away.

"His soul belongs to Kellarac," Estyr declared, "and he will not leave this room alive."

As Calder backed into the wall, Teach and Kern moved to protect him from the Regent.

Kern spoke first, holding his hands out as though to push Estyr away. "The Head of the Blackwatch has vouched for him."

"We have kept him under observation in the Palace," Teach said, and her voice sounded like a plea. "And he has shown no cooperation with Elders or the Elder powers."

Estyr had continued her slow, implacable march forward. "I will Read the truth from him myself."

She reached out, and whatever she was about to learn, Shera suspected Calder wouldn't survive it.

Kern must have thought so too, because the Champion grabbed Estyr's wrist in a hand twice the size of hers. "Regent, please." He didn't seem to notice that she was still easily pushing against him. "Let's take a moment to..."

Estyr started pushing her arm down, showing no strain. Kern grunted, bracing his grip with both hands, shoving upward with the entire strength of the Champion's Guild Head. His skin reddened, and the room filled with noise as his armor started to crack. So did the stone floor beneath him.

He fell to his knees, Estyr pushing him down with one hand.

General Teach tackled the Regent, but bounced off as though she'd run shoulder-first into a mountain.

Estyr's free hand closed into a fist, and Shera saw any hope of peace crushed between those fingers.

They had never been negotiating with people after all.

Calder had been an Elder puppet from the beginning, and if Estyr hadn't noticed, they would have fallen right into Kelarac's hands.

"Elderspawn," Estyr declared, and her hatred and fury echoed Shera's own.

Then the Regent punched Baldezar Kern through the stone floor.

CHAPTER SIX

TWO THOUSAND YEARS AGO

THE MISTRESS OF THE MISTS HAD INHERITED HER TITLE IN THE SAME WAY THAT humans inherited anything: by killing her predecessor.

As their clan reckoned matters, that meant she was more deadly than their previous leader and thereby more suited to rule. Such a system would typically lead to squabbling and infighting, the death of any organization.

Above all, the Am'haranai needed to balance themselves. So they'd created another system.

Each one of their order had to swear absolute obedience to their leader, enforced by the power of Bastion's Veil. Any order from the Mistress was law, and the subordinates were powerless to resist.

There were only two exceptions: the Mistress could not order her servants to their inevitable death, and she could not stop them from seeking her life. Therefore, the Masters and Mistresses before her had to learn to exercise their power only sparingly.

If they abused their abilities by issuing too many commands, they would foster only resentment, and they could never stand against all the attempted assassinations. She had to balance efficiency with the satisfaction of the killers she was training.

Which was as it should be. She thought of herself as an agent of balance, so it was only appropriate that a force should exist to balance her.

She stood on a cliff overlooking the sea, staring through Bastion's Veil; to her, the wall of cloud was clear as air. Someone watching might not see

her at all, her gray robes blending into the Veil, but she saw most clearly when she looked into the mist.

From the images the Veil delivered to her, she divined the future: war was on its way.

One of the Great Elders was moving against its siblings.

A Shepherd knelt behind her, dressed in ceremonial black. Every member of her order wore the same color except her.

“The delegation from Othaghor has arrived, Mistress,” the man said, his head bowed.

“Lead the delegate to me,” she said. Another step of balance. This island was far enough from any land that none of the Elders dared claim it for their own. If one tried to seize it, that would undoubtedly be seen as an act of aggression, inviting war.

It was for that reason that her ancestor, Bastion, had set up his Veil. His was the greatest protection against Elders in the world, so far as she knew, and it was built to repel any attack short of the direct will of a Great Elder.

Only here could humans have neutral ground, meeting on equal footing with Elders. Anywhere else, their overlords could tear apart human minds and bodies as easily as breathing.

So it was that she ordered Othaghor's representative to her, rather than going to visit him. It was an illustration; here, humans were not slaves to the Elders. Rather, they were potential business partners.

She couldn't offend Othaghor, but she could start her negotiations with him on the correct note.

The Shepherd returned a few minutes later, guiding a man in a cloak more appropriate to a tempest. A wet hissing came from within the hood, like a man sucking air through his teeth.

“The honorable delegate of the great Hordefather, Mistress,” her Shepherd intoned. “And may I present our leader and representative, the Mistress of the Mists.”

The Shepherd bowed his way out, but neither the delegate nor the Mistress bowed. They watched each other, Bastion's Veil looming behind her like a castle wall.

After a handful of seconds, the delegate lowered his hood.

His face looked as though it had been ravaged by some disease. Boils and bubbles covered his skin, his eyes were swollen practically shut, and the remnants of his hair clung stubbornly to his scalp. His mouth was twice

as wide as a human's should be, and on either side of his neck, layers of skin formed gills that flapped pathetically in the open air.

Hence the hissing, she supposed.

She felt not a quiver at the sight of his hideous face. She'd seen worse done to men by the power of the Elders.

"I represent the will of Othaghor, the Hordefather," he said, his voice sounding as though his throat had been wracked by the same disease as his face. "He orders the Am'haranai to act on his behalf at the upcoming battle against the vile *worms*."

He spat to one side at the mention of Kthanikahr's forces.

"We would be happy to negotiate terms with the Hordefather," she said, careful to emphasize the word *negotiate*. "What has he to offer us?"

The delegate made a burbling sound that she was certain could never come from a human. "*Offer* you? I'd heard talk of the blasphemies born on this island, but this surpasses my imagination by far! One does not negotiate with the raging fire, nor with the Father of Life! It is an honor for you to serve him, and he will honor you as he honors all of his servants, once the world is his."

"We prefer immediate payment," the Mistress said.

This was always the first step of negotiating with Elders: hearing about how great and mighty they were. "We will accept artifacts usable by men, invested weapons, tame Kameira, or slaves."

Once freed from Elder control, former slaves often became skilled and motivated workers. Some of them showed enough aptitude to be inducted into the Am'haranai themselves.

The delegate slashed a hand through the air, and she noticed the webs between his fingers. "The Hordefather does not show any more mercy to gnats than to worms! You will be crushed beneath his heel!"

"If he has not authorized you to offer payment, we can wait for you to return. As I understand the situation, your master is the one who wishes to act immediately. We have an abundance of time."

The warped man stomped closer, snarling angrily. "Our army will scour this island clean! I will sip your blood from the hollowed skull of your mate!"

Once again, balance needed to be established. With a thought, the Mistress of the Mists stretched out her mind to her Soulbound Vessel.

It hardly took an effort; the power of her Vessel was all around her.

The mist billowed out, swallowing them both. She could feel the Veil pressing down, exuding peace and balance, suppressing Elder influence. The delegate shrieked, and she heard him flailing blindly.

Soundlessly, she pulled one of the bronze knives from the sheath at her back and crept up behind him. The tip rested under his chin for several seconds before he finally noticed, freezing in place.

“If you return with payment, the friendship of my island can be yours,” she said into his mutilated ear. This close, he smelled like rotting fish. “If you return with an army, you will find my hospitality can quickly turn to hostility.”

Some representatives were cowed by this display of force. Some ignored it, more afraid of their Elders than of her. Still others were impressed, even amused, as though they'd come across an exotic species.

Kelarac's last emissary had reacted that way, exposing his gold-capped teeth in a broad grin when she held a knife to his throat. He'd clapped his jeweled fingers together, regarding her from behind a steel blindfold that seemed nailed onto his face. “*Very instructional,*” he'd said, his voice amused. “*I think I'll hire you after all.*”

Since that time, Kelarac had been her best client.

But there was another category of delegate—those so wrapped up in pride that they couldn't take a simple threat. Othaghor's fish-man was one such. He blathered and blustered even more after her threat, shouting about the wrath of his master even as a pair of Shepherds escorted him back to his ship.

After a few minutes, the Mistress spoke into the misty air. “We cannot do business with men like that.”

To her left, in the wet grass, a mass of worms swarmed together until they'd formed into the shape of a human roughly two feet high. “It is not only men who have such a nature. Othaghor himself is prideful and vain. He trades vision of that which is distant for that which is close.”

The Mistress was never sure whether she was dealing with a representative of Kthanikahr or with the Worm Lord himself, but she remained respectful either way. “You may consider us your asset for the coming conflict. Our agents have boarded Othaghor's vessel even now, and they will be yours to command on the battlefield.”

The pile of worms whispered a laugh. “Humans are not fit to be the masters of this world, but even the most vile and insignificant of creatures

have their uses. A few of you may survive as my servants.”

“May I expect payment delivered at dawn tomorrow?” the Mistress asked.

Another laugh drifted up as the worms dispersed, squirming down into the soil. That usually meant yes, that payment was on its way. But if it didn't arrive...well, her troops were already in place to aid Othaghor against his enemy.

That was the beauty of balance: if you started in the middle, you could move in any direction.



FOUR YEARS AGO

Lucan broke away from the memories of the Mistress of the Mists. He took a moment to reorient himself to the present, then scribbled notes of the partial vision he'd just witnessed.

In the year since the Emperor's death, he had snatched every opportunity to steal clues about the Guild's long history. He had started off looking at more recent records, hoping for insight into the current High Council's actions, but the more he dug, the more he became convinced that the true reasons were deeply buried.

Across his table, lit by the steady light of an orange quicklamp, were the fragments of history he had cobbled together to form a single picture.

One, a fragment of a page from the journal of Estyr Six. It wasn't the original, and therefore held no useful Intent, but it questioned in passing why the Consultants had never appointed another Guild Head.

Based on Lucan's knowledge of his Guild, that was a strange thing to wonder.

The Council of Architects had been elected when the last Soulbound to Bastion's Veil had died. As the Vessel was a glass box, there had been no way to appoint a successor. The box could only be used for containment, and therefore it was not a tool that anyone could bind to themselves and inherit, as the Heads of the Imperial Guard and Blackwatch did.

The ancient Architects had considered it impossible, and Lucan himself considered it at *best* ludicrously unlikely.

Any potential Consultant Guild Head would have had to live with the source of Bastion's Veil every minute, maybe for years, making it a part of who they were. That would be putting the Gray Island's greatest defenses in the hands of one person, and even so, the process might not work.

But if Estyr Six thought it was possible for them to appoint a new Guild Head, then it was possible.

The journal fragment was on loan from the Miners' archives, but he'd found the next item himself. The ancient bone fishhook had been used by an Am'haranai in the time before the Council of Architects, and Lucan had been fortunate to find it buried in one of the labyrinthine tunnels beneath the Gray Island.

It hadn't been used in two thousand years, so it wasn't as powerful in Intent as objects of similar age that remained in use, but the significance of an object settled over time. It was still a valuable find.

It carried many fragmented visions, mostly surrounding the act of fishing, but he managed to catch glimpses of deals carried out on the Island. Deals with Elders.

It was common knowledge that the Am'haranai had existed before the Empire, but he had always imagined them working for the primitive tribes of humanity. Though it made logical sense, he had never pictured his ancient predecessors taking contracts from Ach'magut or Nakothi.

The thought sickened him, but after all, the Emperor himself had borrowed Nakothi's power. Clearly, sometimes distasteful Elder deals were justified. And the Consultants had eventually given up those ways in service to the Empire.

More records and invested tools filled in the picture: an old history book from deep in the dusty corners of the archives referred to the Mistress of the Mists by name, which provided context for some of the visions in his own Gardener's shears.

Heavily redacted minutes from old Architect Council meetings—which Lucan had only been allowed to retrieve with Kerian's permission—gave further clues, until he knew a few points for certain.

First, the Mistress or Master of the Mists was the Consultant Guild Head, and if appointed, could supersede the entire Council of Architects.

He was positive that the Architects knew this, or at least the High Council did, but they kept the knowledge to themselves.

It was easy to imagine why. The resurrection of the Guild Head would mean them giving up power.

However, that was too easy to assume. There was also the reality that, as far as he could tell, the Architects genuinely didn't believe they could confer the power onto anyone. Only Estyr Six had mentioned it as a possibility.

Which was the other thread he was following.

Everyone in the world knew about the Regents, the companions of the Emperor who slept until they were needed to defend humanity. They had shown up five or six times since the Elder War that he could confirm, always to stop a rising Great Elder or to put down a calamitous rebellion.

They were called Regents because they were considered representatives of the Emperor himself. When they spoke, it was as though he spoke through them.

Nonetheless, they rarely governed, usually solving a problem and returning to sleep.

Somewhere.

That was his current question. The fragment of Estyr Six's journal read: "...*wish the Architects would appoint a new head of their Guild. If I have to sleep under the mist...someone to guard my back.*"

The gaps in the fragment tormented him, but there was a clear link between the Regents and the Mistress of the Mists.

He didn't know if this had anything to do with the High Council pushing Shera to kill the Emperor sooner than planned, but it was the most intriguing secret he'd uncovered. He was going to keep pulling this thread until the whole thing unraveled.

No matter how long it took.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PRESENT DAY

THE ARMORED CHAMPION BLASTED THROUGH THE FLOOR WITH A DEAFENING explosion, sending smoke and chunks of stone into the air.

When Shera could see again, Estyr was throwing a blinding-fast series of jabs into Teach's midsection, each leaving a solid dent in the armor. The Head of the Imperial Guard tried to sweep a punch at Estyr's head, but the Regent only ducked and landed an uppercut that launched Teach into the ceiling.

Kern leaped back up from the floor below in that moment, blood trickling from his scalp, but he landed and strode for Estyr with no further sign of injury.

They traded six blows apiece before Teach hit the ground. Each punch filled the room with thunder that Shera knew would be heard outside like a barrage of cannon-fire.

Kern's fists were glancing blows, but Estyr's were solid hits, most of which lifted Kern at least an inch into the air. As Teach pushed herself to her feet, groaning, Kern was fully on the defensive.

And Calder Marten was running for the door.

Anger flooded Shera, and she prepared herself to dash across the room. While they were both unarmed, she could kill Calder a dozen different ways before he knew he was dead.

For making her think that cooperation was possible and then dashing her hopes, he deserved it.

“Shera!” Estyr shouted. “My Vessels!” She twisted away from Teach and landing a backhand on Kern’s face that sent the Champion spinning in the air.

Shera watched Calder wrenching the door open while shouting for the Imperial Guard. She longed to put an end to this, to follow him and shove him out of the tower, but ice covered her thoughts.

Coldly, she considered the situation.

Teach was steadying herself and wiping blood from her lip, focused on Estyr Six, but she still stood between Shera and the exit. The Guild Head would intercept Shera, costing her a handful of extra seconds, and each second was precious. Their only sure condition of victory was to get Estyr Six her skulls.

She needed to stick to the plan.

Azea and Calazan Farstrider watched silently from the side, showing no panic at the sight of Champions and Soulbound erupting into combat. Both of them had a hand resting on their candles. They would remember every second of this.

Shera noted that. She would need their testimony later.

For now, the plan.

Bareius had unbuttoned his sleeves and rolled them up, and was tucking his glasses away into his shirt pocket. “I haven’t been in a scrap since I was a boy, if you don’t count exercise.”

Shera didn’t wait to convince him. She scooped him up and threw him over her shoulder as she ran for the eastern window. He yelped in protest but didn’t resist.

She tore open the shutters and leaped out.

As planned, Meia and another Consultant waited below, spreading out a net that had been used in a circus for years. The net would cushion their landing, putting Shera on the ground floor and closer to the Vessels.

Meia’s eyes had turned orange and vertically slitted. She watched Shera carefully, adjusting the net, waiting for the landing.

Shera’s first sign of warning was that Meia’s eyes had widened. Then something tightened its grip around her waist, and she and Bareius were jerked off-course.

As they flew, she looked down to see an ordinary strand of rope wrapped around her midsection, pulling them away from the tower. Instead

of landing at its base, she was being drawn too far away. Onto the wall of the Imperial Palace itself.

Where a team of Magisters and Imperial Guards awaited them.

She caught only glimpses of the situation, but she filed away the important information immediately. Three uniformed Imperial Guard, two Magisters, and one body crumpled in black. A Shepherd.

They had either found him and extracted Shera's exit plan from him or they had Read what was going on during the meeting and anticipated her actions. Either way, they were ready for her.

One of the Magisters was a woman with an iron staff and a skirt of chain mail. A trio of spears lifted from the ground behind her and levitated over her shoulder.

When Shera hit the top of the wall, she released Bareius and rolled into the fall, ending in a crouch.

Bareius just crashed. He groaned in pain, but Shera ignored him.

The Magister with the spears stood over her, weapons hovering in the air. Her partner, a man, had an ice-white staff and a long beard. Paper birds fluttered around him, and Shera wasn't sure what kind of threat they represented.

The Guards that loomed above were far more threatening, two of them holding pistols and the third a halberd. One had broad gray ears that reminded Shera of an elephant, one had wide inhuman eyes, and the third had arms thicker and hairier than a bear's limbs.

The female Magister gave Shera a smug smile. "For Maxeus," she said. One spear shot toward Shera like a bullet, the other two held in reserve.

Shera's hand shot out, and she caught the spear with ease.

The bear-limbed Guard roared and lunged at her from the side. She turned, slamming the butt of the spear into him. It caught him in the chest, the blow launching him out and over the wall until he made a crater in a wall all the way across the street.

Her thoughts still cold and clinical, Shera made a note: *I like this Champion potion. I should get some more.*

Bareius, under the effect of an augmentation potion of his own, had risen up behind the paper-folding Magister. He engulfed the man in a hug, squeezing enhanced arms so tightly that the Magister's arms had begun to break.

Shera heard the snaps like crumbling twigs as the man began to scream.

Shera hefted the spear. She hadn't practiced with a spear in years, though she had been trained extensively with a quarterstaff. She remembered enough to put the weapon to use, and the enhanced strength and speed born of alchemy took care of the rest.

The remaining two spears launched at her, faster than the first, but still not so fast that her augmented reaction time couldn't keep up. She sliced one from the air, dodged the second, and swept a Guard off her feet with the same motion.

In two more seconds, she had stabbed one Guard through the middle and crushed the chest of another. The Magister gestured, drawing her spears back to her, but Shera passed the blade of the spear through her neck.

As Bareius released one opponent to the ground, Shera had dropped all three of hers.

"Thank you for the potion," Shera said.

"Now, I know this isn't the time, but are you feeling any discomfort or nausea? This is a cutting-edge batch, so I'm looking for trial feedback."

Shera peered over the wall, toward the base of the Rose Tower. The body of the Imperial Guard that she'd launched away had been found, and shouts were going up throughout the Guard.

It was like throwing a match to a pool of oil.

The sounds of combat coming from inside the tower must have worried those outside, but no one had been certain enough to draw their weapons. Now, though, blood had been spilled.

Luminian knights drew their swords, Blackwatch pulled nails from inside their coats, Navigators revealed pistols.

A shout grew in intensity from the gathered Guilds and the surrounding crowds, like a single voice building up to a scream.

"You're right," Shera said. "This isn't the time."

Chaos erupted in the streets of the Imperial Palace.

The top of the Rose Tower shook again, rocked by the battle between Estyr and the two Guild Heads, but it was only an afterthought compared to the destruction on the streets. Guns cracked, light flashed as Magisters and Soulbound unleashed their powers, and blood ran on the streets of the Imperial Palace.

Shera stepped up to the edge of the wall, preparing to drop to the ground below. Bareius waved at her to stop.

“Just as a reminder, in case it slipped your mind: the potion *will* wear off. Soon. It is not designed to last forever.”

“How long?” Shera asked, her mind focused like an arrow on the bottom floor of the tower. The condition of her victory was returning Estyr’s Vessels to their owner.

“It’s hard to say precisely, since your body rids itself of potions more quickly under extreme stress, but my professional opinion is six to seven minutes.”

A clock began to tick away in Shera’s head.

“Have you activated your people?” Shera asked.

“Furman will have done so already. I’m not sure if you know, because I was quite discreet, but I had a plan for just this eventuality. My alchemists and mercenaries have been equipped specifically to distract, delay, disturb, and otherwise sideline the Champions.”

“I knew.”

She had been delivered a comprehensive report the night before on the alchemists’ equipment. It was the opinion of the Architects that they had chosen their alchemy specifically to restrain or immobilize powerful opponents, which suggested that they intended to prevent the Champions from engaging.

That was encouraging. Without Estyr and her Vessels, the Champions entering the fight meant an instant defeat.

Without waiting for a response from Bareius, Shera stepped from the building. She landed three stories below, an inch away from Meia, who had been standing in that exact spot waiting for her.

Meia’s eyes were Kameira orange, flitting this way and that as they caught movement, her arms clawed and flexing with inhuman anxiety. “Orders?”

“Retrieve Estyr’s Vessels.”

“I’ll lead.”

They shot off together. For the first time, Shera could keep up with Meia’s pace.

Inside her mind, the imaginary clock ticked away.

The two Consultants flowed through the ordinary Guild members like shadows, and the only one to react was a single Champion.

He had been half-sealed in a gummy pink adhesive sprayed from a pack by an alchemist so that only the Champion’s head and one arm were free.

He tracked Shera and Meia with his eyes, swinging a sword the size of Shera's torso.

If he had been able to put more of his body into the motion, he might have gotten her, but the adhesive restricted his motion. She ducked, slipping under the awkward blow, and Meia slashed her claws at the man's eyes in passing.

He dipped his head backwards and roared a challenge at them, but they had already reached the Rose Tower.

Meia made a flat-footed jump that cleared ten feet, landing with claws sunk into the plaster on the side of the arrow-slit. She peered inside.

After only a second, she pulled a hand out of the wall and signaled to Shera. *Enemy.*

Only a blink later, she dropped down to the street as a pair of musket-shots hammered the wall where she had been hanging.

"Kern," Meia reported grimly. She and Shera took shelter behind a nearby pair of Luminian knights, who raised shields to cover them.

A massive crash sounded from inside the first floor of the tower, followed by a roar that sounded like it was from a massive Kameira. Maybe the Stonefang.

"If he gets his Vessel, he'll return straight to the fight," Shera said. The Miners had assured her that Baldezar Kern's Soulbound power was the ability to enter a berserk state in which he was almost unstoppable. He would seek fight after fight until he ran out of enemies.

Paired with his Awakened maces, which caused fiery explosions on impact, it was no wonder he had sunk the entire fleet of the South Sea Rebellion.

But in his madness, he would become predictable. He wouldn't stand guard over the other Vessels. She could wait until she saw evidence that he had returned to the battle against Estyr, then slip in and crush open the boxes in his wake.

Though every second they spent waiting would cost her more. She had to succeed before her potion ran out.

Fortunately, they very quickly gained confirmation that Baldezar Kern had returned to the battle. In the form of Estyr Six crashing through the northern wall of the top floor and a helmeted Kern leaping after her, a mace in each hand, laughing like an Elder set free.

Estyr's clothes were torn and she was trailing blood, and a second later Teach leaped after them, Tyrfang bare in her hands. It blazed with black power streaked with blood, and the sense of corruption it brought twisted Shera's stomach.

The battle was headed away from them, so she could stand it...and she had a mission.

She matched Meia's earlier jump, landing with her fingers in the arrow-slit and pulling herself up to peer in.

In the days when this tower might have to be defended, there would have been a platform beneath the tiny window where an archer would stand. In the days of peace, the platform was removed, and the arrow-slit was used only to let in light.

The platform was gone now, which Shera thought must have been an oversight. Someone hadn't expected to need archery cover of the streets from this angle, despite the Imperial Guards and soldiers positioned higher in the tower and in the surrounding buildings.

Perhaps they had thought they wouldn't need the platform *because* of all the redundant cover. Either way, she thanked them mentally, because she had an unobstructed view of the room.

The Stonefang, contrary to her expectations, was still alive. As were the Magister and both sets of Witnesses.

The blindfolded Champion, by contrast, lay crumpled against the far wall. Her chest and stomach were covered in so much blood that Shera could see little of the actual wound, and more blood sprayed the wall behind her.

She had her sword clutched in her fist and she was still talking with a wry smile on her lips, which told Shera everything she needed to know about the resilience of true Champions, but she didn't look capable of standing. Even in that state, she might be dangerous.

Shera and Meia had to drop in, fight their way past the Kameira and Magister and wounded Champion, then break open the box containing Estyr's Vessels.

That was the mission, and Shera was prepared for it.

But she hesitated before slipping inside. The clock ticked away in her mind, the power of the potion draining away with every second, but she was thinking like a Gardener.

She needed to think like a Guild Head.

The battle inside would take at least a handful of seconds, and depending on how capable the Champion was, might stretch on for even longer. She and Meia could achieve their objective, but it might cost them too much time or even their lives.

There was another way.

Focusing on the cold in order to ignore the urgency of the ticking clock, Shera gestured at Meia to follow.

Then she scaled the Rose Tower.

Bullets, arrows, or debris thudded into the tower next to her, but she climbed so quickly that most did not touch her. A few stung her skin, leaving only shallow wounds.

She launched herself through the hole that Estyr's body had left, Meia following her only a half-second later. Her flesh shone luminous pink where it was healing a bullet hole, but Meia expressed no discomfort.

The room looked like it had endured a fight between an earthquake and a hurricane. There were holes in all the walls, the floor had almost entirely crumbled away, and most of the ceiling had collapsed. What little surface remained at their feet was covered by rocks, plaster, and debris.

On a tiny island of stone, Azea and Calazan Farstrider remained. They peered at the stairs, whispering to one another, clearly debating whether to cross. The floor between them and the stairs was suspect, and the stairs themselves were mostly blocked by chunks of masonry.

As Shera had suspected, the Guild Heads had stayed to witness the fight, only attempting to make an exit after the battling Champions had left. She considered herself fortunate that they had survived...though depending on who killed them, it could have been an asset for their side.

If they had obviously been slain by Tyrfang's dark Intent, for instance, the other Witnesses would report that the Imperialists had killed the Heads of a neutral Guild. That could be enough to end the conflict on its own.

But they *had* survived, and Shera could use that.

She didn't, however, have time to explain herself.

Shera jumped across the room in one bound, landing on the sill of the western window. The Farstrider sisters looked to her in alarm, but she scooped them up one under each arm.

Meia had already landed on the stairs, and heaved a chunk of brick and plaster bigger than her torso aside, clearing the way.

One of the sisters squirmed in Shera's grip, holding up a chalkboard only the size of a hand. It already had writing on it: "*Imperial Guard?*"

"If these stairs are still guarded," Shera said aloud, "they won't be for long."

Meia pulled her shears as she ran down the stairs first.

Shera didn't see any guards, Imperial or otherwise, as they ran down the stairs. She did see some bloodstains and a few places where it looked as though a large man had been thrown through the outer wall.

Fortunately, the staircase spiraling the interior of the tower remained intact. Stairs, Shera had been taught, retained Intent far better than most any other part of a building. People concentrated on stairs, used them consciously for a purpose, unlike walls or ceilings.

As they reached the bottom floor, Shera spoke again to the Farstrider sisters. "Tell them to release our Vessels."

The Magister stood facing them, the blue crystals of her staff shining and razor-sharp discs of stone hanging in the air behind her. Even the Silent Ones had drawn weapons upon seeing Shera carrying their Guild Heads, and the Stonefang prowled protectively in front of its boxes. The Champion grunted, forcing herself to one knee, and raised her sword.

Shera didn't think much of Magister combat ability, but she was starting to feel dizzy. The Farstriders felt a fraction heavier than they had at the top of the tower. She might not have the full seven minutes Bareius had estimated.

"We will lose if Estyr can't fight at full power," Shera said, keeping her eyes on the weapons arrayed in front of her. "And you heard what she said about Kellarac."

The twins glanced at one another. Shera released them.

Together, they both clapped their hands and swept them out in an obvious signal.

The Silent Ones bowed and holstered their weapons. The Stonefang whined and backed down. The Champion gave a heavy sigh, collapsing back against the wall.

The Magister looked uneasily at Shera and didn't let her stones drop, but took a few steps back from the boxes.

Meia dashed forward.

"The big one," Shera called, and Meia turned to shatter it with a kick.

The Stonefang whimpered.

The skulls shot out from the box in a blur of motion. They crashed through the already-crumbling wall, zipping off to find their master.

“Yours?” Meia asked, but Shera had already walked over to the head-sized box containing Bastion. The lid slid off under the Magister’s command.

Inside, singing to her in its calming voice, was her sheathed Vessel.

She hurriedly tore the knife from its sheath, letting its blue-white radiance calm her, the billowing clouds inside its blade soothing her thoughts.

Only when Meia touched her arm, worried, did she come back to herself and strap her belt around her waist. The job wasn’t done.

“Shepherds!” She called. Two black-clad Consultants slid in from the street outside, both bearing wounds from the fighting.

“Everyone in this room is one of us. Have we started evacuating?”

“We’re trying, Guild Head,” one of the Shepherds responded. “It has become difficult to disengage.”

“I’ll take care of that. In the meantime, get all these people to an exit.” She gazed at the Magister from beneath her gray hood. “Would you rather be treated like a guest or a prisoner?”

The woman spoke carefully. “I’ve sworn to take no side in any conflict between Guilds.”

Shera reversed her grip on her shear.

“Guest!” the woman shouted.

“Good.” Shera turned back to the Shepherds. “And bring a stretcher for the Champion.”

Meia fell in beside her as she walked out of the Rose Tower. She stumbled at the doorway, but Meia caught her elbow and supported her so subtly that she didn’t think anyone else noticed.

“Wearing off?” Meia asked quietly.

“I’ll be surprised if it lasts another two minutes.”

“Too bad. It was fun having someone around who could keep up.” Meia’s orange eyes sparkled with humor for a moment. Until she had to hurl a spade at an approaching Guard.

Shera and Meia dove into the battle.

They fought for...it was hard to say how long. Ordinarily Shera could estimate the passage of time fairly well, but her enhanced senses made her feel like each second was stretched.

But they fought for several long, drawn-out moments, her potion gradually losing effectiveness, until the battle cooled around them.

Not that it was peaceful. Tension hung thick in the air, and bullets still occasionally whizzed by. But both sides had retreated to relatively fortified positions, so a fragile and uneasy truce reigned.

Most of the Independents seemed to have hidden behind a huge wall that someone had shaped the paving-stones into. A group of Luminians, Greenwardens, alchemists, and ordinary-looking civilians—her Masons—clustered behind the barrier, weapons at the ready.

She spotted other clusters of Consultants or other allies behind windows or hiding in doorways. The rest now made up a latticework of bodies that soaked the streets of the Imperial Palace red.

A few Independents had no doubt escaped into the tunnels already. That was where the bulk of her Consultants were, she was sure. The rest couldn't cross the open ground to get there.

An explosion at the end of the street reminded her of the one part of the battle that had never stopped.

General Teach had been slammed by an invisible force into the ground so hard that the stones cracked. She coughed blood, Tyrfang falling from her hand. Its noxious Intent corrupted even the street, stone peeling away from its blade.

Baldezar Kern fell like a meteor, driving a furrow in the stone until he came to a halt. Blood leaked from his battered armor and his left arm hung at an odd angle, but he still held a mace in each hand. He growled up, pushing back against the force that held him down even as the earth crumbled beneath it.

Estyr Six rose above them all. Her coat was shredded, her hair missing chunks. She was stained all over by stone and plaster dust, and blood caked one side of her face.

But she drifted into the air, looking down like a Great Elder over the masses of humanity. A musket cracked, and it was only the enhancement of the Champion potion that allowed Shera to spot the musket-ball freezing a foot from Estyr's head and then shooting back in the direction from whence it came.

Estyr's voice boomed out over the entire Palace. "Citizens, lay down your weapons. This battle is over."

Shera's icy focus relaxed, the peace of Bastion's Veil taking over her soul. They had won the day. She had succeeded.

There were still months of work ahead of her, but at least they could begin on the right foot.

Light and life, I made it. The dizziness of the potion had returned, and her eyesight was becoming less sharp, retreating to human levels.

"Calder Marten," Estyr called. "Come out."

Shera looked forward to this. Not to seeing Calder punished, though that would be satisfying in its own way, but to Estyr determining the truth.

He walked out from a group of Imperialists crouching in the shadow of a nearby building, his formerly white shirt soot-stained and bloody. He stood beneath Estyr Six and his crown gleamed as he looked up at the Regent of the North.

Dimly, Shera heard a distant shout. "*No!*"

She turned to see the disguised Jorin pulling open his cello case, blindfold turned up to Estyr, an expression of naked horror on his face. Within the case, his sword was wrapped in bandages as always.

Her focus sharpened, and she whipped back toward Calder Marten, tapping into Bastion's power.

"Estyr," the Emperor said. "Stop."

Shera shook. Her hand on the shear loosened. The power she'd drawn from Bastion leaked away.

Teach sat up with a gasp and Kern stumbled forward a step as the force that held them to the ground suddenly vanished. Estyr looked shocked, staring at Calder until she started scanning the street as though looking for someone.

It *wasn't* the Emperor who had spoken. It was just Calder. His voice sounded nothing like the Emperor's.

But for a second...it had *felt* like him, even to Shera.

How much worse would it be for a Reader? Estyr would know it wasn't him, but her sixth sense would tell her otherwise.

It had distracted her for only a moment.

But that was enough for the Head of the Champion's Guild.

Kern launched into the air in a blur, his mace connecting with the airborne Regent like a cannonball. A bubble of force stopped the weapon an inch from her body.

It didn't stop the thundering explosion of red flame that followed. The entire street shook at the strike of the Awakened weapon, the surfaces of nearby homes blackening, paint peeling away, glass shattering.

Estyr *shot* backwards. Her body tore through the front of a building at the end of the street.

Either the explosion took a toll on Kern, or Estyr had landed a counterstroke of her own, because he flew in the other direction. He hit the ground like a rag doll, his all-too-human form tumbling end over end until he eventually rolled to a halt.

Teach lay sprawled on the ground without even the strength to sheathe Tyrfang. Kern was down, at least for the moment.

What was Shera's priority?

Should she try and kill the downed enemies, look to find Estyr, or ensure the evacuation of the remaining Independents?

Before she had even finished her thought, Jorin took the decision from her hands.

Screaming, he brought his sword down.

His blade was darker and more corrupted than Tyrfang. It was the original, into which he had fed curses and centuries of malicious Intent. A weapon of pure destruction.

The rotten blade swept a wave of dark power that tore through the gore-littered streets, disintegrating bodies and devouring blood. That black energy consumed everything.

It was sweeping toward Calder Marten.

Seeing his tiny form stand before Jorin's power was like seeing a minnow about to get snapped up by a shark.

Before it struck Calder Marten, Teach threw herself in front, her own sword bare.

Then they were both swallowed.

In that split second, Shera made her decision.

"Exit, Meia. Go."

She poured everything into Bastion.

Blue-tinged silver fog exploded from her, swallowing the streets of the Imperial Palace. The shouts of fighters and moans of the dying were suddenly muted.

Dizziness from the fading potion was making her thoughts heavy, but she clutched at the power of her Vessel to keep her focused. She was still

unfamiliar with this power, but she knew Bastion's Veil had another function. One that the High Council had used for the island's security on a number of occasions.

Her attempts to use this power had given her vague and uncontrolled results, but she needed it now.

With all the will she could muster, she threw her sight into Bastion's Veil.

It was like trying to look through a thousand eyes at once, all clouded by fog. She was blinded by light, shadow, indistinct blurs of motion, and it only made her dizziness and disorientation worse.

Calm, Bastion told her. *Look for those who need protection.*

With that soothing voice drifting through her like a cool breeze, she took a breath and calmed down.

She quickly found her Consultants. Ayana's talons were slick with blood, but she had her palms pressed to a dying Greenwarden's midsection. With a twist of her thoughts, Shera lightened Bastion's Veil between them and the nearest tunnel exit. To them, the mist would have retreated, leaving a kind of hallway through the gray.

She repeated the process with Kerian, who was returning from a tunnel to find other allies, and Yala, who stood with a bloodstained sword in either hand and a room full of dead or dying Blackwatch around her.

She directed others she didn't know, but every additional tunnel she created made it harder, like each was another brick she had to carry at once. Distantly, she was aware that her knees were beginning to buckle and that she was swaying on her feet. There may have been blood coming from her nose.

It was hard to focus on anyone who wasn't a Consultant through the eyes of the Veil, but the Consultants had already been in position to guide the others. They led pockets of other Independents through the mist, slipping into false grates or cellar doors that had been marked in advance.

Just when she was about to drop her vision, Shera noticed an exception in Bastion's focus: Jorin stood out clearly.

He was using his blade to ward off the Blackwatch Guild Head, Bliss, as a group of Luminians hurried behind him to their designated exit.

And if Jorin was easy to spot...

She cast her thoughts in the direction where Estyr had gone.

The Regent was far away, at the very edge of the silvery mist, but Shera found her. Or what had once been her.

She lay in a bloody pile, one half of her body mangled and burned. She was *soaked* in blood, her limbs crumpled in angles that no living person could achieve.

Shera's throat clenched until icy practicality washed away the horror.

It wasn't the gore; she'd seen worse without flinching.

The most powerful person left in the world was dead.

She had to fight back thoughts of how hard that would make their upcoming battles, or how doomed they were when the Great Elders rose. No, she had to focus on what was real.

Then the pile of charred flesh took in a shallow, rattling breath.

Shera slipped out of the vision, reality crashing back over her, and she stumbled and almost fell. Meia caught her. When had Meia come back?

"Estyr," Shera said. "Follow me."

Without the last dregs of the Champion potion flowing through her, Shera wouldn't have been able to stumble down the street after Meia. She would have collapsed. Using Bastion so heavily and so quickly had exhausted her, and her body was starting to ache with the penalty of straining itself beyond her human limits.

But she squeezed the last of the alchemical power, pushing herself to jog on legs that were growing numb.

When she led Meia to the edge of the fog and into the half-collapsed house that held Estyr Six, she heard Meia gasp.

Well, that was the rational reaction.

"Shera, we have to leave." Meia put a hand on Shera's elbow, urging her to turn around.

"She's alive," Shera said, "but I understand the confusion."

Meia looked over Estyr's body, pity in her orange eyes. "Even if she is..."

Shera slammed her shear back into its sheath and walked over to the scorched pile of Regent. With strength beyond what she thought she should have left, she knelt and scooped Estyr up. She tried not to pay attention to how shallow and weak Estyr's breaths were...or to the little pieces of the woman that remained behind on the floor.

She *was* still breathing. If anyone could recover from this, it was the first Champion. And if anyone would know how to restore her, it was Jorin

Curse-breaker.

From beneath the debris, Meia produced a dusty rug. She snapped it once against the wall, then gently took Estyr from Shera, wrapping her in the rug.

That was for the best, as Shera almost staggered and planted her face in the ground just from losing the extra weight.

"I don't think she'll even make it back to the tunnel," Meia said quietly.

"We'll see."

Bastion's Veil had begun to clear, no longer supported by Shera's power, and they had almost reached the closest secure tunnel when Shera realized the lack of cover would be a problem.

All of the Independent Guilds had already retreated. They were alone.

Facing an angry, and bloody, army of Blackwatch, Magisters, Imperial Guards, and a few sticky and poisoned Champions.

Bliss of the Blackwatch stood at their head, staring down at her enemy.

Not Shera.

One man had not yet retreated. He'd kept his hood up but lost the cello case, replacing his blindfold with his pair of shadeglasses. Jorin held his sword reversed and driven into the ground, both hands on its pommel, and stone melted and ran away from the blade in sick black rivulets.

Shera hurried toward him while Meia sprinted. A few muskets spun her way.

Jorin's hands tightened on the hilt of his weapon. "Which man of you is hungry for the grave?" he asked.

No one fired.



When Shera and Meia made it into the tunnels, Consultants and alchemists crashed over them in a wave of support. Estyr was taken from Meia, though they had to explain who she was.

Instantly, an alchemist tried to push a syringe of shining pink fluid into her. Shera caught his wrist.

"Regenerative elixir," he explained. "This is ten times the dose I'd give a dying elephant, but if she can handle it, it will stabilize her."

Shera released him, and he plunged it into what might have been Estyr's thigh.

Wagons waited in the tunnel, ready to carry the Independents to rally points all over the Capital, where a dozen other preparations had been made for their retreat. Shera settled into the back of a cart next to Estyr, shivering and dizziness overcoming her.

Despite her best efforts, they had been driven off once more. It was the Gray Island all over again.

Except...

The identical faces of the Farstrider sisters peeked over the side of the wagon. Two sets of eyes inspected her, taking in her condition, and she was sure they were memorizing the details to relive later.

"You *will* tell everyone what happened here today, won't you?" Shera asked them.

The Witnesses were their only hope from the events of today. If word spread that Calder Marten had been accused of consorting with Kelarac by one of the Regents, he would never be allowed to remain in power. Even those who supported him would come under scrutiny.

Together, the two sisters nodded.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THREE YEARS AGO

“IT’S TAKING ME FAR TOO LONG,” LUCAN SAID, TRUDGING UP A GRASSY HILL. “There’s too much history, and too little of it is helpful.”

Shera was never the best source of sympathy. “Then quit,” she said. Her left arm was linked in his right, and she held a pear in her other hand. She bit into the fruit, punctuating her statement with a crunch.

The second anniversary of the Emperor’s death was approaching, and the world had settled into an uneasy peace. The violent chaos that had enveloped the Heartlands was gone, leaving an unsteady equilibrium.

But that didn’t mean things had gotten better.

Regions, families, and Guilds had begun pulling apart, slowly stretching themselves away from one another, pulling at the seams that tied the world together. The Consultants had almost doubled in size over the last two years, some of their chapter houses in Izyria or Erin now rivaling their Capital chapters in size.

He had discovered thousands of minor Guild secrets, but still nothing explaining the actions of the Architects. He was starting to lean on the simplest, easiest explanation: they had wanted the Emperor out of the way because chaos was good for business.

He could believe it of Yala, at least. Kerian had worshiped the Emperor as much as anyone, but who knew what might have changed for her after his death?

They must have known of some time limit, some plan that the Emperor had meant to implement before his death. They wouldn't have rushed Shera unless they thought they had a clear deadline, and he was convinced it had to do with the connection between the Mistress of the Mists and the Regents.

But he was tired.

Tired of asking the same question with no answers *and* tired in the usual sense. He'd been worked as hard as any Gardener over the last two years, then spent most of his free time on this personal research project.

Shera had pushed him to quit at every opportunity, and Meia had such faith in the Council of Architects that he couldn't share his quest with her. Which had led to something of a rift between the three of them that he hoped the truth could mend.

Lucan spoke again as they approached the gray wall of Bastion's Veil. "Doesn't it bother you, not knowing?"

"Nope," Shera said around a mouthful of pear. She swallowed and continued. "I wish we knew, but we don't, and that's how it is. They had plenty of possible reasons. Maybe they thought that *he* needed to be harvested before he could go mad."

"What if he had a contingency plan they didn't like?" They'd had this conversation before, but he rarely pushed her for her full opinion.

She shrugged the shoulder that rested against him. "We'll never know."

"What if we did?"

"Then we'd take his plan and make it happen."

That stunned him enough that he was silent for almost a minute as they approached the mist-gray house that blended into the veil. Mason Zhen's home.

Shera finished her pear and tossed the core down onto the grass. "Why are you so shocked?"

Lucan knew Shera better than anyone, but he couldn't keep a grip on her moral standards. "I...would have thought you wouldn't care about carrying out a dead man's last wishes."

She gave him a puzzled look. "Not anyone's. *His*. If it turns out you're right, and he had a plan that the High Council knew about and didn't approve of, then it's a question of who I trust more: him or them. And that's no contest."

It was simple, when she put it like that. But after so long looking for an answer, Lucan had questioned himself from every angle.

He expected to find that the High Councilors had a selfish motivation and the Emperor an altruistic one, but he had considered the fact that he might be wrong. Maybe the Emperor had been secretly moved by Nakothi's influence and the Architects had found him out.

It wasn't a question he could answer until he knew the truth.

The gray door of Zhen's house slid opened, revealing the elderly Mason scowling at them. The years had weathered him, and he was fatter and more wrinkled than ever, the points of his now-white mustache hanging down past his chin. The chef's apron he wore was spotless, and he glared at the pair of Gardeners.

"Late!" he bellowed. "What virtue has a Gardener with no sense of timing? One out of ten. I expected better from you...and did you leave rotting fruit on my front lawn?"

Shera separated herself from Lucan, patting the Mason on the shoulder as she slipped past him and into the house. "Sorry," she said. "Do I smell caramel?"

"Dessert is taken *after* the meal!"

Zhen's complaints made Lucan feel more at home.

After dinner, Shera tossed herself onto a nearby couch, leaving Lucan and Zhen seated at the table. The old Mason cracked open a window and lit a pipe with a match, quickly puffing out smoke.

Leaving Lucan with the opportunity he had been hoping for.

"I'm afraid we're not just here to relax," Lucan said. "We thought you could help us with some business."

Zhen's bushy white eyebrows shot up. "The Guild isn't keeping you busy enough already?"

Lucan tried to laugh, but it came out more as a sigh.

He could feel the exhaustion, mental and physical, lurking just beneath the surface. If he dipped even a finger in, it would devour him.

"Just a private interest. I've been looking for some Guild history I can't find in the archives, so I thought I might find it in the tunnels."

"In the *tunnels*. You might as well try and find one rat in the Capital, but I'm happy to give you the tour again. Haven't taken you down there in years, so far as I can recall."

"I'd be grateful," Lucan said, rubbing at his head.

“If that’s the most convincing you can be, you need to train with me again. What is it you’re looking for?”

“I don’t even know anymore,” Lucan said, and it was only half a dodge. “Just trying to put some pieces together for an old mission.”

Light snoring drifted over from the couch.

Zhen narrowed his eyes, examining Lucan for a long moment. “Usually, when we bury something, it’s best not to dig it up again.”

“Don’t worry, I’m close to packing up my shovel.”

Zhen grunted and led Lucan over to the trap door concealed beneath an elaborate rug. “Well, whatever I can do for the Gardeners.”

Down in Zhen’s basement, they walked past rows and rows of costumes tagged and organized according to size, region, and style.

Now that Lucan knew what he was looking for, he could spot young Masons trying to hide as they passed through. They worked full-time to keep these clothes organized, and they were supposed to remain invisible to visitors as part of their training.

“Four out of ten, Kanai,” Zhen called, and one of the shadows flinched. “Remember the angle between the target and yourself.”

The sub-basement, walled in stone, was the beginning of the proper tunnels. Crates waited here, filled with papers that hadn’t been sorted into the archives yet. Not all reports made their way here first, only those of dubious origin.

“I don’t suppose you would let me have a glance into one of these,” Lucan said.

“You come back with permission from enough Architects, and you can drown yourself in ink.”

More than likely, it wouldn’t be worth gaining permission. As the papers hadn’t been sorted yet, any given crate could contain anything from the deepest secrets of the Champions to the current market price of wheat on the Vandenyan coast.

But when Lucan expected Zhen to pull aside the next trap door and descend lower, he noticed that there was now another rug where the next descent used to be. Zhen walked past it, pulling out a ring of keys to open the ordinary door at the end of the document room.

“I thought we were headed deeper into the tunnels,” Lucan said.

Zhen blew out the ends of his mustache. “We are, boy, we are. Just have to take the long way ‘round, now that the Architects have decided they

don't want to take it easy on my knees."

The door swung open as Zhen unlocked it, blowing in the salty ocean breeze and the cool scent of Bastion's Veil. The door was wide, and a ramp led down to the hidden cove into which the documents had been delivered.

But Zhen's mention of the Architects caught Lucan's attention, so he walked back to the rug over the trap door. Kneeling, he placed three fingers on the thick strands.

"Do you have time for this?" the Mason asked before the Reader's trance took over.

She has a few extra skeins of yarn left over from the winter. Might as well make another rug, maybe earn a few marks...

Not the Intent he was looking for. He pushed past it.

"Be warm," an unknown voice begs the blanket, bundled tight inside it. "Please keep me warm, just for one night."

Not it.

An idle, disinterested hand pulls the rug out of a selection of many. This will do. The brief contact leaves only a fleeting whisper of Intent, easily brushed away.

Lucan started to pull his hand away when he recognized the sense of the next vision.

"Hide the trap door," Zhen thinks briefly, but he doesn't fully care if the rug does its job or not. He's doing this to placate the Architects.

The room beneath is almost never used, and no one has ever been down here without his permission. His Intent to hide the entrance is weak...much stronger is his desire to stay out of trouble with the Council of Architects.

What sleeps in the lower room has stayed asleep for hundreds of years.

Lucan broke contact with the rug, looking up to see Zhen looking impatient.

"What's sleeping down there?" Lucan asked.

"Take it up with the Architects. Are we going deeper, or do you want to admire my rug collection?"

Lucan tossed the rug aside, revealing the boards nailed across the trap door. He pulled out one of his bronze shears and looked to Zhen. "I'm going to open this."

Zhen hurried over. "Wait a second, now! I'm happy to invite you into my home, but not if you're going to be tearing it apart and getting me in trouble with the Council."

“When did they have you board this up?”

“Shortly before the Emperor’s death. My house has kept it safe enough all this time, but suddenly they worried about what would happen if I had intruders. As though I can’t keep my own affairs!”

Lucan tapped the boards with his shear. “What’s sleeping down there?” he asked again.

Zhen’s eyes grew hard. “Is this an interrogation, then?” He placed his hands on his hips, and Lucan would have bet ten goldmarks that he had knives tucked away somewhere.

Lucan took a deep breath, settling his own excitement and frustration. “I’m not threatening you. But I’ve been tracking down an answer for two years, and it could have to do with the prosperity of the entire Guild. I just want to look around, and I swear to you that I will reveal nothing to the Council.”

“You’ll have to take it up with the Architects, Gardener. I’m not taking any lumps to satisfy your curiosity.”

Zhen wouldn’t really attack him. Not in earnest.

Despite how some people thought of the Consultant’s Guild, and how some Consultants thought of the Gardeners, they didn’t kill fellow Guild members. But the Mason might draw knives to let Lucan know he was serious.

Lucan dropped his shear to show goodwill, looking up to the man who had given him Mason training as a boy. “Do you know where Shera, Meia, and I were assigned?”

“Of course not,” Zhen said, and he was the perfect mix of puzzled and offended that Lucan would have believed him.

If he didn’t know better.

“We were at the Emperor’s side until the night he died.”

Zhen’s eyes widened in horror that was likely fake. Not much happened on the Gray Island that Zhen couldn’t find out.

“I have one question remaining about the circumstances surrounding his death. I think this could help me unravel them. Now, will you help me?”

Lucan didn’t interact with Zhen much, but he thought he understood the man well enough. He loved his work and loved the Consultant’s Guild, but he loved theatricality and drama just as much. A good production was his passion.

This was a chance to take a peek behind the curtain at the most exciting tragedy since the Elder War: the death of the Emperor.

Zhen huffed out a sigh that was heavy with reluctance. “If a word of this makes it back to Yala, I will swear you threatened me. Very well, out of respect for your service, I will allow you a peek. Just a peek!”

Lucan looked down to hide his smile and scooped his shear back up to pry away nails.

There was no reason to limit him to a peek; this room had been open to Zhen’s guests before two years ago. Dozens, if not hundreds, of people had spent at least enough time in the room to walk through it.

He pried up the first board, then the second. The iron hinges of the trap door creaked as he pulled it up to reveal the simple wooden stairs leading down.

Zhen pulled a red quicklamp from the wall and brightened it. “Haven’t replaced the lights down there since we closed it off. After you, Gardener.”

Lucan descended into darkness, Zhen following after with the light.

In the crimson glow, they entered a room that could have been taken from an Izyrian coliseum, with smooth pillars holding up the walls. Four coffins rested against each other in a cross shape at the center of the room, each carved with the image of a different Kameira.

“Go on!” Zhen said. “Let’s get this over with, Reader.”

If Zhen had really been reluctant to allow Lucan to inspect the room, there was no way he would encourage Reading the coffins. Lucan strode up, resting a hand on the nearest coffin, the one marked with images of a massive, subterranean creature with a thick hide roaring from a cavern mouth: a Mountainroot Goliath.

The instant his skin made contact with the stone lid, a vision crashed over him like a storm-tossed wave.

“Preserve,” the Emperor commands, and the rock is bound together in purpose with the alchemical apparatus inside: they yearn to keep, to preserve, to fight the ravages of time and decay. The Emperor’s Intent is so strong that it wipes away all lesser investment, the wills of ordinary men and women erased before the power of the Aurelian Emperor.

But one Intent yet remains, in the same league as the Emperor’s if not quite equal.

A strong, arrogant mind demands the coffin endure, that it last for all eternity, as he intends to live forever. His resting-place will be as sturdy and

enduring as the very bones of the earth.

Lucan gasped, pulling his hand back, a stinging in his head letting him know that he had stretched himself in Reading such powerful Intent. It wasn't full-on Reader burn, not yet, but if he continued to slam his brain into the Emperor's Intent unprepared, he was in for an unpleasant night.

"Did you find what you came for?" Zhen asked, seemingly disinterested.

From all Lucan's research, he was certain the second voice had belonged to Alagaesus. The Soulbound to the Heart of the Earth, and one of those who had buried Othaghor.

The Regent of the East.

Lucan braced himself for the next coffin, the one carved with creatures Lucan didn't recognize. They were like long-furred, tiny monkeys with eyes that took up most of their skulls. The engraving depicted them resting on trees, surrounded by mists or shadows.

Once again, the Emperor's command to preserve echoed in the stone, exactly the same as it had in Alagaesus' coffin.

The second source of Intent was different, coming from a scholarly and inquisitive mind that focused more on the alchemical devices *inside* the stone box than on the coffin itself.

Lucan recognized the source of the Reading instantly.

Jorin wants the alchemy to continue sustaining him at peak efficiency, the loop to remain closed to outside influence for as long as possible. The coffins can't be airtight, lest they suffocate even in their suspended state, but air brings in all sorts of contaminants.

He invests the coffin for purity, for consistency, and for protection from the elements.

Without responding to Zhen's repeated questions, he dashed over to the third coffin. This one was marked with a Windwatcher, an iridescent bird Kameira with shining feathers.

Once he pushed past the Emperor's Intent, he found that of the occupant.

Her Intent was a comforting blanket and a breath of fresh air, a warm fire crackling in the hearth on a cold day.

"Keep me safe," begs Loreli, the founder of the Luminian Order, "so that I may save others."

Lucan broke contact, panting from the connection to these legendary Readers, his head pounding in the beginning of proper Reader burn.

Fortunately, he didn't need to Read the last coffin. It was engraved with the clear image of three winged lizard-like creatures among the sky. Cloudseeker Hydras.

This was the tomb of Estyr Six.

Lucan fell backwards onto the floor, catching his breath, letting the remaining fragments of the visions swirl around in his mind. The implications of this room's existence were just beginning to settle onto him. And the High Council had ordered it sealed up.

"Boy, if you don't tell me what's going on, I'm going to have the Architects knock you back down to a recruit and give you to me."

Zhen loomed over him, his mustache dangling.

"The Regents," Lucan said. This was a Guild secret, but their custodian should know what he was guarding.

Also, Lucan needed to let at least one other person know, as insurance in case Yala decided to murder him for this. "They're asleep in these coffins."

Zhen snorted out a laugh. "No, they're not. Those are Awakened weapons made from Kameira. They're dangerous, that's why they're sealed up. Light and life, boy, you made me think you were going to find something worth my time down here."

Lucan looked up and met the old Mason's gaze.

Zhen went from confident, to questioning, to nervous. "Not...not weapons?"

Lucan shook his head.

"...Urg'naut swallow me up and spit me out."

Zhen offered him a hand up, which Lucan took. "Now, I know I don't need to tell this to a Gardener, but..."

"I was never here," Lucan finished.

He would keep his mouth shut.

At least until he confronted Yala.

CHAPTER NINE

Some Soulbound report that they hear the voices of their Vessels only weakly or rarely. Some say they have never heard a “voice” and consider it strange when other Soulbound refer to their Vessels as conscious entities. This report intends to prove that all Vessels suited for combat have disproportionately strong wills. I submit that a history of violence affects the Awakening process in volatile, perhaps even disturbing ways.

—INTERNAL REPORT FROM RESEARCHERS OF THE MAGISTER’S GUILD, COPIED AND
RECORDED BY CONSULTANT MINERS

PRESENT DAY

ESTYR SIX HOVERED IN THE AIR IN FRONT OF SHERA, THE WIND ROARING AS HER powers raged out of control.

Rather than floating in a calm circle around Estyr’s head, her three Hydra skulls made chaotic loops, buzzing around her like a trio of bees. The Consultants had given Estyr a bed, but now the frame was nothing but kindling, the blanket and pillow shredded so fine that they filled the air with a blizzard of white fuzz.

Estyr’s skin was covered in rough scars and lumps of newly healed skin. Half of her head was missing hair. Her eyes stared sightlessly ahead, blank and soulless, and her body hung limp in the air as though she dangled from an invisible hook.

The most powerful woman in the world was being twisted like a puppet, at the mercy of her own powers.

Jorin stood in front of Shera, a shield on his arm, bracing himself against the force of Estyr's Vessels. Shera knelt behind Jorin, surrounding herself in a light mist of Bastion's Veil, which helped her resist the mad Regent's out-of-control Intent.

He shouted something, and Shera took that as the signal.

She withdrew a heavy length of chain from a bag that Jorin had prepared for her. The links had words and symbols carved into every exposed inch, which Jorin said helped focus his Intent. He had worked on these for days, ever since Estyr's first caretakers had barely escaped from this room with their lives.

Shera released the chain, letting it spin through the air in Estyr's direction. She didn't bother putting much effort into the throw; Jorin had made it to wrap around Estyr, so it would.

The chain twisted in the air as though the Vessels had grabbed it and pulled it closer.

When it drew close, the chain came to life and latched on to Estyr, binding her arms to her body. The Regent had torn her loose patient's gown to shreds just like her bedding, but now she was mostly clothed by the chain.

The winds died down a little, and the skulls lost some of their intensity.

Shera had been prepared for this. Needles flew from her hands. Most of them missed; needles never flew well under the best circumstances, much less in a wind whipped up by a Soulbound's wild powers. But a handful stuck into Estyr's skin.

They were the needles she usually carried as a Gardener, but unlike the usual paralytic, they carried a custom solution that Jorin had ordered from the alchemists.

Estyr's eyelids fluttered. She dipped closer to the ground for a moment, but the Hydra skulls flew closer and she bobbed back up.

Her Vessels were fighting back.

Braced behind his shield, Jorin pushed forward. Now that Estyr's powers had weakened, he could crawl closer, pulling out a pair of manacles from his coat. With a surge of effort, he lunged forward and snapped them around Estyr's wrists.

She dropped like he'd cut her strings.

The three skulls bounced and rolled as they hit the ground, and there came a soft pattering as all the rest of the debris fell as well.

Jorin didn't quite catch Estyr, but he supported her so she didn't break her nose against the ground. Her eyes were closed now, her breathing deep and heavy, but every breath rattled in her chest.

Now that the noise from the out-of-control Estyr had quieted down, the door at the top of the stairs cracked open. A few Consultants peeked in, ready to retreat at any sign of whirling missiles.

They had contained Estyr in a sub-basement beneath the library headquarters of the Consultants. The room had once been meant as a prison, so bars separated the bottom of the stairs from the one holding cell that took up half the room.

The bars would hold no one anymore. They had been warped, bent, and snapped by the unconscious Estyr.

"Bedding for the Regent," Shera ordered, and the Consultants vanished.

Jorin had melted to the ground with Estyr, cradling her head on his lap.

Shera's limbs trembled, her joints ached, her throat felt like she'd swallowed knives...and none of that had anything to do with the effort of wrestling a mad Regent.

Bareius had warned her about the side effects of taking the Champion potion, but she had underestimated the "flu-like symptoms." Especially since she had been given no chance to rest in the days since.

It had been chaos after their escape from the Imperial Palace. Pure chaos.

They'd managed to retreat to Rainworth, and now the town bulged with Independents. There was no way their location was a secret. They could be attacked any hour, and there were endless preparations required for them to stay ready.

She had no time to sleep and no time to wrestle with her illness. Which meant she *also* had no time to deal with an out-of-control ally.

"We *need* to take away her Vessels," she said. Exhaustion and sickness made her voice rough.

"We can't," Jorin insisted. "They're the only crutch left for her mind. You still have—"

"Yes, I know what crutches are. I understand. But I have to know: is her mind ever coming back?"

Under the effects of alchemy, Estyr's body had knitted itself together before they'd even exited the tunnels.

Mostly.

She was hideous from the scars of the rapid regeneration, and some of her skin had grown discolored or ill-fitting, but she was alive. Her body functioned.

If she hadn't been a Soulbound, she'd have woken up already.

But in the absence of her consciousness, her Vessels had taken over. For a few hours a day, they raged mindlessly, lashing out with their power. This sub-basement had already been a prison with centuries of Intent, and Jorin had reinforced that or they would have lost the whole building.

The only reason the Hydra skulls hadn't killed Jorin and Shera through all their protections was the alchemy that Jorin kept pumping through her veins at all times. When Estyr woke, she was only at a fraction of their normal strength.

"Her mind is..." Jorin's mouth worked as he looked for an expression that she would understand. "...not steering the ship. Our little Hydra friends have taken the wheel themselves." He kicked one of the skulls, which skittered across the ground. "If we send them away, maybe Estyr steps up as pilot. Maybe nobody does, and the rudder goes lonely. And maybe someone *else* grabs at that empty wheel."

He made a circular sign against Elders.

"Is that a possibility?" Shera asked sharply. If Urg'naut could slip into Estyr's empty mind and use her powers against them, Shera would have to remove that risk.

Even if she regretted the necessity. From a practical perspective, Estyr was possibly their most valuable asset. From a less objective viewpoint, Estyr was a hero of the Empire and a person Shera liked. She didn't deserve to die here.

"Search me and you'll find me empty," Jorin said. "It's leaning on too many factors to count, including which of the Great Elders waxes and which wanes." He lifted his shadeglasses to rub at his eyes. "We need Loreli."

That had been his refrain from the moment they'd brought Estyr down to this prison. They had exhausted the capabilities of medical alchemy, and Estyr's Champion body had inhuman powers of recovery anyway. But even

all that wasn't enough to restore her flesh completely or to bring her mind back.

They had sent messages all over the Consultant communication network, but Loreli was in disguise. Maybe if they had Navigators, they could beat Loreli to her destination and then find her. But their one Navigator-class ship, *Bastion's Shadow*, was needed in a hundred different places at once.

"And we can't take away her Vessels?" Shera asked again.

"They're *her* flesh and bone as much as they ever belonged to Hydras. We separate them from her, and we'd be breaking her shins and asking her to walk home."

Shera stumbled for the stairs, trying to remember if she'd ever been this exhausted. Blankets and pillows were folded in a neat pile on the bottom stair, and she hadn't even noticed the Consultants enter. She was dull when she needed to be sharp.

"We can't survive another earthquake," she said. "Keep her under control or we'll have to lock the skulls away."

"This new blend's got her tied tighter than a newborn calf," he assured her, but he'd said the same thing the last time.

"We need her back. We'll collapse at the first attack if *someone* doesn't lead us." She said it sharply, looking back to Jorin, hoping to prod him into action.

He didn't look like he'd even heard her. He stared down into Estyr's warped face like a man on the verge of tears. "You know she was reigning herself back."

Shera's joints ached and her throat burned. She wanted to continue this conversation about as much as she wanted to swallow a glass of sand.

"I'll hear it from her when she wakes up."

He went on as though he hadn't heard her. "She could have spread everyone across the stones like hot butter in the snap of a finger. If she let herself off the leash, that Champion couldn't have touched her. But then she and I would have been the only ones walking away. She held herself back for *you*."

Shera knew he didn't mean her specifically. She was just the closest stand-in for all mortals.

But she didn't have the patience or time to humor a bout of immortal self-pity.

“What about you? Are you telling me that *almost* burning Calder Marten was the best you can do?”

Jorin lowered his gaze to Estyr.

When it was clear he wouldn't respond, Shera left him.

She forced herself up the stairs, avoiding the long crack in the ancient stone. Estyr's first fit had been almost unrestrained, and it had set the earth quaking all over Rainworth.

She shoved open the door, which now stuck in its warped frame, to see that all work in the main library basement had stopped. There were more than just Consultants here now—the place was packed with Independents, from alchemists to Greenwardens.

One and all, they stopped what they were doing, looking to her for news.

Shera shut the door behind them and let them wonder. She stalked off, ignoring their silent pleas.

If she didn't get some sleep soon, she was going to knife someone.

But before she could, there was a meeting.

Another *meeting*.

This one had been scheduled in the same conference room in which she'd met with Loreli and Estyr before, but this time, there were no Regents present. Only Guild Heads.

Bareius sat at the head of the table, bouncing up and down with nervous energy. His glasses rested on the table and his suit no longer looked as slick and pristine as it had before, but he gave no sign of suffering from the same side effects Shera felt from the Champion potion.

His assistant Furman waited behind his chair, clipboard in hand, taking notes.

Tomas Stillwell, Head of the Greenwardens, had pulled his wheelchair up to sit at Bareius' left hand. *He* looked appropriately exhausted, slumping in his chair, his auburn hair limp and unwashed. Even the vine that grew all around his body had started to wilt.

The Head of the Luminian Order, Jameson Allbright, looked like a kindly old grandfather in very expensive white-and-red robes. He stroked his beard and looked out over those assembled with a gentle smile that Shera imagined he wore all the time.

The Farstrider sisters sat next to each other at the far end of the table. One of them had lowered the cloth over her mouth to take a bite of a

sandwich.

Shera sat next to them. She already had a headache, and maybe she could stay far enough from Bareius to keep it from getting any worse.

The Head Alchemist rubbed his hands together eagerly. “A financial strike, that’s the ticket. Once the Farstriders publish their account of the peace meeting, all fairly and accurately, we’ll have the standing to release our *own* interpretation. I own enough printing companies to paper every wall with news-sheets between here and Axciss.”

The Witnesses glanced at each other so quickly that Shera doubted anyone else noticed.

They wouldn’t be happy with his bald declaration of intent to spin their account to political advantage, but they would allow it. That was the fate of the Guild of Witnesses; they would speak the unvarnished truth, and then someone else would come along and varnish it.

Bareius was caught up in the beauty of his own vision. “In the Capital alone...well, the greater Capital region including its outlying townships... there are *hundreds* of companies still known for having major contracts with the throne or Imperialist Guilds. Many of them can’t lose their Imperial contracts, but they can’t lose their private business either. With doubt cast on their Imperial Steward, we can pressure their private clients to back out.

“That will create all *sorts* of opportunity, I don’t have to tell you. Either the Imperialists provide them undue support, in which case we’ve created a financial burden for our opponents, or they’ll have to find new suppliers for everything from soap to ammunition to roof tiles. I fully anticipate picking up some of these failing businesses for a handful of bits, and those private clients will turn to us.”

Stillwell let out a heavy breath, massaging his temples with both hands. “That’s all well and good for your bottom line, Bareius, but what about the rest of us? I don’t have a mark to my name anymore. My people aren’t starving, for the moment, but they’re stacked like firewood in every stable that will house us. And our Kameira need special care that we’re no longer equipped to give them; we’ve collected a menagerie of creatures that are about to go feral without special medication, food, space...”

“*You* need, *you* need, *you* need.” Bareius sneered at the Greenwarden. “What do you give *us*, Stillwell? What have you ever done for *us*?”

“Your plan is too mild, Bareius,” Allbright said gravely. Shera had only met the man once before the last few days, and she’d found him even-tempered, thoughtful, and sharper than the public realized. “*Bold* actions are needed. We cannot be playing market games with Elder thralls. Even our own survival is secondary. Every word we trade here is another moment that we allow Kellarac to sit with the reins of our Empire in his hands.”

The Luminian braced both hands on the table as though he meant to push to his feet at any second. “We must act now! Rile up the people, drive them as a righteous army into the Imperial Palace and flush out the Elderspawn while their forces are still weak!”

So much for even-tempered.

Shera held her pounding head in both hands as the men continued to bicker.

No one had suggested a reasonable course of action. Somehow it hadn’t occurred to Allbright that no matter how weak the Imperialists were, the Independents were even weaker. Or maybe it had occurred to him, and he expected the righteousness of their cause to drum up enough support to make the difference.

Her aching joints made her feel thirty years older, and she was starting to shiver with fever. She didn’t have the fortitude to listen anymore.

Shera tilted her head to one side, holding up a hand to shield herself from the other side of the table. “Will you be all right on your own?” she whispered.

Together, the Farstriders gave an almost imperceptible nod.

One of the major reasons she had agreed to this meeting was to cover for the Witnesses if necessary. She wouldn’t put it past Bareius to pressure them into writing what *he* wanted them to say. It wouldn’t work, but she could at least spare the Witnesses the discomfort.

But this was too much useless talk. She had to get out.

Shera stood, flipped up her gray hood, and began to walk out of the room.

The conversation between Allbright, Stillwell, and Bareius sputtered and died as soon as she pushed back her chair. They watched her until she had her hand on the door.

“You have some urgent business, Shera?” Bareius asked through a gleaming fake smile.

“Yeah,” Shera said. “I’m going to kill everyone.”

She shoved open the door, walking out into the crowd of Consultants.
“Kerian.”

“Yes, Guild Head?” As expected, Kerian had taken up a post outside the door. She would have heard everything that had gone on inside, though they had been forced to drill new peepholes into the room after Estyr and Loreli had invested it for privacy.

“Assemble the Gardeners. I’ll be in my room.”

The Rainworth Imperial Library had a vast emergency shelter beneath it, but Shera’s room was above the library itself. The former head librarian had lived with the books, and the Architects had claimed her bedroom on behalf of their Guild Head.

Shera didn’t complain. On top of indoor plumbing and a private washroom, it had the biggest bed.

She collapsed into it, giving her sick and tender body a rest. Even for Kerian, it would take a little time to gather up all the Gardeners, and Shera intended to put that time to good use.

A moment later, she was shaken awake by Kerian’s firm hand. A dozen braids hung down over Shera’s face, and Kerian’s scarred lips held a gentle smile.

“I’m sorry, Shera. An hour was as long as I could take.”

Shera grumbled something incoherent. The nap seemed to have made everything worse rather than better.

She tried to sit up, but Kerian put a gentle hand on her shoulder. “A moment.” Kerian settled onto the foot of the bed, gazing off at the door.

If she took much longer before speaking, Shera was in danger of drifting off again.

“I take it you’re going to kill all the Imperialist leaders?” Kerian asked at last.

“Why play the game when I can stab my opponent in the throat?”

“And what becomes of us after that? Our Guild, I mean. The Emperor was our moral compass; with him gone, we are nothing better than a band of mercenary spies. If we continue to operate only for the highest bidder, without the good of the Empire as our guiding star, then our moral compass becomes the man with the deepest pockets.”

Shera made a choking sound deep in her ravaged throat. The man with the deepest pockets was Nathanael Bareius.

“*He* is a problem we can solve.”

“And the person who replaces him?” Kerian looked perfectly poised, watching Shera with patience. “We need a new code of behavior. And the sooner we begin operating by it, the better.”

Shera relaxed back onto her pillows. “Great. What did you have in mind?”

“The Architects and I have discussed a number of options, but we don’t decide anymore. You do.”

“Not for long. I’ll see us through this, make sure the world holds together even if the Empire falls apart, and then I’m out. We did without a Soulbound tied to Bastion’s Veil for centuries.”

She had given this quite a bit of thought, especially over the last few days. They didn’t *need* a Soulbound operating Bastion’s Veil. Especially when they didn’t even hold the Gray Island.

“I think you can do better than that.”

If only the potion’s side effects were a little worse, Shera thought. Then I might pass out.

“I don’t *want* to do any better than that. I told you, I never chose to be Guild Head.” *No one* had chosen her. It was freak chance.

“That’s true, you didn’t choose. Yala did.”

Shera wondered if this was Kerian’s idea of a joke. Kerian’s sense of humor could be very dry. “I was trying to save the Veil in my shear. I didn’t even know I *could* be Soulbound twice, and Yala had no idea it was going to happen.”

“No, she didn’t. But the Mistress of the Mists was not such a well-known story. If she had not acknowledged you as Guild Head, no one else could have either. She could have kept control of the Guild, and she chose not to.”

“Yala hates me.”

“I think she did, and she chose you anyway. Because she saw what a Guild Head like you could mean for the Consultants.”

Shera groaned as she levered her sick body off the bed, grabbing her shroud off the nightstand. “Oh yeah? What’s that?”

“You are a Soulbound as powerful as the other Guild Heads, and a symbol that unites us in single purpose in a way that the Council never could. We need singular vision now more than ever.”

Shera’s legs swayed unsteadily, and Kerian supported her gently with one hand. Shera pulled the shroud around her face, tying the ends behind

her neck and tucking the loose cloth into her collar.

“We can have this conversation after this poison wears off,” Shera said. “But I still say I’m the worst person in the entire Guild for this job.”

Kerian remained calm, still wearing a gentle smile. “That is up to you.”

Shera grumbled under her breath as she walked over to the door. “They out there?”

Kerian nodded.

“Great.”

Shera threw the doors open.

Only fifteen sets of true Gardener shears remained in the Guild. There were occasionally more Gardeners than that, and the fifteen most senior were awarded with shears. A handful of Gardeners had died in the Imperial Palace, and three more were out on assignment, so Shera had expected to see about ten people outside her doors.

Instead, the hall was packed with almost thirty people, all dressed in Consultant blacks. Thirteen of them carried shears, with Shera and Kerian holding the remaining two pairs.

Shera leaned back into her room to shoot Kerian an annoyed look.

“Oh yes, and I appointed new Gardeners,” Kerian said. “I know you’re the Guild Head, but I’m still High Gardener.”

Shera slid outside and slammed the door behind her. Meia looked like she was stifling a smile for some reason, and she stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Ayana. The ghostly Gardener had taken a number of injuries in the Imperial Palace and had been on bed rest until now, but it seemed she had been deemed well enough to attend a meeting.

While watching Shera, Ayana too looked like she was laughing at a private joke. Well, at least two of them were having fun.

The rest were a collection of Gardeners from various generations.

A few, she realized, weren’t even twenty. The Gardener generation after hers. The oldest among them looked to be in their forties, as most Gardeners retired or moved to the Architects by fifty. As the High Gardener, Kerian had kept her shears, but she was never sent on assignments.

That still only accounted for thirteen. The remaining attendees were the pseudo-Gardeners that Maxwell had trained before they were stolen away by the Magisters.

Only one of them carried a real pair of shears: Benji, the man who had first recognized her after their reunion.

She felt an indescribable pang as she realized that the shears he wore must be Lucan's.

Shera jerked a thumb at the imitation Gardeners. "Does everybody here live up to your standards, Instructor Ayana?"

"Mostly," Ayana's horrible voice scraped out. "Some are lazy and irresponsible."

Meia's face tightened with the effort of restraining her smile. If they had been alone, she would have joined in mocking Shera with gusto.

"A thousand lashes for you," Shera muttered. "Then you're drawn and quartered. The rest of you, listen up."

They all straightened at that, especially the baby Gardeners. They had been desperate to prove themselves to her since the day she'd pulled them out of the Gray Island prisons.

Now they had their chance.

"You may have heard that peace talks fell through." It was a grim joke, and no one laughed. They had all fought in the Palace. "Since we won't have peace, that means it's a fight. The other Guild Heads have their opinions about how we're going to win, but I have mine."

Shera gestured vaguely and found three Shepherds rushing forward to hand her a stool, a headache pill, and a glass of water.

Well, there were *some* perks to being Head of the Consultant's Guild.

She took the stool and sat, resting her back against the door behind her. "There's only one reason why we can't have an Emperor. It's the same reason why the real Emperor let himself die: because with one person on the throne, the Great Elders only need to take over one person to have the world.

"We're not fighting over the shape of our government. What do we know about government? We're fighting because Kellarac has his hooks in their Emperor. And our worst-case scenario for *everyone* is an Elder wearing the crown."

Though everyone present knew that already, a murmur of anger went through the Gardeners.

"We're not letting Kellarac rule the world. The Architects will be planning, looking for the best strategies, the most perfect tools for the job." Shera reached out for the glass of water, took a sip, and then downed the headache pill as well.

"I'm not an Architect. I'm a Gardener. Here's what we're going to do."

CHAPTER TEN

TWO YEARS AGO

“DID THE EMPEROR TELL YOU HE WAS GOING TO RELEASE THE REGENTS?” LUCAN asked Yala.

It had taken him months to arrange a secret meeting with the High Mason, and this was as close to private as they would ever be. They sat in one of the smaller client rooms, as though he had come here to hire a Consultant and she represented the Guild.

There were three peepholes around the room, so cleverly concealed that he couldn't pick them out even though he knew where they were. One was positioned inside a portrait of the Emperor at sea, another behind the tall potted flower in the corner, and the third embedded in the fixture of the room's quicklamp.

All of those observation posts would be manned by Yala's subordinates, though invested padding would dull the sounds and keep them from hearing the details of the conversation.

Lucan had prepared for as much. He had his own insurance.

If Yala was treating him like a client, she hadn't dressed the part. She wore blacks up to the neck, no shroud, and her gray-streaked blonde hair was bound into a single tail. Yala didn't have the demeanor to meet with clients. One of the reasons she'd been assigned to the Masons.

Her eyebrows shot up, but otherwise her expression gave no clue what she thought of his abrupt question. “The Emperor was not in the habit of sharing his plans with me.”

“I thought you would appreciate cutting to the heart of the matter. The Regents are resting here, on the Gray Island. The Emperor told you that before his mind was taken over by Nakothi, he planned on installing them as his successors, so you moved up his timetable. If you’ll confirm whether I’m correct, I can move on.”

Yala picked up a nearby pen, seemingly for the sole purpose of twirling it around her finger. “Whether you’re right or not, I don’t see why I should confirm it. Nor why you should bring it to me.”

Lucan’s first instinct had been to free the Regents himself, releasing them from their coffins and letting them deal with the Council of Architects. Even Shera had encouraged him to do so, once he’d shared the situation with her.

But he refrained.

“I did not hear the Emperor give that order,” Lucan said. “I can’t find any record of it. And I imagine, if such an order *did* exist, you would have a good reason for not following it. I’d like to know what that reason is.”

Yala studied him, still spinning the pen in one hand. He expected her to ask him about his security precautions—how did he have the audacity to challenge Yala directly, when he knew she could have him disposed of? She would suspect that he had backup plans, which of course he did.

By now, Shera would have replaced one of Yala’s watchers. If Lucan looked like his life was in danger, she would save him.

As further insurance, there were letters detailing what he’d learned that would go to the other High Councilors and a select few other Consultants.

He expected Yala to ask about those preparations, but instead she surprised him. “Correct on all counts. The Emperor warned the High Council to prepare to release the Regents when he was at the end of his reign. That was the sum total of his command.”

It felt like Lucan had thrown a punch only to find out he was boxing with a cloud.

He did not let it affect his response, however, speaking with well-trained Consultant composure. “Very well. So why did you not release the Regents?”

Yala placed the pen carefully down on the desk, then leaned back in her chair, lacing her fingers together. “Why do you think, Lucan?”

Yala almost never called him by name. She called him ‘Reader,’ or ‘Gardener,’ or ‘Consultant.’ Treating him like one disposable part in a

machine she owned.

Lucan slowly let one hand drift down below the desk, closer to his shear. “The Guild has made a fortune in the last three years. Chaos is good for business. But that can’t be enough on its own; the Regents would have made good customers themselves, as their first years would be difficult. I assume that, in some way, you believed that the Guild was threatened by them taking power.”

Yala continued to rest in her chair, and he would have thought she was relaxing if not for her iron-hard eyes. “And?”

“I’m sure that the Emperor’s deteriorating mental state was another concern. You knew Nakothi had been working on his mind, and you wanted him gone *before* he was unreliable. If you waited until he determined he was ready, it might be too late.”

In Yala’s silence, Lucan found permission to continue.

“I’d prefer not to speculate on your motivations. This would be a great deal easier if *you* would tell *me* what happened.”

Despite Yala’s act, Lucan was the one in control of this situation, and he never forgot it. He was the deadlier of the two, he had Shera as backup, and he had his contingency plan in case something happened to him. He was willing to lay his cards bare in order to force Yala to show hers, but there was a limit.

Now it was his turn to lean back and wait for her to respond. And thanks to the fact that she had taken the Consultant’s chair and left the client’s to him, *his* was far more comfortable.

“You didn’t learn anything else in your research?” Yala asked finally.

Lucan had learned many things on his quest to unravel the High Council’s actions, but he didn’t know which of them were relevant, so he simply stayed quiet and adopted an expression of pure confidence, as though he held half a dozen Guild secrets in reserve.

When he didn’t respond, Yala reached into a pocket—slowly, so he didn’t think she was pulling a weapon—and smoothly removed a black linen bag. She tossed it to him, where it landed as though it was filled with feathers.

He made no move to open it. “What is this?”

“Another reason.”

One finger at a time, never taking his eyes from Yala, Lucan pulled the glove from his right hand. It was made to stifle his Reading, for his own

good. As though to feel the heat from a quicklamp, he held his fingers over the bag.

He sensed weak Intent from the bag itself, but no intention to conceal traps. And the Intent from the objects inside was weak as well, not hostile.

With his gloved hand, he picked up the bottom of the bag and upended it, shaking out its contents. It contained a scrap of burned paper, a splinter of wood smaller than his thumb, a small string, and a stub of wick with a lump of half-melted wax that must have once been a candle.

Lucan flicked his eyes back up to Yala, who hadn't moved. She could easily be waiting to strike when he fell into a Reader's trance, so he spread out the scrap of paper first. It had the weakest Intent and was the most likely to give him information from mundane examination.

"...rather ride a fish into the great storms than sit on a throne. When the Emperor dies, so does the Empire. Sure as the grim dawn, the Empire will fall someday, but the people are too quick to equate Imperial rule with humanity. So long as our scholarship progresses, technology..."

The remaining feel of Intent in the scrap reminded him of one of the coffins down in Zhen's basement. Jorin Maze-walker, the Regent.

He glanced up at Yala again. Seeing that she hadn't moved, he gripped the splinter of wood in his bare hand. The power of its Intent pressed against him, begging him to open up and feel it, but he kept it out.

He closed his eyes and waited for one breath...two...three. Most visions didn't last long; if she was going to strike at him, she should have done it as soon as he shut his eyes.

When he heard no movement, he truly Read the splinter. The wood was as fragmented as Jorin's burned piece of paper, having once belonged to the haft of an axe, but he recognized this Intent as well. It was as welcome as a long drink after a march in the desert.

At least, the nature of the Intent was. The actual message Loreli had left in her weapon was anything but soothing.

This weapon will root out secrets, will defend against the Am'haranai, those who hide in the shadows like criminals and liars. Embedded with the sight of a Kameira and the light of the sun, it will shine in the presence of hidden attackers, protecting those of good moral character against the skulkers in the dark.

He put the splinter back. Yala still watched him.

Next was the candlewick that had clearly, from the arrogance it radiated, once belonged to Alagaeus.

This candle has the honor of illuminating the Heir to the Empire, he who will rule when the Emperor is gone. The light will confuse the eyes of any Guild member who tries to see in its presence, for the Guilds are weak and untrustworthy. They must be kept in the dark, for they are not fit to hold power.

Finally, he moved to the object he had avoided. The small gray string that gave off Estyr's powerful, confident Intent. The string was only a small fragment of the whole, so it contained only a brief message, but it was enough.

You will be a hood for the Mistress of the Mists. If they won't appoint a Guild Head, I'll do it myself, because I can't trust their Council...

Lucan took a moment to catch his breath after he settled the string next to the others. "Oh," he said at last.

"Yes."

Lucan spent another minute digesting the knowledge.

The Regents didn't trust them.

He had known that the Consultants would be giving up power by raising the Regents—without them, the ten Guilds essentially ruled the world. That was enough reason for the Council of Architects to be hostile to the idea.

He had never considered that the Regents might actively work against the Guilds. They were both part of the Aurelian Empire; this was only a matter of who stood at the top. But from the feeling of those visions, the Regents might all try to dismantle the Guilds. Loreli and Alagaeus would be after the Consultants in particular.

Small pieces of research he'd unearthed over the past three years now clicked into place. The power and influence of the Consultant's Guild had dipped during the years in which the Regents were free and active, but Guild scholars had attributed it to the increased stability of the Empire. Now, he wondered if the Regents had been strangling them.

The few mentions of the Consultants in Estyr's journal were either brief, dismissive, or critical. To his knowledge, Loreli had never mentioned the Consultants by name, but she preached often against the use of saboteurs and assassins.

Watching his face, Yala spoke. "I kept a log of what you took out from the archives. When you asked to meet me tonight, I knew what it was

about.”

Lucan hadn't bothered to wonder why she'd brought these objects when she wasn't a Reader. He had known Yala would have researched him as soon as she received his request. He was only relieved that Zhen hadn't been interrogated.

“If you weren't still on active Gardener duty,” Yala continued, “you'd be an Architect yourself. The High Council didn't make this decision alone; we consulted first with other Architects, primarily Readers and those with training in history. Their analysis agreed with ours: the rise of the Regents will mean the collapse of the Consultant's Guild.”

The High Mason reached across the desk, pulling the disparate objects back into her pouch. She pocketed the small bag as she stood.

“Assassinations don't work when the victim gets to determine the exact time and method of his death,” she said. “We would have moved up the Emperor's timeline without his knowledge anyway, in service of him.”

Lucan was still shaken, but he extended his bare hand, holding it as close to Yala as he thought he could without getting stabbed. He opened his senses, tasting her ever-shifting Intent. It was tricky to Read a living human being, but the practice could give him a sense of her feelings and intentions as she answered his question.

“So you acted with loyalty to the Emperor?” he asked.

Her Intent was steel determination, but he felt suppressed pain, mournful regret, and heartfelt belief beneath the surface. “To the Guild and the Empire,” she said.

Lucan pulled back his hand and slowly slipped his glove back on.

“The Guilds can keep the Empire together,” Yala went on. “There will be tough times ahead, but we'll weather them. And if our containment is not enough to hold the Great Elders, then we'll release the Regents. Not as our rulers, but in their intended function as warriors who can stand against the likes of Kthanikahr or Ach'magut.”

It had been easier to think of Yala as someone who simply valued profit above the prosperity of others. Now...he had to admit, it would be hard to take the world from Guilds who were a part of it and then hand it over to immortals who had slept through the past two centuries.

After a long moment of silence, Lucan stood and left the room side-by-side with Yala.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

*Who trims the bushes on the Gray Island?
No one. Gardeners don't exist.*

—OLD GUILD JOKE

PRESENT DAY

INTERION DAROVISH HAD BEEN RAISED A CHAMPION. WHEN HE ENTERED THE battlefield, the enemy surrendered.

He had followed Baldezar Kern to the Imperialists. Personally, he didn't care who ruled the Empire; he had worked for private bidders before the Emperor's death, and he would again no matter who sat on the throne.

But Kern was a legend. He deserved to be respected as a Guild Head, even if the Guild hardly existed anymore.

The snakes of the Independent Guilds had killed him.

Yes, he knew it was Estyr Six. Some of his brothers-in-arms maintained that Kern was killed in a stand-up duel, so there was nothing to avenge. What death could be better than a battle against the greatest Champion in history?

Interion didn't see it that way. Kern had gone to their peace treaty unarmed and unarmored, and they had attacked him. That made them cowards and him a victim.

So he was going to make *them* victims.

The gate of Hightower was three stories high, but he leaped over it, the Windwatcher feathers on his boots controlling the wind to carry him.

The headquarters of the Luminian Order had been invested by centuries of petitioners to carry an aura of peace and tranquility, but he was immune to such things. He was war itself.

The massive tower for which the town had been named loomed over him, the gem at its top blazing like a white sun.

He was surrounded by ordinary homes and shops. Most of the Order was quartered with the rest of the Independents in Rainworth, so these were the dregs. Knights too old or too young hurried toward him in their gleaming silver armor, ordinary guards raised pistols, and untrained families ran.

Interion hefted his sword and shield and went to work.

He left a trail of blood, bodies, and rubble from the gates to the base of the actual High Tower itself.

Anyone carrying a weapon died. As did those with no weapons, if they came too close.

Arrows and bullets rained down on him from nearby defenders, but they either fell on his shield or made wounds too small to be worth mentioning.

Champions could fight longer than ordinary people, but that didn't mean forever. When he reached the base of the tower, he looked up at the defenders beneath their white sun. He smiled a bloody smile up at them.

"See you tomorrow!" he called.

As he strolled casually out, past the homes and shops he'd left in ruins, he made sure his laughter boomed over the streets.

Everything about him was superior to mortals, including his eyesight, so he caught a detail no one else would: a figure in black ducking from one nearby rooftop to another.

Consultants. Spying on him.

"Take your shot!" he roared at the shadow. "Darovish does not hide!"

They did nothing, of course.

He had prepared a carriage to take him back to the Imperial Palace. He tossed his shield and sword into storage in the back, hopped inside, and shut the door gently enough that he didn't shatter the entire doorframe.

"Drive," he called to the coachman.

Obediently, the man cracked his whip. The carriage began to move, and Interion let his head rest against the back of the seat.

The Steward was dragging his feet, hoping to curry favor with the people. He was an ordinary man, and a kid at that. He didn't have the resolve to do what was necessary: send the Champions to Rainworth. Destroy all the Independents in one stroke.

So Interion would attack their homes until the rats were driven out of hiding.

His thoughts were interrupted as the carriage slowly rolled to a stop.

He heard wheels and horses around them, so this would be an inspection by the Imperial Guard. It was an irritation, and all he had to do was reveal himself to put it to an end, but he respected the necessity. Couldn't have Independents crossing into the Capital these days.

Voices demanded to know the identity of the carriage, which had been hired from a reputable transportation company. When the coachman said his passenger was a Champion, Interion was pleased to hear the questioner—presumably the Imperial Guard—swallow deeply and say there was no need to search the interior, but they would need to stop the carriage temporarily to search the exterior.

The carriage shuddered, and Interion frowned. Flattering as his reputation was, this was shoddy work. He heard horses, or maybe an Imperial Guard with hooves, trotting around him, but the conversation didn't continue.

He couldn't let this lack of security go. Interion pushed the door open, leaning half his body out.

There was no one there.

The horses were gone. The carriage was propped up on crutches that looked like they had been made for that purpose.

Rage boiled up in Interion. They had *dared* to rob his carriage? His sword and shield would be gone from the back, but the robbers had made a fatal mistake. There really *was* a Champion inside, and neither the sword nor the shield were his Soulbound Vessel. They could not have gotten nearly far enough away from him.

He placed one foot on the step before the alchemical munitions detonated.

The explosion scorched him in an instant, sending his flame-ravaged body tumbling into a ditch. He had no idea how far he had been thrown, but the pain was...all-consuming.

His Champion enhancements worked against him now, keeping him conscious and alert though his eyes were gone and his throat was burned too badly to speak.

He heard footsteps, and he reached in their direction. Eventually, he would heal, but until then he needed help. He grasped blindly, trying to find a foot, to reassure himself that someone was there. Someone who could save him.

Cold blades slit his throat.



Oleana kicked the alchemist all the way across the makeshift arena she'd made out of an Imperial Palace basement. The man landed hard, coughing up blood.

She pulled him up one-handed and looked him in the eye. "How you feeling now? You feel like laughing?"

The members of his Guild who had poisoned her, gassed her, and tied her down with glue had laughed at her. They'd mocked her, saying that a *real* Champion would snap her bonds. It had taken her lungs weeks to heal from what they'd done to her.

She hurled him into the wall, where he broke.

"Send in the next one," she ordered.

The Palace servant shivered and didn't look at the man's twisted body. "We're almost out of..."

She met his eyes, and his voice trailed off. "There are always more alchemists."

The servant obeyed.

Oleana liked to start by making it a battle. She gave them their choice of weapon while she went in bare-handed. When they realized that they couldn't kill her with a spear or a sword, even if she stood there and did nothing, they started to plead.

That was when she batted them around like a ball for as long as they lasted.

Which usually wasn't long.

After a long afternoon, she went upstairs and showered off the blood, but she didn't stay in her Palace rooms. She never did. This wasn't her

place; everything was too *clean*.

She made her way down to the docks, near where Oleana had been born. The inns there were more her style, and the workers roared and lifted their drinks as she slammed open the door. They couldn't wait to buy her drinks in exchange for stories of battle, and she had plenty of those.

They had to keep the cups coming, because Champions needed more and stronger drinks than anyone else. The server never left her side...and he was *adorable*, with huge brown eyes and a quick laugh any time she said anything remotely funny.

He grew more adorable with every drink.

Finally, she threw an arm around his neck and asked him how he'd like to spend a night with a Champion.

She didn't even hear his answer over the roar of laughter from the rest of the room.

It felt like the whole building was applauding her as the workers cheered and shouted jokes while she dragged the man upstairs. He protested, saying that he had to get back to work, but she laughed and shoved him through the open door into her room.

"No need to be nervous," she said, peeling off her gloves. "You'll—"

He threw a dart at her.

Oleana pulled it out from the base of her throat and held it up between two fingers. It was just a needle, and she laughed again as she let it fall. "You'll have to do better than that."

Four more needles pricked her neck and shoulders from the open door behind her. Was someone messing with her on her time off?

She was about to get annoyed.

Blindly, she reached out with one hand and groped for the nearest thing she could use as a weapon, which turned out to be a huge mirror bolted to the wall. She only found out that it had been bolted down when she pulled it free and chunks of wood and plaster came with it.

She spun, ready to break the mirror into the face of the first person she saw...but the mirror suddenly felt heavier. Too heavy.

Her limbs wouldn't listen to her. She was ordering herself forward, but her body felt like it was turning to stone. She fell to her hands and knees, the mirror cracking against the floor beside her.

Her veins burned, already counteracting the poison, and she forced her head up. She glared up at her attackers in hate.

They wore all black, their faces half-covered, and all of them—including the pretty server—pulled out gleaming bronze knives.

Oleana tried to choke out a challenge, but her voice wouldn't listen to her either.



Trip had always wondered why no one made Champions for any purpose other than combat. Tradition, he supposed. But he could brace the entire frame of a house by himself, carry whole logs back for timber, and push nails through boards with his thumb.

Besides, when he sat back with his crew and looked at the house they'd rebuilt from the rubble of one destroyed in battle, he felt better than he ever had at the end of a fight. The rest of the crew slapped him on the back, congratulating him, making good-natured jibes about his size, and invited him to drinks.

He had never been part of the Imperial army, so maybe it was different for soldiers, but no one had ever joked with him after a battle. Mostly, they ran away.

He hated to turn them down, but he had a date.

Deanne, a girl from the Blackwatch, waited for Trip in a teahouse near the Palace gates. She had a beautiful laugh.

During the meal, a group of his friends from the Imperial Guard spotted him. They insisted on paying the bill for the both of them; Trip had saved their lives after the battle, pulling them one by one from burning wreckage.

Many of the others were full of rage and hate after the battle of the Imperial Palace, but Trip wanted these days to continue forever. No one had ever appreciated him so much, to the point that he almost suspected a trick.

For the first time, he felt like a hero.

He bid Deanne a good evening and walked back home. His inn had been destroyed in the fighting, so a family of Palace servants had allowed him to stay in their home above a bakery for the last several weeks. He had his hand on the doorknob when an Imperial Guard stepped out of the shadows nearby.

He didn't recognize her, and he would have remembered, with her long fingernails that seemed to be made of iron, her long white hair, and her pale

pink eyes.

Still, thousands of people wore that Imperial Guard uniform, so he couldn't have met them all.

"Why are you fighting with us?" she asked, and her voice matched her appearance: raspy and disturbing, as though the words were spoken by an ancient spirit.

He smiled at her. "We're the Aurelian Empire. Isn't it the same for you?"

She grunted and walked away, but he didn't take it personally. Since the battle, there had been many like her.

Doubt was an insidious enemy.

He walked in and greeted his host family, played with their children for a while, and then headed off to sleep. Trip tried not to think about the battles that would come, battles that he would surely win. After all, he *was* a Champion.

But the longer these peaceful days continued, the better for him.

Trip never woke up.

The family discovered his body the next morning, not bearing a single apparent injury. It looked as though he had passed peacefully in his sleep.



Yzara hauled another crate up the ramp and onto the deck of the ship.

This vessel was made of ordinary wood, and she was used to traveling by Navigator, but she didn't want to get tied up in any more Guild trouble. Even with the best medicine the Imperialists had to offer, her injuries hadn't fully recovered yet. Digesting food was painful, and she had to watch how quickly she moved lest she shatter her own ribs.

Even through the blindfold over her eyes, she had to squint in the bright sunlight, but that had nothing to do with her wounds. There were differences between Champions, their bodies adapting differently to the alchemical augmentations and Kameira grafts that made them superhuman. Her eyesight was a bit too sensitive, so she wore a blindfold.

The sailors protested every time she loaded one of their crates, barrels, bags, or boxes, but she ignored their complaints and asked only for more. The faster they were loaded, the faster they could leave.

She was eager to put the Guilds behind her.

When she returned for a barrel, there was a girl sitting on it. The girl seemed to be seventeen or eighteen and was skinny as a rail, her eyes and skin and hair all equally dark. She wore tattered clothes that looked as though she had scavenged them from a dumpster, and she picked her teeth with a fishbone.

“Where you bound?” the girl asked.

Yzara raised an eyebrow behind her blindfold. People didn’t usually ask questions of a six-and-a-half-foot-tall blindfolded woman with a two-handed claymore on her back and a golden Champion badge on her chest.

“Back home,” Yzara said, picking up a different barrel. “To Izyria.”

The girl kicked her feet idly. “Axciss?”

“Never even seen Axciss. The town I’m from is called Nyala.” Yzara headed up the ramp, following the crew.

“So you’re not going to stay?” the girl called. “Fight Estyr and all them?”

Yzara winced in remembered pain, setting the barrel down delicately. “That’s given me more trouble than I need.”

“Oh, really?” The girl flicked her fishbone into the ocean and hopped off the barrel. “Safe trip, then, Miss.”

Yzara glanced around, looking for a crew member to direct her. When she looked back down the ramp, the girl was gone.

Her trip back home would take two months longer than it would have if she had booked a Navigator, but she didn’t mind.

She had plenty of time.

CHAPTER TWELVE

TWO YEARS AGO

LUCAN ROWED THE TWO-PERSON ROWBOAT AWAY FROM THE DOCK AND UP TO THE silver mist of Bastion's Veil. The main dock was a massive stone affair, extending through the Veil, but there were many smaller docks for clandestine departure all around the Gray Island.

Shera leaned back, making no offer to take over the oars, leaning on her crossed arms as a pillow. She wasn't sleeping; she seemed to enjoy watching him row.

"If we fall in, I'm making you swim me back to shore," she said.

Lucan puffed out a breath. He kept himself in shape with regular training, but it wasn't as though he made a habit of rowing boats. "You can't swim yourself?"

"Not this time. It's your fault I'm out here, so you deal with it. I'll just let myself sink."

Lucan glanced over his shoulder to see how close they were to the wall of fog, but no sooner had he done so than they were swallowed up by gray.

Shera gave an exaggerated yawn as she disappeared from his view, hidden by the thick Veil.

"We'll talk as soon as we're through," Lucan assured her.

"I guarantee you we could talk on the island without being overheard."

Lucan didn't respond until he had cleared the mist, when he folded up the oars. The Aion Sea stretched out before them, the water gently rolling, the stars stretching endlessly overhead.

Bastion's Veil tended to eat sounds from the other side unless they were excessively loud. And since Elderspawn couldn't pass through the mist, they should be as alone as possible. This was the shallow Aion anyway, where Elder activity was rare.

He did notice that Shera had sat up and was eyeing the water around her.

While stretching his weary shoulders, Lucan began filling her in. "Yala proved to me why they can't trust the Regents."

For fifteen minutes, he described his Readings to her, filling in the gaps in his explanation with what he'd learned from his research. The Regents would depose the Guilds in general, the Consultants specifically, and they could still be used to oppose the Great Elders in times of emergency.

"And what stops them from taking over later, when we let them out for a fistfight with Othaghor?" Shera asked.

He couldn't read her expression, which might mean she was taking the topic seriously. Though it could also mean that she was thinking about killing someone.

Those two tended to overlap more often than not, in Shera's case.

"At least two of them don't *want* to rule." Loreli had always delegated, appointing other rulers as she acted as more of a guide and resource, and Jorin spoke of governing only in horrified tones. "Alagaeus and Estyr are the exceptions, and Estyr has always prioritized combating the Elders over politics. The bigger threat is that they will appoint their own Emperor candidate, rather than allowing the Guilds to do it."

"The Guilds haven't done it so far." Still no expression.

"Every one of them have issued a public statement saying that they want the Empire to return to a place of peace and stability before they endorse a candidate. Except the Champions. As far as I know, they haven't taken any official Guild actions since shortly after the Emperor's death."

He reached the end of his explanation and realized that his heart was pounding harder than it should.

How would Shera respond? If she didn't come to the same conclusion as he had, then...what?

What would she do? She was capable of assassinating Yala and freeing the Regents herself, if she felt like it.

Or she could decide she didn't care and drop off to sleep at any second.

She rubbed at her temple, and her expressionless mask cracked into the face of someone faced with days of unexpected, unwelcome labor. "...so how do we open the coffins?"

Lucan spoke very carefully. "Shera, I agree with Yala."

Shera moved her hand from her temple to cover her face. "*Why?*"

"The Emperor wanted the world to grow up without him, to make our own decisions." He had spoken of it often enough with his three Gardeners. "This is our first major decision without him, and we have no indication that the Regents would be good for the Guilds. Or for the people. There are some questionable records about Alagaeus' rule."

Shera took in a deliberate breath and looked up at him. "This is our job."

"It's our job to take on assignments for the Guild. You *really* want more work?"

"I don't mean our job as Gardeners," Shera said, and she sounded weary. Resigned. "I mean *our* job, yours and mine and Meia's. The Emperor left his death to us. He trusted *us* to deal with this."

Is Shera really making an argument based on her principles? It was like looking into a canyon and finding himself staring into the sky.

He gathered up one of her hands in both of his, meeting her gaze earnestly. "Shera. If we could abandon the Guild right now, just you and me, and no one would follow us, would you do it?"

Shera's eyes lit up, and she glanced from side to side. "We don't have any supplies. Let's raid the kitchen first. I know they have rations. We can be gone in two hours."

He released her hand and spread his own, as though presenting his point. "I know you would never betray me or Meia—"

"Or a few others," Shera interjected. "Maybe...six others."

"—okay, you would never betray the eight of us, but I can't help but think you don't have much Guild loyalty at all."

Shera nodded along with his words. "Yeah, that sounds about right."

"So can you just...trust me when I say that you *should*?"

Her eyebrows furrowed and she stared out at the waves as the boat rocked. She didn't get that icy glare that meant she was angry or absolutely focused, but she did seem to be turning his words over in her head.

"No," she said at last, "I think this is where *you* should trust *me*."

She sat up straight, hands by her shears, as serious as he had ever seen her outside of combat. “There are some things I see more clearly than you. Your loyalty to the Guild gets in your way, so you can’t see the truth. This is simple.”

“This is an *extraordinarily* complicated situation—” he started to say, but she cut him off.

“Who do you trust more: Yala or the Emperor?”

That brought him up short.

“I’m not saying I always listened to him. I...” She glanced from side to side, taking in the featureless water and the wall of mist. “...surprised him at the end, too.”

With a knife to the heart, Lucan thought.

“But that was in a job he gave me, where he trusted me to use my best judgment. *His* job was to rule the world. If his best judgment was to put the Regents in charge, we should make that happen.”

“We can’t live in his shadow forever. We have to make our own decisions.”

“We don’t have to make any decisions about ruling the world at all, thank the Unknown God.”

Did she not see the hypocrisy? “You’re trying to decide who rules the world right now!”

“There’s no decision to make.” She shrugged one shoulder. “The Emperor already made it.”

“They will *ruin* us,” Lucan said, frustration growing. “What if they start fighting among themselves for rule? What if they shut down the Consultant’s Guild? Jorin built this island; what if he claims it for his own?”

This time, Shera was the one to reach out and take one of *his* hands in both of *hers*.

“Do you trust Yala and the High Council to make better decisions about the fate of the world than the Emperor?”

“That’s not—”

“What about you?” she asked, and she sounded genuinely curious. “Do you think you know better than he did?”

A dozen questions, excuses, and arguments passed through Lucan’s mind before he let out a heavy breath. “No.”

She patted his hand and lay back down. “Neither do I. So...how do we open the coffins?”

He still wanted to argue. The situation was infinitely more complex than she suggested, but for some reason he kept coming back to the central question: did he trust himself to know better than the Emperor?

And he didn't.

Even if you set aside his two millennia of experience ruling the world, the Emperor knew both the Regents and the Guild Heads personally.

If he thought the Regents would be better rulers, he was likely to be correct. Lucan could try and tell himself that it was the Heart of Nakothi speaking through the Emperor, but he had no reason to think so.

In the end, he just didn't want to see his Guild fall.

Stomach sinking, terrified of the future, Lucan still had to admit that Shera was right. "I never thought you'd be lecturing *me* on Imperial loyalty."

She patted his hands and let him go, giving him a lopsided smile. "Why not?"

"What do you care about the Empire?"

She looked at him quizzically. "Haven't I served the Empire all this time?"

He had to force his jaw closed.

Yes, he admitted to himself. She really had.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“The Consultants don’t know what they’re getting themselves into. I have them dancing on my strings.”

“I don’t know why you bothered hiring them. Aren’t they just servants?”

—TRANSCRIPT OF A CONVERSATION BETWEEN TWO CLIENTS UNDER OBSERVATION BY
THE CONSULTANT’S GUILD

PRESENT DAY

SHERA WRAPPED THE GRAY CLOTH AROUND HER FACE AND FLIPPED UP HER HOOD. For the first time since the Champion potion had worn off, she could breathe easily.

Just in time. Later that night, the Farstriders’ report of the peace meeting between Independents and Imperialists would be distributed. The entire world would know that Calder Marten was in the thrall of Kelarac.

Then he would die for it.

She adjusted Bastion in its sheath. It murmured in her mind, calming her, reminding her that she worked to protect the Consultants. She wasn’t sure if that was quite *her* motivation or if it was just Bastion’s purpose bleeding into her mind, but either way, it comforted her.

She had finished her morning stretches already, but she continued stretching her shoulder as she walked out of her room. She needed to be at her best.

“You’re here early,” Shera said to the room.

Meia dropped from the ceiling, landing as softly as a cat. “Just testing you.”

“Did I pass?” Shera put her hand on the door, but Meia stopped her with a gesture.

“Just...just a second.”

It wasn’t like Meia to hesitate, but she was shifting uncomfortably now, like she had as a girl when she had to face Ayana after breaking some rule.

“Is this about your mother?” Yala had been openly critical of Shera’s decision to send the Gardeners after the Champions, suggesting that the Council of Architects should have been informed first.

Meia frowned. “She’s been talking to Bareius about sponsoring us. I don’t think she’s happy.”

“Please stop. My heart.”

“She *is* loyal. She’s been working hard to support you as the Guild Head, even if she doesn’t always agree with you.”

Shera reached under her hood to scratch at the side of her head. “Is this what you came to talk about? I have a busy day today.”

“I know. That’s what I’m here about.” She met Shera’s gaze firmly. “I don’t want you to kill Calder Marten.”

Shera waited for the punchline.

“I’m serious. I don’t believe he was taken over by Kellarac, but we can hold him captive and find out for sure.”

When Shera had proposed her plan to the Gardeners, *including* Meia, there had been three phases. First, remove the Champions. They would be the biggest obstacles next to Bliss.

Phase one: success. Sixty percent of the Champions loyal to Calder had been removed, which was within acceptable margins.

The second phase was to separate Calder Marten from his guardians. The Consultants had started or subsidized petty crimes all over the Palace, straining the Imperial Guard to their limits. Calder Marten probably wouldn’t even notice.

As part of phase two, they had placed bait for Bliss. She would be away from Calder’s side at the critical moment.

Phase two: success.

Phase three was in process. It started with the Witness report of the peace meeting at the Imperial Palace, which included Estyr accusing Calder

of being enthralled by Kellarac.

Calder had taken his own countermeasures against the report, but Shera knew all about them. He had formed a panel of Blackwatch, Magisters, Witnesses, and a lone Luminian they'd captured, with all signing an agreement that Kellarac had no influence over Calder's thoughts.

If that persuaded enough people, he would stay in power. If not, he would be stripped of his title in the morning.

But that wouldn't matter. By tomorrow morning, he would be dead.

Shera wasn't wasting any more time with a potential Elder cultist on the throne. She would kill him, bring the rest of the Independents in after her, and take the Imperial Palace.

She didn't know why Calder or the others with him hadn't used the Optasia to free the Great Elders already, but the time was surely imminent.

"Why didn't you say anything earlier?" Shera asked Meia.

Meia shifted in discomfort again. "I was looking for proof. I had time, while we were removing the Champions."

"Did you find any?"

"...with me along, we can take him without killing him."

Shera threw out her hands. "*Why?* And while we're on that subject, why should I trust your judgment over Estyr Six?"

Meia chewed on her lip. Shera could read her thoughts: she didn't have an answer.

"Act like a Gardener." Shera tore open the door and marched out, now thoroughly annoyed.

The Masons were in place in the Imperial Palace. The Miners had confirmed the layout, Shera had picked her point of entry and she'd briefed her team in the primary plan, the backup plan, and the emergency plan.

If the Unknown God himself descended from the heavens and revealed that Calder Marten was a spirit of pure light in human form, it *still* wouldn't matter at this point.

The plan was moving forward.

She was still irritated when she walked down to the sub-basement to meet Jorin.

Behind the twisted bars, Estyr lay on a miraculously intact cot. Her Vessels sat on a table next to her, and while she occasionally twitched like a puppet whose strings were randomly pulled by a child, at least she wasn't floating in the air and destroying everything she could see.

Jorin sat at her side...although “at her side” might have been generous.

He had set up some kind of mobile alchemist laboratory in the corner. Three tables were set up next to each other, with a folding chair in between them and a chalkboard and a corkboard stuck up on the wall. Racks of flasks sat on the tables, holding plant and animal samples floating in alchemical preservatives, along with a pile of seemingly random objects.

That sight reminded her painfully of Lucan. He had always carried bits and pieces that looked like he’d scavenged them from the bottom of random cupboards. She associated the practice with Readers; if they found a stone or a wrench with unusual Intent, they would pick it up and take it home like a stray puppy.

The corkboard was covered in pinned notes and sketches and the chalkboard in cramped, hurried handwriting. The entire setup was lit by quicklamps of harsh white.

Jorin had his sleeves rolled up. He scribbled on the chalkboard, checked a note, and then scribbled again.

As she hurried down the stairs, Shera kept a careful eye on Estyr. The last thing she needed was for the Regent to wake up and slam Shera through the wall.

“You have answers for me?” she asked.

Jorin waved a free hand at her. “Sssh! Keep your tongue...I mean, *be quiet*. For the briefest moment. Please.”

No one had ever accused Shera of making too much noise, and she was already upset. When the Regent turned his attention back to the chalkboard, she slipped out of his peripheral vision.

Slowly and carefully, with smooth movements, she crept up behind him.

Estyr twitched as she passed, but she made no further sound. Finally, Shera stopped within arm’s reach of Jorin’s back.

He finished the last note and sighed, looking over his scribbles in apparent satisfaction. “Now, what were you...”

He trailed off as he looked to the bottom of the stairs and didn’t see Shera there.

If he concentrated for even a moment, he would sense her. He was one of the most powerful Readers in history, after all.

But that required him to look for her, so she spoke from behind him.

“You have my answers?”

He stumbled forward, catching himself on the desk, almost upending a flask containing a twisted animal that looked like a mummified rabbit floating in amber liquid. He scrambled with both hands, catching it before it spilled.

That was more satisfying than she had hoped.

He took a deep breath before turning to face her. "Oath to eternity, girl, don't you know you're playing with Shades?"

"Playing with fire."

"I know you're not responsible for the way language evolved before your birth, but I must protest that the Crawling Shades of Urg'naut are *far* more dangerous than fire."

Shera held out a hand. "I need my knife back."

He brightened, adjusting his shadeglasses. "Aha! *That* is a tune to dance to. Look here." He turned to a wooden box, which he flipped open with a flourish.

Syphren lay inside, just as she remembered last seeing it: Bliss' black iron spike pierced it through the middle, causing no apparent damage to the material but killing the Vessel's power.

Where her left-hand shear had once looked like a window onto an underworld in which tiny, bright green hands pressed out and tried to escape, now the blade resembled dead green bottle-glass.

With the air of a street performer about to do a trick, he pinched the spike between two fingers and pulled it out.

Shera braced herself. She'd thought she was prepared for Syphren's return, but now that she was faced with it, she found that she was afraid. She might not know her own thoughts anymore, as her Vessels ran away with her...

But Jorin stopped before removing the spike entirely. The iron had slid out of the glassy surface of her shear as though he'd pulled it from a pool of liquid. When he pushed it back the other way, it was once again as though Syphren had no more substance than the surface of a lake.

"It was all a question of finding the proper layer of Intent," he said proudly. "I labored to convince the spike that it was preserving a subject for examination, and that it needed to be released for only a breath."

That had been surprisingly coherent.

"So is it ready to use?"

“Keep your dogs leashed, I haven’t finished. One...unique...feature of this dandy hand-in-hand relationship is that you can do *this*.” He flipped the spike around so that it pierced her Vessel along its length rather than across. The spike slid mostly into the hilt, leaving only about a half-inch of iron sticking out of the blade on either side.

“You should have your sheath adjusted. Or find a bag. But now you can decide for yourself when to pull the lid off this hell-pot!”

Shera *had* been wrapping it in bandages, and something that she could remove and replace easily would be far more convenient. “So I can pull it out and put it back? To keep it from...running away with me?”

“Do you have a word for both yes *and* no? Yes, you can pull it out. No, you can’t put it back.”

“...our word for that is ‘no.’”

“I left it inside so that you can have a long think before you let this stallion loose.” He gazed at her seriously from behind his dark glasses, but she was having a hard time taking her focus off of Syphren.

If she listened hard enough, it was almost as though she could hear it whispering to her. Its song was so similar to the Heart of Nakothi...

“Multiple Vessels are rare for a solid reason,” Jorin went on. “It’s all gambles and guesses as to how they’ll interact. Will they grow stronger than the sum of their parts? Will they squabble like siblings on Sea Day? Those shears were forged and invested as a pair, so they should get along, but it’s all...”

He mimed flipping a coin. “Ah, this is when we would use our thumbs to flip coins into the air so that we could guess where they would land. It represents a fifty percent—”

“We still flip coins.” Shera looked from the sealed Syphren to Estyr’s scar-ravaged body. The Regent’s ankle jerked up an inch and then fell back down to the table.

“So if my Vessels are too much for me, I’ll end up like her?”

“They’re *your* Vessels. If that gets all topsy-turvy, and you become *their* Vessel, then you’ll be nothing more than the pair of boots that carries them from victim to victim.”

She braced herself as she picked up the sealed Syphren. She had thought physical contact might return its voice to her mind, but it remained silent.

She couldn’t fit it into her current sheath with the sides of the nail still jutting out from the flat of the blade, so she held the shear bare. “Should I

free it now?"

"Now, when our fates teeter on the cliff's edge? Were I you, I would leave it in my quarters and scrub it from my mind until our battle is done. This blade in particular, if it fed until it was fat and content, it would make you too strong to conquer. We'd need a team of Champions to rein you in without killing you."

At first, Shera thought she understood: a Soulbound with two powers was a terrible force. But he hadn't said anything about her being too strong when she *released* her second blade, just when it was fed.

"Fed until it was fat and content," she repeated. "What do you mean?"

He gave her an astonished look. "I *know* you know what that means."

"I mean why would that make me stronger?"

Jorin gestured between her and the blade. "The light you steal from others, it strengthens you. You know this, you used its power to heal yourself."

"It heals me. It sharpens my senses. It doesn't make me any stronger or faster."

"Then you're steering with the wrong wheel. Intent has many layers beneath the surface, as human intentions do. The challenge of a Soulbound is not to gain power, but to uncover those layers and plumb the depths of their Vessel to its fullest extent."

Shera tucked Syphren into her belt, putting it out of her mind for the moment.

"And what about the other question I asked you?"

"Aha!" He tapped the chalkboard. "The Great Elders are indeed waiting."

Shera waited for more, but apparently he considered that a complete explanation. "For what?"

Jorin shrugged.

"If they're waiting, why did they crack open the sky when they did?"

"That, as far as I can track down, was an act of opportunity. It's a door they hold open even now, as they gather their strength. *Something* will trigger them, and I don't know what, but their ultimate goal remains the same as it ever was."

The ultimate goal for the Great Elders, as Shera had always heard it, was destroying the Empire and re-conquering the world. "When we get rid of Calder Marten, they won't control the world anymore."

He looked to her in evident surprise. “They don’t want to *control* the world. They want to escape it.”

The break in the sky took on a whole new significance.

“Then we let them leave.”

“Simple and sweet as pie. As long as their leaving doesn’t tear our reality asunder.”

The discussion was getting away from Shera, so she re-focused: “Calder Marten. If we kill him, we set the Elders back?”

“Removing a pawn of Kellarac from the throne is a prize above all. And we need to empower the regional governors so they can keep the door tight-shut on all the Elder tombs.”

“Great.” She walked toward the stairs, cradling Syphren in her left hand. “You’re with Meia in the backup team?”

“I’ll be there and a half.”

She had more to worry about with her shears, but at least the situation with the Great Elders was simple enough.

All she had to do was win.



As the sun set, Shera flattened herself against the dull red tiles of an Imperial Palace roof.

A crowd filled the streets below, some clutching lanterns and quicklamps. Fully half of them waved news-sheets, and while she couldn’t read them from so far away, she already knew the headline.

ESTYR ACCUSES STEWARD OF ELDER WORSHIP!

That wasn’t technically accurate. Estyr had accused Calder Marten of selling his soul to Kellarac, which wasn’t the same as worshiping a Great Elder.

Shera had seen the report the Farstriders had written, and it had repeated Estyr’s words accurately, as well as providing context behind them obtained

from separate research. But Bareius' printing-houses knew what would grab the attention of the masses.

Many people didn't even believe in Elders as real entities, just as bogeymen or mythical spirits to blame problems on. Maybe Elders *did* exist, but they were sleeping and had no impact on real life. Or maybe they *once* existed, but the Emperor and the Regents had driven them to extinction.

Even after the uprising of Elderspawn around the world on the night of the Emperor's death, most ordinary people had seen nothing that couldn't be explained by Kameira or Awakened objects.

But while the existence of Elders themselves might have been in doubt, everyone knew that Elder cultists were real.

And they were hated.

The crowd—mostly the population of the Imperial Palace itself, but a good twenty or thirty percent from the city outside—pushed through the gates of the Palace, demanding answers.

Behind the main gate to the Palace was the Emperor's Stage, a three-story building with a broad balcony overlooking a courtyard big enough to hold ten thousand people.

Depending on the severity or nature of his message, the Emperor would address the Capital from one place or another. The Hall of Address was one while the Emperor's Stage was another.

The courtyard wasn't exactly full, but Shera suspected there were between four and five thousand people milling about, shouting for answers. The noise was overwhelming, even from her perch atop the roof of the Stage.

Days ago, Calder Marten had released a statement saying that he would address the Capital tonight. It would have been a packed house as a public address from the new Steward, but after the release of the news-sheets, the people wanted an explanation.

Which hadn't entirely been *their* idea.

Masons and out-of-uniform Shepherds and Guild hirelings had been positioned to spread discontent with the news-sheet copies, turning real anger into a suggestion that they march on the Emperor's Stage and demand answers.

Soon, Calder Marten would appear onstage and address the citizens. Or rather, his body double would.

A red blanket, both painted and invested to serve as camouflage, hid her from Imperial Guards searching overhead. They would look down and see her as a stretch of uninterrupted roof tiles.

Shera waited four hours, motionless as darkness crept over the Capital and the crowd grew larger. By the sudden outpouring of noise from the crowd, she knew Calder Marten had appeared on the balcony beneath her.

Beneath the camouflaged blanket, she flipped onto her back, peeking down past the lip of the roof with a hand-mirror. She saw a silver crown in his red hair and the wide sleeves of the Emperor's clothes—the body double wouldn't be allowed to wear Calder's white armor. That would be required to protect the Imperial Steward's person.

He had a saber belted on, which looked incongruous with the Emperor's clothes, but the Masons in the Imperial Palace had reported that it wasn't Calder's Awakened blade. Just an ordinary saber to use as a prop, to remind the people of his background as a Navigator.

He began to address the crowd, and Shera had to admit that the double had gotten his voice down. The double was a professional actor of Calder's approximate description treated with alchemical putty to complete the disguise.

The Consultant Miners told her that the Empire had once registered a Soulbound with the ability to change a person's appearance, even down to their voice, and when she had aged into her eighties she had been retired into the Imperial Palace.

But no one could confirm whether this woman was alive or dead, after the chaos following the Emperor's death and the further devastation of the recent battle inside the Palace itself.

Shera wasn't sure if the woman *was* still alive, and she couldn't see Calder's face from her angle, but the voice of his double was very close. Not perfect—he was a little *too* impassioned during the speech, playing up the cadence of an orator a little *too* strongly—but very close.

It was those imperfections that satisfied Shera. Her information was correct, and the real Calder Marten would be deeper in the Imperial Palace.

Now it was her job to find him and remove him while his double stood onstage.

She slipped to the back of the roof and lifted a few tiles. They revealed a hole down into the roof just big enough to slide into.

The space beneath was a cramped attic about four feet high, and it was filled with cobwebs, mouse droppings, and unused candlesticks. She pulled the tiles back into place behind her before the hole was spotted by airborne enemies, then crept over to the ladder.

One of the Palace maids, a Mason in Shera's employ, had left the ladder down. Shera peeked around before crawling down, one hand on her needles.

This time, the poison on her needles would render the target unconscious. Sometimes she carried lethal poison or a paralytic, but there were situations in which a sleeping body would draw less attention than a dead or paralyzed one.

No one was in sight except one girl in the red-and-black dress of an Imperial Palace servant. The girl was perhaps nineteen, and she bowed as she saw Shera, her hands folded primly in front of her.

A Mason.

Without a word, the Mason led the way through the hallway and down a flight of stairs, Shera trailing behind so the girl would have time to signal her in the event of an emergency.

The maid picked up a snack tray, piled with sweet pastries, from a table as she turned the corner. Before she started down the side hall, she coughed into her hand: Shera's cue to stay put.

"Snacks for the Steward," the girl announced, so close that she must have stood in front of the first door to the right. "Would either of you like anything?"

So there were two Guards. That was confirmed when two voices turned her down before the sound of the door opening.

Shera drew a needle in each hand and waited.

In some places in the Imperial Palace, it was impossible to hear conversations through the walls, centuries of Intent making the rooms impervious to eavesdroppers. But the Consultants had prepared for this.

At about Shera's knee level, hidden behind a decorative vase, there was a tiny lump of paint on the wall. Shera pulled the plug out, exposing the tiny hole that had been drilled through the thin wall.

"...you can't eat with the helmet on," the girl chided. She must have been standing over the hole, because her voice was clear.

Calder's voice came through, too muffled and distant for Shera to make out, but the Mason laughed heartily.

The Consultants hadn't known exactly what room Calder would wait in while his double gave the address, so they had prepared a simple countermeasure: they had hidden one of these holes in every private room in the entire Stage building.

Shera plugged up the hole. A moment later, the door opened and shut again.

"Are you sure I can't bring you anything?" the girl asked. "I couldn't bear leaving you hungry."

That was the signal. The word "bare," however she could work it into a sentence, meant that Calder was unprotected by the Emperor's armor for the moment.

Shera's turn had come.

The maid Mason left the hallway, carrying her tray. Shera nodded to her.

"Oh no," the girl said, suddenly turning back. "I think I left—"

She stumbled over her own feet, sending her tray crashing to the ground.

Shera raced around the corner, leaping over the girl. The two Imperial Guards were focused entirely on the maid, leaning over to help her up.

Before they could react, Shera had planted in a needle in each of their necks.

She watched them as they seized up and collapsed to the ground. Sometimes their Kameira enhancements could mess up the dosage, so the instant one of them made a single sound, she was going to plunge Bastion into their throats.

But they fell as expected, so Shera flicked a needle into the side of the girl's neck as well. The scene would now look like Shera had come across a servant, immobilized her in the middle of her job so that she spilled her tray, and then knocked out both of the Imperial Guards.

A muffled question came from the other side of the door as Calder asked what was going on.

Shera opened the door, and Calder looked up to her, mouth stuffed with pastry and eyes wide. She hurled a spade right into one of his widened eyes and blood spurted out.

He slumped over onto the table, a knife in his eye.

"*Never trust a mission that's too easy,*" Maxwell had taught her. *That* was a lesson she'd learned over and over again.

She dashed over to him, quickly opening his carotid artery with Bastion.

Still too easy.

But wasn't that the point of a plan? To make everything easier?

Shera had never trusted plans as much as most Gardeners did. Something always went wrong, and then you could only count on your improvisational abilities.

But this *had* to be Calder. She'd seen his face only a moment ago. And he was wearing the Emperor's armor...

Just in case, she struck the back of the white plate armor with Bastion. She'd seen this armor hundreds of times; she knew what it looked like. It couldn't be an imitation.

Her knife cut it open easily.

Fake.

She'd been tricked.

She grabbed Calder by the hair and lifted him to get a closer look at his face. The disguise was almost perfect, but this close she could make out the paste used to fill in his chin, the shading used to make his eyes look bigger, a touch of the glue used to hold on his fake beard.

The primary plan had failed.

It was time for the backup.

The door hadn't quite swung shut yet when she was out of the room and sprinting down the hall. Had her plan been leaked? Was there a spy or traitor in the Consultants?

She would get to the bottom of it after she survived the night.

One Imperial Guard, one ordinary Palace guard, and one servant all crossed her path and went down to one needle apiece. Her backup route was supposed to be clear of interference, but nothing was ever certain.

She finally located the door she'd been looking for, finding it unlocked. It was a room that another Mason in the Palace had left open. Inside, a Palace maid uniform in Shera's size had been laid out on the bed.

Shera unbuckled her belt. Dressed as a maid, she would leave out the front door, where Meia and Jorin and a few other hand-selected Independents waited among the crowd below...

Some half-formed thought stopped her before she changed clothes.

How much of her plans had they anticipated? If they knew *exactly* what her plan was, they would have taken her on the roof.

They may have just swapped Calder out of general paranoia, but if they knew she was coming and not the details of her plan, what would they do?

Lock down the building.

She threw aside the shutters of the outer window. She tried to pull it open, but it had been glued to the frame.

They'll have this exit watched.

She threw herself aside as the thought occurred to her, and a hole appeared in the glass a moment later. She still didn't hear the shot, but a puff of feathers flew up from the bed as the musket-ball landed.

Ice crept over her thoughts as she realized that she was trapped.

Her primary and secondary plans had both been cut off. It was time for the emergency plan.

She clutched her shear in her right hand and concentrated.

Bastion's Veil swallowed the Emperor's Stage.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

TWO YEARS AGO

SHERA AND LUCAN DIDN'T MAKE IT ANYWHERE NEAR ZHEN'S HOUSE.

The gray headquarters of the Masons was made to blend into Bastion's Veil and the hill leading up to its doors was covered by nothing but grass, but there was nowhere on the Gray Island without hiding spots.

With the slightest inclination of her head, Shera signaled to indicate a figure hiding inside a clump of grass. In one intentionally loud footstep and a subtle hand gesture, Lucan responded by indicating that he had seen another hiding inside the Veil itself.

Yala, it seemed, had wasted no time.

Having realized what Lucan was after, she wouldn't give him a chance to get so close to the sleeping Regents again.

Lucan had been forced to wait an entire day since his meeting with the High Councilor, waiting for the cover of night. He had known the delay would put him at a disadvantage if Yala decided to act, but he and Shera had agreed they needed the time.

By posting guards, Yala proved that she wasn't going to allow him to simply push a lid off of a coffin. And she had shown that she didn't trust his outward show of agreement...or at least she wasn't relying on it.

As soon as they spotted the sentinels hiding outside of Zhen's home, this stopped becoming a personal attempt of Shera and Lucan's and became a Gardener mission.

Shera melted into the grass, snaking so subtly up the hill that Lucan could barely track her even knowing what to look for.

Lucan himself had not wasted the day; he'd stolen a tool from another Consultant Reader. A color-shifting cloak made from the fur of a Nightbender, a Kameira that stalked jungle trees while invisible.

The cloak's Intent was strong, and while it wouldn't render him invisible unless it was Awakened, the investment still helped hide him. Lucan wrapped the cloth around himself, pulling it tight rather than letting it hang loose and brush the grass, and then he too began to stalk the grass.

While Shera moved to circle around and intercept the Shepherd nearby, Lucan targeted the one in the mist. He moved in a wide loop, slowly, because stealthy meant slow.

They had hoped that Yala would leave the room open so they could infiltrate the house, sneak past Zhen, and release the Regents.

But they hadn't relied on hope.

The cold of Bastion's Veil gripped Lucan, seeping through the gaps in his clothing and his few patches of exposed skin. The Shepherd was wearing a cloak of his own, gray to match the fog, and there must have been some investment in it as well. Lucan had a hard time keeping his target in vision, though he knew they were only a few yards apart.

He had considered throwing a paralyzing needle, but now it was impossible. Throwing a needle was a risky gambit under the best circumstances, but when he couldn't see his target clearly...he might as well stand up and announce himself.

Delicately, he crept around, running over his personal inventory of invested items. Most were disqualified as being too lethal, too loud, or too necessary to part with...but there was one that caught his attention.

He snaked two fingers into a pouch at the back of his belt, pulling out a few glass marbles. When he thought his target's head tilted a different direction, he hurled the marble past.

Thanks to the Veil, there was no moonlight to glint off of the glass orb, which had been invested with a very special property. When it hit the soft ground, it shattered instantly, smashing the quiet of the night like a porcelain bowl hitting tile.

This was a perfect example of why Consultants worked in teams.

At an unexpected sound, one of the Shepherd lookouts would glance in the direction of the sound, while the other should be trained to look in the

opposite direction.

But with Shera distracting or incapacitating the Shepherd's partner, Lucan was confident that this one would give in to instinct.

As the cloaked figure turned to see what had made the sound, Lucan leaped up. His target spun, pulling a weapon, but Lucan had the momentum and the needle already in his hand.

The poisoned point sunk into the other man's bicep, which wasn't ideal. The poison would take longer to affect him from that location and might not paralyze his entire body. Lucan had already pulled out another needle, but the Shepherd was no pushover.

He tried to shout, raising a cry that lasted only a second before Lucan clapped one gloved hand over the man's mouth. They struggled against each other for a long moment, grunting, before Lucan finally inserted another needle into the man's opposite shoulder.

Finally, the Shepherd slunk immobile down to the ground, and Lucan wanted nothing more than to fall down panting and join him.

Instead, he moved instantly, fading deeper into the Veil and slithering away from his last known position. He and Shera had spotted only two guards outside and expected there to be only two...the other teams would be inside the house.

But that was only an assumption.

He hid in the mist, surrounded by his Nightbender cloak, listening. Even the sound of the wind was muted in the Veil, but as he got closer to the silver barrier's edge, the sounds of the night returned.

He had left the Shepherd's eye-bending cloak on, so any ally would have to search for him in the grass, and Lucan spotted no movement in the grass nearby. He heard no crunch of broken vegetation, saw no glint of moonlight off the lens of a blade or a telescope.

When he was satisfied that any further backup was either immobile or nonexistent, Lucan crept over to where he'd last seen Shera.

She bent the grass aside, blinking her eyes in a way that suggested she had been asleep just a moment before.

Lucan signaled for her to watch over him as he approached the house.

They had plenty of time before the guards awoke, but they still couldn't be certain that there were only two, and there was always the chance of bad luck. In the event of a scheduled guard change or another Consultant accidentally wandering onto the scene, the whole mission could be over.

He snuck up to the walls, throwing up a grappling-hook that had been used by a wanted burglar for the entirety of his distinguished career. The soft rope wrapped around a second-floor balcony railing, the hook catching without a sound.

In this case, the longer he left the rope standing out against the face of the house, the greater the chance he would be spotted. He ascended the rope like a spider, reaching the top in seconds.

So there was something to be gained from keeping up with his standard Shepherd exercise routine after all.

He spun when he landed on the balcony, pulling a miniature crossbow from his belt and cranking it back to load a bolt.

The bolt was tipped with the same immobilizing poison as that on his needles, but he was reluctant to use the weapon at all. No matter how carefully he aimed, a crossbow bolt was no needle-prick. He was likely to kill or permanently maim his target, which he wanted to avoid.

And it wasn't as though he was some kind of legendary marksman with the pocket crossbow; he might catch his target in the neck or through the eye.

Even so, he needed something to cover Shera. When she saw him set up, she dashed to the rope, hauling herself up and flipping over the railing. With a few quick motions, she pulled the rope back to the hook and wove it all into a tight loop, which she handed back to Lucan.

He enjoyed working with Shera. They knew each other so well, had trained together so often, that they often felt like two hands working in unison. There was something exhilarating about being so in sync with her, as though she lived in his mind and he in hers.

He stopped watching the quiet horizon to take the device and tuck it back into his belt. Shera, all business now that the mission had truly begun, had already turned to the door.

There was only one safe entrance at a time to Zhen's house, while the other doors that covered the building's face were all decoys.

At the same time, they *would* technically lead into his home. They were just trapped.

There would be an alarm on this door designed to ring when it opened, as well as some sort of non-lethal trap meant to incapacitate them.

Zhen wouldn't want some young Consultant to get full of their newfound skills and try breaking in, only to take a musket-ball through the

eye or a swinging blade to the neck. Yala might have ordered him to use lethal traps this time, but Lucan doubted it; whatever else they were, he and Shera were still Consultants. Yala was nothing if not loyal to the Guild.

Though they could be relatively certain that the traps weren't meant to kill or maim them, that still left the problem of identifying what the traps actually *were*.

There were eight commonly used door alarms that every Consultant knew, and ten more exotic forms that Lucan could think of off the top of his head. There were far more possible traps: poisoned needle in the doorknob; gas dispersal triggered by the movement of the hinges; darts from the hallway on the other side; alchemical glue on the floors that would trap not just their shoes, but their feet if they set foot inside.

And there could be uncountable variations more.

Worse, Reading would be of limited use. The door would hold no Intent based on the traps it concealed, as the traps changed so often, so he would have to try and Read through the door to the trap on the other side. Which was not only difficult and imprecise, but potentially misleading.

Though he would still try.

He pulled off his glove, resting four fingers against the door. That itself was dangerous; Zhen could have put a contact poison in the gray paint. But if he had, at least Shera would have some warning in the form of his seizure.

"Good news," Lucan said to Shera, in a low voice that was less audible at a distance than a whisper. "I found the alarm. Just a bell."

Zhen would have used a different alarm for every one of the potential entrances to his home, and there was nothing wrong with the classics. Eager infiltrators on the watch for more elaborate alarms might overlook something so simple.

Shera brightened, but he held up a hand in caution. "Bad news...no trap."

He could sense nothing beyond the door, which could mean almost anything.

It could be that this door *wasn't* trapped because the trap was in the floor or down the hall, in which case it would almost certainly be designed to release a secondary alarm in case the first failed. Or it could be that the door *was* trapped, but it had been assembled by such a distracted or uninterested worker that it held almost no Intent.

There was also the possibility that its Intent had been hidden from him, as the Emperor or some skilled Magisters could do, but that would be far too arcane and elaborate a trap for Zhen's front door.

Lucan signaled for them to try another door, but Shera had made up her mind. She was already turning the knob.

Slowly, a hair at a time, Shera twisted the knob and began to open the door. It slid outward so gradually that the bell on the inside caught with only the slightest sound...but if she pulled it open too much farther, the bell would fall back and ring in earnest.

Lucan reached up and pinched the clapper of the bell with two fingers, preventing it from ringing. But Shera didn't open more than a crack. She glanced through, looking up and down, even ducking down to peek under the door.

She pulled out one spade and poked the floor—no glue.

From her own pouch, she withdrew a hooded quicklamp the size of her thumb, activating it and sliding the hood open a crack. After a moment warming up, the device gave her a focused beam of blood-red light. Red light was supposed to be easier on their eyes as they snuck around in the darkness, less likely to blind them, and it was slightly harder for observers to notice than white.

She moved the light across the entire doorframe quickly, including the floor, ceiling, and hinges, and then flashed it to the end of the hall.

"Darts," she muttered back to him.

Kelarac take it, Lucan thought. They had bad enough luck to be up against the trap that was worst for them. When the darts activated, they would activate a second alarm.

He was going to have to get creative.

Thanks to the Emperor's tutelage, he could destroy the door. He could bring down the whole building, using Reading as a weapon in such a way that was traditionally considered impossible. But there was no way to do it *quietly*. A door smashed to pieces by Reading would sound just like a door smashed to pieces by axes.

This time, Shera had the solution.

She had packed for this mission, just as he had, and she'd brought some solutions that he hadn't thought of. In this case, the word 'solution' was particularly appropriate; she pulled out a stoppered alchemical vial and a tiny paintbrush.

Lucan adjusted his shroud, making sure it was secure over his nose and mouth—it would help him against the alchemical fumes of the solution that Shera was about to use.

It still smelled foul as she carefully painted a two-foot square at the corner of the door and the paint began to hiss quietly, sending smoke billowing up into the night sky. In under a minute, a chunk of the door had dissolved, leaving enough room for them to crawl through without triggering the darts at the end of the hall.

And now they had to hurry. Useful as the alchemy had been, it wasn't odorless. Zhen or his guards could easily be alerted by the chemical stench, once it reached them.

Once they were on the other side, Shera's blood-tinted quicklamp quickly revealed a line running from the top hinge of the door all the way to the mechanical dart-launcher perched on a tripod at the end of the hall. Shera cut it, and if they had not been trained better, they would have stopped there.

Instead, she continued her examination and Lucan Read the floor. Quickly, they found the secondary activator: a pressure plate in the floor ahead of the tripod.

They slipped past it and into a second hallway beyond. All of the doors on the second story led into this hallway, which had a handful of false exits leading to further traps, but one was real. Lucan popped the trap door and Shera tucked away her lamp, then both pressed an ear against the seams of the trap.

"I tell you, there are *no* benefits to the old ways," Zhen's voice echoed from below. "Modern laundry soap is a miracle of alchemy. Quicker, easier, no residue, and only *marginally* more expensive. Leaves cloth softer than the Emperor's silks."

Lucan Read for traps and found none. This trap door was supposed to be safe, but it was better to be careful.

Shera looked into his eyes, where they silently coordinated. She gave him a smile he could barely see behind her shroud, but he could read it nonetheless. "*Look at us,*" she was saying. "*We could be off work right now.*"

The door popped open and Shera fell like a panther.

Spades flashed from her hands even as she dropped, three in an instant. They too had been coated with non-lethal poison, just for this evening; it

was not traditional to poison spades, as they held it poorly and delivered unreliable doses, but the trick could be useful for disabling opponents.

Lucan landed only a blink after Shera, spades in his own hands.

He stopped himself instantly.

Zhen crouched behind a fully set dinner-table, holding a soup bowl up like a shield in front of him. Judging by the steaming liquid dripping from the tablecloth, the bowl had been in use only seconds before.

A Consultant in blacks leaned drunkenly against the far wall, trying to draw a weapon. A line of red against her shoulder and the spade embedded in the wood behind her showed Lucan that Shera's aim had been true. Another stranger, probably a Mason by his lack of a black uniform, slumped over onto the table. A third, another Shepherd, tripped as he tried to run for the door. He struggled to rise, but a poisoned spade was stuck in his back.

Zhen peeked over his bowl-shield. "*Shera?* Light and life, girl, calm down." He sniffed the air. "Did you burn through my door with acid? Your answer gets a nine out of ten, but you'll be replacing my door."

Shera moved forward with another shear in one hand and a needle in the other. "Do you want a nap?" It would look better for Zhen afterwards if the Architects found him immobilized by Gardener weapons.

The old Mason snorted. "I don't know what they taught you in the Garden, but *I* trained you better. If you're really after that basement, you should give it up. There's no victory here."

Lucan frowned. Zhen knew what was buried there. He should understand what was at stake, and therefore should either be fighting them or helping them. Not standing idly by.

What did he know...

The answer interrupted the question: he knew what defenses waited between them and the frozen Regents. Shera and Lucan had discussed as much before their voluntary mission began.

Shera held up the needle with its glistening point. "Let me know what we're in for, and I'll knock you out." She sounded casual, close to bored, not icy. That was a good sign.

Zhen's bushy eyebrows shot up. "You know they'll find out. If I tell you what to expect, they'll punish me with you."

Shera glanced over at Lucan. They had both agreed what to do in this situation.

She jabbed the needle into his neck and he didn't resist. Even if they had been willing to interrogate an old friend, they didn't have the time.

And they *weren't* willing. Even Shera said she'd rather fail and face punishment than to hurt the Mason.

He must have made a real impression on her.

As Zhen's body tightened up, he groaned, stretching himself out on the floor. "Foolish. They'll assign you to the...northern wastes...for...this..." That was all he managed before his jaw locked up.

Lucan snatched up a pillow from a nearby couch and levered Zhen's head up, sliding the pillow underneath. He would still wake up with a headache, but maybe not as much of one.

Shera had started to move downstairs. "If we have two minutes left, I'd be surprised. So far, so easy."

One of the incapacitated Shepherds groaned.

Lucan had to admit, Yala had underestimated them. She habitually underestimated Gardeners; she considered herself the equal to any Gardener, or so he'd interpreted from his occasional Readings of her belongings. Maybe she simply didn't believe that they would really come here.

He and Shera pushed through the room with the crates of documents, using Shera's hooded quicklamp for light. He tried to turn on a nearby light, but it was out of fuel, so they proceeded carefully through the darkened room.

This time, instead of the rug covering a few nailed boards over the trap door, there was a metal plate welded in place.

Shera stepped back, letting Lucan take the lead. "Your turn."

Lucan pulled both of his gloves back and pressed them against the iron, focusing his Intent. Active Reading was a difficult skill, more like Awakening than investing, changing an object's physical form by twisting its Intent.

Fortunately, the easiest physical change was destruction.

The iron plate had little Intent to work with, which made his job difficult, and he strained to grasp at its physical form.

The metal gave a shriek as it peeled back.

He was sunk so deep into his Reader's trance that, when the gunshot rang out, he thought for a second that it was the sound of a rivet popping out of the iron.

He only realized what it was when the lead ball kicked him in the chest.

He tumbled back, the ball stopped by the investment in his camouflaged cloak and in his masterfully crafted blacks. He lost control of his active Reading...and instead of merely pulling back the metal plate, the entire plate and a chunk of the floor beneath it *exploded* into the ceiling.

The way down was now completely open, but Lucan couldn't spare a thought for it. He held up a sleeved arm to protect his face as another pistol cracked and another shot hit him like a kicking horse, snapping the bone in his forearm.

The pain blanked him out, but one priority remained: *What about Shera? Where's Shera?*

He pushed through his tears to see around him.

Consultants had hidden in the crates, waiting for them to arrive. No doubt they had come in through the door at the far end of the room, the door leading to the hidden harbor, alerted by Zhen or one of the others as soon as Shera and Lucan had breached the dining room.

They stood now, quicklamps bright, the lids of the crates discarded and firearms in every hand.

Shera stood over a body, and Lucan couldn't tell if the woman at her feet was dead or unconscious.

Shera had a shear in her right hand, and her left was held in front of her face.

Lucan was forcefully reminded that others could not focus their Intent. She didn't have the additional protection of his cloak, and her blacks weren't bulletproof.

There were red holes in Shera's shoulder, her stomach, her left arm. Her ear was missing, the right side of her face painted in blood.

Still, she drove her shear into the chest of a Mason who had come too close.

Lucan screamed. Or someone did.

Why are they trying to kill us?

He was not unfamiliar with a sudden, unexpected transition to violence. That was part of a Gardener's work.

But they had planned this operation knowing that Yala would follow the unspoken rules of the Consultant's Guild. If Lucan and Shera's mission had succeeded, they would have won the game. If they were caught and failed, they would gracefully accept their loss and punishment.

Even Zhen had said it a moment ago: *“They’ll assign you to the northern wastes...”*

They had all assumed that Yala would follow the rules.

What fools they’d been.

Bitterly, he lashed himself with regret. He had given Yala too much credit. Too much trust.

Two more pistols discharged, deafening in the enclosed space.

The gun aimed at Shera missed, but Lucan’s didn’t. This bullet caught him in the side of the skull. He spun, his world dissolving.

His last sight was of Shera, dribbling blood, dropping her shear to the ground and reaching for her left side.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

PRESENT DAY

SILVER MIST FILLED THE BEDROOM IN WHICH SHERA CROUCHED, FLOODING through the building, pouring out the hole the bullet had broken in the outer window.

She slipped behind the bed, hiding herself from further shots. Her head spun with the effort of using her Soulbound power so heavily with no preparation.

Bastion whispered contentedly in her mind.

It was satisfied with a job well done; the mists would protect her now, and they would serve as the signal for others who would soon come to protect. Its greatest purpose, to defend the Am'haranai in the execution of their duties, was being fulfilled.

Meia and Jorin had gone to great lengths to bring a team into the Capital, hiding them among the crowd.

An assassination was far better than a frontal attack, but they had come to back her up. They didn't want to start another fight like the one in which Estyr had fallen...but they would if they had to.

Now, the stealthy approach had failed. Backup was on its way.

She just had to survive.

When Jorin and Meia saw the mist, they would enter the building. Shera would evade her enemies long enough for that to happen.

Once her head stopped spinning, she dipped her awareness into the fog. She couldn't afford to tire herself out here, but she caught a few glimpses of

what awaited her outside the door.

She waited until the pair of Imperial Guards had approached her room, then she leaped from inside.

Her objective was to escape, not to kill, and even now it was better to keep the body count low.

Jorin and Bareius and Kerian had all emphasized that fact over and over. She wasn't supposed to kill anyone she didn't have to.

So the first Imperial Guard took a needle to the side of the neck and the second took one in the thigh.

She was already dashing down the hall when she realized that her fears had been realized: one of the Imperial Guards processed poisons faster than the others. The Guard screamed an alarm, her voice echoing through the halls: "THIRD FLOOR, HEADING EAST!"

Bastion's Veil treated sounds strangely. If she had just yelled for an intruder, her allies might not have found her, but she had shouted Shera's location.

This is exactly why you kill people.

Shera dashed down the hall, gripping Bastion tightly. She only needed to dodge pursuers until Meia showed up, so she would find another unlocked room and slip inside. After they checked the halls, they would realize that she had hidden somewhere, but by then it would be too late.

But when she turned the corner, the Veil granted her a vision of a new pursuer.

He dashed through the mist in a blur of motion.

Champion.

She leaped backward just in time to avoid a man crashing through the wall after her. Wood and painted plaster exploded outward, coating the walls and floor.

The Champion was *covered* in weaponry, as though he'd made himself armor out of every sword, knife, and axe-head he owned. Three swords were strapped to one hip, two swords on the other, and another on his back. He had sheathed knives everywhere they could fit.

Under other circumstances, he would look ridiculous and impractical. How did he even draw a sword without it getting tangled in the others?

But having just seen him tear through a wall, he was frightening enough. There was no doubt he was a genuine Champion.

She recognized him from the Consultant's Guild reports: Rosephus, one of the two Imperialist Champions who had evaded her Gardeners. She had known he would be here, but every plan involved not coming face-to-face with him.

His expression was hidden beneath a helmet made from a hollowed-out hammerhead with a spike on the end. It swiveled to look at her, and his eyes gleamed orange from the helmet's shadows.

Shera had only one mission left.

Run.

A short spear shot toward her, but she had already dropped to the ground and thrown a spade into his face. Bastion's Veil thickened around her and she ran.

When the Champion overtook her in an instant, it was no surprise.

Shera had run only a few steps forward, then crouched and slipped back the other way. With his senses confused by the Veil, Rosephus plunged deeper into the hallway, each of his footsteps ringing like thunder.

Meanwhile, she ran the opposite direction. When she reached the end of the hall, she tugged at the window.

This one must have been glued shut as well, because she couldn't budge it, but she saw no nails. How had they managed to glue all these windows shut so quickly? Her Masons would have reported a bunch of servants crawling all over the building with jars of alchemical glue.

She shoved a spade under the windows...but it stuck. Even the thin knife couldn't slip inside.

Frustrated, she tried Bastion, but the shear let out a crackling light as it met resistance.

Foreign Intent. They had used a Soulbound power or an Awakened object to seal the building.

Instead of panic, ice grew over her thoughts, fighting against Bastion's haze of protective calm.

There would be no escape. Could even Meia and Jorin break in?

Shera ran down a different hallway, shaking her doubts away. Of course they could. The musket-ball had broken the window earlier, so the glass could be broken. If *she* broke through the glass and leaped outside, the Guards would know her location and be on her in an instant.

If a bullet could break its way in here, so could Meia and Jorin Maze-walker.

Bastion flashed a warning into her thoughts: the image of a woman stopping to stab a long silver spike into a wall.

Shera reversed position as silver light speared through the wall, grazing her shoulder and leaving a bleeding gash in her skin. She still couldn't spare the attention to dive into Bastion's vision, but she caught glimpses of her opponent: a tall, lithe woman with caramel skin who moved with a dancer's grace.

Her long hair was tied back into a tail, she carried a thick silver needle the length of her arm, and she wore armor of leather and chain that looked easy to move in.

The second Champion.

In Shera's reports, Tyria was described as having an atypical personality for a Champion. She didn't seek out fights, rarely carried weapons, and had little loyalty to the Empire. Shera's Gardeners had found no opportunity to assassinate her, as she had never left her rooms in the depths of the Imperial Palace.

But she was all business now, sending another spear of light lancing through the wall as she ran around the corner to find Shera. The light was several feet wide, but Shera didn't know how Tyria had found her at all. Bastion's Veil dampened sight, sound, smell, and even Intent.

Tyria slid into view, close enough that Shera could see her with her own eyes. She was well and truly cornered now.

Especially since the needle was not Tyria's Soulbound Vessel.

Golden light pooled at the Champion's feet, congealing into finger-thick vines. Thorns of gold light sprouted on the vines, and half a dozen shot toward Shera like flexible arms.

Tyria was one of the Champions best-suited for capturing an opponent, so Shera had no choice. The instant she caught a glimpse of her opponent, she thickened Bastion's Veil and dove out the window.

She led with her shear, so the window shattered instantly; from the moment Shera had seen the musket-ball break through the glass, she knew that whatever they had done to seal the building had not prevented glass from shattering.

Her gray, hooded outfit had been both designed and invested to protect her, so the glass couldn't cut through the soft fabric...but that didn't mean she escaped unscathed.

Sharp edges tore at her wrists beneath her sleeves, the sides of her neck, and even her cheeks, though she did everything she could to hide her face.

She landed on the eaves of the lower floor, tucked into a roll, and risked collapsing as she poured more energy into Bastion's Veil and ran.

Bullets shattered the tiles all around her.

She couldn't spare the attention to look through the eyes of the mist, but she had known the exits would be covered. She could climb down now, but as she glanced down, she saw Imperial Guards filling the streets below.

Shera continued running around to the front of the building, where the balcony still hung over a crowd confused by the sudden mist. She could slip down and rejoin Meia and Jorin.

Without the vision of the mist, she couldn't find them. She wasn't sure where they had positioned themselves.

But if they *could* join up, then they could all escape without another open attack on the Imperialists in their own headquarters. That had always been a terrible risk.

She dropped onto the corner of the balcony, taking a moment to catch her breath. Blood dripped from half a dozen wounds as her body and mind ached equally. She had overused her Vessel too quickly. If she didn't get some sleep soon, she might collapse.

The mist was silver and endless, as though the world ended at the railing of the balcony. The noise of the crowd below echoed strangely inside the Veil, like a murmuring that came from all around her.

Her best chance was to find Meia and Jorin while the Champions were distracted, but she might pass out if she tried to look through Bastion's Veil.

Instead, she gently let her awareness drift into the Vessel and allowed the tides of mist to take her where they wished.

Like brief flashes of half-remembered dreams, she saw images with no order or reason to them. Glimpses of individuals from the crowd outside, maids huddled in their rooms, Calder Marten sitting and chatting with Imperial Guards, Rosephus destroying walls in his rage to find her...

Hold on.

Shera's head spun as she took the reins of Bastion's power. She knew it was a gamble using her own power so much, but she spun it back.

There... She focused on Calder. He was sitting on the floor of a well-lit room, leaning his back against the wall. From the neck down, he wore the

Emperor's armor, but his red hair was bare. The helmet sat on the floor next to him.

He finished a joke and a snake-scaled Imperial Guard forced a laugh, but Shera let the vision vanish.

He was below her.

From the brief glimpses she'd received and from her own study of the Emperor's Stage layout, she knew where he was. It was a costume changing room behind the balcony and one floor down.

His Champions were gone. Only half a dozen Guards remained with him in the room, and he had his helmet off.

With Bastion's power, she could do this. The mist was thin inside the room at the moment, but she could change that. She wasn't so exhausted yet that she couldn't run in, slit his throat beneath the cover of the Veil, and run out.

She hadn't seen Meia or Jorin, so she had to assume that they hadn't been able to extract themselves from the crowd yet. She could complete her mission while she still had the chance of success.

And she could pull the weed that was Calder Marten, who had caused her too many problems already.

Even if worst came to worst...

Her left hand drifted down to the sealed Syphren.

She had options.

Shera gripped Bastion's hilt and lightened some of the mist inside the hallways and out in the periphery around the crowd. Her breath became ragged and sweat beaded on her forehead as she slowly thickened the mist inside the storage room where Calder waited.

It would have been easier to fill it suddenly, but she didn't want to alert them more than they were already. Stealthy meant slow.

After a few minutes, she had fogged the room enough that it would be hard for them to make out details of a figure only feet away.

Now was her time.

She caught her breath one last time, limbered up, and slid Bastion back into its sheath. Then she crept back into the Emperor's Stage.

A squad of four Imperial Guards covered the nearest entrance to the storage room. There were two such entrances, both guarded.

The locked door was at the bottom of a short staircase, and two of the Guards stood at the top of the staircase, with two more taking up positions

farther away. She could spend her time taking out first the gunner in the highest position, then the spearman watching the corner, then the two over the door.

Or...

A gust of fog blew in over the Guards, and they readied themselves, but this had happened several times over the evening as Bastion's Veil waxed and waned. They prepared themselves, leveling their weapons and moving closer to one another, but they didn't immediately call for an emergency.

The mist withdrew after a moment, and Shera heard them relax.

From the bottom of the stairs, where she already waited against the door.

Why fight the Guards when she could just walk past them?

The Emperor's Stage was never designed as a fortified location. The Imperial Guard did their best, but it wasn't as though it was a military installation. In order to make things easier on the maintenance staff, the publicly accessible areas used one master key.

Shera took a copy of that key from her pocket and opened the door.

The sound of the lock turning was muffled from the outside, thanks to the cloud of mist that she carried with her, but it would be clear from the inside. That was to her advantage; the Guards within wouldn't be afraid of anyone who entered with a key.

Someone from inside called out for verification, and Shera took a moment to glance inside. She still didn't want to exhaust herself by looking for too much detail, but she got a brief impression of the positions of everyone in the room.

Then she threw the door open and dashed inside, carrying Bastion's Veil with her.

She shot through, dodging the shadowy figures of the Guards. Their voices echoed through the fog, cries of alarm sounding from every direction, but she reached the far wall in a second.

The mist cleared enough to show her Calder, still in the process of putting on his helmet. His throat was bare.

Bastion leaped for his neck.

A sharp pain seized Shera around the ankle and yanked her entire body back, tearing her skin as it did. She twisted in midair, slashing at her own leg with her shear.

The silver-blue blade passed through Tyria's golden thorns, slashing the vine apart.

Silver light pierced the air where Shera would have been if she hadn't broken the Soulbound's power.

Shera lunged back in the other direction...and Bastion's blade skated across the Emperor's helmet.

Calder leaped away, into the Veil.

She'd lost him.

Mission failed.

Shera moved away from her last known position. She couldn't chase; Calder would be leading her closer to the Champion.

A woman's voice resonated through the mist, casual but powerful. "You're pretty slippery, aren't you?"

Tyria. The Champion.

An explosion sounded through the room, and a quick shadowy glimpse through Bastion's Veil showed her that Rosephus had blown his way through the doorframe of the door Tyria had already opened. He held a sword in each hand while a trio of ghostly red daggers floated over his head: his own Soulbound power.

"FACE ME, SNAKE!" Rosephus roared.

No, Shera thought.

She ran for the other exit.

She couldn't afford to look through the mist anymore; her eyes and mind were both on the verge of giving up. When she was close enough to see the Guards on the door, they swung weapons at her immediately.

"East exit!" one called, and Rosephus' weapon-clad figure landed before the words were even out of the Guard's mouth.

The floor cracked under his boots, and a sword and a spectral dagger both flashed for Shera's chest.

She rolled away, drawing the mist like a cloak around her, but something still scored a hit on her back.

She limped away, hearing the Champion tearing the room around her apart.

In an instant, she assessed her condition.

She could no longer see through the Veil, and her ability to control it was questionable at best. One of her ankles was damaged, so there would be no outrunning anyone. She was losing blood by the second.

This could only get any worse if someone stumbled on her in this exact moment.

Calder emerged from the mist, looming over her, his sword shining orange in the silver clouds.

Of course, Shera thought.

The black glass of his visor made Calder's visage inhuman as he looked down.

"By the authority of the Imperial Steward, you're under arrest, Guild Head." Coming through the Emperor's armor, his voice had an unusual tone of authority.

"We've fought before," Shera said, lifting Bastion. "You want to try again?"

He had her beat in reach, strength, and physical condition. And while wearing that armor, Bastion couldn't touch him. But every second she could bluff him was a second she could use to think of a way out.

Her left hand tightened around Syphren's hilt. *Bastion* couldn't touch him, but Syphren had been invested to break through defenses. If he came any closer...

Calder took a step back. "This is not about me or my pride. We will stop you from tearing the Empire apart. Whatever it takes."

He raised his voice and called, "Southeast corner."

He had grown up. He wasn't trying to prove himself, to match her. Shera's frustration was distant. Cold calculations kept it at bay.

The Champions were coming closer with every second. Shera had only moments to live.

This was no time to hold anything back.

Without further thought, Shera drew her second shear.

The voices of her Vessels slammed together into her head like two ships colliding head-on.

Bastion's voice was soothing. *We protect, preserve, and conceal. Our life is a small price to pay for peace and unity.*

Syphren was anything but peaceful. Its whisper tore at her reason. *So hungry...*

The two clawed at each other, and Shera was merely debris tossed between them.

What did *she* want? Where was she? How much time had passed? She couldn't know. Was she here to save the world from the Elders or to kill a

man? Did she want to preserve the Guild or to find some kind of revenge for Lucan?

Around her, the mist seemed to grow thinner or thicker as Bastion's power waxed and waned. Syphren felt the power of those around her, though that sense dimmed to distant awareness one moment and brightened the next until she could almost see balls of green light floating around her.

The two brightest lights moved up to either side of Calder: the Champions.

Gardener doctrine had a saying about having to face a member of the Champion's Guild in open combat: "*When the Champion defeats you, end your own life.*"

She was dead, her body just hadn't figured it out yet.

Soon, she would join Lucan.

In Syphren's whispers, it was as though she could hear Lucan's voice drifting from beyond the grave.

"You will need as much power as you can get...to protect Shera."

Bastion's voice echoed one word. *Protect.*

"To feed...in Shera's service."

Service, Bastion repeated.

Gold light pooled beneath Shera, and thorny vines reached up to surround her in a cage of Soulbound Intent. Whether they meant to capture her or kill her, she didn't know; she was swallowed up in her own Soulbound power.

"To turn power against..."

Lucan's whispers faded, merged into Bastion's voice, and the two Vessels completed the sentence together.

...any that would threaten her.

Suddenly she could sense the lives of those around her as clearly as she knew the position of her own limbs. The powers of the two Champions were like two bonfires just out of arm's reach.

But she was already surrounded by delicious power.

Shera's left arm swept out and green light swallowed gold. The golden thorns melted into green, flooding into Shera, filling her with life and sharpening her senses...

And this time, not just her physical senses.

The scene in the rest of the room was *burned* into her mind so clearly. She could see everything, and the power she'd just absorbed gave her all

the fuel her power needed.

It was so *easy* now.

“...kill her!” Calder shouted, and Rosephus didn’t need another order.

Having just seen Tyria’s Soulbound powers failing, he knew better than to try his own. He was on her in an instant, swinging a sword the size of her thigh with one hand.

Shera had told Jorin that Syphren’s power didn’t make her any stronger or faster.

“Then you’re using it wrong,” the Regent had responded.

Was it because she knew how the emerald light was meant to be used, or was it because Bastion’s power muted Syphren’s and made it easier to handle? She couldn’t be sure.

But as the Champion’s blade came down, Shera drank in the power she’d just absorbed. It sunk in more deeply and more easily than it ever had before, filling her with vibrant life.

Her arm came up and caught the Champion’s sword on Bastion’s blade.

Even with the power flooding through her like lightning, Bastion still cautioned against overconfidence. She herself remembered enough that she didn’t try and meet Rosephus strength for strength. No matter how useful her Soulbound powers were, his body was more than human.

She turned his blade aside with Bastion and struck at his head with Syphren.

The green blade came in and slashed through the metal of his helmet in a spray of sparks, but he was still a Champion. He bent himself backwards so that when she tore open his armor, she left only a shallow slash on his skin.

His leg swept hers out from under her and she fell, but a small spark of dense green energy hovered in the air where Rosephus had been cut. She drew it closer.

Then she rolled away, into the mist.

Bastion’s power surrounded her.

Tyria drove her own weapon into the ground where Shera had just lain.

In that moment, Shera absorbed the spark of power from Rosephus.

She’d thought that the amount she had before was enough, but it was a puddle next to the lake of what she drank this time. The power forced her to her feet, and she could feel torn muscles and skin knitting themselves back together all over her body.

You are invincible! one of her shears cried.

But don't let it go to your head, the other counseled.

It was like each of the Vessels was an impossible weight. With only one, it tilted her too far to one side. But the two kept each other in balance.

For too long, her shears had been unequal. They had been forged as a pair, and now they worked as a pair once again.

For one driving purpose.

Shera readied her shears and dove into Bastion's Veil, hunting her target.

The mist was so thick now that it was difficult for anyone else to see their hand in front of their face, but Shera could see, feel, and hear everything in the room. If she tried to expand her senses any further, it would be too much for her...but within the bounds of the storage room, it was as though she had a thousand eyes.

Four Imperial Guards surrounded the armored Calder, taking him to the exit. Meanwhile, Tyria and Rosephus had exploded with power, tearing craters in the floor and flailing around in their search for her. Even in her current state, she could not take on a Champion in open battle.

But she wasn't after a Champion.

She took away the first of the four Guards and shoved two needles into his neck. The dose might kill him, but at least she had tried to keep him alive.

The other three Guards hadn't even seen him vanish before she took the second.

This woman resisted the needle, but before she could cry out, Shera drove Syphren into her and drank deep of her energy.

Oh well, I tried.

The Independents would still need the cooperation of the Imperial Guard afterwards, so she didn't want to upset them too badly, but she had killed their fellow Guild members before. No matter what she did today, she wouldn't ever be their favorite person.

Calder turned when his final Guard vanished, calling out for the Champions...but his voice echoed from every direction in the room. And he didn't know where he was.

His orange blade swept through the mist as Shera appeared in front of him.

"She's here!" he shouted.

“WHERE?” Rosephus roared back.

“Where’s your wife?” Shera asked quietly.

Jyrine was the one who had *really* killed Lucan.

“You want to know?” Calder levered his sword. “Defeat me and I’ll tell you.”

There was rarely any good reason to engage the target in conversation before killing him. Shera wasn’t sure herself why she had spoken; maybe her stolen power was making her cocky.

But the game was over. She’d won.

She readied her two shears and let the mist overcome her again. “I’m not here to defeat you.”

As the Champions tore apart the room, Shera paced around Calder, occasionally stopping to avoid a wild attack from the blind Soulbound. Calder whirled in place, his visored face turning this way and that, pointing his sword into the mist.

Finally, she saw an opening and stepped in, driving Syphren into Calder’s armored back.

Despite its long history as a weapon, Bastion had been unable to pierce the protection of the Emperor’s Intent. But Syphren...Syphren had been made to pierce defenses. To turn the target’s power against itself.

Calder would have been better off wearing ordinary steel.

There was an instant of resistance as the point met white metal before it flashed green and penetrated. The armor sank into flesh, and Shera could feel Calder’s life bleeding from him. And into her.

There was no saving him now, but this didn’t quite satisfy her anger. Calder had caused her too much frustration and pain.

So she leaned closer, whispering into his ear. “All hail the Emperor of the World.”

It was the last thing the false Emperor would ever hear.

As she pulled her dagger free, she tore Calder’s life from him as well. It was paltry next to the power from the Champions, but it still energized her, sharpening her senses as she dashed for the exit.

She cast her vision into the mist, looking outside...where, at last, Jorin and Meia had arrived. They had torn apart an entire wall of the Emperor’s Stage and were rampaging inside, looking for her.

Shera ran to join them.

If they played their cards right, they could still salvage the plan and end the war right here.

The Imperialist figurehead was dead.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

TWO YEARS AGO

YALA PUSHED THROUGH THE DOOR INTO THE LOWER LEVELS OF THE MASON HOUSE where, years ago, she had been trained. This had been her childhood home, though she hadn't known all its secrets.

Now she was charged with its defense.

She pushed through the door from the harbor flanked by two Readers, an alchemist, and a field medic. Architects all. They had waited outside the door until the sound of gunfire stopped.

Only then did they enter. By any reckoning, an ambush of eight with firearms would be enough for two, but she had not gotten this far by underestimating Gardeners.

The stench of blood and black powder filled the room, which was thick with haze.

Her Readers and medic flanked to check the bodies of their four loyal Consultants, but to Yala's eye, only one wouldn't make it. He gurgled face-down into the floor, a sucking chest wound making a scarlet circle on the ground. The others were wounded or poisoned, but with help so close, they would live.

Two traitors lay on the ground as well.

Lucan, the Reader, lay sprawled on his back. Musket-balls rested on him where they had failed to penetrate his two layers of invested cloth, though some of the black fibers had come unraveled from the force.

The camouflaged cloak of Kameira hair still shifted to match the background, making him look like pieces of his body had just vanished. The left side of his skull was cracked as though someone had hit it with a hammer, leaving a red mess the size of a baby's fist.

He convulsed, his eyes rolled up into his head, blood matting his dark hair. He would be dead within the hour.

Shera was in worse shape.

She had holes all over, her black uniform not invested as well as the Reader's. She sprawled on her stomach, her left hand extended in a fist toward the gaping hole where the trap door had once been.

Shera's left shear caught her eye: it was still sheathed. Interesting.

Yala would have expected her to go for her second knife. Instead, the girl's fingers twitched around whatever she held in her fist.

The alchemist stepped up to Yala. "High Mason, ours are stable. One beyond saving. Should I stabilize the Gardeners?"

Yala gave one sharp nod, which sent the alchemist to work. Shera and Lucan both would be tried before the Council and executed, per Guild protocol.

Yala returned her attention to the spot where the trap door had once been.

Lucan had torn open a ragged opening into the floor itself big enough for two men side-by-side. As Yala had suspected, he was more dangerous than any Reader had the right to be.

She wanted to see this with the cold detachment of her office, but she didn't. This hurt. *Her* Consultants had betrayed her, had betrayed their own Guild. Her sorrow and her anger fed on each other, and she didn't know which was stronger.

What a waste. What a colossal waste.

Shera and Lucan were both talents of a generation, equal to her daughter, as the Emperor had both wisely divined and enhanced with his personal attention.

But they were never bound to the Consultant's Guild as firmly as they should have been, not like her daughter was.

When she had met with Lucan the night before, she'd hoped he would see the error of his ways. He was meddling with the fate of the Empire itself.

But she hadn't leaned on trust. One of the weaknesses of the Gardeners, especially these two, was their endless faith in their own abilities. *What does it matter if there are guards?* They must have thought. *We're better. We're smarter. We know best.*

She had brought her team into place as soon as Lucan's bed had been discovered empty tonight. They would have spotted a tail, so she didn't tail them. Her team headed straight for Mason headquarters, posting the guard that they would have posted against any other intruders, with a backup ambush in the document room.

Yala had beaten them by being the first to get serious, to treat this matter as gravely as it deserved. But she hadn't *wanted* to beat them. She had wanted all this to end up as an unnecessary misunderstanding.

She had *wanted* them to follow her orders.

She wished, as she had wished in the past, that they had a Guild Head. Someone who could unite the Consultants as a leader and a symbol in a way that an ever-shifting Council never could. No one trusted a council.

In the deepest chambers of her heart, she wanted a leader because she wanted to have a purpose again.

She loved the Consultants, the Emperor's thousand hands in the shadows, and she wanted them to move as one body. Let the burden of leadership pass from her, so that she could serve as she was always meant to.

But the steadiest hands available were hers, so light and life, she would take the wheel and steer this ship.

Only moments had passed since she entered the room, and now a pair of Consultants approached Shera. One pulled her shears away, shuddering as he touched the one in her left sheath. The other knelt to examine her hand.

That one stumbled back as her fist began to hiss and a spark of light emerged from between her knuckles. With one last surge of life, Shera opened her hand and shoved a ball across the floor.

It rolled, one end sparking like a lit fuse.

The two Consultants flipped Shera over, and the girl's eyes were open. Shera looked into Yala's face and smiled.

One of the Shepherds lunged for the hissing ball, but Yala's alchemist gave a throat-wrenching cry, pointing at the ball as though all the shifting demons of Tharlos were packed within

The Shepherd hesitated, but Yala's reactions were better trained.

“Out!” she roared, sprinting for the door herself, hauling a wounded man to his feet and shoving him through the still-cracked door.

The Consultants had evacuated the basement in two seconds, slamming the door behind them and backing away from it. The only two remaining in the room were Lucan and Shera, and though they would surely die to whatever alchemy they had unleashed, they deserved their fate. She did regret that they had managed to escape a fair trial.

But she had to be sure.

She spun on her alchemist. “What was that?”

“Gas,” the young, pale waif of an Architect responded. “It has a spark on the side that lights an internal fuse.”

“What kind of gas?”

“Could be anything! Hallucinogen, paralytic, emetic, irritant, plain smoke...” The alchemist frowned mid-sentence, watching the door. She pulled a fine green cloth from her pocket, pressing it against her face—which had already been covered by another invested cloth, so Yala could only assume the redundant protection was necessary—and pulled goggles down from her hairline over her eyes. Only then did the alchemist peer beneath the door.

Whatever she saw, she let out a sigh of relief and stood. “Everyone stand back,” she said. “I’m clearing the room.”

No one needed an excuse to take another step away.

She cracked it, peered inside, and then threw the door wide, striding into the room. She began to laugh. “The Emperor has left us some luck,” she said. “She missed us.”

Yala moved up to the doorway, following the younger Architect’s gaze to the floor. Stray wisps of gray fog drifted up...from the basement. Shera lay next to the opening, clearly unconscious.

Shera’s gas bomb had rolled straight from her hand and down into the basement below, where it would hurt no one.

“Is it safe to enter?” Yala asked, only passing through the doorway when the alchemist waved her in.

“By the scent, I believe this to be a dose of ‘sister of metal.’ It works quickly, especially in a tight room, and causes muscular seizures without interrupting cardiovascular operation. Non-lethal, and it clears up in under a minute. She must have prepared it for the guards.”

Yala had to hand it to Shera; the Gardener had blunted her blade when dealing with fellow members of her Guild. The High Councilor snapped for the medic to get back to work. Maybe, if their one grievously injured man survived, she could have mercy on Shera for this. Exile instead of execution.

Yala peered down into the next room. “What about our guests? Will they be affected by the gas?”

More than two years ago, when Yala had been first contacted by the Emperor, she had led a team of alchemists and archaeologists to examine this tomb of the Regents.

The only Readers she brought tonight were those she trusted implicitly. She didn’t want anyone outside the High Council and a handful of necessary Architects knowing who they really protected beneath the house of the Masons.

The alchemists had a reasonably good idea of what the alchemical systems in the coffins could do. As thorough as they could have without opening the coffins and releasing the legends within, anyway.

Those alchemical reports had, by Yala’s orders, never made it into the Miner archives.

The alchemist waved a hand in response to her question. “Between the protective investment on the coffins themselves and the air-cleansing systems we’re certain are inside, they’ll be fine. Their air is alchemically filtered, and if it goes beyond what the filters can handle, I’m certain it will trigger some sort of backup action to release the subjects.”

Yala nodded, turning her attention to the three gravely injured Consultants—the two Gardeners and her own man.

The medic had sealed up Yala’s man with sticky alchemical glue, given Lucan a shot of some kind, and wrapped a bandage around him. Those two were being carried out.

Now she was putting more glue-plugs over Shera’s gunshot wounds, but when she saw Yala looking, she shook her head.

“She’s lost consciousness, and I don’t see her ever regaining it. We have to move her, and even if she lasts to the operating room, we can’t stop her organs from failing. We would need a medical alchemist on site now, fully equipped.”

“Not my expertise,” the alchemist said, waving a stick through the dispersing gas from downstairs. She held up the stick, which had turned

pink. “As I thought: sister of metal. Lucky for us.”

The word triggered an instinct in the back of Yala’s mind.

“*Luck belongs to dice,*” her old trainers used to say. “*We don’t play dice.*”

When fortune started to go Yala’s way, she got suspicious. “How is it lucky?” she snapped.

The alchemist looked like a child with no idea why her mother was suddenly upset. “Well, even if the sister of metal makes it past the coffin filters, the inhabitants are in stasis. They’ll just twitch for a while, they won’t wake up. It’s even less dangerous on them than it would be on us.”

Yala stared into the hole in the floor, mind swimming back through the last few minutes.

Shera had left a triumphant smile when she thought she’d gassed them all.

What would the gas do? It would be weakened by the investment on the coffins, then caught by the filters. If by some miracle it did pass the filters, the coffin had redundant backup systems...

Shera’s smile. If she had intended it to go off in the room, why did she look so triumphant? Even if it *had* gone off, it wasn’t lethal. It would only have immobilized them for a few minutes.

She had *accidentally* rolled a gas bomb down a hole big enough to swallow a tiger?

Shera, who could put a spade through a crow’s eye at twenty paces?

Yala’s subordinates had already pulled Lucan and the other hideously wounded man out of the room, and there were four currently carrying Shera. Though they had been employed on opposite sides tonight, they were gentle.

Yala seized her alchemist by the scruff of the neck, making her drop her diagnostic stick. The younger woman’s eyes grew wide behind her goggles. “What is the backup?” Yala demanded. “What happens if the gas gets past the filters?”

The alchemist trembled on her own even as Yala shook her. “I don’t...I don’t know, probably a secondary filter? Maybe a cleansing agent?”

“What happens if *all* of those were to fail? What’s the final failsafe?”

“System purge and subject release,” the alchemist said, as though it were obvious. “If anything too catastrophic happens to the alchemical

systems, it will be designed to instantly trigger the final waking potion. The designer wouldn't want them to die in their sleep."

Yala slowly released the alchemist, her brain paralyzed with terror. Lucan must have Read the coffins directly, learned how they worked. How much time did she have? *How much time?*

Old habit snapped her out of it. "Harvest the Gardeners!" she shouted. "Do it now! Burn their clothes!"

She didn't wait to be obeyed, dashing forward, stealing a reloaded pistol from one of her subordinates as she passed. The two men carrying Shera dropped the Gardener at Yala's order, drawing knives.

Yala didn't wait for them. She leveled the gun at Shera's chest and pulled the trigger.

The explosion in the enclosed room deafened her, and the drifting smoke left her blind for an instant.

When the smoke cleared, she saw the lead ball hovering in the air an inch from Shera's face.

That was when she realized she couldn't move her finger from the trigger. She could barely breathe, as though chains had been pulled tight around her chest. She could barely twitch her eyes.

The other Consultants were held in place as well. Lucan had dropped halfway to the ground, hovering in midair.

A slam echoed up from below.

She knew it for what it was: a heavy coffin lid slamming to the ground.

Yala started to pray. To the Unknown God of the Luminians, to the Emperor's ghost, to the Great Elders themselves, to anyone who was listening.

Please...please don't let that be who I think it is.

Debris from the broken trap door shot upward, a volley of splinters shooting into the ceiling. A figure drifted up from the darkness.

Three large lizard skulls, each twice the size of a human's, swirled into vision first. They orbited one another, drifting upwards over a head of blonde hair.

A myth flew into the room. The greatest Soulbound in Imperial history, the warrior who had fought Kthanikahr head-on, whose mighty power had created the Dylia Basin. The woman who could have been Empress, had she accepted a crown.

She was tall and pale, golden hair hanging matted and wet behind her. She wore only a loose white robe, which must have been the clothes she was buried in. Her skin was still damp with potions, but she did not shiver. Her blue eyes were more terrifying than any Awakened weapons Yala had ever seen.

The Regent surveyed the room, her gaze landing on Yala.

“Where’s the Emperor?” Estyr Six asked.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Philosophers and historians have varying opinions on historical figures such as Estyr Six and the Emperor.

While they are no doubt incredible individuals, no one is above criticism. They came to power in war, and the ruthlessness that served them so well in battle against the Elders may not be the trait best-suited to a world at peace. Some say compassion and understanding should be valued instead. When questions such as these were first raised, there was a widespread movement to put Loreli, Regent of the West, on the throne.

—INTRODUCTORY *HISTORY OF THE EMPIRE*, A COMMON TEXTBOOK FOR CHILDREN

PRESENT DAY

WHEN JORIN ARRIVED AT THE EMPEROR'S STAGE, THE BATTLE ENDED.

It was a better result than Shera had hoped for. Shera, Jorin, a handful of Gardeners, and a few supporting teams infiltrated the crowd watching Calder's speech. Then, when they saw Shera's signal, they were supposed to march in and retrieve her and then run from the city.

The Imperialists had, of course, sealed up the tunnels they'd used to escape the Imperial Palace the first time, so they had planned a new escape route. It was...unreliable, to say the least, being a network of civilian homes, but they had hoped never to use it.

However, their emergency plans had ended up working better than anyone had predicted.

The moment Jorin tore down the wall of the Emperor's Stage with his corrosive Intent, all the Imperial Guards that had been protecting Calder threw down their weapons. Meia and the Regent came through the wall to see a bunch of Guards kneeling in surrender.

The two Champions were already gone.

That was probably for the best.

Shera tried to concentrate enough to find them through the mist, but she was on the verge of collapsing. It was a headache to use that power even when she was at her best. The Champions escaped, but that was worth not having to fight them.

The *bad* news was that they had taken Calder's body with them.

There was no doubt that he was dead, not with Shera's testimony and the handful of Imperial Guards who had seen the body, but now there was no way to prove it.

She dispatched a team of Shepherds immediately, hoping that the Champions would ditch the corpse after they'd stripped it of the Emperor's armor and the crown.

With the Champions, the Steward, and their Guild Head gone, the Imperial Guard had given up. Some of them fled, but most threw themselves into serving Jorin immediately, gathering under the Emperor's Stage less than an hour after he'd arrived.

They had only one authority figure left: the Regents. Or at least the one Regent they could reach.

It was a change so abrupt that it startled Shera. At first, she eyed everyone in a red-and-black uniform as a potential enemy, keeping a hand on Syphren. Meia clearly felt the same, as her eyes stayed orange and she kept her claws out.

However, they sensed nothing from the Guards but fear and despair. Jorin's performance in the battle for the Imperial Palace must have made quite an impression, as they served him as though he would execute anyone who didn't obey quickly enough.

She still didn't plan to trust them so easily. For one thing, the terror and reverence they showed Jorin didn't extend to her. Four Guards pulled weapons on Shera over the course of the first night and had to be restrained before she killed them.

She didn't blame them. Shera had buried enough Imperial Guards recently to be considered the number one enemy of the Guild.

She wouldn't be surprised if they ended up petitioning Jorin to hold her accountable for her crimes once everything settled down, the possibility of which didn't worry her. One crisis at a time.

The people of the Capital were a separate concern.

The citizens gathered in the courtyard had seen the silvery mist of Bastion's Veil, heard the battle from outside, and seen Jorin draw his sword to melt a hole in the wall. Afterwards, they had pressed forward to see what was going on inside, only to be repelled by a group of Imperial Guards.

Even the blind and deaf among the crowd knew something had gone wrong.

To assuage their fears, Jorin stepped up onto the Emperor's Stage, wearing his hallmark shadeglasses and hat. Even in the depths of night.

The disquieted rumbles quieted at the sight of him. Even those who had never seen a portrait of Jorin Maze-walker still recognized his description.

Most hadn't spent any time with him personally, but Shera had. She knew that he tried his best to avoid speaking to crowds whenever possible.

He cleared his throat, the horn mounted in the Stage railing picking up his every noise and broadcasting it clearly.

"Well," Jorin said. "You see. Here's the thing of it."

The audience had grown quiet enough that Shera could hear them shuffling in place.

He took a few heavy breaths, which were magnified in volume, and then resorted to reciting a formal declaration that Shera would bet someone else had written.

"In the name of the remaining Regents—Loreli and Estyr and myself—I declare an end to the internal conflict that has been called the Guild War. We intended to overlook the actions of the so-called Imperial Steward, but the criminal behavior uncovered by Estyr and revealed in today's news-sheets persuaded me that I could no longer remain indifferent."

He spoke stiffly and mechanically, but the words still set the crowd aflame.

Hundreds still waved news-sheets in their fists, and they collectively let out a shout. Some of their anger was directed at Calder, Shera was sure. But some wasn't.

The crowd stirred, and Shera braced her battered and exhausted body to run.

They had not brought enough Consultants to secure this place, and the Imperial Guard was still scattered. Two flanked Jorin, but Shera certainly didn't have the influence with the Guards to get them to control the crowd.

Still, she doubted even a mob would lose their minds enough to try and rush Jorin Curse-breaker with violence in mind.

"The Imperial Steward Calder Marten has been taken into our custody," Jorin went on, and Shera could now see from her vantage point behind him that he was sneaking glances at a small piece of paper cupped in his palm. "From now on, the other Regents and I will resume our collaboration with the regional governors in managing the Empire. We encourage the other Guilds to return and help us rather than clinging to division. That is all."

Abruptly he turned and walked away, leaving a confused and roaring crowd behind him.

As he walked past her, she could see him sweating. Part of her wanted to tease him and lighten his mood, but she didn't have the energy.

Meia sat down next to Shera, both Gardeners leaning their backs against the wall.

"Well, you got him," Meia said.

"Looks that way."

"How do you feel?"

"Tired."

Meia nodded, staring off into the distance. There was a haunted look in her still-orange eyes.

If she had expected Shera to spare Calder after everything, she had set herself up for disappointment.

"What now?" Meia asked.

"Now," Shera said, "I find someone else to do my job."



On the deck of *Heart of the Aion*, Loreli, Regent of the West, vigorously scrubbed the boards. Her braids dangled into her face and sweat dripped from her forehead onto the ship.

One of the crewmen, Terrens, slid over to her again. She didn't look up, but she was sure he was wringing his hands.

“Ma’am, why don’t you stop now? We don’t make passengers do our work for us.”

She looked up and flashed him a smile. “Put your mind at ease. I’m doing this for my own satisfaction.”

It would probably be more considerate of her to stop, since her cleaning the ship only made the crew uncomfortable, but she had never been able to relax with idle hands. They would get used to her eventually.

Terrens gave her another nervous assurance that she could stop, reminded her to tell the captain that it was her idea, and left her alone.

She spent the next hour enjoying the rhythm of the cloth on the deck, the cool sea breeze, and the rocking of the ship. She let the peace of the ocean wash over her as sea birds cried in the distance.

At least, she assumed they were birds.

Here on the Aion, they could be anything.

It had been a long time since she’d sailed this haunted sea, and it promised just as much adventure now as it had then. She supposed it shouldn’t feel like too long—it had only been a few years since she woke up—but the coffin didn’t shut out time entirely.

Though it had physically felt like nothing more than a long nap, some part of her had always been distantly aware of the decades passing. About two centuries this time, though she hadn’t learned that until she woke up.

It was always fascinating and a little melancholy to wake and see everything that had changed...and everything that hadn’t.

Loreli pushed herself to her feet as she finished, wiping sweat away and looking proudly over the deck. She’d completed her task just in time.

She could feel something familiar approaching.

One of those things that hadn’t changed.

Captain Marstrom had the wheel. He was a tall, whip-thin Heartlander man with a pointed beard and a hat that resembled a nesting tropical bird. The Navigator gave a long, fluted, elaborate whistle when he saw her; he had a special whistle for every occasion.

“I hope the state of my deck now meets your standards, Madam Sunblood. I hope it isn’t inappropriate of me to say, but it was soothing to watch you work. You show such grace and focus in your movements.”

“Years of training in the sword, Captain. I could give you a lesson, if you like.”

He laughed and held up a hand as though surrendering to a superior joke, but Loreli had been entirely serious. A dedicated exercise regimen would do wonders for anyone, both physically and mentally.

‘Sunblood’ had been her alias when she booked passage on the ship, but it was something of a joke. It was what the ancient Izyrians had once called her after she pierced the side of Urg’naut and light spilled out. It had looked like a bleeding sunset, they said.

To her, it was more like being inside an exploding volcano.

The sun was setting now, but it wasn’t the only light on the horizon. As the sun sank behind them, a clean yellow-white flame burned ahead of them.

She was just beginning to be able to make out the details of the light, but she knew what it looked like. It was a two-hundred-foot-tall stand of wrought iron holding a glass-paned cage with a crystallized Kameira skull inside. The skull had glowed for over a thousand years, bathing in the light of the sun during the day and blazing with Intent at night.

Loreli’s Intent.

The ship steadily approached as the lantern radiated the feeling of an old friend: soothing, calming, and protective. It stood guard here, keeping the darkness at bay.

Silently, she thanked the Unknown God for protecting it all these years. Her handiwork had stood the test of time, resisting the push of hostile Intent that never...

Her thoughts trailed off. The Intent of her guardian lantern remained bright and steady.

She rushed over to the railing, extending her Reader’s senses out over the water.

Ordinary Readers wouldn’t be able to sense anything from the ocean at this distance, nor would they dare to try if they could, but Loreli had been born with every bit as much talent as Estyr or Alagaeus. She had honed that talent under the Emperor’s tutelage, and now she extended her awareness, searching for something that should be there.

A sly, cunning, hungry presence. Infinitely devious and selfish, the dark Intent should have lasted even longer than her guardian lantern.

She couldn’t feel Kelarac.

The Collector of Souls had been imprisoned on the ocean floor only a few miles from here. Her lantern was both a defense against his influence

and a boundary marker warning people away.

“The light looks healthy today,” the Captain observed. “That’s a good omen.”

“No...it isn’t.” She turned to face him. “Captain Marstrom, it is imperative that we sail beyond that lantern immediately.”

He gave a whimsical whistle that reminded her of laughter. “Madam, I have no doubt that you have a great deal of experience, but this is my specialty. Ships that go beyond that marker don’t return. You should take the dangers of the Aion Sea seriously.”

She went down on one knee, bowing her head, in a pose appropriate to someone begging a favor. “I beg you. I am a Reader, and I have made this boundary my...personal study. I can assure you that there is something wrong here. I fear that many more lives may be in danger than just ours.”

He looked like he was going to argue further, but she stayed kneeling humbly on the deck. He finally gave a louder, sharper whistle.

Terrens stepped forward with arms behind his back. “Call to stations!” he bellowed. “Stand ready!”

Relief flooded Loreli. The Captain had no reason to trust her, and she would be in danger if she revealed her true identity to him. “Please accept my thanks,” she said.

“Mark my words, Madam Sunblood: if I see so much as a shadow in the water, we’re sprinting out of here faster than a Luminian running from a brothel.”

She appreciated the sentiment, even if she didn’t particularly like that saying.

The crew started off on high alert, keeping their eyes sharp on the waves. But the farther they sailed past the boundary, the more they relaxed. After about an hour, they began to crack jokes about the rumors being exaggerated or the sea clearing up.

Loreli, on the other hand, grew more and more tense with every foot they traveled.

She dipped below deck for a moment, bringing up her sheathed sword. She wore her White Sun Beacon around her neck, beneath her shirt, but the sword was a weapon that had been at her side for centuries.

Cradling her blade, she approached the captain, who was in a noticeably better mood.

“Is your curiosity satisfied, Madam Sunblood? Quiet as it seems, I am not eager to spend longer here than I must.”

“A wise policy,” Loreli agreed. “But I’m afraid I must impose on you once more. Please lower me down.”

Captain Marstrom gave a low, long whistle. “I beg your apology; I knew you were adventurous, but I didn’t realize you were suicidal. I hope you won’t mind if we contain you to your cabin for your own safety.”

“I will be entering the water, Captain. The only difference is whether you are here to pull me back up or not.”

When she put it that way, she left the captain no choice but to slow down. He really was a decent man, and she resolved to honor him when she returned.

He didn’t drop anchor, but he did furl his sails and turn the ship, letting their momentum dissipate among the waves. As they slowed, she shared her plan. Such as it was.

“I will be going for a short swim,” she told the astonished crew. “If you see me pulled suddenly underwater, if I begin speaking a language you don’t understand, if you hear a voice from nowhere, or if anything rises from the depths of the ocean to attack me, immediately flee for your lives.”

The faces of the crew members darkened with every word. Several of them voiced protests, but Loreli had already walked up to the railing.

“I will jump if I have to,” she said, “but I’d prefer it if you lowered a ladder.”

Terrens reluctantly unspooled a rope ladder for her, and she thanked him before climbing down one-handed.

Her blade was tucked into her left elbow; she wasn’t about to wear her sword-belt when she had to go swimming. It was foolish enough to take the sword, but in this case, it would have been more dangerous to leave it behind.

With every rung, she prepared herself mentally. She focused her thoughts, embraced her power, and sent a brief prayer up to the Unknown God.

As I go into the darkness, please help me bring the light.

She waited on the final rung for one last, deep breath. Then she carefully slid into the Aion Sea.

Despite what she’d said about swimming out, she knew she had to approach this carefully. She held on to the bottom rung of the ladder with

one hand, holding her sword in the other. The water was calm and the weather pleasant, but even the gentle bobbing of the ship felt violent from down here on the level of the waves.

Holding tightly to the ladder, she ducked beneath the ocean and opened her senses wide.

Heart of the Aion was a momentous presence against her back, its power and its accumulated history pressing against her like a massive weight, but she filtered that out, letting her Reader's awareness spread through the water.

A Kameira like a fat whale drifted over the ocean floor, coasting on currents of warm water. It was lazy and content and felt only the faintest curiosity about her presence.

Ordinary fish were everywhere, their presence dull in her mind. Some rested from the sun in the shadow of the ship while others ran away from the disruption that the object caused on the surface.

And they weren't the only things to flee.

Something dark and alien scuttled across the sand, its feet made of sharpened bones. The stray Child of Nakothi fled from the touch of Loreli's mind; it may have been nothing more than a stupid drone, but it still recognized the presence of its ancestral enemy.

It hadn't run fast enough.

With a stray thought, she triggered her Beacon. The diamond at the center of her White Sun medallion kindled with pale fire, and blinding light streaked out from her. It torched the Elderspawn in an instant, the Child of Nakothi dissolving to ash even in the depths of the sea.

But that only took a fraction of Loreli's attention. She gripped her sword, even opening her eyes as wide as she could, waiting for Kelarac's power to crash into her. He would have sensed her light and would strike back to kill or possess her.

The ashes of the Elderspawn drifted away on the currents.

The Intent of the Aion Sea remained as calm as its surface.

No news could have been worse.

Loreli hauled herself up with one arm, calling up to the captain to make ready to sail. She climbed even faster than she'd descended, and when she reached the deck, she found the crew still gathered around waiting for her. They hadn't returned to their stations at all.

She tried to give them a reproachful look, but it was hard to do while she was swiping seawater from her eyes. “The situation has changed. The people of Izyria will have to do without us for a little longer. The Capital is in danger.”

The Captain rubbed the back of his neck. “Are you certain? We are halfway there. It might be faster to send a message once you reach Izyria.”

Loreli drew herself up. She had hoped to avoid this; friendly though she may have become with the Navigators over the last few weeks, their Guilds were still supporting a false Emperor. Once they knew who she was, they wouldn’t be wrong to see her as an enemy.

“It is my presence that is required,” she announced. “A Great Elder is at large, and I must destroy him once more. For I am Loreli, Regent of the West and first of the Luminian Order.”

Captain Marstrom gave an awkward cough. “...yes, madam, we know.”

She turned a confused look from him to his crew, none of whom met her eyes.

“We weren’t certain at first. Your appearance is famous, but it’s copied so often as to be commonplace. But with the way you behaved, and the sword...I think we all agreed the first night after dinner.”

There was a murmur of agreement among the rest of the crew.

Her face was growing hot, and she tried hard not to show any reaction.

Even Terrens spoke up. “We all just saw you shoot a beam of light through the water. That was brighter than any Pilgrim *I’ve* ever seen.”

A few other crewmen nodded.

Loreli’s shoulders slumped, and she felt a little energy drain from her. She had been so certain that they wouldn’t guess...

“Why did you give passage to an enemy?”

One and all, they looked confused. Captain Marstrom had already returned to the wheel, and he laughed aloud. “Enemy? The only thing we’ve ever heard about you is that you save people and fight Elders. Why wouldn’t we help you?”

In spite of herself, Loreli’s eyes misted up. She always tried not to get attached to the people of the current era, knowing that they would all be dead when she next woke. She always failed.

Loreli braced her sheathed blade on the deck. “Thank the God for all of you. We really have no time to waste; Kellarac is on the move.”

The sails snapped down at the command of the Captain's Intent, and he gave her a salute.

“The *Heart of the Aion* is at your command, Regent.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

TWO YEARS AGO

YALA WOULD NEVER DARE LIE TO A REGENT, ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL Readers ever to walk the earth. So when Estyr Six asked where the Emperor was, Yala had to deflect with the truth.

“I apologize, Regent.” The telekinetic grip on Yala had loosened, allowing her to speak. “We had no intention of waking you. I’m afraid that some gas slipped through the filters in your containment, which required—”

“Yeah, I know what happened.” Estyr’s eyes drifted over the room again, and she inhaled slowly as though breathing in their Intent. “This wasn’t an accident. We were woken on purpose, just not by you.” She nodded to Shera, her gruesome halo of skulls dipping in the same motion as her head. “Who’s that?”

The question was deceptively casual, but beads of sweat popped onto Yala’s skin.

She kept herself intact with the iron will she’d honed over years of undercover action. “A rogue Gardener. After discovering your presence down there, she dropped an alchemical gas charge into the basement. We attempted to stop her.”

Yala’s prayers had changed. She now prayed desperately that Shera would expire, and the sooner the better.

Estyr’s brow furrowed into a frown and she drifted over, inspecting Shera more closely. One bronze shear lifted from the corner of the room, where it landed obediently in Estyr’s hand. “He touched this. It...did it

draw his blood? She wanted it to. But she wasn't bloodthirsty. I think it even wounded her to do so, in ways she didn't feel. And this is..."

Her head jerked back, though she still held the blade. Everyone else in the room was still held in the grip of her power, as though invisible hands had seized everyone at once.

"...this stabbed the Heart of Nakothi. The Emperor granted it power. So did Tyrfang." Estyr sighed and closed her eyes, and Yala even thought she heard distant cries, as from three ancient hydras.

The shear drifted over to Shera, sliding gently into her left-hand sheath.

"He's dead, isn't he?" Estyr asked, her eyes still closed.

"Yes." Yala was proud that her voice stayed clear and strong.

"But he didn't wake us..." The blue eyes snapped open again, meeting Yala's gaze. Yala could read no particular expression in them, but still her blood ran cold. "That's pretty interesting, don't you think?"

Estyr held out her hand to one side, then slowly dragged her finger along the air.

From downstairs, Yala heard the grinding of stone on stone. When Estyr stopped moving, there was a great crash.

The other three coffins.

"Her smoke bomb landed next to my chamber. She invested a lot of Intent into it, for someone with no power. Good for her. And *lucky* for her that I was the first to wake."

The lead ball, which had been fired from Yala's pistol and then frozen in midair by Estyr's power, fell limply to land on Shera's chest.

A coughing and sputtering came from downstairs, followed by a man's voice. "Oath to eternity, Estyr, you have to needle me in the eye when I've only been up for two blinks? Where are my shadeglasses..."

Estyr kept her attention fixed on Yala. "Did the Emperor tell you to wake us?"

"No," Yala answered. Technically she was telling the truth.

"Oh, I see...half true. He told you we were down here, but he died before he could directly order us up."

Yala focused on not shivering.

"Loreli," Estyr called. "We need you."

A woman's long yawn came from below. "Has the time come already?" Then a quick intake of breath. "Where's Father?"

A quick expression passed beneath the surface of Estyr's face. "He's gone, Loreli."

A man's head popped up from the trap door, black glasses over his eyes, his hair a wet mess. He wore a white robe identical to Estyr's. "Gone as in *gone*, or are you blowing wind through a..." For the first time, Jorin surveyed the scene himself. When he was done, he sighed and pulled himself up to sit on the floor. "Well, rattle my bones. Didn't think I'd live till this day. Didn't think..."

He reached up to hold his eyes beneath the glasses, taking a long, rough breath through his nose. "Where is he now?"

Estyr looked to Yala for an answer.

"He *is* dead," Yala assured him, reluctant to give any more details.

Jorin made a choking sound, as though forcing down tears. "His *body*, new-flower girl. Where is he?"

"I apologize." She was never as likeable or diplomatic with clients as many of her fellow Consultants; one of the reasons she had been guided toward the Masons, where the only thing she had to conceal was her true allegiance. "He was buried outside the Imperial Palace, with a cemetery all to himself and a magnificent monument marking his resting place."

"Not magnificent enough by half," Jorin muttered. "Not until I'm through with it."

Meanwhile, Shera was bleeding, and Estyr noticed. "Loreli! A life is at stake."

Loreli was next up the ladder, her dark skin the same shade as the Emperor's, her hair in a hundred braids like Kerian's. Or rather, Kerian's was like hers.

Tears ran in free rivers down her face, and her expression was contorted, but her brown eyes were still warm and comforting even through the pain. "Of course, Estyr. I'm here." She climbed out, making a beeline for Shera.

Loreli lifted the silver sun-shaped medallion from her neck. She knelt next to Shera, raising her Soulbound Vessel high.

This was the first Beacon, the original that all Luminian Pilgrims in history had copied. She was the original Pilgrim, and the original Knight as well. The tactician, warlord, healer, visionary, religious icon: Loreli, Daughter of the Emperor.

The diamond at the center of the medallion shone bright.

White-gold light shrouded Shera, and balls of lead crawled out of several of her wounds as though obeying the Regent's command.

In seconds, the wounds had closed up. Color even returned to Shera's cheeks, her breathing evening out.

I'm under the axe now, Yala thought. Shera's death had been her best hope of walking away from the Regents.

Loreli knelt next to Yala's fallen Shepherd, channeling power into him.

"What do you know about the Emperor's death?" Estyr asked, and Yala could feel the axe lower another inch.

Two of the four Regents focused directly on her, and she had no doubt that Loreli was listening as well. Yala had to keep matters to the bare truth if she wanted to escape with her life and authority—not to mention her entire Guild—intact.

"Will you allow the rest of my team to leave? These are secrets they are not qualified to hear."

Estyr didn't waste the time required to respond. Not in words.

Like dolls, everyone except the Regents, Yala, Shera, and the man under Loreli's care was picked up and moved out of the room. Before the door shut, Lucan's unconscious body drifted inside as well, settling down next to Loreli.

That hadn't been enough for a delay to allow Yala time to think, so she simply dove into the muck. "The Heart that had sustained his life had begun taking a toll on him."

She still restrained her speech, in case anyone outside listened, and also because speaking vaguely allowed her some leeway with the truth. "Sensing this, he selected three young Gardeners-in-training to become a team that would watch over him. He wished to train them into a force that could do what was necessary, when the time came."

Jorin pointed one finger at Shera, then a second at Lucan. "Where's the third?"

Yala hadn't intended to confirm Lucan's identity, but of course they had divined it immediately. "The third was my daughter."

"Who decided his time had come?" Estyr asked.

"I am not clear enough on the details to answer that with certainty." Yala had, of course, done her research. But the events that had occurred inside the Emperor's chambers were known fully only to the Emperor and his personal Gardeners. "I was not present that night."

But *Shera* was. Yala didn't say it aloud, but she hoped the implication would drive the Regent to anger.

Estyr floated over to *Shera*, holding her hand over the Gardener's body. She left it there for a few seconds, eyes closed, breathing evenly.

When her eyes finally opened, she gave no sign of what she'd Read. "How long has it been?"

"About three years."

"Three years...so let's run this backward." There was iron in the Regent's voice now. "These Gardeners, *these* particular assassins, risk their lives to free us. After three years in which the Consultant's Guild let us sleep as the Empire rotted around us. And before that, the Emperor told you he intended to release us before his death. Am I right?"

Yala swallowed, but didn't retreat. It wasn't in her nature. She bulled ahead. "He didn't leave us instructions, so we had to use our own judgment. We have worked ourselves to the bone holding the Empire together."

Estyr Six's gaze softened into what Yala thought must be weariness. "True...that's true. At least, you believe it."

By then, Loreli had finished healing Lucan, and her bare feet slapped on stone as she moved over to regard Yala sadly. She reached out to the High Mason, taking Yala's face in her hands.

Yala should have felt threatened by the contact, but there was no sense of hostility from Loreli. She radiated warm sympathy.

"You've carried a hard burden," Loreli said softly. "Harder than anyone else knows." Yala could feel that burden even then, pushing down on her shoulders, threatening to buckle her knees.

"You have lived a life in service to the Empire," the Regent continued. "Thank you. *Thank you* for what you have done, and you can set part of your burden down. We are here now."

Yala was shocked to find her eyes watering, her heart rising into her throat. She couldn't remember the last time she had wept.

Estyr gave Loreli a wry look, though there was little humor in it. "Hard to strip her of her rank when you're thanking her for her service."

Loreli smiled at Yala and pulled away. "She made a hard decision. She has her rough edges, but she made it as best she could. Why would we punish her for that?"

"What is this indignity?" a man bellowed from downstairs. "Where are my clothes? Servants! *Servants!*"

“Bustle up here, Alagaeus,” Jorin responded. “We have...news.”

A short, squat Heartlander emerged from the trap door, scowling at everything and everyone. “Is this how they treat their betters in this age? Keeping us to mold in a basement?”

“Alagaeus,” Estyr said quietly, “if you smile or laugh or say anything to set my teeth on edge, I’m throwing you into the moon.”

His face spit into a sinister grin. “So you have chosen to rule as a tyrant after all? I thought your *nobility* was too important to you.”

“He’s dead.”

Yala watched the reality slowly dawn on the fourth Regent’s face. His face went from petty vindictiveness to disbelieving, then finally melted into something Yala would call ancient grief. “So he carried the world alone to the end. I would have...”

He straightened his back. “Well. Our work has been set before us, then, hasn’t it?”

Fresh tears ran down Loreli’s face. She walked over to throw her arms around Alagaeus.

The shorter man blinked, stiffening as though he’d never seen a hug before, but after a moment he relaxed into her embrace.

Jorin lifted his shadeglasses to wipe away his own tears, and this time even Estyr’s eyes watered. She floated down, landing on the stone and staring into the distance like a lost mortal.

Yala didn’t dare interrupt. She bent every thought, every scrap of her Intent, and every fiber of her body into pretending she didn’t exist.

Then Shera sat up, eyes wide, gasping for breath and drawing a weapon.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

PRESENT DAY

MEIA WALKED DOWN INTO ONE OF THE IMPERIAL PALACE DUNGEONS CARRYING A stick of incense and a box of matches.

There were many dungeons in the Palace, but these were connected to the rooms of the Imperial Steward. Calder had liked to visit whenever his schedule allowed.

It wasn't unusual that he would want to visit his wife.

Meia was still uncertain how she felt about Calder's death. Her interactions with him had led her to believe that he could be trusted, even worked with as an ally. He *had* been marked by Kellarac, but the Emperor had carried around a Great Elder's heart for almost two thousand years.

She recognized that Shera had been working on behalf of the Guild by killing him, but she still regretted it. She wished they had found his body.

If she couldn't express her respect in any other way, she wanted to at least visit his grave.

But his death still wasn't public knowledge, nor had they found the body. The most she could do was to personally take on the job of interrogating Jyrine Tessella Marten.

She wasn't sure she would call it an apology; it was just a...gesture. Something to make herself feel better.

It couldn't be for Calder, because the dead didn't care what happened after they died. Every Gardener was well aware of that.

The “dungeon” looked like one of the hallways upstairs, its carpet red and plush, its walls freshly painted. Servants and guards—just regular soldiers, not Guild members with the limbs of Kameira—walked up and down the row.

The doors were the major difference between this place and the hall for visitors upstairs. Rather than solid planks of painted wood, they were wide-set bars that made it easy for guards to assess the prisoners at a glance.

There were more prisoners than she expected. The Imperial Palace had plenty of dungeons besides this one, and any captured Independents had been released days ago.

Still, the hall was quiet. Something about the walls or the carpet absorbed sound. She could see a nearby prisoner grasping his bars and shouting until his face turned red, but she heard him only as a whisper.

The cell she was looking for had a dedicated guard and a servant standing nearby, both chatting with each other in words she couldn’t hear.

Meia presented a letter of authorization marked with the Steward’s seal—Jorin had been using it when his personal seal wouldn’t be recognized and the Imperial Seal would be overkill. She had used it to get into the dungeon as well.

She probably didn’t need it, as she was coming in with her Gardener blacks, but it was better to follow protocol if possible.

The guard saw her credentials, saluted, and unlocked the door. There was no second door inside, so the prisoner could rush out if she wished, though of course she wouldn’t make it past the three locked doors Meia had already passed to get to this point.

Jyrine didn’t try.

She sat gracefully on a padded chair as though hosting a reception. She wore a crimson prisoner’s suit, in which she looked quite comfortable.

She should be; she’d worn one long enough.

She had the caramel skin of Vandenyas, and her long hair—which she usually tied into a single braid—cascaded loosely down her back. According to her behavioral reports, she still spent time in the morning and evening keeping it brushed.

Jyrine leaned back in her chair, ankles crossed and hands folded in her lap.

Before Meia could introduce herself, the woman arched an eyebrow. “Hello, Meia. Where’s my husband?”

It was something of a surprise that Jyrine had been able to recognize her so quickly, but not impossible. If Meia had cared whether or not Jyrine recognized her, she would have sent someone else.

Meia showed no reaction, only setting the incense into a stand she'd brought with her. She placed the stand onto a nearby table—the furniture in this dungeon was just as high-quality as that provided upstairs.

“The Guilds have reached a peaceful agreement.” Meia struck a match, lighting the incense. “I have been sent to ask you a few questions about the Sleepless cult. If you cooperate, I can authorize a few concessions to your accommodations.”

While the room itself was nice, there were still restrictions on prisoners, even those in the Imperial Palace.

Jyrine nodded toward the table. “What’s that for?”

“I have a sensitive nose,” Meia said. “Now, what do you know about the intentions of the Great Elders?”

The prisoner watched her, clearly trying to decide what to say.

Meia gave her plenty of time to think, pulling out a notebook, pen, and inkwell from a pouch in her pocket. The longer Jyrine took, the more incense she would breathe in.

And the smoke, crafted by the Alchemist’s Guild, would loosen her tongue.

Another interrogator using this alchemy would have had to wear a mask or an invested cloth, which would give the prisoner a clue about the nature of the smoke. Meia’s body ignored most toxins, so she breathed without worry.

She even kept her shroud pulled down to avoid suspicion. Jyrine knew who she was anyway.

The guards and servants outside might get a whiff of the incense, but at the worst, they’d be a little chattier than usual for a few minutes.

After a minute or two, Jyrine decided to speak.

“The Great Elders want to pass through the crack in the sky in order to ascend beyond this world. This isn’t their home; they’re trying to leave. So you see, we’re really trying to *help* you.”

Jyrine would have kept talking, but Meia interrupted with another question. “How do they plan to leave?”

She scratched notes as Jyrine spoke, but it was largely a pretense to keep the prisoner comfortable. Meia would remember everything Jyrine

said.

“I don’t know,” Jyrine said.

Meia let her sit.

Under the effect of the incense, Jyrine couldn’t tolerate the silence. “... but they’re supposed to take human vessels. Well, we have conflicting reports. Some say they can’t leave unless they’re in the form of a person, but others suggest they *could* leave, but they seek human bodies anyway. In the Elder War, some fought in human bodies at first before reverting to their true forms, but some didn’t.”

They had that testimony already, both in the historical records and in the firsthand accounts provided by the Regents, but Meia wrote it down anyway.

“And what do the Sleepless want?”

Jyrine brightened. As Lucan had once mentioned, she seemed like she was desperate to share her point of view with someone. “We’re working to secure a bargain with the Great Elders so that they will leave their power and knowledge with us when they depart.”

She leaned forward, keeping eye contact with Meia. “That’s why we need Calder. If he can negotiate with them directly, he can get their concessions. He might even be able to open the crack in the sky himself and let them out without any conflict. I’ve told him—”

“About that,” Meia interrupted. “How do we heal the sky?”

“I don’t know,” Jyrine admitted, and this time Meia believed her. “I can’t even begin to guess. It was made by the Optasia as the result of a plan by Ach’magut. As far as we know, they were never able to do so much even at the height of the Elder War.”

That lined up with what Jorin remembered. He had all sorts of theories about the crack in the sky, but ultimately he had never dealt with anything like it before.

Meia scribbled some more notes. “I see. I’d like to speak some more about your knowledge of the Great Elders, but first...we’ve talked about the desires of the Sleepless and the Elders, but what do *you* want, Jyrine?”

Asking about the prisoner’s state of mind wasn’t unusual in an interrogation, but this question was mostly to satisfy Meia’s personal curiosity.

How did a traitor to humanity think?

How did she justify lying to everyone she knew for her entire life?

What made someone turn?

"I want it all to be worth it," Jyrine said softly. The incense was in full effect now, and she lounged in her chair, speaking while staring into the distance. "My father sacrificed his career, his reputation, and eventually his life because he believed the Elders were the path to a better world. I've given up everything myself. I don't want it to be for nothing.

"And if we don't get it *now*, on our terms, with someone on the throne speaking on behalf of humanity, then the Great Elders will break us and get what they want anyway. We either cooperate with them or we are trampled beneath them.

"Calder can give them what they want from us while getting what we want from them. It's symbiosis. But if he won't do it...then I'll still do whatever it takes to strike an agreement. If they're going to break us anyway, we need a foundation to rebuild. I..."

She blinked repeatedly as though coming out of a dream.

Her eyes widened as she looked Meia up and down, and then she turned to the incense. Anger began to twist her expression.

It was satisfying to watch.

With a small smile, Meia snapped her notebook shut. She hadn't waited for the ink to finish drying, but the notes were just a formality anyway.

"I see that my time has run out." While keeping eye contact with Jyrine, Meia reached out and snuffed the burning incense between two fingers. "Thank you for your cooperation, *Miss Tessella*. I'll be back to see you."

She turned to leave Jyrine to stew in frustration...but turned back. She couldn't resist one last parting shot.

"If you really intend to lean on the power of the Elders to protect us from the destruction of the Elders, then you're even more of a fool than I took you for. Would you adopt a wild wolf to protect you from wolf attacks?"

Jyrine wore an iron mask of anger, but she still responded. "Kelarac keeps his bargains. Ask Calder."

Meia wished she could see Jyrine's reaction to the news about Calder's death. It would be more than satisfying.

But it would be foolish to give out more information than necessary.

From the door, Meia looked down on the prisoner. "I will," she said lightly.

Then she left.



To Shera, “victory” in the Guild War felt like having a thousand new responsibilities pushed on her. While the Imperial Guard had mostly returned to Jorin, even he hadn’t been able to wake Jarelys Teach. Shera had gone to see her in person, finding the Head of the Imperial Guard in a strange transformative coma.

Her hair had turned navy blue, growing out far longer than Teach had preferred it, and her pale skin was stained in patches of purple. Her cheekbones stood out more sharply, and it looked like she’d lost weight, although that could have been due to the coma more than any transformation.

It had been uncomfortable seeing someone she knew in such a state, especially since the alchemists said the changes to the Guild Head’s body were most likely permanent.

But what frustrated Shera the most was that the Imperial Guard held *her* responsible.

Dozens of reports from Shepherds and Masons suggested that the Guards thought Jorin was refusing to treat her, not that he had failed. And every member of their Guild blamed the Independents for fighting in the first place.

Discontent in the Imperial Guard was bad enough, but they were the *most* loyal Guild. The others were all worse.

Bliss of the Blackwatch had simply vanished. She’d had a showdown of some kind with Bareius—the Consultants had a full report on the matter, but Shera hadn’t read it yet—and afterwards, she had dropped off the planet. The Architects couldn’t even begin to guess where she was.

Cheska Bennett of the Navigators showed up, met with the other Guild Heads, and pretended nothing was wrong, but Shera’s Consultants suggested she was just putting on a front to contain the Elders.

Seemingly by coincidence, the Navigators were all drifting back to the Capital. Cheska was preparing to make a show of force, and it was likely to be directed at the Consultants.

The Magisters and Champions still hadn’t elected another Guild Head.

That was both a blessing and a curse, as Shera didn’t have more opponents to wrangle, but at the same time, there was no one to lead their Guilds. They were locked in a stalemate, and until it ended, the

Independents wouldn't be able to use the Magisters or keep a leash on the Champions.

Her own allies were just as bad.

Tomas Stillwell had taken the Greenwardens and left the Capital. He sent his regrets, saying that his health didn't allow him to stay any longer and that his Guild members had to care for their Kameira, but they were all just excuses.

He had done nothing throughout the conflict, and he was still taking any opportunity to do nothing.

Jameson Allbright was...well, Shera didn't have much to criticize the old man for except that the Luminian Order was stretched thin. They'd lost too many members in the fighting, and knights were difficult to replace. He was focused on rebuilding broken lines of communication all over the world so that he could coordinate Order resources around sites of heavy Elder activity, but it was slow going. He was the only one working longer hours than perhaps even Jorin himself.

Which now left Shera in a meeting with the only Guild Head who was her equal in power and influence: Nathanael Bareius.

Bastion's whispers in her mind urged her to leave, gather the Consultants, and retreat to the Gray Island. They could retake their headquarters at any time, now that Jorin was acting as the Emperor.

Syphren just wanted her to kill someone.

Of the three voices in Shera's head, none of them wanted to stay where she was.

But she did anyway.

"...and we'd be better off with loyal, reliable members in positions of authority anyway, if you ask me," Bareius went on. He adjusted his glasses. "And the Regent *did* ask me, so I've prepared this report."

Two of his servants unfurled a massive sheet of paper and pinned it to the wall, and Shera groaned aloud. He didn't even seem to hear her, caught up in his own vision.

He was trying to persuade her of the virtues of assassinating all the other Guild Heads except for Jameson Allbright and the twin Witnesses. The rest couldn't be trusted, and matters could easily be arranged so that their successors were "more amenable to influence."

He'd already been talking for twenty minutes. Now he had diagrams.

In Shera's opinion, he could have made his pitch in two seconds.

“I think we should kill all the Guild Heads we can’t trust.”

The end.

They could go over the details once the decision was made.

Of course, there was a more fundamental issue: she didn’t want to assassinate the other Guild Heads.

They had already lost too many of the world’s most powerful Soulbound in the Guild War. Estyr Six showed no signs of improvement; in fact, Jorin had begun to suggest she was on the decline. Jarelys Teach was in a similar situation, and even if she did wake up, who knew if her mind would still be her own? She could be corrupted by her Kameira blood.

They could easily replace the current Guild Heads in terms of political influence, but what about actual ability? How could they find another Baldezar Kern or Mekendi Maxeus?

“...and of course, you understand why we have to get rid of Bliss. Especially Bliss. Let the record show that even if no other Guild Heads are removed, we should most certainly remove Bliss.”

Shera rubbed the back of her neck. “We can’t afford to lose any of these people, except maybe Cheska Bennett. So are we done?”

The Head Alchemist’s glasses gleamed as bright as his smile. “What do you think, High Mason?”

Both of them had brought an entourage to this meeting, secret though it was, and Shera’s was led by Yala. She’d expected that to be more of a headache, but Yala had done her duty silently all day.

For his part, Bareius had a couple of servants who were clearly alchemists themselves. They wore not just glass goggles, but masks that covered their whole faces. He hadn’t brought Furman, his duplicate, with him today.

Shera couldn’t care less. At least she didn’t have to watch two of Bareius.

Once he’d addressed his question to Yala, Shera tilted her own head back to look at the High Mason. Yala had her yellow-and-gray hair pulled back, which made her weather-beaten face look even more severe.

“We should give it consideration after the Regents have stepped down, the regional governors are supported, and the Guilds are established as independent entities.”

Shera jerked a thumb at Yala. “Sounds great. I’m leaving now.”

Bareius laughed, though Shera hadn't been joking. "I wouldn't want to imply anything, of course, but it almost *sounds* like the Head of the Consultant's Guild isn't willing to give Guild matters her full attention. There are those who might suggest that such a person isn't suited to be a Guild Head at all." He raised both hands. "Not me, you understand! Other people."

"This *is* your responsibility, Guild Head," Yala said stiffly.

The masked alchemists around the room shifted in place, but none said a word.

Shera pushed up from the table and stood.

She didn't disagree with Bareius about her position, really. Shera had never wanted the position of Head, and it was better suited to someone who was willing to tolerate veiled insults for the sake of the Guild.

Shera was far more likely to kill someone when her patience ran out. Though her Vessels were oddly against it.

Don't bother with him, Syphren seemed to whisper. The blade sounded disdainful, if anything. *There is better prey close by*.

He is no threat, Bastion agreed.

Both of her Vessels urged her to ignore Bareius, and it would cause her far too much paperwork if she were to rip his life straight out of his body.

The alchemists stepped out of her way as soon as she stood up, but the moment she placed her fingers on the doorknob, Bareius spoke again.

"A word of warning, Guild Head! I know you're new to this, so take this as advice from someone who is your senior in experience: a Guild Head who neglects their Guild is often...replaced. Suddenly and violently."

That was the feather that tipped her exhaustion and frustration over the edge.

Shera kept her hand on the door and did not turn around. "Does your Guild make sedatives, Bareius?"

"In all different grades and price ranges. Are you having trouble sleeping, Shera?"

"No, I've been told you were up at three o'clock the last four mornings in a row. And you were such a sound sleeper before." She wrenched open the door and marched out, leaving a parting comment behind: "Try to sleep well, Guild Head."

She let the door shut behind her, but Yala still appeared beside her, having slipped out. "Are you a fool?"

Whispers from Bastion and Syphren filled her mind, and Shera put a hand against her temple. Yala didn't let that slow her down.

"Do you have any idea what an enemy he'd make? He can afford to hire every surviving Champion. As an ally, he could personally fund our entire Guild for a year. I can't imagine what was going through your head."

"Where's Kerian?"

Yala's eyes narrowed as she searched Shera's face. "Ignoring me won't solve your problems."

"It'll solve one. Where's Kerian?"

When Yala finally told her, Shera climbed out through a window. She marched along the red-tiled rooftops of the Imperial Palace rather than staying in the hallways. Up here, she could make sure she was alone.

At least as alone as she ever was these days. Syphren insisted on drawing her attention to every strong life in the buildings below her, whispering that she could be down there and feasting on them before anyone knew.

Bastion was agitated about something, insisting that the Veil should be drawn over the entire Palace. The people here were too vulnerable.

The Vessels may have learned to work together, but in some ways, that made them harder to disregard.

Shera stuffed her ears to both daggers until she found Kerian's room.

As Yala had suggested, Kerian had indeed retired to her own room for privacy. Though not to relax, as Shera would have done.

The High Gardener sat at her desk, black-and-gray braids swinging over some paperwork. She scribbled her signature with one hand while absently tracing the thin scar that ran down her face with the other. It was an unconscious habit she'd shown for as long as Shera had known her.

Kerian finally tapped her pen dry and set it down next to her paper. "Come in, Shera."

Shera had been peeking into a corner of the window, so she'd thought Kerian hadn't noticed her. She should have known better.

A spade from the pouch on her belt was thin enough to slip beneath the window-latch and slide it upward. It tripped the wire to an alchemical trap that would likely have sprayed acid in her face, but Kerian's hand shot out and grabbed the wire before it could activate the mechanism.

She wore an annoyed expression as Shera pushed the window open.

"I'd have thought you would disarm the trap yourself."

“You were closer.”

Shera hopped down from the windowsill.

Kerian carefully unwound the wire, preventing it from triggering. When she’d finished, she dusted her hands off and turned to Shera. “How can I help you, Guild Head?”

“I quit.”

“I see.”

Shera had prepared counterarguments for everything Kerian could say, but the High Gardener didn’t say anything. Instead, she reached into the papers on her desk and slid one sheet in front of Shera.

“Sign here,” she said.

Consultant training had ingrained into Shera an inability to sign a contract without reading it first. She scanned it, but the document was fairly simple: it stated that Shera would retain the title of Guild Head but would rely on the Council of Architects for day-to-day maintenance of Guild affairs.

Shera grabbed Kerian’s pen and was about to sign, but hesitated. “This isn’t a trap, is it?”

“It is not.”

“This isn’t going to make it *harder* to quit, or somehow you’re going to twist my words to mean that I have even more responsibility...”

“It means what it says, Shera.” Kerian sighed and leaned back in her chair. “I am not so blinded by tradition as to force you to keep a position that you are clearly unsuited for just because you happened to become Soulbound to a certain Vessel. Until recently, we needed you at the helm in order to have a voice among the other Guild Heads. Now, the situation has changed.”

Shera signed, and she wasn’t prepared for the relief that surged over her. Finally, no one would be looking to *her* for decisions about *their* lives.

Kerian touched the scar on her forehead again. “I do admit, I had hoped you would adapt to the role. For your sake.”

“You don’t need me giving orders. Just stabbing things.”

“I will call you when we need a Gardener. Or a Guild Head on the battlefield.”

Shera paused climbing out the window. “*You* can call me for whatever you want.”

She had finished climbing onto the roof outside when a knock sounded on the door. Shera slipped out of view of the window while Kerian readied herself for a visitor, straightening her hair and her dress. When Shera flattened herself against the tiles, she heard Kerian's shoes padding across the floor.

A moment later, the door clicked open.

"I beg your pardon, High Councilor, but I haven't been able to find the Guild Head."

Darius Allbright's voice.

Shera began to quietly slide away. She had nothing against Darius, but he brought work for the Guild Head, and she had *just* finished shedding those responsibilities.

"Of course, Knight-Adjunct. Shera, could you come here for a moment?"

Shera slid away faster.

"You said I could call for you whenever I wished."

I should never have said that, Shera thought.

A moment later, she reluctantly climbed back through the window.

The Luminian looked surprised to see her crawling in from the roof. At least, she assumed it was surprise that made his head draw back. His expression was, as always, covered by the impenetrable shadow beneath his hood.

"Hello, Shera. I hope I'm not disturbing anything...important."

"You are. Critical Guild business. So please don't bother me unless it's absolutely vital."

He held up an envelope. "I'm afraid it may be."

Shera yearned to lunge for him with her knife, but she jerked her left hand up when she realized that desire didn't come from *her*.

Syphren wanted a meal.

"We've lost contact with our units around Urg'naut's tomb," Darius went on. "The few Watchmen I've been able to track down said that the Blackwatch have had similar trouble with other tombs. Typically, our Guilds cooperated to maintain security on the Great Elders, but the Guild War has...strained that relationship."

Kerian nodded along with his words. "Is this a request to reestablish communication with the Elder tombs?"

"It is."

Shera pointed to Kerian. “Then you’re talking to the right person. This isn’t public knowledge yet, but I have resigned my position.”

The darkness inside Darius’ hood shifted to regard Shera. “I understand. It can be hard to find a second of rest when everyone looks to you for an answer.

“It *really* is.” Shera had never liked Darius more than she did in that moment.

“I’ve watched my grandfather struggle under the title of Guild Head all my life. I wish you the best, and I’ll direct my inquiries to the Council from here on.”

He bowed in her directly.

This could not have gone any better.

Suddenly in a more pleasant mood, Shera climbed out of the window again. Darius had reacted so well, she felt somehow that she ought to respond in kind. From the other side of the window, she crouched down and looked back at him. “What about you?” she asked.

Kerian looked to her in surprise, but Shera continued. “What’s going to happen to you if the Great Elders rise?”

In the past, he had described what it was like seeing through the darkness on his face. He stared always into the void in which the Elders lived.

“I’m...not sure.” He raised one hand as though to touch his face, but soon put it down. “I will pray for strength, but who is proud enough to think they have the will to match a Great Elder?”

Shera remembered the Emperor’s body shuddering as she plunged her knife into his heart.

There was one responsibility she still had, Guild Head or not.

“Don’t worry,” she assured him. “If a Great Elder takes over your body, I’ll kill you myself.”

That should put him at ease.

Feeling satisfied, she went back to her room to nap.



Norian was a guard who worked in the Imperial Palace, *not* an Imperial Guard.

He had to explain the difference annoyingly often. He still regularly had to face comments like “*But you look human to me!*” or “*Why don’t you have a tail?*”

Whenever anybody bothered to ask him, Norian would honestly say that he had never dreamed of joining the Guard. Far from it. He had wanted the honor of defending the Empire without any parts of his body being replaced.

He’d worked in the Palace since before the Long Mourning, and he worked there now. Imperialist or Independent, he didn’t care. He wasn’t a Guild man. He just kept the prisoners.

And he was the first to notice that one of them had gone missing.

When he first came on the empty cell, he didn’t sound the alarm immediately. The Steward had demanded this prisoner many times, so it wasn’t unusual for her to be gone. The other guards were *supposed* to report to him first, but he had just begun his shift, and sometimes the Steward called for her at inconvenient times.

Until he remembered that the Steward was gone.

Had Regent Jorin called for her, then?

Stifling a rising sense of doom, he rushed for the book in which they wrote down all prisoner transfers.

The Consultant Meia had been the last person to speak with the prisoner, and she had left alone afterwards. The prisoner had been reported in her cell at lights out.

Somehow, she had slipped away unnoticed since then.

Norian seized the Awakened bell, the one he had never hoped to use. He picked it up and shook it with all his strength, and the ring of the bell echoed throughout the entire Palace undiminished.

Jyrine Tessella Marten had escaped.



Urg’naut’s tomb was a castle.

It had been a fortification raised during the Elder War, and the place where the greatest warriors of humanity had trapped the Great Elder before Loreli landed a fatal blow.

The Creeping Shadow was trapped by a network of lights, mirrors, lenses, and shining Awakened objects so that not a single corner of the entire castle remained in darkness at any time of year.

Unlike most of the other Great Elder tombs, these defenses were focused inward. Urg'naut did not deal with cultists. He had no material body from which anyone could steal a powerful piece. There was virtually no reason for anyone to break in.

The soldiers of the castle spent their time making sure that the defenses held and that nothing made its way *out*.

The Shades of Urg'naut were difficult to spot and to track, and only the Guilds or powerful Soulbound could destroy them once they escaped. Crafting Elderspawn seemed to be the only way the Creeping Shadow could influence the world, besides occasionally speaking into dreams or causing bouts of despair.

This was therefore the one tomb that was not primarily run by Guild members.

They had contacts among the Luminian Order and the Blackwatch, of course, both of whom usually performed monthly inspections. But the defenders were primarily an order of dedicated servants, living like monks in the castle and caring for the vast network of lights.

When Jyrine stepped through the void portal, she gave them a chance to run.

She gave them another chance after using her green flame to cut a hole in the castle wall, breaking the chains of light binding the greatest shadow.

This time, some of them did.

The rest ran after she finished drilling enough holes in the walls that the roof collapsed, sending tons of stone and masonry tumbling into a circle of endless darkness.

With half the castle in ruins, she had expected Urg'naut to billow out in a wave of shadow. Kellarac had assured her that *she* would not be harmed, but she knew that Urg'naut was considered an impossible Elder to negotiate with.

He desired only the end of all things.

Not even maniacs actually wanted oblivion. She would never have considered waking him up...but they had left her no choice. She had to free the Great Elders so they could escape the world, leaving her with their knowledge and power.

If only Calder had done as she wished while he had the chance. Then everyone could have gotten what they wanted.

When the new world was born, they would see she was right.

When only silence and dust remained in the newly ruined castle, she finally threw in the object she had carried here. The gift Kelarac had given her, whose song had remained happy and muted in the back of her thoughts all the way here.

A Heart of Nakothi.

The gray-green mass of flesh flew into the darkness and passed from sight.

Or perhaps the shadow consumed it.

A breeze caressed her cheek, whispering into her ear.

"Deliver a message for me, High Priestess of the Void."

The voice sounded exactly as she had imagined a shadow might sound: like the scrape of insect wings and the scuttling of spider's legs.

Jyrine shivered in fear. But it was exciting fear, thrilling fear, the sort that made you want more.

The sort that helped distract her from the implications of what she was doing. What *he* would do, when he was free.

She went down on one knee. "I live to serve."

"Tell Kelarac that I will stop the outsider once I find a vessel. But until then, I will pursue my purpose."

"...your purpose?"

The wind hissed in impatience. *"Deliver the message. He will know."*

She bowed her head more deeply. "I will."

"And to you, I must apologize."

She resisted the urge to look up and see who was speaking. She knew she wouldn't see anything, but this was not like what any of the reports suggested it was like to deal with Urg'naut.

Was this an imposter?

"I cannot bring you to oblivion." The voice sounded truly regretful. *"You must suffer the pain of existence for a short time longer..."*

A shadow passed under her feet, as if she were on the ocean and a whale had swum beneath her, and then the darkness left the castle. It was hard to see exactly what had changed in the ruins, but moonlight now played naturally over the stones.

Jyrine straightened, the thrill of danger deepening into something less pleasant.

Now the Guilds would fall. The Regents would fall. The Great Elders would destroy the old order so that they could leave this world behind and move on to greater things.

And she would inherit their legacy.

If only everyone had listened to her, this could have been easier.

With the emerald embedded in her forehead shining, she strode back through the void portal.

Back to Kellarac.

CHAPTER TWENTY

TWO YEARS AGO

THE HIGH COUNCILORS OFFICIALLY MET WITH THE FOUR REGENTS STANDING ON the stone pier just inside of Bastion's Veil. The Consultants had proposed hosting the Regents in luxury, but Estyr Six had staunchly refused.

None of the four of them could wait to leave.

Now they met with the three leaders of the Consultant's Guild...along with Shera and Lucan.

Shera still wasn't quite sure what she was doing there.

She was grateful to be *anywhere*. The last thing she remembered was taking several bullets and making a last-ditch gambit to wake the Regents.

At least that had worked out.

The Regents had traded the white robes from their imprisonment for their original clothing, and Shera was somehow surprised to see how much they resembled their portraits. From tall Estyr with the skulls whirling around her blonde hair to squat Alagaesus with his emerald-topped staff, they looked like they had stepped out of a history book.

Tyrl, the High Shepherd, smoothed his hair back and bowed to Estyr. "Lord and Lady Regents, let me first say what an honor it is to serve you. As you have expressed the urgency of your business, I will be brief: we three have agreed that the Consultant's Guild would support any one of you to the position of Emperor or...Empress."

He very clearly locked eyes with Estyr, which made Alagaesus scowl.

However, Estyr clearly shook her head. "There was only one Emperor."

Beside Shera, Lucan seemed startled. Kerian didn't visibly react, but Yala looked like someone had stabbed her in the gut.

If she kept pushing her luck, soon *someone* would. Shera didn't forget that she had been shot on Yala's orders.

"For now, we'll divide the world into four, as we have done before under the Emperor's direction," she continued. "You've grown beyond an Empire. Let's see how the world handles its first taste of freedom."

Judging by Loreli's melancholy expression and Jorin's heavy sigh, they did not expect this to go well.

Shera focused on the words "for now."

To her, it sounded like the Regents meant to proceed as they had in the past and see how it worked before appointing a new Emperor.

That seemed reasonable.

Personally, she wondered more about her own future in the Consultant's Guild than the future of the Empire. Kerian would do what she could to protect Shera and Lucan, but the second the Regents left, Shera's fate would be...uncertain.

And so she wondered again why she was here. She would have greatly preferred to have been left alone.

Then she and Lucan could have prepared to run.

Finally, Estyr turned to Shera. "Now, what are you going to do with these two?"

Yala stiffened, but Lucan let out a breath of relief.

Shera thought it was too early to be relieved. She *thought* Estyr would be a friendly voice here, but who knew what an ancient Champion would do?

"They broke the laws of the Guild," Yala said defiantly. "They will be executed."

"No."

After Estyr's one word, silence reigned for a breath.

Yala bristled, stepping up to one of the Regents. "On what authority do you interfere with the Consultants? You're not the Empress. If you want to rule, then *rule*. If you don't, then we'll make our own decisions. Don't like it? Kill us."

Tyrl and Kerian both took steps away from Yala.

Estyr crooked a smile, the skulls around her head spinning faster, but Jorin stepped up and looked to everyone involved. Though it was still the

gray light of predawn, he wore his trademark black-tinted shadeglasses.

“My, you’re a jumped-up little lion, aren’t you? Let me try to point a question squarely at the heart of it: *which* laws did they break, exactly?”

Yala began listing immediately. “Assault of fellow Guild members, destruction of Guild property, divulgence of Council secrets, trespassing, and defiance of Council orders. The cumulative punishment of which is execution.”

“No, it isn’t,” Estyr said.

Yala had turned red with fury. “And I ask again, on whose—”

“Whose authority do you think I need?”

Shera, for one, couldn’t *wait* to see Yala launched to the moon.

Jorin made a pacifying gesture to Estyr. “Let’s...rein in our horses before they run off, shall we? High Mason, Estyr happens to be correct. Guild crimes committed in the process of executing an Imperial order don’t hold ink. This pair can’t be charged for anything they did to free us.”

Alagaesus sneered, grinding his staff against the dock. “Consider yourself fortunate we’re having mercy on *you*.”

“Divulging Guild secrets, then,” Yala said. “His research began years ago. It’s still within the power of the High Council to execute Consultants who intentionally seek out Guild secrets and reveal them. Even to other Consultants.”

Shera’s hands slipped back to her shears.

That was an execution order directed squarely at Lucan.

“...which applies only to the buck over there,” Jorin pointed out, nodding to Lucan. “And unless the law has slipped and slid for more than a mile since my last fresh-air trip, then the *minimum* punishment is a lifetime of shallow imprisonment.”

Estyr looked to Tyril and Kerian. “Well, High Council? Execution or imprisonment?”

Her hard stare made it clear which they should choose.

“There’s actually a *rainbow* of other options between those two,” Jorin began, but Estyr hushed him with a gesture.

Kerian responded easily: “As High Gardener, I would be delighted to accept a minimal punishment.”

“I wouldn’t *dream* of executing such a talented Gardener!” Tyril said. “Wouldn’t dream of it!” Shera suspected he would start eating his shoes right there if Estyr asked him to.

“Fine.” Estyr locked eyes with Yala. “You get to hide behind Guild law once. If I find that you have gone *outside* the law, even an inch, then it will no longer protect *you*. Do you understand?”

Yala nodded tightly.

Shera knew what Estyr was getting at. The day after the Regents left, Yala would have started arranging an “accident” for Lucan and Shera. Estyr was warning her not to try it.

That was good enough for Shera, too.

Shallow imprisonment meant that Lucan would be held in the nicest cells. The ones closest to the surface. He would even be allowed on limited missions, if the Council issued special permission.

Shera would have him out before sunset.

Sure, that might put them at odds with the Guild. But she was willing to

—
Estyr cut off her thoughts by turning to her. “I want to hear what these two think. Get out of here.”

Yala started to protest, but Kerian and Tyril physically dragged her off.

Which left Shera and Lucan in the company of the four Regents.

If she hadn’t been so used to the presence of the Emperor and General Teach, Shera might have been intimidated.

“Thanks,” Shera said as soon as the High Councilors were far enough away. “She was definitely going to kill us.”

Estyr looked taken aback for a moment, then she grinned. “Yeah, I didn’t need any special powers to read that one.”

“Will *you* be all right?” Loreli asked Lucan.

The Luminian Regent had said very little. She seemed distracted, and if Shera wasn’t mistaken, she looked almost on the verge of tears.

Well, she *was* supposed to be the Emperor’s daughter. Shera had never been sure if that was an honorary title or if her father was literally the Emperor, but either way they had to have been close.

Shera shifted her weight to try and keep her left-hand shear away from Loreli.

“From the beginning, I was willing to go to prison to serve the Empire,” Lucan said. His voice was strong and confident.

As well it might have been. He’d be in prison for...six hours? Maybe twelve. It depended on if Shera slept before breaking him out or not.

“And you?” Loreli asked Shera. She looked equally compassionate, which meant she must not have Read Shera’s shear yet.

Shera tried to subtly slip further away from the Regent as she answered. “I’m going to break him out before the end of the day, so I’m fine.”

Alagaeus looked irritated by that for some reason, but Estyr and Jorin both chuckled.

“That might be a tougher root to chew than you think,” Jorin said.

“Why do you think we gave up so easily?” Estyr asked. “If we had pardoned you both, it would have split the Guild against Yala. And *he* doesn’t want that.”

Shera glanced around to see if someone else might have snuck back into the conversation. Maybe Tyril.

Lucan was looking down on her with a pained expression. “Shera...at least for a few years. After that, we can appeal. My freedom isn’t worth losing Guild unity.” He waited for a moment, and when she didn’t say anything, he continued. “I knew what I was getting into.”

Shera felt like she was hearing a different language.

“...what?”

That was all she could think of to say.

When dawn broke and the Regents left, she and Lucan were still arguing.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

We are very careful when we select subjects to become Soulbound, and we never make the attempt unless we have Imperial permission and can reasonably guarantee the subject's safety.

—OFFICIAL MAGISTER RESPONSE ON THE SUBJECT OF SOULBINDING SUCCESS RATE

Thirty-seven percent.

—CONSULTANT ESTIMATE OF ACTUAL SOULBINDING SUCCESS RATE

PRESENT DAY

SHERA WAS WOKEN BY AN EXPLOSION THAT ROCKED THE ENTIRE BUILDING.

The instant she regained consciousness, she was hit by an even greater blow: her two Soulbound Vessels pulling her in different directions.

Syphren was practically salivating. *Great power! Seize it, take it, consume it now!*

The Awakened blade was doing its best to push her toward an unleashed bonfire of power shining from nearby. She could feel it herself, a ball of energy, and the part of her connected to Syphren yearned to drink from it.

Bastion, on the other hand, was quietly panicking. *A threat looms. Release the Veil! Defend them all!*

Shera struggled within herself, wrestling down both Vessels as they competed with one another. When she regained control, she realized she was crouched on the floor with her back to the wall, both shears raised to defend herself.

At least my instincts are working.

As she pulled on her gray uniform, a Shepherd knocked and let herself into the room. “Regent Jorin leveled a building three streets north,” she reported.

“Why?”

“I couldn’t speculate.”

That was a standard Shepherd response indicating that she hadn’t had the chance to run her information by the Architects or Masons for analysis yet. When Shera finished dressing and headed for the door, the other Consultant followed her out and then vanished.

That was considered good manners for Shepherds.

It wasn’t hard to find Jorin; everyone else in the Imperial Palace was headed in the same direction, and there was only one pile of rubble with a cloud of dust drifting up. The rest of the street had been diligently repaired from the battle against the Imperialists, but now Jorin had undone some of that work himself.

Shera had to walk down the open street, past Imperial Guards who looked like they would draw pistols on her if she gave them half an excuse.

Her Vessels were still riled up, which made it even harder to resist the Guards’ hostile stares. They wanted her to kill the Guards for her own protection. And to devour their strength.

Sometimes, having the shears agree was worse than having them bicker.

Jorin stood in the middle of the street, surrounded by Guards himself. Coming up on him from behind, Shera saw the bandage-wrapped sword slung across his back and the wide brim of his hat.

Kerian, a couple of other Consultants, and a handful of members from other Guilds now stood in a loose crowd around Jorin, talking amongst themselves or staring at the rubble.

Shera took a peek herself. As far as she could tell, this building was no different than any of the other half-repaired structures around them.

“Rough day?” she asked.

“Jyrine Marten has gone the way of yesterday’s wind.”

When Shera decoded that sentence, a cold anger settled on her. She had only let Jyrine live because Meia and the High Councilors had insisted she be interrogated. Shera had intended to execute her immediately, but they had intervened.

The Regent's shadeglasses turned to Shera. "Slipped out from beneath my paws and I was none the wiser. Not half a breath after her scheduled questioning, no less. I need the transcript of that interrogation three days before yesterday."

One of the Shepherds dashed off.

Shera looked to Kerian. "Jyrine Tessella Marten is ripe for harvest."

"Already noted." Within the hour, there would be a Gardener assignment with Jyrine's name on it.

Kerian looked no happier than Shera felt. She would be visiting Meia soon, no doubt. As the last person to speak with Jyrine, Meia would be facing a lot of visitors.

"Did she walk out of here?" Shera asked. If this was Calder Marten's action, that meant there were Imperialists still in the Guard.

"Do cats bark? If she didn't take a void transfer out of here, I'll eat my hat. This stinks of *Kelarac*." Jorin swiped angrily at the air, and the feel of his Intent sent half a dozen people around him stumbling back. Shera herself felt sick, and Syphren's appetite surged.

Some intact support beams in the already-collapsed beams rotted away in seconds, and Shera got some insight into what had happened to the house in the first place. At least the Regent was channeling his frustration into something that could be rebuilt.

"It *cost* Kelarac to do this," Jorin went on. "In fuel and in risk. If I had sensed him...but he doesn't dump out his purse for every liquored-up farmer who puts on a cultist mask. She's key to something. Now we're all on the block and awaiting the headsman."

Shera's heart detached and she examined the situation coldly, as though she stared down a target. "What kind of threat are we facing?"

"We have to bet on Kelarac himself." The Regent straightened before turning his gaze to address the growing crowd. "Evacuate the Capital. Squeeze it dry if you have to drag them out of their homes with hooks. Every second counts, gentlefolk. For all we know, he could be here within the hour."

The onlookers threw out a number of panicked questions, but Shera was closer to Jorin. “You think he’ll be coming *here*?”

“The void was torn open here. This is the crack in the door.” He stared off into the distance. “As long as we can hold onto the wheel until Loreli comes back. As long as we can do that...”

At that point, one of the other questions caught his attention, and he turned away from Shera. She stepped back to join Kerian.

“What have we heard from the Great Elder tombs?”

Kerian’s braids swayed as she shook her head. “We’re spread thin, just like the other Guilds. Our contacts are generally still intact, but there’s been too much upheaval lately. We’re trying to rebuild lines into the tombs, but we can’t know how much work there is yet to be done.”

“And how many combatants do we have capable of scoring a blow on a Great Elder?”

“The Regent would be the expert, but...” Kerian looked between Shera and Jorin. “...I would say that, in our current state, we would be lucky to have as many as five.”

Shera rested palms on her two Vessels, letting their emotions flutter around each other inside her mind. It was easier to withstand them while she was focused on a mission; their competing urges tugged her left and right while she stood in the middle.

She had begun thinking like the Head of the Consultant’s Guild again. This wasn’t her responsibility anymore.

She could leave this to Kerian.

Protect the Guild, Bastion whispered.

Syphren agreed, eager for any kind of action.

The Emperor would tell her that it *was* her responsibility to oppose the Elders.

Meia would tell her that it was her duty as a Consultant.

Lucan would say that if she could serve to protect people, she should.

And Shera herself...

...as much as she wanted to give up and let someone else lead, she reluctantly recognized that she was in a unique position to direct the Consultants. So, for the good of the Empire, she would act.

This one time.

“What have you announced to the Guild about me?”

“Nothing,” Kerian said. She patted the leather satchel she often carried slung over her shoulder. “Your paperwork is in here. I haven’t yet found the time to file it properly.”

Shera scanned her expression for mockery but saw nothing she could read. “...well, good. Hold off. I have a plan. Once we’re on the other side of this, we can talk about my retirement.”

“Very good, Guild Head.”



In a broad conference room of the Imperial Palace, almost forty people gathered at Shera’s order. There had been chairs set up before, but the Shepherds removed them.

Shera faced the crowd. The three High Councilors waited for her at the front, backed by all the Gardeners and every Reader they could find among the Architects. Darius Allbright had been dragged in as well, though he’d protested; he had to help the Luminian Order coordinate the evacuation of the city. Shera had forced him here anyway.

This was the second time Shera had addressed all the Gardeners, but today she felt only focus. If a Great Elder was coming to the city, they needed to make drastic moves just to survive. And the Council of Architects was not known for its drastic action.

She had to plunge the knife in herself.

“As you’ve heard by now, we think there’s a Great Elder coming for us.”

Everyone in the room shifted either their feet or their gaze, which among Consultants was enough to show how out of sorts they really were.

“Circumstances as they are, we have very few who can fight Kelarac or any of his lieutenants. We need more combat-capable Soulbound, and we need them now.”

Meia looked frazzled; she probably hadn’t escaped interrogation all day. Shera intended to ask Meia some questions herself.

But at the mention of Soulbound, Meia’s eyes shot up to meet Shera’s.

“We only have one pair of Awakened shears in the Guild,” Shera said, placing her hands on her own hips. “I need every Gardener Soulbound by tomorrow at sunset.”

Silence.

One of the Architect Readers looked around and, seeing no support, began to hesitantly speak. “Guild Head, that is...impossible. For a number of reasons. You aren’t a Reader yourself, so from your perspective—”

“Darius Allbright. Tell them how hard it was to Awaken my shears.”

Darius scratched the back of his neck, causing an odd distortion as his hand passed through the veil of shadow over his face. “I only Awakened one of them, but in my experience it was...unprecedented. I would describe it as the weapon being on the verge of Awakening itself.”

The Readers in the room looked to one another. A few of them leaned closer to the Gardeners bearing shears.

None of the practicing Gardeners were Readers. Lucan had been the only one in the Guild, and this would have been *so* much easier with him here.

Everything would have been easier.

She cleared her thoughts and focused on what she knew of Guild history. Though Reading was an advantage in many ways, Gardeners were more effective when they weren’t distracted by Intent. Readers also tended to be more valuable in other roles, and thus were rarely risked on the sorts of dangerous assignments that Gardeners accepted daily.

Even Kerian spoke up with an objection of her own. “There is a reason why none of the shears were Awakened before yours, Guild Head. Most Awakened weapons are easy to sense coming. How can a Gardener do their work in the shadows with bright lights tied to their belts?”

“And we *can’t do it*,” another Reader protested. “No matter how close the weapon is to Awakening, we need time to catalog the Intent in the weapon and get to know the subject. If the three of us aren’t in sync, you’ll be risking us all!”

A chorus of agreement rose up.

Not, Shera noticed, from the Gardeners.

Shera had not proposed this action lightly. She was gambling with the lives of the few people she still cared about: Kerian, Ayana, and Meia.

She knew the risks. And so did they.

As the words died down, Shera slowly locked eyes with everyone in the room carrying bronze daggers. Kerian looked resigned, Meia eager, Ayana conflicted, and Benji...well, the newly minted Gardener would jump into a volcano for the chance to become a Soulbound.

“Gardeners,” Shera said, “this is a voluntary mission. Even if it works on all of you, fourteen new Soulbound might not be enough to turn the tide against Kelarac. What do you think?”

“If it improves our odds by even a small fraction, that’s enough,” Meia said, but Shera knew she was dreaming about her chance to truly rival a Champion. The only reason she hadn’t Awakened her shears already was the risk of losing the ancient weapons.

And because the shears were technically Guild property, and no one had given her permission.

Ayana’s voice scraped out of her throat. “Agreed.”

“Yes!” Benji shouted.

Shera gestured for him to calm down.

The other Gardeners voiced their assent one at a time until, at last, Kerian gave a reluctant nod.

Another Reader threw up her hands. “This still won’t work. Maybe if we had a few weeks...”

Finally Yala strode out. Her hair was pulled tight behind her, and the tail whipped Shera in the face as the High Mason turned around to address the rest of the crowd.

Shera found it hard to believe that wasn’t intentional.

“You may be Architects, but you’re Consultants first,” Yala snapped. “If you didn’t want to bet your lives on your Guild, you should have joined the Greenwardens. You are the *only* ones on the Gray Island who don’t have to risk their necks, so today it’s your turn.”

Shera couldn’t see Yala’s expression, but the front row all flinched back from the High Mason as she spat her final words: “Get it done.”

The Reader who had spoken swallowed hard and asked quietly. “How... how long do we have?”

“Tomorrow at sunset,” Yala snapped.

Which was exactly what Shera would have said, had she been given a chance to say it.

She pushed Yala to one side and addressed the room again. “You may think I don’t understand what kind of risk I’m asking you to take. Here’s what I understand: I’m going to be fighting a Great Elder tomorrow. I’d rather not do it alone.”

Shera walked out, passing Darius on the way. She had brought the Luminian for his testimony about Awakening Bastion, and she didn’t know

if he would stay to Awaken a set of shears himself or if he would return to his Luminian duties. That was up to him.

She glanced back before exiting, looking over the room of quiet, determined, and frightened people.

“Go to work,” she said.

The next day was chaos.

Every soldier and Guild member in the Capital was assigned to the evacuation, and Shera faced a stream of problems on behalf of the Consultants. Not least of which was their lines of communication.

They had managed to contact several of the Great Elder tombs or adjacent facilities, but the news was bleak.

Every time the Consultants received another message, it was only to learn they were too late.

“Where is the Blackwatch?”

“Call the Order!”

“Trying to reach someone, anyone...”

“Emperor save us.”

The messages came in from Awakened chalkboards, from Soulbound with powers of communication, from exhausted messengers arriving on Kameira worked nearly to death. The more they learned, the worse the news became.

The defenses around the Elder tombs had been weakened too far by the Guild War, and many of them had fallen to attack. Some had been driven out by Elderspawn, some by human cultists, still others had refused to work with enemy Guilds anymore.

Now it was impossible to know the status of any of the Great Elders. Kthanikahr could be devouring towns in Dylia and no one would be the wiser.

They were blind.

Yala finally cornered Shera, pinning her against the wall. “We need to take the Guild out of here.”

Shera narrowly resisted the urge to break her arm. “I thought we agreed we need Soulbound to fight Kelarac.”

“We agreed that the *Guild* needs Soulbound more than we need to continue investing in Gardener shears. With the Elder Tombs overrun, it’s far too risky to stay in the Capital. The Great Elders will head straight here, and we could be facing them *all!* That’s suicide, no matter how many Soulbound we have.”

Shera pushed past Yala and walked away, hoping the High Mason would take the hint. “You must be confident to think you know what’s going through Kelarac’s head.”

“Soulbinding the Gardeners is still the right idea. In case we need them to defend *ourselves*.”

Shera gritted her teeth and spun to face Yala. “You say you love this Guild. Do you remember who we—”

Her mind was overwhelmed with an urge so powerful that she couldn’t resist. Her Vessels drowned out all her thoughts with an impulse louder than a shout.

HE’S COMING!

Silver-blue mist erupted from Shera and filled the building of the Imperial Palace.

Still overcome with panic, Shera tackled Yala to the ground. The High Mason rolled as she hit, landing in a crouch and pulling out a knife in a move that would have been suitable for a Gardener half her age.

She looked up, moving her knife around, her eyes moving aimlessly. “What are you doing, girl?”

Only then did Shera realize she was using Bastion's power to see through the mist. Yala had no idea what was going on.

Of course, neither did Shera. She had reacted purely on the impulse delivered by her Vessels.

She let her vision drift up, through Bastion's Veil, into the sky. The daggers had reacted to a feeling in the air.

A feeling of darkness, emptiness, cold.

It didn't seem overwhelming to Shera. More like a winter wind on its way.

The Capital was still bustling in the midst of the evacuation. No one outside had panicked any more than usual, so nothing outwardly dramatic had happened. No giant Elders bursting from the ground.

It was only a little overcast; the daylight was gray and pale, and dark clouds loomed on the horizon.

Shera stretched out her mist, and it grew thin as she reached deeper into the Imperial Palace. In combination with Syphren's sense of life and power, she soon found Jorin.

The Regent was standing looking into the clouds. As her vision closed on him, he began to speak as though quoting. "For his jaws will swallow the sun." He pulled the bandaged sword from his back, but didn't begin to unravel it yet. Even so, the feel of its bound Intent was nauseating. "All that lives will pass away, leaving only the shadow eternal.' Once upon a turning of the sands, we worked with the Sleepless to stop that prophecy from coming to pass."

With his free hand, he pulled off his shadeglasses and tucked them into his pocket. Silver eyes turned to stare straight at Shera, though he shouldn't have been able to see her in the mist. "We were wrong, Shera. This is not Kellarac. This is worse."

His eyes returned to the sky. "I'm afraid we have only hours. Even the Sleepless fear the Creeping Shadow."

Shera snapped out of her trance and rushed over to Yala, easily sidestepping the woman's defensive slash.

She grabbed the High Mason with both hands. "Urg'naut is coming."

Whatever Shera's personal issues with Yala, the woman was a professional. She didn't waste time on useless questions, cutting to the heart of the matter: "Then we run."

"No. We're fighting."

Anger showed on Yala's face, but Shera didn't have time for it.
"Round up the Readers. They're out of time."



One and all, the Readers protested.

They needed weeks to safely and effectively Awaken anything. They had been prepared to spend every second of the day and a half they were given to learn the necessary Intent, and they still weren't sure that would be enough time.

Now, hearing they had to pull the trigger when less than half of that time had elapsed must have been like hearing they had to run into battle naked.

But if they didn't bow to their Guild Head, they bowed to reality.

With Kellarac, there could be negotiation. There would certainly be survivors; Kellarac wanted slaves, not corpses.

Urg'naut was the Great Elder of Annihilation.

One by one, fourteen Reader-Gardener pairs entered secluded chambers and began the Awakening process.

Shera paced the halls outside, fighting urges from her Vessels: they were uncomfortable waiting around and wanted battle to begin.

If they hadn't balanced one another, she would have had more awkward urges to deal with. Syphren would have loved to charge into these rooms and devour the delicious power it could feel, while Bastion wanted her to find a secure room and hunker down.

They had come to a compromise that made her more and more restless, waiting for combat.

With every passing second, the sky grew darker and the air grew colder.

Which gave Shera no choice but to stand and wait for the Gardeners to emerge. To resist her impatience, she sank into the state of low-level concentration she used on Gardener assignments when she had to wait around for hours at a time.

Either she was about to get a load of new Soulbound or they were all in trouble.

Incidentally, it also helped keep her mind from the fact that she was rolling dice with the lives of her few remaining friends.

By the time the air had become fully gray, color seeming to leech from every surface, she heard a distant shriek coming from within one of the nearby rooms. It sounded like a hunting jungle cat.

Syphren knew the presence inside the room. It had always smelled delicious, but now that scent had become richer and stronger.

Shera barged into Meia's room without invitation.

The Architect Reader was kneeling on the ground nearby and clutching her head, but Meia stood in the center of the room with her back to the door and her shears bare in each hand. The knives had grown longer and thinner, and now instead of bronze they were a sort of dull yellow, like topaz or unlit stained glass.

At the center of each blade, a shining orange eye appeared with a vertically slitted pupil. They looked like enlarged versions of the Kameira eyes that Meia showed when her blood was up.

The eyes on both of the knives focused on Shera, and she had to resist Syphren's urge to feed.

"I see you, Shera." Meia sounded delighted, and when she turned around, there were actual tears in her eyes.

Shera blinked. "Meia, are you...is everything okay?"

Different Soulbound had different urges, depending on the nature of the Intent in their Vessel, but Shera knew from experience that it could be overwhelming at first. Maybe these Vessels had brought grief or depression.

"I want to see *everything*." The eyes on her knives slid around, looking at something in the distance as tears rolled down Meia's face. "I'm sorry, Shera, I know this is serious. But this is...it's incredible."

"Uh, well, as long as you're all right."

Shera didn't know how to respond. Was this a genuine emotional response, or was it a new Soulbound Vessel messing with her mind?

Meia didn't seem to be a danger, and for that Shera was relieved. She didn't think she could count this project as a victory if it cost them Meia.

A deep whistling cut through the walls and Shera ran out, moving next door. If she remembered correctly, it was Benji in the next room over. To think the newest Gardener would be the second one finished.

This time, the Reader was standing and wiping sweat from his forehead. When he saw Shera, he raised one fist into the air. "It's a miracle! You have no idea how hard I—"

Shera hushed him with a gesture, watching Benji.

She had to be ready in case Benji went insane.

In fact, a whole squad of Consultants and Imperial Guards waited outside, ready to put down any wild Soulbound, but Shera had insisted on the opportunity to check first.

It had been her decision to go through with this, so she would take responsibility for the results.

Benji hovered in midair, his shears now purple and hooked like sickles. Purple light fluttered around him in the form of a cloud of butterflies.

He looked from one to another, wearing a slightly irritated expression.

“How do you feel, Benji?” Shera asked. She kept her hands away from her weapons lest he take that as a threat.

“The Kameira that left the deepest impression on these blades was a Flutterlight,” Benji said. “...can I try again?”

The Reader looked to him in horror.

“You look fine to me.” Shera jerked a thumb behind her. “Report to the Architects. Get yourself checked out and register your power.”

She hadn’t needed to instruct Meia, who reported to the Architects whenever a cloud drifted by, but Benji was still new to the Guild. He didn’t know how things worked yet.

The newly Soulbound Gardener sighed and agreed.

Shera took a deep breath as she felt another power blossom in a nearby room. Ayana and Kerian were still locked in with their Readers, but with two successes, she now felt much better about their odds.

The third room she opened was filled with blood.

Just blood. No chunks of meat, bone, or organs. The inside of all four walls and the ceiling were splattered as though someone had exploded, but there were no shreds of burst clothing. None of the details Shera would expect from a scene of true gore.

She would have almost thought the room had been covered in dark red paint if not for the smell. Coppery, not as foul as carnage usually was.

At the center of the room, a pair of sharp and twisted bones glowed a dull red. From Syphren’s surge of hunger, Shera supposed those had once been Gardener shears.

Two seconds after opening the door and taking in the details, Shera slammed the room shut again.

The few Architects close enough to see looked sick. One made a gagging sound.

“Not a word,” Shera said coldly. “Send in cleaning crews afterwards. Who was in this room?”

A nearby Architect gave her the name of a Gardener and a Reader, neither of whom she knew well.

She breathed a sigh of relief. If she had to lose someone, at least it was no one she cared about. Though she did understand enough not to voice that thought out loud.

A pattern became clear as the next five Gardeners emerged successful. Unlike Shera’s shears, these knives were being Awakened in pairs, so they shared one consciousness. No one but Shera would have to deal with multiple minds within their own, which Shera found convenient if a little unfair.

Also, none of the others so far had to deal with urges as strong as Shera’s had been.

Some of the Readers speculated that it was because her shears held Elder Intent from the Heart of Nakothi, though Shera suspected it had more to do with the Emperor.

Finally, the success rate was astonishing. With every new person that came out successfully Soulbound, the Architects grew more and more excited. One failure—no matter how violent—and seven successes was a performance that surpassed any Soulbinding attempts on record.

When word finally reached Yala that the Gardeners were coming out, she ran so fast that she arrived out of breath, searching for her daughter.

Seconds after she saw Meia, her stern and tightened face beamed. The two crashed into an embrace.

Shera was horrified.

Seeing Yala happy was like watching an Elder dance. It twisted everything she knew about the world in on itself. Meia’s entire life, Yala had never been fully satisfied with her daughter. At least, not as far as Shera had ever seen. Their relationship had been one of Meia constantly seeking approval while Yala withheld it.

To see them get along as a family was...uncomfortable.

She edged away from the mother-daughter pair and focused on the doors.

Six left, and two of them were Kerian and Ayana.

Honestly, Shera was far more worried about Kerian. She was older than most Gardeners ever lived to be, and she had a permanent injury to her knee

where Shera herself had kicked it in.

Kerian might not have the physical stamina to live up to the strain of her Vessel, and even if she did, she may not be capable of carrying it in battle. If Kerian's long bond to her shears wouldn't improve the success rate of Awakening, Shera would have found a new Gardener.

Ayana, while perhaps a little past her physical prime, had inherited Kameira blood from the Imperial Guard. If Shera knew her at all, Ayana was looking forward to standing on equal footing with the Head of the Guard, General Teach. She would be fine.

Name the Elders and they appear, Shera thought as she heard a low growl coming from a door to her right. Ayana's door.

She moved to open it...but the room swung open on its own.

A bloody Architect stumbled out. He had one hand clasped over an eye, which gushed so much blood that Shera knew it must be gone. Missing, like three of the fingers on the man's other hand.

"Help..." he gurgled.

From behind, something leaped for him.

Shera had already moved, pulling the Reader back and out of the way, as Ayana landed where he had just stood.

It was like a wild beast in Ayana's skin. Her six-inch iron claws dug at the bloodstained carpet where the Reader had been as though she thought he might have escaped her by burrowing into the ground.

When Ayana turned her ghostly face up, she bared her teeth and growled at Shera. There was no reason in her eyes. Blood splattered her mouth and face.

Bands of softly glowing pink metal encircled both her wrists, short spikes sticking out like rose thorns.

Manacles that had once been her shears.

Ayana had lost to her Vessel.

She bunched her legs up beneath her, ready to pounce, but Shera was ready. She unleashed Syphren's power.

Shera *tore* green light from Ayana's chest.

The wild Gardener's eyes fluttered. Her limbs sagged, and she stumbled in place. The light hovered in the air like a fuzzy green haze, and Syphren hungered for it so strongly that Shera's left hand drifted for it.

But Shera didn't want it. She forced her arm down.

The medical Architects dragged the Reader away from Ayana and began patching him up.

“Take him to a Pilgrim,” Shera ordered. Her eyes were still on Ayana.

There was no trace of Shera’s mentor left. She moved jerkily, like a wounded animal trying to pull herself to Shera.

“Meia.”

Shera didn’t look to know that Meia would already be in position.

Sure enough, Meia landed on Ayana in an instant. Her eyes shone as brightly orange as her new Vessels.

Ayana struggled, scraping up more carpet with the knives on her fingers, but she had no chance against Meia’s augmented strength. Meia had to snap Ayana’s fingers to get the Awakened manacles off, bones crunching like ice. Ayana’s scream shook the hallway.

Shera stood, stone-faced, not even willing to blink.

She committed the scream to memory.

This was her fault.

The thought didn’t draw any blood. It was a simple fact. She had made this decision, and it had cost her one of the people she had ever considered a friend.

She would take responsibility for that.

Once Meia had bound Ayana, some Shepherds carried her off. She would receive the best care the Guild could offer, but even if she recovered completely, Shera had still made her suffer. It was a fact that could not be changed.

Eight successes and two failures.

Four left.

Another Gardener succeeded—not Kerian—and developed the power to liquify stone. One more failure, but this one wasn’t so harmful as the last had been. The shears Awakened, but he didn’t become a Soulbound.

That, the Readers told her, had been the expected result. For it to have happened only once out of twelve attempts thus far was extraordinary.

That knowledge did not wipe away the sound of Ayana’s scream.

Finally, it came down to Kerian and one other Gardener left.

Meia stood next to Shera in silence. Shera glanced at her friend’s face. All joy had vanished, leaving only sober reality.

Did she blame Shera? She should. It would be like Meia to blame herself, even though it was objectively Shera’s fault.

When this process completed, she would accept whatever punishment the Guild thought was appropriate.

Shera's thoughts cut off as the wind whispered in a voice that everyone could hear. "*Jorin...such torment you still suffer. I will free you.*"

The sun died. It flicked off like a quicklamp.

Urg'naut had arrived.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

*The Elders all believe they are doing the right thing. Even Urg'naut.
He just wants to save you from pain.*

—Dying message from a former Head of the Blackwatch

PRESENT DAY

WHEN THE SUN DARKENED AT MIDDAY, IT WAS AS THOUGH URG'NAUT HAD dropped a moonless night over the Capital. Buildings shone like islands in the dark and lanterns lit up the lines of people evacuating the city.

The newly Soulbound Gardeners cast lights of every color through the hallway, so Shera had no trouble finding the windowsill as she pushed it open.

"Time for your crash course," Shera said. "Follow me to Jorin. Learn as you go."

A more-than-physical chill hung in the air, so Shera worried how the Great Elder's Intent might affect the Awakening of the last two Gardeners, but there was no time to consider now.

Jorin needed backup.

The world of the Capital was entirely dark; even the lights in windows were strangled so their light didn't penetrate as far as she would have expected.

Most of the Gardeners followed Shera along the rooftops of the Imperial Palace, but some had new ways to travel now. Benji, for instance, floated

along in a cloud of purple-light butterflies. He did not look happy about it.

They reached the Regent in less than two minutes. Around him, the darkness had lifted somewhat, so it looked as though he was surrounded by a hazy gray light. Wood-and-paper wings stretched from his back, attached to him by some sort of harness. Kameira feathers had been glued all over the device.

Those must have carried some sort of power, because he drifted sixty feet in the air. His rotting sword was bare in his right hand, and he stared up into the darkness covering the sky.

When Shera and the other Gardeners arrived, glowing shears in their hands, they couldn't get too close to Jorin because of the Intent in his blade. Shera pushed against the nausea to get closer and call up to him.

"Reporting for duty, Regent."

"Scatter like sand," Jorin called back. His attention was still fixed upward. "He'll call his Elders soon. Don't burn yourselves for tinder, just protect everyone you can until Loreli gets here. She will save you."

Shera hadn't heard that the Luminian Regent was incoming. "When will she get here?"

Jorin didn't answer, which told Shera what she needed to know.

They had no way of telling when—or if—Loreli would arrive. It was just a desperate hope of Jorin's.

They were on their own.

Shera turned to her Consultants. "Pair off," she commanded. Counting her, they had ten Soulbound Gardeners. If she could, she would have gone off by herself, but she knew it was foolish to split up in these circumstances.

Meia immediately stood by Shera's side, but Shera shook her head. "Not you. We can't put our two biggest guns together."

The orange eyes in Meia's face pierced the darkness just as brightly as the ones on her shears. "I apologize, Guild Head, but we have no time to argue."

More quietly, she added, "*They* won't stop you from throwing yourself into an Elder's mouth."

Shera didn't find that entirely fair, but she didn't protest.

"Find Shepherds and take them with you," she ordered the other teams. "Eliminate Elders. Save lives. Make it back in one piece. Any questions?"

When there were none, she dismissed them.

She and Meia stayed together beneath Jorin.

“Should we be going somewhere else?” Meia asked.

“Until I have a better target, we’re staying here. This is where Urg’naut will strike.” Syphren gave her a sense of the lives all around her, some more vibrant than others, but none so bright as the Regent.

There was another presence nearby, a unique power that seemed as though it was blending into the darkness surrounding them, but even that didn’t stand out next to Jorin. “If you can think of someone else he might want more than...”

Shera trailed off as a thought occurred to her.

She remembered that unique presence. It was Darius Allbright.

The man with a spawn of Urg’naut wrapped around his face.

Cold gripped Shera’s heart and dripped into her voice. “Belay that. Follow me.”

Meia would be surprised for an instant, but she could easily follow. Shera dashed across the paving-stones of the Palace streets.

They had to lock down Darius immediately.

He was a potential vessel for Urg’naut, they had always known that, but they had expected Kelarac to show up. Upon learning it was the Creeping Shadow, Shera had been too focused on her Soulbound project to spare a thought for Darius.

Now, she had to make sure they weren’t too late.

“*Jorin...*” Urg’naut whispered again. “*Do not fear the inevitable.*”

Jorin’s voice echoed through the Imperial Palace. “You put yourself on a gold pedestal, don’t you? This is no advance of the inevitable. This is just a prison break.”

The icy air slithered into Shera’s ears. “*Such turmoil. Such fear. I will free you.*”

Shera glanced back as Jorin swept his sword upward.

At that moment, Shera realized just how much the Regents had been holding back.

She’d always known, on some level, that they must have restrained themselves when fighting humans. Estyr probably could have collapsed the foundations of the Capital instead of engaging the Imperialists in combat, but she had controlled her power to avoid hurting allies or bystanders. Jorin had chosen not to blight the entire Gray Island, constraining himself to only a corner.

But it was one thing to assume as much and another thing entirely to see a single sword-slash unleash a river of putrid darkness up into an entirely black sky.

It should have been impossible to distinguish black from black, but Shera had no trouble. Jorin's Intent crashed against Urg'naut's advancing shadow like two waves meeting.

A splash of power erupted when the two Intents collided, sending droplets of darkness raining over the city...

And Shera felt people die.

Thousands of lives were extinguished in an instant like candles blowing out.

One of those drops crashed to the ground in front of her, erasing a corner of a building as it fell. It landed on a group of fleeing servants, and they were swallowed up by the dark.

The droplet didn't disperse, though. It congealed, drawing itself together. It was black outlined in gray, so she could see it clearly, and as she watched it molded itself into a vaguely human shape.

An eye—a round shape colored like an overcast sky—opened in the center of what she would call its head. It towered over the nearby buildings.

With half-formed hands, the Elder of Urg'naut reached for her.



Inside a locked and bolted room, Darius heard the whispers of the void.

The moment he heard the cold wind of Urg'naut approaching, he had sealed himself into a basement. He had wondered if he should kill himself to remove the risk to everyone else.

But he couldn't be sure the Great Elder would target him. And, after all, who wasn't afraid of death?

"The end is the last thing you should fear," the shadows whispered.

Things moved in the corners of his vision, and he squeezed his eyes shut.

The darkness was even stronger behind his eyelids.

"Resistance only brings you pain. Let me in, Darius. Let me in, and I will bring sweet relief to all the world. Together, we will move beyond this tiny prison, and we will spread...peace."

Sweat broke out all over Darius' body, because the Great Elder's words were too sweet. He could feel the relief of a good night's sleep after a day of hard work. Years of staring into the void weighed on him, day and night of constant terror lurking just out of view.

He could let all that go. It would be so easy.

He opened his eyes again. The darkness around his vision was still there, as it always was. Dark tendrils crept closer and closer, ink seeping down from the sky.

The sky?

Darius looked up, shocked. The sky boiled with darkness.

Why was he outside? How had he escaped the room?

He stood in the outer edges of an Imperial Palace courtyard. All around him, darkness did battle.

Darius drew his sword and raised it against the darkness, tapping into its Intent. It shone brightly, fighting back the night.

Unknown God, keep me strong, Darius prayed.

"Come to me, Darius Allbright," Urg'naut said to him. *"Bring the end."*



Meia struck the Elder first, leaping up to the height of its shoulders and slashing with glaring orange blades. Gray-outlined darkness sprayed into the air, and Shera couldn't tell if the attack had dealt an injury or not.

But *Shera* would.

Her two Vessels shouted at her, and now the time for restraint had ended. This was what they were made for.

She let them off the leash.

Dense silver-blue mist surrounded Meia and Shera and the Elder, suppressing its power. With its strength reduced, when it struck against Meia, she only went flying one street over.

And as its overcast eye searched through Bastion's Veil, Shera reached the base of the creature.

Syphren hungered, longing to taste a being of such power.

Shera gave in.

The second the green blade pierced the gray barrier around the living shadow, a surge of vibrant energy surged up through Shera's Vessel and trampled her like a herd of horses.

Syphren sang in ecstasy, drinking deep, and Shera felt the satisfaction in her bones. *This* was what she wanted.

She wanted to hang on to the power like a child hoarding candy, but she knew from experience it would leave her exhausted afterwards.

So she channeled it into Bastion's Veil.

This time, the Veil exploded over almost the entire Imperial Palace. She could feel her Consultants spreading out, Blackwatch and Luminians fighting side-by-side. She glimpsed Imperial Guards fighting smaller shadows that flitted between their feet.

The Elder by Shera wasn't entirely finished yet, but Shera was done with him.

As she had done with the out-of-control Ayana, Shera tore the remainder of its energy out and let it hang in the air.

The creature gave a hiss as it dissipated.

Meia leaped down from a nearby rooftop and landed near Shera. She waved a hand. "I can see through the Veil! It looks...different than I imagined. Like spiderwebs." She shook herself, returning to business. "Where now?"

Shera gripped Syphren, staring into the center of Meia's mass, where she could sense more life waiting. Leftover energy still coursed through her body, lending her strength. She could catch Meia off-guard...

But Bastion's voice balanced Syphren's. *Protect and cleanse.*

"Darius Allbright," Shera called. "This way."

The Luminian Knight-Adjunct was nearby, in an external courtyard, but every step closer cost them more time than it should have.

Shades slithered across the paving-stones, hungry to swallow Shera and Meia whole. Shera brought Syphren down on them again and again, dragging their strength from them in the form of hazy balls of green light.

The light from each Shade was pathetic, less even than an ordinary person's, but Shera would turn nothing away. She absorbed each one like a breath of fresh air, fueling her to continue fighting.

Above, Jorin flitted all over the city, trading blows with the Great Elder that had darkened the sky. At first, he had been entirely on the defensive,

protecting the city as best he could from the tendrils that crept down to devour life.

Then a spear of white light crashed into Urg'naut.

Shera *felt* the Elder's scream like a fingernail of ice scraping along her spine. But the spear didn't let up, continuing like a lighthouse's beam.

At first, Shera thought Loreli had joined the battle, and her spirits soared.

But Syphren sensed no person behind the power. When Shera thought about the direction of the light, she realized the truth: it was coming from Hightower.

The headquarters of the Luminian Order.

With the support of the White Sun, Jorin took the initiative. Now he struck against the Great Elder, carving chunks of shadow away with every swing of his blade.

Shera began to think they might make it after all.

She couldn't see much of the battle without borrowing the vision of Bastion's Veil, but she *felt* it, a titanic exchange of power that had Syphren panting with thirst.

Only with Bastion's influence was she able to keep her mind on her task, and finally she and Meia emerged into the courtyard to find Darius Allbright.

He was locked into a battle of his own.

Darius was *surrounded* by Shades. Dozens of Elderspawn pooled around his feet like schools of fish, clung to nearby walls, and dripped from the eaves. Elders of Urg'naut lumbered over them, watching the Knight-Adjunct with their overcast eyes.

White flashed against black as Darius resisted.

He had his sword raised, and it flickered brightly, burning against the encroaching shadows. As its light waxed, the Elderspawn backed off.

Then the sword would grow dimmer for a moment, and the Elders would take a step closer.

Shera and Meia needed no discussion to know what to do. Their Vessels had been made for this purpose, and they could not allow Urg'naut a host.

They waded in to break up the stalemate.

Shera spun, Bastion burning Elderspawn even as Syphren tore away their lives. The Veil thickened around them, weakening the Elders, and the

mist's power was concentrated in the blade of her right-hand shear. The touch of the blue blade was like poison, bursting Shades from the inside.

The green light Syphren drained fueled her, pushed her forward.

She had to reach Darius in time.

She'd made him a promise, but she had never intended to keep it. She had just wanted to reassure him. If *she* had been the one who might become the host to a Great Elder, she would have been relieved to hear that someone else would kill her.

Now she had to break Darius free of the Elderspawn before she had to fulfill that promise after all.

Meia had thrown herself onto the larger Elders, and though her Soulbound power was not specialized in destroying Elders, she was doing well enough with sheer physical strength. She tore strips of shadow away with her glowing orange blades.

Darius dropped to one knee.

His sword sagged. Its light weakened.

Shera was almost there.



I will not be your tool, Darius declared in his mind.

But he could feel himself weakening.

His body and mind were running out. His sword's light was little more than guttering embers now, and he wanted nothing more than to rest.

That was Urg'naut's promise: rest unending.

"Why not give in?" The Great Elder sounded genuinely curious. *"Annihilation comes for all things."*

In my body, you would be stronger. You would bring death to the world. I will not allow it.

That was his last source of strength. His cornerstone. No matter how weak he grew, no matter how easy it would be to give in, his surrender would mean the death of all things. How could he ever give up?

Urg'naut sighed. *"And what if I did not?"*

The world around Darius grew quiet. The battle overhead, the seething Elderspawn around him. He could hear only the cold wind of the void.

"I am not Kelarac. I see no value in...deals. Bargains. But when we merge, so will our desires. I wish to bring the end to far more worlds than this one. If the protection of this world is your final wish, then that desire will remain when we become one. We can leave this world behind us, whole and untouched, once we break free."

Darius' sword-hand fell. *How can I trust you?*

"Trust yourself. If your will is so strong, it will survive our union."

Darius could feel himself breaking.

When there had been no way out, he could have stayed strong. He might have dissolved into nothing, but he could have done so without giving in.

Now...there was one tiny spark of light he could cling to. Even if the shadow devoured other worlds, he could protect this one.

And this was *his*. As far as he was concerned, this was all of existence.

Urg'naut might speak of other worlds, but they had no meaning to Darius. This was all he'd ever known, and he had difficulty even conceiving of others.

If he could protect the world...then he'd done his duty.

A green light stabbed through the darkness around him.

His eyes snapped open and he saw Shera fighting next to him. She whirled as she advanced, shredding her way through living shadows, eyes filled with determination beneath her gray hood.

"Darius!" she shouted. "Stay right there!"

Inside the void that surrounded his face, Darius smiled.

He had fought to keep *her* from giving in to a foreign power taking over her mind as well, when he had tried to stop her from going mad and killing Magisters. What a twist of fate that now their positions would be reversed.

And that she, like him, would also fail.

Let them live, Darius thought.

As he gave in.



Shera had almost reached Darius when his light died.

It was like standing next to the birth of a tornado.

All the Elders of Urg'naut collapsed at once, melting into darkness and spinning around him in an instant cocoon. The wind of their motion shoved

Shera back so violently that she would have crashed into a nearby wall if Meia hadn't caught her.

Bastion's Veil, never touched by natural wind, was shoved away by the force of the Great Elder's will. The darkness covering the sky began pouring down into Darius' cocoon, like a river of ink funneling into a single bottle.

The white beam from Hightower continued blasting into the dark mass overhead and Jorin worked his sword furiously, unleashing his power fully now that Urg'naut's attention was focused elsewhere.

None of it stopped the process.

Despite the fear and reluctance of her Vessels, Shera channeled the life that she'd absorbed and pushed forward against the wind whipped up by the cyclone of shadow.

Forward, she urged herself. *One more step.*

She could do this. With Bastion to ward off the Elder's power and Syphren to tear through it, she could strike a blow to the Great Elder.

Urg'naut might recover, but it wouldn't be in her lifetime. And Darius wouldn't be his host anymore.

She was the only one who could do it.

Shera compressed the silver mist of Bastion's Veil, surrounding herself with it until it was almost liquid. Her steps became easier until she reached the actual spinning vortex of shadow around Darius.

Now it was Syphren's turn.

Jorin swooped down into the courtyard on his wood-and-paper wings. He must have seen her there, but he didn't hesitate to slash his sword down and send a wave of shadow blasting out.

That was good judgment. Shera approved.

Rather than saving herself, she struck at the same moment.

Syphren touched the dark tornado and it flashed with veins of green. The shear broke down the power of the Great Elder, absorbing a portion and turning the rest against itself. On the other side, Jorin's blow hit like a cannonball.

The cocoon around Darius vanished.

So did Jorin's attack.

So did the wind pushing Shera back.

With the force supporting her gone, Shera stumbled forward. She had only tasted a fraction of the energy in Urg'naut's defense, but it ran through

her veins like lightning. She raised her blades, ready to do battle.

A Great Elder stood before her in Darius Allbright's body.

Above him, the sky had brightened. It was fully blue except for the one crack off to the side. The sun was bright. All the nearby Shades had vanished.

Shera trembled.

Darius still wore the same silver-and-white armor he always had, but now wisps of shadow rose like smoke from its gaps. His sword lay at his feet, and his hood was gone.

The disc that had once concealed his face in darkness was now a sphere. It was not cleanly defined, but rather a ragged hole, a distortion in reality that led onto absolute black. His entire head was gone.

Urg'naut raised Darius' hands, flexing them, moving his fingers independently as though familiarizing himself with a body.

Shera struck.

Heedless of her own fear and the terror of her Vessels, she knew this was her only chance. Syphren had been invested to turn power against itself, so in theory, it should cut even a Great Elder. Jorin had theorized that she might be the only one alive besides the Regents who could threaten Urg'naut or Nakothi.

Urg'naut shifted his new body to face Shera.

She froze.

Syphren was lunging toward him, but her body froze up. She couldn't move another inch. It was as though he had bypassed her mind and reached her muscles directly.

Behind him, Jorin fell to the ground.

He landed in a crouch. Without his shadeglasses, his silver eyes gleamed like coins reflecting light.

"You were close," Urg'naut whispered, and Shera found that she couldn't tell who he was talking to.

"Then how about a little closer?" Jorin asked.

He tossed his sword aside and reached into his pockets.

His left hand emerged with a silver mirror and his right with a bottle of liquid that gleamed like a star.

Urg'naut shifted to face him and gestured as though brushing aside cobwebs.

The paving-stones between him and Jorin were erased in a blink. The wave of nonexistence was about to devour Jorin...but instead, his mirror flashed. It blackened and crumbled to pieces, but Jorin was unharmed.

A second later, the liquid in his bottle erupted in an explosion of golden light.

Rather than just filling the courtyard, the light expanded to envelop the entire Imperial Palace. It should have blinded Shera, but she found that she could see *more* clearly while covered in the gold aura. It swelled in a dome that stretched from ground to sky, an overwhelming aura that reminded her of the Emperor.

Whatever the Great Elder had done to her body, the golden light cleansed it. She staggered back, catching her breath.

Meia moved up next to her as the gold lingered on the air.

"Run," Meia whispered, grabbing Shera's arm.

Shera resisted.

Thanks to the power Syphren fed her, she was able to pull free of Meia's grip.

"Not yet," Shera said.

As she often did, she set aside her fear and her hopes for the future. She focused entirely on the mission. On the other side, Jorin lifted his sword.

Together, they dashed toward Urg'naut.

Who had taken not a single step.

"You must be smarter than this," the Creeping Shadow said.

He broke the corrosive aura surrounding Jorin's blade.

Shera froze again, an inch from Darius' chest. This time, her left hand trembled and seized, the muscles moving on their own.

Her Vessel fell from shaking fingers.

Syphren's power still ran through her, but she couldn't bend down to pick it up.

The Great Elder focused on Jorin, and though the air between them crackled with the clash of Intent, Jorin's silver eyes lost their luster. Blood ran from his nose. Slowly, he sank to his knees.

"Without the Emperor or his daughter, how will you oppose me?" He turned to Shera. *"How can you strike me when my attention is upon you?"*

"You must improve yourselves if you are to bring true death to my brothers."

Shera thought she must have misunderstood.

Was the Creeping Shadow *helping* them?

"We bring annihilation to all things," Urg'naut whispered. *"Including our own kind."* For a moment, the Great Elder shuddered as though fighting Darius' body.

"We...must leave...you intact. We are sorry that we cannot relieve your suffering. In return, you must annihilate my brethren."

For a moment, the sensation of Urg'naut's power weakened. It felt familiar.

Darius.

They were both there, simultaneously, layered on top of one another.

Somehow, that made it worse. She had expected this to be Urg'naut taking over Darius' empty body like a hermit crab, but he was still there. He could be aware. Suffering.

"When we take on human form, we are subject to human laws. Including death."

Urg'naut knelt to face Jorin, taking the Regent's chin in one gauntleted hand. *"Kelarac comes. Bring him the release of death. Bring..."*

The Great Elder trailed off.

Life had returned to Jorin's eyes. He looked to the side, staring into the distance.

A moment later, he stood and walked to the spot where Jorin had been staring. Urg'naut's empty darkness faced something Shera couldn't see.

"You were gone," the Great Elder said, and Shera thought she heard surprise in the tone. *"You became nothing. But they were not thorough. Pieces of you remain."*

He had stretched out Darius' arm, pointing into the corner of the courtyard. Away from Shera.

For which she was grateful, because her Vessels were screaming alarm. This time, Shera was the one pulling Meia away.

"His back is turned," Meia whispered when Shera seized her arm. "Can we—"

"No. It's too late."

This time, Shera was certain. If she had attacked while Urg'naut was unaware, she could have struck him down.

She had missed her chance.

And now the Great Elder was about to unleash his full power.

Syphren and Bastion screamed in Shera's mind as everything in front of Urg'naut's hand ceased to exist.

In an instant, Shera could see from that courtyard in the Imperial Palace to miles deep in the Aion Sea. The annihilation spread out in a wedge from Urg'naut's body, growing wider as it spread. It spread deep, revealing layers of pipes and ground beneath what had once been Capital streets, and it erased water so thoroughly that for a moment walls of ocean spread out on either side of bare seafloor.

Shera staggered. Syphren sensed lives vanishing in a moment.

Thousands upon thousands of lives.

An entire section of the Capital was gone. How much had it been? Ten percent? Twenty? She couldn't be sure, but the death toll was...staggering.

She had sent Gardeners to spread out among the city. How many Consultants had died?

And this was only the Great Elder's first blow. The rest would surely be worse.

Darius' hand lowered, and a moment later his body shuddered.

"We can save no more of you. The time has come to do battle with the Outsider." The black orb that was Urg'naut's head lifted up. *"Perhaps he will bring salvation to us all."*

The Aion Sea thundered back into place, filling in the wedge that the Great Elder had weakened.

And a column of darkness connected Urg'naut to the sky.

It stretched out, not perfectly straight, twisting toward the crack in space. His body lifted, rising in the center, and a moment later it pulsed with power.

That power struck the sky and more cracks crawled out from the first.

It was like watching glass break one hammer-tap at a time. In seconds, the Great Elder had struck the sky several times.

Like it was only an inverted bowl of blue crystal, the sky cracked further and further.

Finally, it broke completely.

Some jagged pieces of blue remained hanging from the ceiling of the world, but they were only patches of normality over an endless black.

The void was their new sky.

It was the home of the Elders that Shera had glimpsed before, a stretch of endless darkness filled with shivering spots of color like stars. It covered

the entire world as though an alien night had fallen.

Now, Shera could see the difference between those colored lights and real stars. One purple circle was nothing more than a circular window onto an amethyst city. A red spot flying in circles looked like a giant droplet of blood chasing its own tail, and a blue spot was a massive azure fist clutching something she couldn't make out.

It was as though someone had scattered handfuls of random, shining treasures throughout the night.

And one spot seized her attention, taking up the spotlight like the moon among stars.

It was a disc of blue light, much closer and brighter than any of the others. It seemed to be made up of every shade of blue all layered onto each other at once, and it looked so solid that she thought she could reach out her fingertips and touch it.

A man stood between the world and that disc of blue. He should have been hundreds, maybe thousands of miles away, but she could make him out clearly. It was as though distance had less meaning now, like physical rules had begun to break down.

He wore gleaming armor of head-to-toe black, and he clutched a matching scythe taller than his own body. Long, white hair streamed from his head, but he seemed young.

Or rather, ageless. Like a statue. His face was handsome but cold, distant. A king about to pass judgment.

Urg'naut ascended into the void to meet this stranger, the one he had referred to as the Outsider. A shadow stretched out from the Great Elder, slithering like a thousand dark snakes to cover up the colored lights in the background.

When the Creeping Shadow and the Outsider faced one another, their backdrop was only darkness.

Shera's Vessels both cried to her at once: *DON'T LOOK!*

She grabbed Meia's head and forced it down just as the celestial figures clashed in the void.

The entire world lit up bright white as the two exchanged blows, and Shera felt a strange pressure all over her entire body. The flash was like lightning, but instead of thunder, it filled the air with a crackling like a million snapping bones.

Shera brought her head up, still careful not to look into the sky, as Jorin limped over to them.

“Beat me like a kettle drum,” the Regent said hoarsely. “He was right after all.”

“Who?”

“The Emperor always said there were outsiders peeking in our windows, but I was never...well, I’m sure now, straight as a good road.”

He almost collapsed, but Shera caught him.

“Can he defeat Urg’naut?” Shera asked.

“The Great Elders truly slip their leash when they escape this world. They’re stronger than any of us can picture or imagine.” He leaned heavier on Shera. “But I don’t think it matters one bent bit who wins. If there’s one thing we know about the Outsiders, it’s that they are no friends of ours.”

Meia took Jorin’s other shoulder, and together they carried him away from the courtyard.

Shera thought back to the words of Urg’naut: “*Kelarac comes.*”

“What about Kelarac?” she asked.

Jorin chuckled humorlessly. He had left his sword behind him, and stone curled up as it dissolved beneath the blade. “I suppose we’d best greet him as best we can.”

Shera asked no more questions as she dragged the Regent from the battle they’d lost.

Toward the next hopeless fight.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Before the Elders, all men are allies.

—The Emperor

PRESENT DAY

LORELI SEIZED A MAN BY THE ARM AS HE FLEW PAST HER, HAULING HIM BACK down to the *Heart of the Aion*'s deck.

Above her, Urg'naut fought against an opponent of impossible power. The Emperor had warned her that there were people outside of the world they knew and had emphasized that they couldn't be trusted. She had never been sure.

Now she could see one of them for herself, could feel his power as he clashed against a Great Elder beyond the borders of existence. She finally believed, but it did not reassure her.

If these outsiders could fight against the Elders, why had they never helped? Why had no one saved them during the Elder War?

Why only now, at the end of the world?

Captain Marstrom gave a sharp whistle, stealing her attention. His hat was gone and he clutched the wheel like a drowning man. "Regent, please! We can't go any further!"

Everything flashed and the air crackled with a sound like seeds tossed into a fire. She looked around at the enraged seas.

Their ship had a huge gash in its hull. She had managed to patch it herself with all the spare planks and rope in their storage, but hope and Intent could only hold a Navigator vessel together for so long.

On their journey back, Elders had thrown themselves into her over and over as though they had a death wish.

She was exhausted, the crew were soaked and doing everything they could to keep the ship upright, and every blow from the heavens sent waves soaring.

She was desperate to get back to the Capital. Jorin needed her help. If she'd only *been* there, she would have been able to restrain her old enemy. Urg'naut would not have escaped with her on watch, and she cursed herself for her decision to leave.

Loreli had thought keeping all three Regents in one place would have been a strategic mistake, and the situation in Axciss had sounded urgent. But she had known too little about her enemy's intentions.

"No help is coming, Captain!" Loreli shouted back. "Together we hold your vessel, or together we swim!"

Marstrom said something under his breath that was probably a curse, but he went back to wrestling the wheel, and she could feel his Intent flowing throughout the ship.

Once again, she opened her Reading to the air around them. They should be within a day of the Capital, though now that Urg'naut had left, she couldn't feel anything from such a distance.

But no matter how tired she became, she tried to extend her senses out at least once an hour. There might be someone to help them, or someone they could help. She had yet to find anyone, or at least anyone still intact enough to be helped.

She had almost withdrawn her Reading when she felt something.

Loreli.

It wasn't her name, not quite. Another Reader was searching for her. Close by.

They had extended their senses much further than most could manage, but they were unsteady, as though they had heard of that technique but not quite mastered it. A Magister, perhaps.

It was the best news Loreli had heard in weeks.

She pointed, tapping into her Soulbound Vessel and making a light appear at the end of her finger so that Marstrom would notice. "Captain!

That way!”

“Where do you think I’m—”

“Adjust your heading, Captain!” The Reader was coming from the direction of the Capital, so they were almost directly ahead of Loreli, but not exactly. Every adjustment Marstrom could make might be the difference in reaching help before a crewman died.

Or reaching someone in distress before they were killed themselves.

Based on the distance and the chaos in the sea, Loreli had expected it to take at least an hour to reach the source of that Intent, but she caught a glimpse of something in only a few minutes. Between rising swells, she saw a giant pulling something behind him.

A wave blocked out the image again, and when it fell, the giant was much closer. It was a humanoid Elder chained to a dark green ship.

She lost vision again, and the third time she saw the ship, it was already upon them. The strangers had *eaten* the distance, and she couldn’t believe the speed the Elder had made through the ocean.

The creature spun to the right, bringing the ship alongside them. She could see the name burned into its side: *The Testament*.

The red-haired man at the helm met her eyes, and she knew the armor he wore. She had sensed its familiar presence from hundreds of yards away, though she hadn’t recognized the source until she saw it with her own eyes.

Calder Marten, the pretender to the throne, wearing the Emperor’s armor.

“Regent Loreli,” Calder shouted across the water. “Will you come with us?”

“We are all allies in the face of this greater threat,” Loreli called back. Which wasn’t exactly an answer.

She turned to Marstrom and asked him in a lower voice, “What do you know of him?”

“Over long distances, his ship is the fastest in the Guild,” the Captain said. “But I had no idea it was *that* fast. If you need to get back to the Capital now, you should go with him.”

Loreli nodded sharply and turned back to the “Imperial Steward.” “Do you have room on your ship for myself and eight others?”

“Regent,” Marstrom protested, “we will make it. I can’t abandon my Vessel.”

“Without my protection, you will more likely die out here.” She looked into his eyes, seeking a mutual understanding. “I have lost my Soulbound Vessel before. It is like burning away a part of your heart...but it is not worth dying for. We can come back for your *Heart of the Aion* later. I personally promise you a team of Readers to dredge the ocean floor.”

The wind and rain whipped Captain Marstrom as he looked to the faces of his crew.

Minutes later, Loreli and the entire crew boarded *The Testament*. Some wept, but Captain Marstrom kept pained eyes on his ship as it drifted into the distance.

To expedite the process as much as possible, Calder Marten had not only extended ropes and boards from his ship onto the other, but he himself had leaped from one deck to the next and picked up a man under each arm, jumping back.

She had never met him, but she was certain he had not been so strong before. Either he was under the effect of some kind of alchemy or he had been enhanced.

If they were to fight the Great Elders, she would accept an advantage anywhere she could find one.

“You don’t know how to put the sky back together, do you?” Calder asked from the wheel. It was the first thing he had said to her since she’d boarded.

Loreli walked up to join him. “Unfortunately, that’s not our most urgent concern.”

He looked to her, outwardly calm, but in the depths of his eyes and his Intent she could see more. He was holding himself together with sheer will. Dangling over a pit and hanging on by a thread.

She could understand that.

“And what could be more urgent?”

“The prison doors have been broken,” Loreli said. “And there are six prisoners still inside.”



When Shera finally dumped Jorin off and found her Gardeners, they had all gathered together, huddling by a window and muttering about the heavenly

battle warping the sky.

Something tight in Shera's chest relaxed. None had been lost. In fact, one more had joined them.

Kerian's shears had grown broader and shone deep blue. The blades undulated like waves, and as Shera walked into the room, the High Gardener was levitating a stream of water into a loop around her arm.

When Shera entered, the High Gardener let the water return to a nearby bottle. She bowed lightly. "Guild Head. I apologize for being late. And I regret to inform you that Dashen's Soulbinding was unsuccessful."

It took Shera a moment to remember who Dashen was. She ended up realizing that he must have been the final Gardener awaiting his Awakening alongside Kerian.

"Oh yes. Is he..." She was going to ask if he was alive before she spotted the man slumped in the corner, eyeing the Vessels of the others. A pair of shears were tucked into his belt.

"He's quite safe. The Awakening simply failed." Kerian snuck a glance outside. "Regent Loreli told us that the world is not ending, but we have been unable to learn anything further. Do you happen to know what's happening?"

Shera brightened. "Loreli? She's here?"

Something behind Shera caught the attention of all the Gardeners, who stood at attention and bowed. Shera turned.

"I am," Regent Loreli said as she entered the room.

She was dressed in her silver-and-white Luminian armor with her hair hanging in dozens of braids, as usual, but her expression was tight. She watched out the window. "We need you in the throne room, Shera. The battle isn't over."

If Urg'naut was to be believed, Kellarac was on his way.

Shera hoped that the Regents had a plan for dealing with him, because if he was on the same level as the Creeping Shadow, he might level the Capital on the way up.

But Shera didn't follow Loreli immediately. She was distracted by the woman at Loreli's side.

General Teach wore her own armor of red-and-black and had Tyrfang slung over her back. If not for those things, Shera might not have recognized her.

Her hair was glacial blue and hung down to her shoulders. Her skin was mottled shades of purple, and she looked thinner than she ever had, prowling into the room like a jungle cat.

When she caught sight of Shera, flecks of her eyes burned silver-white, and the room was filled with an actual *growl*.

Shera raised a hand. "Teach. You're looking...better."

"I'm glad to see you, General," Meia said softly.

Teach's eyes flicked to Meia and then returned to Shera. "Stop dawdling."

General Teach turned on her heel and walked out.

Loreli looked curious, but didn't ask any questions as they left. The end of the world put personal issues to the side.

"I guess this is a strategic meeting," Shera said. Teach had actually waited for them outside the room, taking the lead as Shera and Loreli walked side-by-side.

"We need a plan," the Regent responded. "If Kelarac is really on his way, we can't meet him here." She exhaled softly. "I don't know how we can do this without my father or Estyr."

Another of Shera's hopes crumbled away. "You couldn't heal Estyr?"

Loreli stopped in her tracks.

Shera stopped along with her and Teach turned, looking annoyed.

"...heal her?" Loreli asked. Her eyes were huge.

"Haven't you seen her?"

The expression on the Regent's face was answer enough.

"This way," Shera said. She directed them down a side hallway without checking to see if Teach was following.

Loreli walked so quickly that Shera had trouble keeping up. "I haven't spoken to Jorin, but I couldn't feel Estyr anywhere in the city when I returned. I just assumed she was gone."

"Not exactly."

They had moved Estyr back to the Imperial Palace after the Guild had left Rainworth. The facilities here were far more secure than the ones they had left behind, but even so, no one in the Palace had been able to restore the Regent of the North to her right mind.

Jorin had been adamant that there was only one person left to try.

When they arrived, the Imperial Guards had left their position and were staring out a nearby window. One had slumped against the wall with her

spear propped up nearby.

When they saw General Teach, they lit up. Her transformation didn't startle them—either news of her condition had spread while she was unconscious or the Imperial Guard weren't bothered at all by physical changes. Probably both.

They mobbed her, and Shera was reminded of dogs greeting a long-absent owner. Especially because one of them had a canine tail that was wagging furiously.

Teach halfheartedly tried to push them off while Loreli and Shera pushed into the unguarded room.

The next door was locked and chained shut, and only Jorin had the key. It fell apart to one slash of Loreli's sword.

She tore the doors open to see Estyr strapped to a bed. The Champion strained against thick restraints that looked like they were designed to hold bears. Three stone chests rattled in the corners of the room. They must have contained her Vessels.

Loreli's expression softened when she saw Estyr. She walked up to the side and placed her hand on the restrained woman's forehead. "Ssssh, Estyr, ssshhh. Come on back now."

A soft, soothing white-gold light seeped out from the White Sun hanging from Loreli's chest. It made Shera feel peaceful, safe, at home.

She backed up a step.

Estyr stopped bucking in the bed and slumped down, panting and sweating. Her eyes were still shut.

Her skin, ragged with scar tissue from burns, began to smooth out and clear up. Around the room, the stone boxes rattled harder and harder. Estyr frowned.

Loreli whipped around, her eyes flashing white. "You be *silent*."

The boxes instantly stopped shaking.

Outside, the sky flashed again. The air crackled and popped.

"We need you, Estyr. We need you. Kell'arack comes for us."

Estyr's eyes snapped open.

Loreli's white-gold light faded slowly, seeping into Estyr like rain into thirsty ground. Estyr looked to one restrained arm, then the other.

With no more effort than Shera would use to lift a spoon, she tore the restraints apart.

“Thanks for pulling me out,” she said to Loreli. Then she took a deep breath as though savoring the scent of the room. “...things went bad, did they?”

“Urg’naut escaped,” Loreli said softly.

Estyr padded over to the wall, resting her hand on it. After a moment, she said, “You all did well.”

When she lowered her hand from the wall, she walked past Shera, patting her on the shoulder as she did so. “Good job, Shera.”

“I failed,” Shera responded.

“Yeah, but your head was in the right place. Well done.” Estyr raised her foot and kicked the stone box open. It shattered and a hydra skull drifted out to float around her head.

She broke the other two boxes with a flick of her hand. The other two skulls joined the first.

“Now tell me, what did Urg’naut say to you?” she asked.

Jorin would surely tell everyone else, but Shera was prepared to share. “That the Great Elders are vulnerable in human form. They can be killed.”

Estyr chewed on her tongue for a moment, staring off into space as skulls drifted around her head. “That would explain some things.”

Loreli’s eyebrows raised. “You believe him?”

“No.” The doors crashed open. “I’ll believe when I see it for myself.”

She drifted out of the room. A black coat floated down the hall to join her, and she slid it on even as she flew.

General Teach and the other Guards scrambled to attention at the sight of her. “Regent,” Teach said with a bow.

Estyr glanced down at her. “Glad you’re finally on the right side. Take the lead.”

She would surely know the way through the Palace, but the General rushed out into the front, bulling her way to the throne room.

Though the divine battle continued to crash outside, Shera felt much more secure with Estyr Six at her side.

Jorin waited for them in the Emperor’s throne room, as were most of the Guild Heads.

He stood at the base of the throne wearing his usual ensemble of a jacket with far too many pockets, shadeglasses over his eyes, and wide-brimmed hat over his head. He didn’t look injured, but he was two shades paler than usual and he braced himself on a pillar.

Nathanael Bareius looked entirely unbothered by all of creation unraveling around him. His hair and glasses were equally slick and gleaming, and he sat at a collapsible stool and table filling out paperwork. Shera was certain that nothing he was doing was urgent; he just wanted to create the impression that he was too good to pay attention to the most dire crisis in living memory.

Standing opposite them were the Imperialists.

Bliss of the Blackwatch had her hands tucked into the pockets of her Blackwatch coat, pale hair falling straight down her back, and she glared at Bareius. She looked like she was holding herself—or maybe her Spear of Tharlos—back from murdering the Head Alchemist at any second.

Cheska Bennett of the Navigators rubbed at an eyepatch that Shera had never seen before. She must have lost or injured an eye in the fighting. Otherwise, she looked like she was dressed for gutter-fighting, with stained and rumpled clothes and an old bandana tying back her red hair.

Shera approved of the outfit as a disguise. It wouldn't look out of place in the poorer sections of the Capital.

Beside her was Calder Marten.

Shera stared at him.

Estyr and Loreli both glanced at Shera, no doubt picking up on changes in her Intent.

He wasn't wearing the Emperor's armor, but something he might have worn aboard *The Testament*: a brown jacket and white shirt appropriate for a ship's deck. He looked drained and haunted, but otherwise unharmed.

Syphren muttered in discontent.

Bastion writhed, eager to dispatch a servant of the Elders and an enemy of the Consultants.

Shera's mind was blank.

Impossible. It's impossible.

He was *dead*. Shera might have made many mistakes, but she would not mistake a corpse for a living man. Especially not with Syphren. She had *torn his life away*.

A chill passed through her.

Kelarac must have restored him to life.

Teach led the way into the room, saluting Jorin as she came close enough. "What is the plan, sir?"

Jorin turned in the direction of Shera and the other two Regents. “We’re still waiting on the last cards in our hand. Fortunately, we don’t have to wait long.”

Everyone turned to follow his gaze, including Calder.

Shera saw him swallow hard.

She had her hands on her shears. If the Regents hadn’t been present, she would have drawn blades and instantly returned this Elderspawn to the grave. In fact, she didn’t understand why Jorin hadn’t killed him already.

But now she didn’t have long to wait. Estyr raised a hand as though gripping something.

Calder lifted into the air, clawing at his throat and gasping. His feet left the tiles as he choked.

The heavenly battle outside the room crackled.

“What’s Kellarac’s bilge-boy doing here?” Estyr asked calmly. She was casual. In no rush.

The longer the conversation took, the faster Calder would die.

“I’m not so certain myself,” Jorin said, with no more urgency than Estyr. “Loreli?”

“Let him down!” Cheska Bennett cried. She hurried forward as though she had some way to stop Estyr Six, but she ended up freezing in her tracks.

Bliss scowled and withdrew a spear of yellowed bone from her pocket. It was far too long to have fit into her coat. “You should put him down so we can hear the charges against him. Otherwise I will be forced into combat against you.”

Estyr smiled. Calder’s legs kicked empty air and his face turned blue.

Then Loreli rested a hand on the other Regent’s arm. “He is tied to Kellarac,” she said, and Shera felt a vicious satisfaction. She *hadn’t* failed to kill him after all. A Great Elder had resurrected him.

“...but he isn’t controlled,” Loreli continued. “I investigated him closely.”

Another blow from the divine battle shook the room.

Estyr’s face was cold. “Kellarac has fooled us before. Better to be safe.”

“I am certain. I have thoroughly Read him, his ship, his crew, and his possessions. I will vouch that he is not a puppet, only a fool.”

“Impossible,” Shera said. She didn’t want to correct a Regent on the subject of the Great Elders, but she had personally stabbed the man in the back. “I killed him *myself*. He was dead.”

Loreli shook her head. “There is no time to explain, but I assure you he was not brought back to life by a Great Elder. He is himself. Now, Estyr, will you please release him?”

After a long, tense moment in which Calder spasmed and Shera secretly hoped he would die, Estyr finally lowered her hand.

He dropped to the floor, gasping like a drowning man. Cheska fell as well, the force holding her back vanishing. Bliss slipped the spear of bone back into her coat.

“Fine,” Estyr said, “but why is he here?”

Loreli glanced up at the ceiling. “Kelarac is on his way—”

“And possibly the others,” Jorin interrupted. “Five, if you count Ach’magut.”

Estyr shook her head. “We don’t. The Emperor dealt with him only a handful of years ago. He can’t pull himself together, even now.”

Loreli continued, “We know Kelarac is coming. Nakothi, Kthanikahr, Tharlos, and Othaghor are unknowns. With their prison weakened, any or all of them may have manifested earlier than they should have been able to. However, we have two advantages. First, as they have not fully recovered, they will be weaker than they were in our day.”

Bliss pushed down a lump in her coat. “Unless they enter human vessels.”

“Which brings me to our second advantage: we know their objective.” Loreli rested a hand on her sword as she turned to slowly regard everyone in the room. “They can’t possess just anyone, as we saw in the last war, and they must leave our world from this location. I thought that may have changed when the sky broke, but if that were the case, Kelarac would no longer be coming for us.

“They *have* to come here, and they will head straight for the human with the strongest connection to them. When we know who that is, we will have a significant opportunity.”

Calder Marten pounded on his chest and swallowed. When he spoke, his voice scraped out. “When they’re in human form, we can strike them down. For good.”

Shera frowned. How had he learned that?

He was telling them as though they didn’t know already, so he couldn’t have overheard Urg’naut. And he hadn’t been in the courtyard anyway.

He must have learned it from Kelarac. Why had Loreli cleared him?

Estyr lifted an eyebrow, clearly as skeptical as Shera felt. “And how do you know that?”

Under the scrutiny of everyone in the room, Calder’s jaw dropped. He looked genuinely astonished. “I *told* you. I sent messages. I sent messages to all of you!”

Bliss raised her hand like a girl in the schoolhouse. “He told *us* quite a while ago.”

Shera felt Jorin’s power stirring, and he pushed up his shadeglasses to hide his gleaming eyes. “Easy to blame silence on a missing messenger. I suppose you learned as much from Kellarac, did you?”

Calder’s eyes darted from face to face before he stabbed a finger at the ceiling. “From him! The man in the sky! I spoke to him!”

Absolutely not.

Shera didn’t believe him for an instant. Loreli and Jorin hadn’t even *believed* in the Outsider before they were faced with him. And yet Calder had spoken to him? Absurd.

But the three Regents glanced at one another and Jorin’s power calmed. Did they believe him?

“You really didn’t hear?” Calder asked.

He sounded...lost. Weary. Almost heartbroken.

Maybe it was just acting, but Shera was starting to consider that he might be telling the truth.

False lightning and thunder shook the air, and Estyr stepped forward. “Only one way to find out. We corner Kellarac. And we keep a tight grip on his host body.”

One and all, everyone in the room looked to Calder.

That worked for Shera. As far as they knew, he was the living human with the strongest connection to Kellarac.

The solution was clear, and she said it aloud: “We should get rid of him now. Take him away from Kellarac.”

Even if they could kill Kellarac after he slipped into human flesh, it was better to minimize risk. Killing him for a few decades or centuries wasn’t as good as killing him permanently, but it was better than letting him destroy the Capital.

The look in Calder’s eye hardened, and he clenched a fist.

She prayed he would make a move for her. She wouldn’t make the same mistake twice. This time, she’d leave him in so many pieces that even the

Dead Mother couldn't stitch him back together.

Cheska Bennett was in no better mood. "Look at you, so eager to sacrifice someone else."

"If a Great Elder wants me, kill me," Shera responded easily.

One life to stop a Great Elder? That was the easiest sacrifice she could imagine.

Cheska bristled. "Easy for—"

"Shut up," Estyr interrupted. "Kelarac's coming here. He is..." She closed her eyes briefly, then opened them again. "...very close. Perhaps a day away. We can use that against him, but none of the others are close enough for me to detect."

"Kthanikahr and Othaghor will be harder to host than a Champion dance party," Jorin said, adjusting his hat. "No human wants to give up their body to those grave-bugs. Nakothi, I'm sure, has choices from here to Axciss."

Loreli stared out the window. "And we know Kelarac will have a backup plan. Most likely a series of them. As for Tharlos..."

Bliss straightened. "If Tharlos has a better host than me, I would be very surprised. And I do not like surprises." She surreptitiously pushed her pocket down, where the Spear of Tharlos was straining to escape.

"With a coordinated, unified assault, I believe we could defeat any Great Elder alone in their current state," Loreli continued. "We know where they're headed, and we have to assume they're all moving with urgency as Kelarac is."

Another blow was struck in the void above them, leading to a flash of light and a crackling sound filling the air.

Shera's Vessels both communicated anxiety, which suited Shera just fine. She was anxious herself. It was hard to stand around talking as reality crumbled.

"If they take their time," Loreli went on, "they could easily move together and defeat us, but their history and our circumstances suggest they won't. So we prepare for Kelarac."

As Shera remembered her showdown with Ach'magut, she and her Vessels all trembled.

Kelarac.

Urg'naut had suggested that she could strike a blow against a Great Elder in human form, but was that true?

As Estyr had said, there was only one way to find out.

As though responding to Shera's thoughts, Estyr spoke. "We'll fight him on the sea. Our battle with Kellarac last time destroyed a chain of islands. If we fight him in the Capital, there won't be a city left afterwards. Fortunately, he *should* be weaker this time. We face him with our combined might, get rid of him quickly, and then regroup in case we have to face another fight."

Teach stepped forward. It was strange to see her hesitant at all, but especially now, in her savage new purple-and-blue form. "Pardon the interruption, Regents, but what happens to us afterwards? The sky is still open."

And that's the winning question, Shera thought.

Not only did the Great Elders have a chance to escape while the sky remained open, but judging by the strange things she'd seen in the void, they might face attacks from *others* of their kind. The sky had to be restored.

Estyr spoke with confidence that Shera suspected may have been mostly pretense. "When the air is as clear of Elder Intent as we can make it, I will sit in the Optasia and try to talk to him myself. Defeating the Elders will make it safer for me and will show him we can take care of ourselves."

"Kiss a penny and make a wish, but we think it might be an advantage to beat them first." Jorin didn't bother even to fake confidence. "*Someone* up there is fighting Urg'naut, and we're hoping they might decide to reach in and help us out."

"Don't count on it," Calder Marten said.

He sat heavily, staring into the distance as though in the depths of despair, and Shera remembered her impression of the man in the sky. He had gripped his dark scythe and looked down at them as though surveying a field of ripe wheat.

And what would Shera do if her prison full of dangerous Elders was about to break open?

She would burn it all to the ground.

"He's here to put us down, isn't he?" she asked.

Calder looked up at her, and she thought he registered surprise. "He says that if it looks like the Great Elders are going to escape, he'll destroy everything. The entire world."

That made sense to Shera. *If* they assumed everything about the Outsider and the nature of their world was accurate. She still wasn't sure.

Either way, it didn't change what they had to do.

Bliss tilted her head like a bird. "Urg'naut already made it out. Do you think it's too late?"

That was Shera's question as well.

"We can do nothing but hope it isn't," Estyr said. "We beat Kellarac, then if the air is clear enough, we use the Optasia. If not, we keep beating down Elders until it works."

Bareius tapped a stack of papers into line, drawing Shera's attention to him.

It was a shame. She'd almost forgotten he was there.

"So we sail off into the sea to fight...all four remaining Great Elders?"

"Only Kellarac for certain," Loreli said.

He gave her a skeptical look. "Do you think that's a winning strategy?"

The Regent would have been well within her rights to scorch him down to the bone for that tone. Shera hoped to see it.

Instead, she responded more gently than he deserved. In the tone of one quoting, she said, "We will fight until we can no longer lift our arms, and then we will pick up swords in our teeth and continue fighting. To our last breath and beyond, we will give no ground to the Elders."

"To our last breath," muttered Jorin, Estyr...and Calder.

All together.

He had joined in with the Regents as though it was only natural for him to do so, but he didn't look as pretentious as he had before. He looked haunted. Throughout this entire exchange, since his resurrection or whatever had happened to him, there had been a darker edge to him.

Even with the reassurance of the Regents, Shera started to suspect that he really *had* seen death.

"Even if we beat him now," Calder said heavily, "he'll come back."

Shera saw where he was going immediately. She was surprised. And somewhat impressed.

Of course, it could still be a trick.

Estyr gave a quick nod. "That's the fight."

"But there is a way out." He looked up and met Shera's eyes. "When the battle begins, stay next to me."

So he really did intend to sacrifice himself to kill Kellarac. Good for him.

Of course, if this was a trap, Shera now had her own contingent of Soulbound to back her up. Soulbound that Calder knew nothing about.

She nodded. Either his plan worked and killing him would kill Kellarac, or he betrayed her and she killed him anyway.

Win-win.

Cheska Bennett looked into his eyes and Bliss grabbed his arm.

“What stupid plan is this?” the Navigator asked.

“I don’t like what you’re saying. Say something else,” the Watchman commanded.

Shera wondered what he’d done to make the other Guild Heads care at all whether he lived or died.

He did belong to both of their Guilds, she thought. Maybe he was a hard worker.

But he clearly wasn’t persuaded. “The next time Kellarac offers me a deal, I’m going to accept.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

PRESENT DAY

THE FIRST CHALLENGE IN THEIR WAR AGAINST KELARAC WAS FITTING EVERYONE aboard Navigator ships.

The entire fleet had been recalled to the Capital over the course of the last week or two, which Cheska Bennett pretended had been in anticipation of this exact crisis.

Consultant intelligence determined that to be a lie. She had gathered her Guild's strength to oppose the Independents.

But there were still only a few dozen ships in all the Empire capable of traveling the deep Aion. Navigator ships were almost always small, requiring only a Soulbound captain and a skeleton crew.

As a result, the army they brought to Kellarac could number only in the hundreds.

The Guilds sent their best combatants, but it was still a tough competition to decide who would go and who would be left behind.

While Shera and the rest of the mortals crammed as many allies on their ships as possible, the Regents made their own preparations.

Loreli spent her time with the Luminians, and Shera couldn't be sure if she was motivating them, directing their strategy, or standing around in a circle and praying. Whatever kept her power in the best shape was fine with Shera.

Jorin stayed underfoot on the Consultant ship, *Bastion's Shadow*. He had taken over the captain's cabin for himself, and instead of directing the Guild

efforts, he was chugging potions to try and get himself back to one hundred percent.

Or, as he put it, “To hone his fangs to points.”

Unlike the other two Regents, Estyr made her preparations in full sight of everyone. She had unearthed a set of armor that resembled the Emperor’s.

But instead of white, hers was jet-black.

She hovered over the Capital, the only hallmark of her identity the three reptilian skulls floating around her helmet. When she spread her hands wide, the entire city shook.

And from the ground, beneath Imperial parks and nature preserves and other restricted areas, spikes of iron the size of towers began to drift into the sky.

An armored Estyr Six flew over to Candle Bay followed by a procession of seven enormous iron nails. Shera didn’t need to be an expert in Imperial history to suppose these might be the original inspiration for the seven spikes of the Blackwatch.

Estyr drifted over *Bastion’s Shadow*, the spikes blotting out the light that spilled from the void overhead. She tilted her visor up to regard Shera. “Tell Jorin his time’s up. We’re leaving.”

Shera pointedly looked her up and down and then moved her gaze to the giant spikes. “Are you sure you need the rest of us?”

“Tell you what, we can trade jobs. *You* fight Kelarac and *I’ll* kill Calder Marten when the time comes. Or if he gets out of line.”

“No way. I’ve got the fun part.”

As the Regent drifted off, Meia stepped up behind Shera. “I’ve taken a look at their ship,” she muttered. “They’re definitely prepared, but we shouldn’t have to worry about them until our way back.”

It took Shera a moment to remember what Meia was talking about. That was life with the Consultants: secret plans on top of secret plans.

“Oh good. We’ll just take care of Kelarac first.”

Only once Estyr left did the alchemists approach.

Their ship was by far the biggest in the fleet—a metal monstrosity that dwarfed *Bastion’s Shadow*. The name painted on the side declared the ship *The Final Solution*.

Bareius himself walked up to the edge of the deck and raised a captain’s horn. “Ahoy, Shera! I hope you don’t mind, but we thought we’d *shadow*

you on this mission. Don't mind the pun. Is that a pun? Furman, is that a pun?"

His assistant stepped up and adjusted his glasses, muttering something to his boss.

"Wordplay then. The point is, we're here to help in your most vital mission. Now, Shera, before we depart, I thought I'd make you an offer."

A Shepherd handed Shera a captain's horn of her own, and Shera sighed as she lifted it to her lips. "Is this really the time?"

"Why not? We're all waiting around for clearance, aren't we?"

Shera supposed that was true. The drifting alien sky and the crackling sounds of reality crumbling around them were keeping everyone's edges sharp, but the fact remained that the fleet couldn't leave until everyone was ready.

"Very well. I decline your offer."

Shera handed her horn back to the Shepherd.

Yala snatched it up, wearing her iron glare. "*Listen* to him, Shera. This is your job."

Shera resisted the urge to hurl the horn, and maybe Yala, overboard. "There is no point to this. You know that."

"Situations are always evolving. He could make this beneficial for the *Guild*."

Reluctantly, Shera took back the horn.

"Ah, I see that High Councilor Yala has convinced you to listen to reason! Very good." The Head Alchemist's smile beamed. "I would like to hire your entire Guild, open contract, for the duration of one year. Every single Consultant."

As everyone else on the deck of *Bastion's Shadow* stumbled to a halt, Shera stared at Bareius, trying to divine his intentions.

What was he doing?

Why now?

"Of course, any tasks the Regents require of you take priority. I would never dream of interrupting you, Regent Jorin."

Jorin emerged from the cabin behind Shera. His jaw was clenched tight, but there was far more color in his skin than before, and his stride was strong.

He raised a hand to greet Bareius. To Shera, he spoke almost without moving his lips. "You have his reins?"

Shera made sure her captain's horn was too far away to pick up her words. "Tightly in hand."

He gave one sharp nod. Wood-and-paper wings spread from his back and he took off after Estyr.

"Busy man," Bareius called. "Anyway, Shera, I can't think this is a bad deal for you. I would certainly like it to improve our working relationship."

Yala spoke low and urgent into Shera's ear. "We should consider this. A year of employment is nothing to toss aside. And who knows what can happen after a year?"

On her other side, Kerian's words were more careful. "That's not untrue, but it is difficult to enter into a contract with someone we know we can't trust."

"I will need time to consider," Shera called halfheartedly.

Bareius' smile took on a sharp edge as though he knew something she didn't. "Of course," he said. "Take your time."

Shera now had one more reason to look forward to the end of this battle: so that she could deal with Bareius.

When the fleet finally departed, Calder Marten's ship stayed in the middle. It was the job of the Consultants to stick close enough to him to get their Gardeners in position, so Meia used her Soulbound powers to keep an eye on *The Testament*.

Meanwhile, *Bastion's Shadow* sailed along at the back of the formation. The captain wanted enough room to maneuver to unexpected variables.

The Final Solution shadowed them the entire trip.

The sky flashed. Ahead of them, the ocean boiled. She had just caught a glimpse of an army of Elderspawn in the distance when *Bastion's Shadow* shuddered.

And began to slow.

Shera turned, not to the captain, but to Meia. "What is this?"

Meia looked even more alarmed. She shut her eyes and drew her shears; the orange eyeballs on the blades shone brightly. "I promise you, he's not... oh no." Suddenly she raised her voice. "Alchemical fire in the hold!"

Anger reared up in Shera, violent and ugly, catching her off-guard. She hadn't expected to be this furious.

But she also hadn't expected Bareius to be this stupid.

Shera rounded on Kerian. "How did we not catch this?"

“We caught the trap he placed on the rudder, the saboteur he embedded in the crew, and the charges he left on the ocean floor.” The High Gardener looked baffled. “He must have had a *fourth* redundant plan. A launcher aboard his own ship, maybe?”

The culprit walked up to the edge of the railing again. “I apologize, but I’m afraid I’m not as patient as I seem.”

Meanwhile, the rest of the Navigator fleet grew more distant by the second.

The Regents were flying at the front, their attentions focused on the enemy. *Bastion’s Shadow* and *The Final Solution* had been the last two ships to leave. Even if someone noticed them missing, no one would return to help.

Shera extended a hand and her captain’s horn was placed in it. She raised it again. “This is a strange time to commit suicide, Bareius.”

His glasses caught the light from the heavenly strikes overhead. “You know, the Consultants always talk like they have monopoly on information. As though you know *everything*, and everyone else knows *nothing*. Well, I’ve done some research of my own, and do you know what I’ve found?”

“No one wants you in charge, Shera. No one trusts you. Not even those closest to you.”

There came a sharp prick at the side of Shera’s neck as a needle entered. Instantly, she slumped down.

From the deck, she looked up at the black-clad people looking down on her. Even Kerian and Meia glanced at her and back up.

Yala returned her packet of needles to her pocket and took over the captain’s horn. “I take it you have no problem endorsing me as Guild Head?” she demanded.

Bareius let out a laugh. “You have no idea how to savor a moment, do you? To the end, her face never changed.”

When Yala didn’t respond, he finally waved a hand. “Yes yes, you know I’ll support you. Now we’re extending a ramp. We have space for you all and we should be able to catch up soon.”

Yala lowered her captain’s horn and spoke into the shadow of the deck. “Is that good enough?”

The twin Witnesses, Azea and Calazan Farstrider, took their hands away from their candles and nodded in unison.

Now, what they were about to do to Bareius would have full justification. He had made legal preparations implicating the Consultants in the event of his assassination.

Otherwise Shera would have killed him a long time ago.

Shera rose, placing fingers to her tender neck and wincing.

There had been no poison on the needle, but Yala didn't *have* to stab her. She could have faked it.

"What is this?" Bareius asked. He still hadn't seen the Witnesses, and he seemed more disappointed than anything. "You know, that was... pathetic. You deceived me for what, two seconds? I'll have to take more direct action. Furman, launch the—"

"Furman," Shera interrupted. "Time to come home."

This had taken too much time already. There were other steps to the plan, but she was skipping straight to the point.

So Furman the Mason, who had been in position for ten years, slit his employer's throat.

It was somewhat odd, seeing someone kill their twin. And Masons were usually not employed for assassinations; they often became attached to their subjects.

That had never been a problem for Furman. He shoved Bareius down to the deck with a smile on his face.

On cue, a series of smaller explosions rocked *The Final Solution* as the ship was disabled from within by the alchemical munitions they had planned to launch on *Bastion's Shadow*.

They wouldn't sink the ship; most alchemists were blameless in this.

The explosions would only cripple the ship, leaving it helpless for their return.

Neither Shera nor the other Consultants had ever expected Bareius to launch these preparations on the way *to* a battle with Kelarac. They had also never expected him to have a fourth, secret plan to disable their ship.

He had repeatedly assured Furman that he was going to wait until the battle was over.

It seemed his ambition had outweighed his self-preservation.

Before he was captured by his fellow alchemists, Furman executed a perfect swan dive over the edge. He had likely intended to swim over, but he was caught midair by a cloud of shining purple butterflies.

"Well done, Mason," Yala said as he was carried over the side.

Furman adjusted his glasses. “Not a problem, High Councilor. He was the most irritating human being I have ever encountered. But what are you going to do with him now?”

Back over on *The Final Solution*, Bareius stood up and gasped for breath.

After years of fleeing Bliss of the Blackwatch, Bareius’ protections against assassination had reached truly paranoid levels. Even with Furman feeding them information, they had not been able to determine a way to definitely kill Bareius short of Shera tearing out his life with Syphren. The man drank a regeneration elixir with every meal.

“We traded him,” Shera said, turning back to the captain. “We’ve lost too much time, Captain. Catch us up.”

Furman’s eyebrows lifted. “If he survives, he will make a...tenacious enemy.”

“We sent his escape plan to Bliss.”

“Oh,” Furman said. “Very good, then.”



Bastion’s Shadow approached a scene of such chaos that it was difficult to unravel the details.

First, the sky had been reduced to shards of normal blue between an infinite void, where a battle raged that couldn’t be comprehended by the human mind. Shera had to keep from looking up, and even so, she fought back a headache whenever Urg’naut traded blows with the Outsider.

The world flashed as they struck one another, the air crackled, and if Shera looked any closer, she risked losing her reason.

That was only the backdrop for the earthly battle. The ships of the Navigator fleet were scattered, individual spots of color amidst a raging sea. The water rose in peaks as though whipped by a fierce storm, though *Bastion’s Shadow* sailed over only mild chop.

Around the Navigators, the water boiled with Elderspawn.

They crawled up over some ships, gnawing through the hulls of others. Shera couldn’t make out the details of the tiny creatures even with a spyglass; to her they looked like ants emerging from the water to swarm over the corpse of a bigger animal.

But they had larger cousins. Real Elders. Those she could see all too clearly.

A tube-shaped creature chewed on an entire ship with its wide circular maw filled with teeth. She would call it a worm if it weren't so bulbous and fat. A massive, muscled humanoid fish-creature—similar to the one bound to Calder Marten's ship—slapped cannonballs out of the air as they were fired by a ship that left a fiery trail on the water.

Finally, the actual monster tied to *The Testament* wrestled with a kraken.

The Elder was manacled to the bottom of Calder's ship, as it always had been, and it already looked bloody and wounded. The creature was wrapped in tentacles, and it roared to reveal a mouth full of triangular teeth. As it did, it shoved the kraken beneath the waves. A giant squid could surely breathe underwater, but otherwise she might have thought it was drowning its enemy.

The captain of *Bastion's Shadow* had already spotted *The Testament* and was changing their heading accordingly, but Shera was more concerned about the battle in the background. The *real* battle.

Behind everything else, the three Regents fought Kellarac.

Shera's view was obscured by distance and disorder, but she saw enough of Kellarac to identify him. A shark's fin taller than the mast of a ship jutted out from above everything else, and his massive bulk reminded her of an island.

Kellarac had the form of a shark with hide resembling stony, pitted skin. A rusted steel blindfold was bolted to his face.

Shera had seen a shark similar to him before, in a vision that the Emperor had shared with her through the Optasia. That fish had been smaller than this one—though still the size of a ship—and had no blindfold. Had it been Kellarac himself, in a reduced form? Had she been present when the Emperor faced down a Great Elder?

Well, I'm definitely here this round.

In her black armor, Estyr Six hovered in the air over Kellarac. She launched one of her massive iron spikes with such force that Shera heard the crack of it tearing the air a second later.

She was either levitating the other two or they had their own methods of flying, because the other Regents flew at her side. Jorin swept his sword down, hurling a wave of corruption, and Loreli surrounded them all in a protective bubble of white light.

Kelarac did not fight in a way that Shera would have expected from his form. He seemed to simply be circling the water beneath them as a storm of weapons fought the Regents on their own.

Titanic, semi-transparent chains erupted from the ocean, knocking Estyr's iron spike aside. Jorin's attack vanished into a tiny spot that Shera couldn't quite make out, but if she squinted into her spyglass, she thought the spot might have been a jar that swallowed Jorin's power.

A double-bladed axe the size of a full-grown man slid out of the void above Loreli, shining sickly green. It crashed down onto her barrier and split it into two halves.

All in all, the closer Shera's ship drew, the more she began to feel like they were sliding straight into a nightmare.

"Light and life," Meia whispered. "What can we do?"

Shera, as was her habit, set aside her fear. Her unease. All her uncertainties about the future.

She had a mission.

"We can kill Calder Marten," she said.

She unleashed Bastion's Veil.

The mist pushed into the army of Elderspawn, shoving many of them back and leaving others confused. She could feel some of the weakest fleeing for deeper waters, and the silver-blue mist pressed against the larger Elders, weakening them.

But it alerted them too.

Shera could see very little with her eyes, but through the Veil, she saw the Elder with the circular mouth stop chewing. It let half a ship fall to splash in the ocean and turned toward them, shooting through the water with surprising speed.

"Elder incoming!" Shera and Meia shouted at the same time.

More helpfully, Meia also lit up the mist with a floating orange eye in the direction of the Elder. She pointed. "Mark!"

"Gardeners," Shera called. "Your turn."

Shera was saving her concentration and her stamina for maintaining Bastion's Veil and killing Calder Marten. She hadn't been able to witness her small army of new Soulbound fight the Elders Urg'naut.

Now the time had come for them to prove their worth.

The circular mouth, bigger than their ship, erupted from the mist with a roar that sounded like a thousand saws chewing through wood at once. It

loomed over them, teeth spinning, bringing with it a stench like a thousand open graves.

The monster was met by two firing cannons, a sapphire spear, a jet of pressurized water strong enough to slice through steel, a crimson flame, a flock of purple butterflies, and Meia.

She shot off from the deck, slashed the creature a dozen times while weaving through friendly fire, and then leaped back to the ship.

She even backflipped in the air, which Shera thought was showing off.

The Elder quivered. Its body slowed.

Only then did it fall into a thousand bloody chunks.

Shera wasn't sure whose Soulbound power caused the delay, but it was a nice touch.

As a rule, Consultants didn't cheer, but the sound that rose from the group was definitely approving. Shera suspected they had almost as many combat-capable Soulbound on this one ship as the rest of the fleet had combined.

Through Bastion's Veil, Shera caught sight of *The Testament*. They were close.

And...was that *Jyrine Marten* on the deck?

She wore a long golden dress, her hair tied back into a single braid. Her emerald Soulbound Vessel, once mounted in an earring, was now embedded directly into the center of her forehead. She looked healthy, confident, and deadly.

Calder stood in the Emperor's armor with his helmet off, red hair sweaty and bare to the air. Giant worms squirmed over the deck, as did what had probably *been* giant worms very recently. The wood was a slick mass of dark gore.

Calder held his orange Awakened blade and stood at the edge of the deck, back to his wife, looking down into the ocean.

For a moment, Shera wondered if she had been played again. If Bareius and Calder Marten and Jyrine had all planned this together, delaying Shera long enough that Calder could meet up with his wife and betray them to the Elders.

If Calder took one more step, he would go down to Kellarac.

Bastion's Shadow loomed close, but not so close that Shera could make the jump. She gestured to Meia, urging her to close the gap first...

...until Calder turned and faced his wife.

Jyrine responded with a thin stream of green fire, and Shera changed her mind.

“Meia,” Shera asked, “can you carry me over from here?”

Rather than responding, Meia scooped her up beneath one arm. It would be hard to maintain the element of surprise, but Jyrine was carving the Emperor’s armor off Calder in pieces. Clearly she wasn’t trying to *kill* Calder, or she would have aimed for his head. She was trying to leave him vulnerable to Kellarac.

That was exactly what Shera was here to prevent.

Just as Meia was about to leap over from one ship to another, she froze. Evidently, with her Soulbound power, Meia saw the same thing that Shera did.

Calder’s figure blurring as he closed the distance between him and his wife, slamming his fist into her ribs in a punch that sent her rolling across the deck like a tumbleweed.

Shera hadn’t even seen him don his helmet, but he wore it. Now he marched on Jyrine like a faceless titan, driving his sword into her shoulder.

“I didn’t know he had it in him,” Meia said. She sounded impressed.

Shera tapped her on the elbow, reminding Meia to release her. “Looks like we can take it slow. Benji, can you lift me over?”

Benji was waving his hand through the cloud of purple butterflies in irritation as though trying to shoo them away. “Yes,” he admitted.

“...then do it.”

He sighed but agreed.

Although, as Shera was carried over a stretch of Elderspawn-filled waters carried by a flock of brightly colored butterflies, she *did* see Benji’s position. This would not be the most dignified way to travel.

It was effective, though, and that was what mattered.

Shera set down on the stern railing, her figure concealed by Bastion’s Veil. Her vision through the mist and Syphren’s sense of everyone’s presence helped keep her oriented as she moved herself, creeping along the deck.

When she checked on Calder Marten again, he had ripped his wife *apart*.

She was bleeding from a dozen wounds, the most grievous of which was a slash across her face that tore her mouth and nose in two.

She begged for mercy, and Shera braced herself for Calder to grant it. He was going to let her live, and then Shera was going to have to finish the job herself. She drew her shears.

Calder stomped Jyrine straight through the railing.

The wood splintered, his wife fell through, and the body made a splash as she hit the water.

In the mist, Shera froze. His extraordinary strength and speed were new—they had to have something to do with the way he had survived Syphren. Alchemy of some kind, she was sure.

But more than that, she was shocked by his sudden and decisive brutality. If he had always been so heartless, he would have been a far more frightening enemy.

Then again, Shera would have had an easier time understanding his motivations. She might have liked him more.

She sheathed her shears and settled down to watch, but she was sure her job was over. Calder had resisted the call of the Great Elder.

Maybe they could reach an understanding after all.

The other three members of Calder's crew made their way onto the deck, trading comments and picking their way through worm pieces, but Shera didn't listen. The Regents seemed to have Kelarac under control, after which they only had to clean up the remaining lesser Elders. They were almost safe.

Then a deep masculine voice echoed in Shera's mind.

It laughed and laughed until laughter was all she could hear. The water around them began to shine green, and Shera dashed to the railing, looking down.

The water beneath them was glowing and spinning as though they floated at the center of a whirlpool, but the ship remained still. Shera cast her mind out through Bastion's Veil and looked to the Regents.

Kelarac's stone shark form was crumbling. Pieces fell off into the ocean as he dissolved to rock and sand, his laughter echoing in the hearts of men. He disintegrated in seconds, and the last thing to fall was his steel blindfold. It kicked up a huge wave as it hit the sea.

Then a beacon of green light shone from beneath the ship, and something else drowned out the Great Elder's laughter in Shera's mind: her Vessels.

They spoke in unison, delivering her an impulse that needed no translation.

FLEE.

Jyrine's body rose from the Aion Sea, her gold dress spotless and even more ornate than before, her flesh whole.

But Jyrine wasn't the one wearing that body anymore.

Invisible power crashed against Bastion's Veil, breaking Shera's vision and dispersing the mist like a strong wind. She got a taste of the Intent that opposed her: it was bottomless, infinite, unfathomable greed.

She dropped to the deck, trembling, praying not to be noticed as Kellarac hovered over the deck in Jyrine Tessella Marten's flesh.

Kellarac smiled through Jyrine's lips, revealing a mouth full of yellow shark's teeth. "This body *barely* passes muster...but any port in a storm, as they say. And neither of us are willing to let you go."

Kellarac wore gold rings on every finger and layers of jeweled necklaces. Jyrine's face was covered from nose to hairline with a polished steel plate, the very center embedded with the most impressive jewel of all: her emerald Soulbound Vessel.

He continued speaking, but Shera noticed what he hadn't: a pile of wood that had once been a ship levitating before Estyr Six. The Regent gestured, and the wooden missile struck like a fist from heaven.

The Testament buckled under the impact, knocking Shera from her feet, but she used the motion to roll and grab the railing.

She looked up, hoping to see that Kellarac had been knocked off *The Testament's* deck.

Only to realize that the Great Elder *had* noticed the attack after all.

He burned through the wood with green fire. Both halves of the wrecked ship slid away from him to either side, charred in the middle.

But Estyr had arrived. She followed her first attack with another of her iron spikes, a divine spear descending in judgment.

The hand of a bronze titan reached up from the depths and caught it midair.

A moment later, the statue at the end of that arm rose from the water. It was a giant that loomed over all the ships, and it was made in the image of a woman with a long coat and a crown of reptilian skulls.

Shera's heart sank. She recognized the statue.

Years ago, the Emperor had taught her some precautionary tales of those who had dealt with Kellarac. One particular example involved the Four Protectors of Beldin, ancient bronze statues of the four Regents. They were crafted by Soulbound and invested by the Emperor himself to defend Beldin, a city in the region of Erin, but the city leaders had become so afraid of Elder attacks that they had sunk the statues down to Kellarac in a bargain for peace.

In seeking defense, they had traded away their only protection.

The Emperor had personally executed them all.

All the Emperor's stories, it seemed, ended in mankind doing something foolish.

So Shera knew that not only were these statues meant to defend against the possible rising of a Great Elder, but they had also been sunk thousands of miles from here. Kellarac had somehow transported them here.

And this was the statue of Estyr Six.

There were three more.

Sure enough, Jorin's effigy soon joined Estyr's with bronze sword in hand, hat on his head, and glasses over his eyes. Followed by Loreli in her armor and her braided hair, then a squat man with a tall staff. Alagaesus.

Four bronze Regents rose to face their living counterparts.

Calder rushed at Kellarac below as the Regents joined battle against the statues. Alagaesus' giant staff crashed through *The Testament's* mast, sending it crashing down next to Shera even as the representation of Jorin's sword met the real thing.

The noise, chaos, and impact on the boards deafened Shera. She was drowning in a battle that was too overwhelming to fully process.

So she shut it out.

She dove into the ice, letting all her disorientation and her fear freeze over. She had never been so grateful not to feel as deeply as others did.

Because *she* could keep her eye on the goal.

She had come here to kill Kellarac's vessel, and that was what she intended to do.

She levered herself over the railing, holding on and sliding slowly down the side. The wood bucked beneath her hands, threatening to spill her into the wall, but from this angle she couldn't be spotted.

Slowly, just a little at a time, she began feeding more power into Bastion's Veil.

Kelarac had broken the mist on his arrival, and he could do it again... but he would have to spend his attention to do so. She was betting he wouldn't distract himself. And the cover the Veil provided could mean the difference between a successful attempt on his life and throwing Shera's own life away.

Her mind flashed back to the last time she had crawled up the side of *The Testament* to assassinate a target. Not so long ago, in the grand scheme of things.

It felt like a decade.

Lucan had been alive. Shera hadn't been a Soulbound. There had been no Guild War. She had never lost control and killed a Guild Head.

The Elder bound to the bottom of *The Testament* loomed over Shera, dripping water onto her like rain, and for one instant she thought it was going to tear her apart.

Instead, it clapped a massive palm down onto Kelarac.

Shera was almost jostled loose, but her most notable emotion was irritation. Obviously *slapping* the Great Elder wasn't going to work.

Sure enough, it didn't.

Kelarac detonated the creature's hand in a burst of green flame, sending it stumbling backwards and screaming. Once again, Shera had to grip more tightly to the railing to avoid spilling into the sea; her fingers and forearms were beginning to burn.

Finally, Shera was positioned behind Kelarac.

He stood over a screaming Calder, burning plates of the Emperor's armor off one at a time. As each plate fell to the ground, Calder's cries grew more agonized.

Slowly, patiently, Shera thickened Bastion's Veil.

Kelarac's attention was still on Calder.

He pried the Emperor's helmet from Calder and tossed it aside. Shera couldn't see the expression on the possessed Jyrine's face, but Calder glared up through a mask of tears.

"I will see you dead," Calder spat.

Under the cover of mist, Shera hauled herself up and onto the deck.

"I will look on your body and I will *laugh*," Calder continued. He sounded like a man venting a lifetime of resentment all at once. "I will laugh because you could have escaped your prison, but you decided to stay and die among your toys."

Safe meant stealthy, and stealthy meant slow.

Shera crept up on the Great Elder one step at a time.

Kelarac laughed physically this time, a mangled fusion of his voice and Jyrine's. "You think *you* will be the one to bring me to my end, fallen King?"

Shera loved it when the target was talking. It meant they were paying attention to someone else.

This time, she would do what she should have done the first time she'd met Jyrine Marten.

A broad smile bloomed on Calder's face.

"Not me," he said.

He knows I'm here, Shera realized.

Suddenly desperate, she pulled Syphren and plunged it into Kelarac's heart from behind.

Please, let me not be too late, not too late...

Raw power surged through Shera like a river forced through the mouth of a bottle.

She wasn't too late.

Syphren feasted, drawing power until Shera felt she couldn't take any more...and then he drew *still more*, packing her to bursting. She thought her skin might pop with the pressure from inside.

When she hit her actual limit, there was still power left over. She was horrified for an instant, thinking that Kelarac might crawl away.

But that energy turned on its origin, devouring Kelarac from the inside.

As Shera had learned long ago, Syphren was invested to turn defenses against themselves. The more powerful the defenses, the harder the blow.

The Great Elder didn't get a chance to cry out, or protest, or strike back.

Kelarac died in a pillar of green light. Every part of him, and of Jyrine, dissolved.

Or...maybe not all of him.

She wasn't sure how to name what she felt. It was like an instinct, a thought, a dream. But she felt as though the bonfire had been snuffed at once, leaving a cloud of sparks behind.

Shera's vision cleared and she saw Calder on the deck beneath her. Wounded, exhausted, burned all over, with his remaining clothes stuck to him mostly by dried blood, he looked up to her.

She could only speak through clenched teeth. Her entire body trembled.

“Why did you have to warn him?” she forced out.

“If he had turned to look at you, I would have done something,” he said confidently.

“What?”

“...something.”

By his expression, he seemed to think that was an adequate answer.

Shera thought back to their first time meeting on *The Testament*. She thought back to it often, especially after Lucan’s death. Now, though she bristled with power that begged for release, she felt as though she had to say something.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

She almost choked on the words.

Calder had been a reckless, selfish idiot a thousand times, and his actions had put the entire Empire in danger.

But if Shera had succeeded in her contract—or even if she’d killed Jyrine—none of this would have happened.

“For what?” Calder asked. He looked suspicious rather than confused.

“For failing to kill Naberius Clayborn.”

Like an old man, Calder pushed himself to his feet. Shera could have helped him, but she felt as though her first step would launch her a mile into the sky. It was all she could do to contain Kelarac’s energy while standing still.

“I’m sorry I let Lucan die,” he said, and Shera was unprepared to hear Lucan’s name from him. It stirred up emotions that she had to shove down again.

“I didn’t want that to happen,” he continued.

The only one who could pay that debt had just burned along with Kelarac...and more importantly, Shera didn’t want to think about it anymore. She was starting to smell every individual Elderspawn on the deck and her ears were picking up the creaking of each splinter on the ship.

Her focus wouldn’t last for long.

“That account is settled,” she said aloud, hoping he would drop it.

Green light crackled in the clouds overhead. Shera felt something respond inside her, and she quickly scanned the sky to search for Kelarac’s return.

But no, it was just the remainder of his power dissipating. She was on edge for nothing.

She spent a small fraction of her power dismissing Bastion's Veil. The mist forcibly cleared at once, allowing the rest of the humans to see that the battle was won.

Even those who couldn't tell that Kellarac had been beaten could guess the rest. Bodies and burning ships were scattered over the ocean, and the air was filled with the sounds of the dying. But there were no powerful Elders left. Even most of the Elderspawn had fled.

The Regents still flew in the skies and the four guardian statues were gone. A ragged cheer went up from all around them, drowning out the screams.

Shera returned her gaze to the sky.

The battle overhead had ended.

No incomprehensible force clashed in the void any longer. The colored spots had also vanished from the void; now the slices of sky drifted in pure, endless darkness blacker than the darkest night.

So this is it, Shera thought. *We can win every battle and still lose.*

"Urg'naut won," she said out loud.

She didn't expect that to sound as hopeless as it did. They had done everything right and still lost, in the end.

It had all been for nothing.

She would have to apologize to the rest of the Consultants...and then go find a place to nap. When the end of the world came, it would find her sleeping.

"No," Calder said, "he lost." Shera turned back to him. Did Calder know something she didn't?

"And now it's over anyway," he finished.

Shera was about to ask what he meant when she heard a new sound drift through the air. A sound that, once again, she picked up with her mind more than her ears.

Come, my children...come to me...rise once more and taste perfection.

The Elderspawn pieces and human bodies began to stir. They lurched across the deck toward one another, stitching themselves together. Shera saw a human hand attached to the end of a worm body.

It only took a flick of Shera's finger to tear Nakothi's power from them, leaving hazy green orbs hovering in a constellation over the deck. Even Syphren didn't give her any urge to consume it; she felt like a snake who had swallowed an entire deer, and even her Vessel's appetite was sated.

But using just that little bit of energy made the rest surge up until she felt as though she would burst with power from every inch of her body. It was all she could do to force it back down.

“Thank you,” Calder said roughly.

She responded through a jaw that felt locked in place. “Don’t...thank me...yet...”

Shera no longer needed her spyglass to see a huge, bloated corpse wading through the ocean that only rose to its hips. The body’s flesh was tinged green-and-gray, its chest pried open to expose gruesome innards, ribs grasping outward like claws.

The dead island had risen.

No...Nakothi’s body.

Was this Kellarac’s last attempt at revenge? Had Nakothi awakened naturally? Were *all* the Great Elders awake?

Whatever the reason, the fact remained that they had barely defeated one Great Elder. Now they were facing a second.

Calder watched the Dead Mother walk as well. “Can you help with her?” he asked.

Shera couldn’t speak, but the energy she’d taken from Kellarac had to go somewhere. She didn’t know if she could take Nakothi down, but she would try.

Stiffly, she nodded.

“Then I think...” He looked up, and Shera saw on his face the resolve to die. “...I think there’s one last thing I can do.”

Something about that phrase stuck in Shera’s mind, and she repeated it. “One...last...thing...”

A new voice, a man’s, cut in as though she’d been talking with him all along. “Well, it doesn’t have to be your *last*.”

The speaker was a Heartlander man with clothes of loose golden silk that resembled the Emperor’s. He wore rings on each finger, necklaces around his neck...and a steel blindfold bolted to his eyes.

Calder walked past the man without seeing. *The Testament* lurched forward, pulled forward by the Elder creature below the ocean’s surface.

No one saw the man in gold but her.

Shera wanted to call out, but suddenly the energy inside her surged and her jaw locked shut again.

The man shaded his eyes with one hand and peered at the giant corpse shambling closer. The Navigator fleet formed up again...though it was smaller now, and its crews were haggard and missing positions.

“It looks like you could use some help.” Kellarac’s smile gleamed. “Why don’t we make a deal?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The quality of mercy is among the rarest of virtues, and rarest of all in killers and kings.

—Sadesthenes

PRESENT DAY

THE POWER IN SHERA'S JAW RELEASED...IN FACT, THE TENSION THROUGHOUT HER entire body lessened, as though the Great Elder's power inside her was being suppressed. Even her twin Vessels seemed more distant, muted.

Naturally, the moment her hand was free, Shera attacked.

Syphren passed through Kellarac's smile as though he didn't exist.

Which, of course, he didn't. He couldn't. She'd killed him.

"Killed is such a...*human* word," Kellarac said. "Granted, I do have to play by human rules when I'm in one of your bodies. But you didn't just kill me, did you? You absorbed me. You swallowed a very, very small piece of me. And the largest trees can grow from the smallest seeds."

Shera sheathed Syphren and marched toward Calder. She could get him to kill her.

But he was facing away from her. Her body spasmed again, out of her control...and then a swarm of purple butterflies scooped her up and began carrying her back to *Bastion's Shadow*.

Kellarac patted her on the shoulder, drifting along beside her. "It was an honorable try. Now, since we're limited on time, let me present my offer as

clearly as I can: I want you to put me into an object and throw me into the ocean. I will be no threat to you; it will take me centuries to return to what I was. Then I'd like you to leave."

Shera struggled against her own body. She didn't want to throw herself into the ocean while carrying Kellarac, but the deck of *Bastion's Shadow* grew closer, and she wasn't about to put her Guildmates in danger.

"Leave," he continued. "Just go home. Let Nakothi take a host—no one you know, I'm sure—and rise up to do battle with our Outsider friend." Kellarac laced fingers behind his head and looked upward. "Otherwise, he'll kill us all."

Shera was lowered to the ship, surrounded by Consultants, faces she knew.

"I would be a fool to believe any word from you," she said aloud.

Kellarac faced her earnestly. "If you know anything about me, you know I keep my deals. Did I attack Beldin after they sunk their bronze statues down to me? Did I revoke Calder Marten's gifts even as he turned them against me? I did not. I am the Soul Collector, and I cannot act against my nature."

"Then you have more to gain than to lose."

Benji peered down at Shera. "Shera? Are you talking to me?"

"Of course I have more to gain," Kellarac scoffed. "I would be a fool to negotiate from any other position. This is my *one chance* to live again. The Outsider plans to blow up this entire prison-world so long as our kind burns with it. You are just the...insects nesting in the jail."

What he was saying felt true. And even the Emperor had never said that Kellarac reneged on his deals.

"Set me free and go *home*. Let the Regents live or die against Nakothi on their own; give her a fighting chance to beat the Outsider and save us all."

Shera looked around at the Consultants staring at her in concern. "You want me to abandon them?"

"Medic!" Benji called.

"Take them with you!" Kellarac waved a beringed finger. "What fun is being alone? Anyone who matters to you, take them. I can give you protections far greater than Bastion's Veil. You can live out the rest of your days in a paradise."

That was a vague, flimsy promise, and it didn't move Shera, but she did catch another mistake he'd made. "So everyone else suffers as the Great Elders roam free?"

Kelarac sighed. "I could tell you that only Nakothi is free for now, and she roused herself too early, so without a host she will not remain free for long. I could assure you that her goal is not to rule but to escape. Both are true. But I have a better question: what do you care? What use are strangers to you?"

A memory played before her, dredged up from her past without her consent.

Maxwell's blood spraying out from her knife.

Her own thoughts: *I have no use for you.*

A pair of Consultants pulled her to her feet, dragging her into the cabin for medical inspection, and Kelarac kept pace. "You see things clearly, Shera. You don't assign value to things that are valueless. They have called you broken, but I would say you are *repaired*."

The Emperor had died the same way Maxwell had. His own words to her: "*I need you to be ruthless.*"

And she was. More ruthless than even he had expected.

"You've fought over and over again for someone else's vision, assuming they can see where you are blind. The truth is the opposite!"

Shera was sat gently in a chair, and Architects busied around her as Kelarac knelt before her. "Be cold, Shera. Make the rational decision. Denying my words because I am an Elder? That is stubbornness based on fear. You know I'm not lying. Preserve yourself and everyone you care about—anyone you like—and *leave*. Stop risking yourselves for people you don't know."

Shera looked through a lens of ice and saw the situation as it truly was.

First, she knew that she was negotiating with a manipulative Great Elder who had nothing in mind but his own interests. He had no intention of helping her unless it furthered his own interests.

On the other hand, what was *her* plan? Stay here and fight Great Elders until the human forces were ground down to nothing? That wasn't viable.

Even if Kelarac was lying about this Outsider poised to destroy an entire world, Shera knew what the outcome of facing Nakothi would be... and there could be more Great Elders awake as well.

Ayana had already been wasted on this attempt. How many more could she waste? Kerian? Meia?

It wasn't even the job of the Consultants to fight Elders.

They could duck out of the fighting temporarily, at least. Assess the situation. If it looked like the Regents would win easily, they could move in and support the other forces of the Empire. And if it looked like there was no hope, the Consultants could cut their losses and survive to fight another day.

She was starting to see a certain logic to it.

Shera rose from her chair. "Sorry, I hit my head. I'm fine now. I need to get back out there."

One of the Architects that she recognized as a Reader looked at her in fear. "Guild Head, there's...something wrong with your Intent. There's so much..."

"An effect of my Vessel. If I don't vent some of this excess power, I could very well explode."

That got them out of her way.

Shera marched out of the room and toward the Captain of *Bastion's Shadow*. All the other ships were locked in battle against the dead while the Regents had begun striking Nakothi. The closer the Dead Mother was, the more powerful her Children would become, and the dead would only join her ranks.

Her path was clear.

Kelarac's blindfold gleamed. "What a fortunate accident you turned out to be, Shera. We saw you coming. Ach'magut's prophecy called you 'the Killer,' did you know that? The one who could strike down the Emperor because she had no heart."

Wordlessly, Shera borrowed a gun from a Shepherd.

She opened her mouth and stuck the barrel inside.

Kelarac's words made complete sense to her, which meant she was compromised. He had even told her that his power now lived only in her.

She'd said it to the Imperialists already: "*If a Great Elder wants me, kill me.*"

As Kelarac had said, she'd always weighed lives without being overly influenced by her own feelings. Why should her own life be any different?

Before she pulled the trigger, an orange eye flared into existence in front of Kelarac.

Meia fell from above, landing with knees crouched and one hand on the deck. She slowly unfurled, her own eyes blazing with rage.

At Kelarac.

“*Get out of her head,*” she snarled. Her claws swept through the space where Kelarac stood...and he vanished.

Shera’s thoughts were cold, but she still registered surprise, pulling the gun away from herself. “I didn’t think he was really there. I thought this was just my brain—”

She was cut off by Meia seizing her by the collar and shaking her so hard that her toes left the deck. “Your brain! Your *brain!*”

With one hand, Meia hurled her to the deck.

With the amount of energy blazing through her, it didn’t really hurt. In fact, before Shera came to a stop, she spent some of her power to flip and land evenly on her feet. She could have probably avoided the blow in the first place, but she was curious about where this was coming from.

Meia had taken the gun from Shera, and she squeezed it one-handed into a ball of splinters and twisted metal. “If you had a *brain*, you wouldn’t be listening to *Kelarac!*”

The entire deck of Consultants stared at Shera.

Some of the Gardeners drew glowing shears.

Shera raised her hands. “He’s in my head, Meia. If I live, I’ll give into him eventually.”

“And you don’t think that’s *exactly* what he wants?”

Meia’s chest still heaved with her fury, but Shera sighed. She was letting her personal feelings get in the way, and they didn’t have time for this.

“You have to trust me. I can see some things more clearly than you can.”

“*Clearly?*”

“If you set your personal feelings aside, you have to see it makes sense. While I live, you’re all in danger.”

Meia looked mad enough to bite. “You’ve never set personal feelings aside in your *life!* Why did you kill Maxwell, Shera?”

Shera didn’t have a problem telling the story. “I had no use for him.”

Meia barked out a laugh. An Elderspawn of flesh and bone crawled up over the railing, but Meia threw a spade behind her with such force that the

monster's head exploded and it slowly slid back down into the ocean. "There really *is* something wrong with you!"

"That's what I—"

"You killed him because he *killed your best friend*, you *absolute idiot*."

Meia dashed up to Shera. Ordinarily, Shera wouldn't even be able to keep up, but the Great Elder's power bubbled up inside her.

She dodged, intercepting Meia's hand as it lunged for her throat.

Out of habit, Shera reached down for one of her shears.

But she stopped.

Meia noticed, and she bared feral teeth. "Do you even pay attention to the decisions *you* make? Did you risk your life on a secret solo mission because it was going to succeed, or because you wanted Lucan free? Do you sleep all the time because it's the optimal use of your time or because you like it? Did you fall in love with Lucan because you're a *rational decision-making machine*?"

Meia swept a slap at Shera's head, but a slap from Meia could fell trees. And she had adjusted her strength based on what Shera had shown before, so Shera had to duck, sweeping a leg at Meia's ankle.

Shera might as well have kicked a steel post, but she hooked her foot behind Meia's and pulled, knocking her off-balance. Her hand came up with a spade in it...and stopped at the base of Meia's neck.

Meia made no move to pull back, glaring at Shera. "I want you to tell me how many other people have done more for the Empire than you have. For the Consultants. For their friends."

Shera's hand trembled, though she wasn't exactly certain why.

The ship quaked beneath them, Awakened weapons flashing and Children of the Dead Mother swarming. The Consultants shouted to one another, fully locked in battle.

Neither Meia nor Shera flinched.

Blood trickled down Meia's neck where the spade had broken the skin. "If you're really going to sacrifice yourself, kill me. Because while I'm alive, I won't let you die."

Shera lowered the spade. "I still have a use for you. This proves nothing."

"Shera, caring more about your friends than other people is not heartless. That is *normal*." Meia grabbed a flying Elderspawn from the air and hurled it against the mast, where it broke into pieces of bone. "Now that

you're listening, I've got another question: what makes you think Kellarac really wants what he says? Don't you think he might want you dead?"

Another image of Kellarac appeared, just as self-assured as before. "You see? She sees things from a human perspective. Her vision isn't as clear as —"

"So I should...stay and fight?" Shera asked. Her jaw was growing tight, and the energy was threatening to split her in half again.

Meia tore a freshly risen corpse in half. "What do you think?"

Shera stared Kellarac right in the blindfold. She reached for him...but not with her hand. With her Intent.

"Now, Shera, think of all the opportunity..."

His voice faded. So did his appearance.

As Shera grabbed the last remaining piece of Kellarac and brought it forth into reality.

All around her, the air tore open. Tiny slits appeared, opening not into the void, but into a sunken palace piled with treasures.

Out above the ocean, four giant holes appeared, and bronze statues of the Regents dropped out.

Awakened items poured from Kellarac's treasure vaults. Swords, axes, spears, arrows, iron bars, tanks of liquid, coils of rope, shining lamps, spinning blades, chalices, jars, bones, cannons, devices for which she had no name, they all emerged into the air.

A gleaming, shining constellation of power awaiting her order.

In the distance, the battle between the Regents and Nakothi slowed. The drowned corpse that had once been the dead island turned her face toward Shera; it was half bone and half melted flesh, a hideous mask of death.

Nakothi's song began crooning in her mind.

Come, children, come to me...come and be remade...

Shera focused on the Dead Mother.

Every weapon in Kellarac's arsenal turned on her at once.

Light of every color split the sky as the Awakened weapons struck. Chains erupted from the deep, wrapping themselves around Nakothi's limbs and stretching them, trying to pull them off. Bronze statues of the Regents slammed their weapons down, hacking at undead flesh.

Axes struck in explosions of light. Spears pierced hearts. Saws carved through Elder bone. Needles drank blood. Drills burrowed through Nakothi's skin. Mirrors caught her retaliation and turned it against her.

Liquid spilled from jars, setting the ocean waves aflame around Nakothi's ankles.

Awakened weapons from every age of humanity assaulted the Dead Mother like an army of Soulbound.

The air trembled and the broken sky quaked as though the heavenly battle above had returned. The sea burned, waves leapt, and water flashed red, then white, then green as lights bright enough to blind the eye erupted.

Kelarac's power drained quickly from Shera. After the first moment, the Regents recovered from their astonishment and joined in, supporting the barrage.

Jorin's power drowned the Great Elder in acidic darkness.

Loreli raised her sword with a cry and a lightning-bright bolt of pure white pierced the top of Nakothi's head.

Estyr flew over the shambling mass of undead flesh, arms crossed in her black armor as she drove the seven spikes of the Blackwatch into an Elder. Giant armored nails shot past her, piercing the Dead Mother's right arm, left arm, right leg, left leg, stomach, chest, and head.

Finally, when Shera felt as though she'd stayed awake for the last year, the last of Kelarac left her. The host of treasures lost their support, falling from the air as though their strings had been cut. One by one, they splashed down into the sea.

And Nakothi crumbled to bloody pieces.

Chunks of her body made waves as they plopped into the water, droplets of blood flying as far away as the Navigator ships.

Shera swayed with exhaustion, and it might have been her tired mind, but she thought she saw a piece arcing through the air toward her.

A moment later, something plopped onto the deck.

A small lump of gray-green flesh slightly bigger than a fist.

Do not suffer, it sang in Shera's mind. *Do not weep. I will take you in my arms...*

Shera kicked the Heart of Nakothi over the railing and into the Aion Sea, where there was no more Kelarac to claim it.

That spent the last of her stamina.

She started to collapse, but Meia caught her. "Nice work, Shera."

"I know," Shera said. Her consciousness was already drifting off. "You...handle...the rest..."

The world blacked out.

EPILOGUE

FIVE YEARS LATER

“AND THAT IS *IT!*” SHERA PULLED OFF HER GRAYS AS QUICKLY AS SHE COULD, tossing them into a corner. “I’m done!”

Someone rapped on the door. “Are you decent?” Meia called from the other side.

“I have never been better in my entire life.”

“Put your clothes on.”

Shera grumbled, but she pulled on the loose white robe she was supposed to wear for her upcoming procedure. Ordinary clothes would be ruined, so this robe was specially invested.

It was more comfortable than she’d expected.

A moment later, Meia marched through the door. “Did you have to wait until the last possible second?”

“A thousand apologies, High Gardener.” Shera walked out and Meia fell into step beside her.

“Don’t call me that.”

“You called *me* Guild Head.”

“When other people were around.”

Shera glanced around at the wood-and-plaster walls of the House of Masons. “There could be other people watching us here.”

“You finished your work?”

“Complete and filed.” Shera’s final act as the Mistress of the Mists had been to approve a system whereupon their Soulbound Gardeners could be

borrowed by other Guilds for the purpose of securing any Elder tombs.

What had happened once couldn't be allowed to happen again.

After the departure of Urg'naut, the death of Kelarac, and the defeat of Nakothi, the sky had gone back to normal within the day. Holding open the sky had taken the power of the Great Elders, and with so few of them left, the world had largely repaired itself.

There were other rumors, whispers of something the Optasia had done, but Shera didn't concern herself with them for now. That was Regent business. As long as the rifts were closed and the Great Elders stayed gone, she was satisfied.

"The governors have been sending gifts," Meia said. "It hasn't been made public when exactly you're all...departing...but they know it's soon."

"Not soon enough for them."

The Aurelian Alliance was still in its early days, but the governors were already jockeying to be free of the Guilds. One and all, they had started to build their own imitation versions of the various Guilds. Vandenyas had a Navigator-style ship that could supposedly traverse the Deep Aion, and the Governess of Izyria had started to rebuild the Champion's Guild in her own name.

None of the Alliance leaders could wait for Shera and the Regents to step down.

"Are you...looking forward to it?"

Shera glanced at Meia, but Meia was facing rigidly forward.

"Being done with work? Yes, I've dreamed of this day since I was a girl."

"I mean the rest of it."

As they walked, Shera thought. Was she looking forward to it? She often had to examine her own thoughts for a while before she understood them.

"...no, I don't think I am," Shera said at last. She was surprised by her own answer.

But they had already come to the final door.

Meia glanced to both sides, touched her shear, and then lowered her voice. "You know, you don't *have* to do anything. They can't make you. Last chance."

They had talked about this before. For years, actually.

"It's only two years, then we'll pop back in and see how you're doing."

“Two years the *first* time,” Meia emphasized. “And then...who knows?”

Shera scratched the back of her neck. “I think I have to do this, Meia. It makes sense that it’s me. And...I mean, I *am* tired.”

Meia looked into her eyes. After a moment she straightened and offered her hand. “Well then. Good-bye, Shera.”

Shera was relieved. She had been worried that Meia would force her into some drawn-out, overly emotional farewell.

She took Meia’s hand and shook it firmly. “Good-bye, M—”

Meia swept her up into an embrace.

She trembled against Shera’s shoulder, and her sobs echoed in the hallway. Shera patted her awkwardly on the back.

She never did know how to handle situations like this.

Strangely enough, her *own* vision was getting blurry. She raised fingertips to her cheeks and they came away wet.

Shera backed away, pulling back from Meia. She hurriedly swiped at her eyes. “Sorry, I—I don’t know where that came from.”

Meia watched her through her own teary eyes and then began to laugh. She was a mess, laughing and crying at the same time.

A moment later, so was Shera.

Shera was already late, but she took a few more minutes to clean herself up before stepping into the next room. She didn’t want to present herself as a mess in front of the Regents.

The *other* Regents.

Estyr lounged on the edge of her stone coffin, grinning. No skulls floated around her head; they must have already been packed away. “You should have seen me when they stuffed me away for the first time. I was a nightmare.”

Loreli rose from the ground and brushed off her knees. “It can be hard, but it’s better to make it quick.”

“I cried like a Merinthian waterfall,” Jorin piped up. Like the others, he wore only a loose white robe. “Woke up ten skips later still crying. I like to picture myself sobbing up a rainstorm in my sleep.”

Shera approached the eastern coffin. It had been re-carved; now it showed a stylized image of Shera surrounded by mist and carrying a shear in both hands.

Alagaesus’ name had been erased and replaced with a new one: Shera Gardener, Regent of the East.

Meia helped her into the coffin, smiling down through her tears.

“See you in two years,” she said.

Shera tried to respond, but yawned instead. The Intent of the coffin was already beginning to work. She managed a small wave before Estyr’s power rolled the lid over her.

It was utterly dark inside. Her heartbeat echoed in her ears. She was surrounded by cold, but the robe kept her surprisingly warm and the alchemical gas pumping into the air was almost scentless.

Shera relaxed into the padding at the bottom and, with alchemy and Intent flowing through her veins, she slowly fell into the deepest sleep of her life.

Until it was time to get back to work.

THE END

OF THE ELDER EMPIRE, LAST SHADOW

OF KILLERS AND KINGS

BLOOPERS

YALA BRISTLED, STEPPING CLOSER TO ESTYR SIX. “ON WHAT AUTHORITY DO YOU interfere with the Consultants? You’re not the Empress. If you—”

In mid-sentence, the High Mason was hurled into the sky as though launched from a catapult.

Her shriek grew more and more distant until she vanished from sight.

Today, Shera thought, is my favorite day.



The Emperor held out the pulsing gray-green heart. “Join me, Estyr. Bind your soul to this, and we can rule for eternity together.”

“Sure, that sounds great,” Estyr said. “Can I see that for a second first?”

The Emperor handed over the Heart of Nakothi.

Instantly, Estyr crushed it into pulp.

The Emperor stared after it in horror. “Why, Estyr? That was eternal life!”

“For a moment, I thought, ‘yeah, why don’t we bind ourselves to the heart of a Great Elder so we can live forever?’ Then I had an even better idea: let’s *not* do that.”



Benji hovered in midair, his shears now purple and hooked like sickles. Purple light fluttered around him in the form of a cloud of butterflies.

“Can I try again?” Benji asked.

“Sure,” Shera said.

Miraculously, the next Soulbinding attempt succeeded.

Benji returned for the second time, his shears fused together and stuck to his forehead to form a rainbow horn. “...one more time?”

“Why not?”

He emerged the third time, his blades having transformed into a shimmering pair of pink pixie wings stuck to his back.

Benji started to cry.



Jyrine wore an iron mask of anger. “Kelarac keeps his bargains. Ask Calder.”

“I will,” Meia said lightly.

Then she left.

...a moment later, she walked back into the room. “I changed my mind. Calder is dead and we killed him.”

The look of shock and horror on Jyrine’s face was more than gratifying. Meia savored it for a moment, then added, “And now I’m going to kill you before you can escape from us like you did last time.”

Before Jyrine could respond, Meia snapped her neck.



The announcement went out all over the Empire: to prevent the spread of disease, citizens were required to implement quarantine procedures.

They should stay home as much as possible.

Keep at least six feet away from other people.

And cover their mouths and noses with masks whenever they went out in public.

For the Consultant’s Guild, nothing changed.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

AM'HARANAI – THE ANCIENT ORDER OF SPIES AND ASSASSINS THAT WOULD eventually become the Consultant's Guild. Some formal documents still refer to the Consultant's Guild in this way.

Architect – One type of Consultant. The Architects mostly stay in one place, ruling over Guild business and deciding general strategy. They include alchemists, surgeons, Readers, strategists, and specialists of all types.

Awaken – A Reader can Awaken an object by bringing out its latent powers of Intent. An Awakened object is very powerful, but it gains a measure of self-awareness. Also, it can never be invested again.

Jarelys Teach, the Head of the Imperial Guard, carries an ancient executioner's blade that has been Awakened. It now bears the power of all the lives it took, and is lethal even at a distance.

All Soulbound Vessels are Awakened.

Children of the Dead Mother – Elderspawn created by the power of Nakothi out of human corpses.

Consultant – A member of the Consultants Guild, also known as the Am’haranai. Mercenary spies and covert agents that specialize in gathering and manipulating information for their clients.

Consultants come in five basic varieties: Architects, Gardeners, Masons, Miners, and Shepherds.

For more, see the Guild Guide.

Dead Mother, The – See: Nakothi.

Elder – Any member of the various races that ruled the world in ancient days, keeping humanity as slaves. The most powerful among them are known as Great Elders, and their lesser are often called Elderspawn.

Gardener – One type of Consultant. The Gardeners kill people for hire.

Intent – The power of focused will that all humans possess. Whenever you use an object *intentionally*, for a *specific purpose*, you are investing your Intent into that object. The power of your Intent builds up in that object over time, making it better at a given task.

Every human being uses their Intent, but most people do so blindly; only Readers can sense what they’re doing.

See also: “Invest,” “Reader.”

Invest – Besides its usual financial implications, to “invest” means to imbue an object with one’s Intent. By intentionally using an object, you *invest* that object with a measure of your Intent, which makes it better at performing that specific task.

So a pair of scissors used by a barber every day for years become progressively better and better at cutting hair. After a few years, the scissors will cut cleanly through even the thickest strands of tangled hair, slicing

through with practically no effort. A razor used by a serial killer will become more and more lethal with time. A razor used by a serial-killing barber will be very confused.

Kameira – A collective term for any natural creature with unexplainable powers. Cloudseeker Hydras can move objects without touching them, Windwatchers can change and detect air currents, and Deepstriders control water. There are many different types of Kameira...though, seemingly, not as many as in the past. The Guild of Greenwardens is dedicated to studying and restoring Kameira populations.

Humans can borrow the miraculous powers of Kameira by creating Vessels from their body parts, and then bonding with those Vessels to become Soulbound.

Mason – One type of Consultant. Masons are craftsmen and professionals in a particular trade, covertly sending back information to their Guild. There are Masons undercover in every industry and business throughout the Empire.

Miner – One type of Consultant. This secretive order is in charge of the Consultants' vast library, sorting and disseminating information to serve the Guild's various clients.

Nakothi, the Dead Mother – A Great Elder who died in the Aion Sea. Her power kills humans and remakes their bodies into hideous servants.

Navigator – A member of the Navigator's Guild. The Navigators are the only ones capable of sailing the deadly Aion Sea, delivering goods and passengers from one continent to the other.

For more, see the Guild Guide.

Reader – A person who can read and manipulate the Intent of objects. Every human being invests their Intent subconsciously by using ordinary objects. However, Readers can do so with a greater degree of focus and clarity, thanks to their special senses.

Readers often receive visions of an object's past.

Shepherd – One type of Consultant. The Shepherds are observers, thieves, and saboteurs that specialize in infiltrating a location and leaving unnoticed.

Soulbound – A human who can channel the power of an Elder or a Kameira. These powers are contained in a Vessel, which is *bound* to a person during the Awakening process. Soulbound are rare and powerful because they combine the focus of human Intent with the miraculous power of inhuman beings.

Bliss, the Guild Head of the Blackwatch, is a Soulbound with the Spear of Tharlos as her Vessel. Therefore, she can borrow the reality-warping powers of the Great Elder known as Tharlos, the Formless Legion.

A person becomes a Soulbound by having a personally significant object Awakened. If the object has a strong connection to an Elder or Kameira, and if it is significant *enough*, then it can become a Soulbound Vessel.

See also: Vessel.

Vessel – An Awakened object that becomes the source of a Soulbound's power. Not all Awakened items become Soulbound Vessels, but all Vessels are Awakened.

In order to become a person's Vessel, an item must fulfill two criteria: it must be *personally linked* to the individual, and it must be invested with the power of a Kameira or an Elder.

1.) Personal link: A ring that you bought at a pawnshop three weeks ago could not become your Soulbound Vessel. It has not absorbed enough of your Intent, it is not significant to you, and it is not *bound* to you in any way. A wedding ring that you've worn for fifteen years and is significant to you for some reason—perhaps you pried it off your spouse's bloody corpse—could indeed become your Vessel, assuming it fulfills the second criteria as well.

2.) Power: A spear made of an Elder's bone could allow one to use that Elder's power of illusion and madness. If you bonded with a necklace of Deepstrider scales, you might be able to sense and control the ocean's currents as that Kameira does.

See also: Soulbound.

Watchman – A member of the Blackwatch Guild.

For more, see the Guild Guide.

GUILD GUIDE

*A BRIEF GUIDE TO THE TEN IMPERIAL GUILDS OF THE AURELIAN EMPIRE, WRITTEN BY
a licensed Witness for your edification and betterment!*

The Am'haranai: Commonly known as Consultants, the members of this mysterious brotherhood work behind the scenes for the good of the Empire...or for anyone with enough gold to pay them. Consultants are more than willing to provide strategic advice, tactical support, and information to the Empire's rich and elite, so long as it doesn't destabilize the government they've worked so hard to build.

Believe it or not, the Am'haranai were the first Imperial Guild, having existed in one form or another since long before the birth of the Empire. The next time you walk by the local chapter house of the Consultants, know that you're in the presence of true Imperial History.

The Consultants' local Guild Representative would not give us a definitive response to the less savory rumors surrounding this particular Guild. Juicy speculation suggests that—for the right price—the Consultants will provide a number of darker services, including espionage, sabotage, and even assassination. We can neither confirm nor refute such rumors at this time.

Consultants in the field are known to refer to each other by code names, to conceal their true identities.

Shepherds are their expert scouts, trained to watch, remember, and report.

Architects are the leaders of the Am'haranai, and typically do not leave their island fortress. They're the strategists, alchemists, tacticians, and Readers that make the work of the Consultants possible.

Masons are a truly terrifying order, though once again the Guild Representative put off most of my questions. They go undercover as everyday folk like you or me, living ordinary lives for months or years, and then providing information to their Architect leaders. Your best friend, your neighbor, that street alchemist across from your house...any of them could be a Mason secretly watching you!

Other, less credible reports suggest the existence of a fourth brand of Consultant: the **Gardeners**. The job of a Gardener is to "remove weeds." They are the black operatives, the pure assassins, the knives in the dark.

The Guild Representative had this to say on the matter: "There is not now, and never has been, an order of the Am'haranai known as the Gardeners. That's simple speculation based on our Guild crest, which is actually derived from our origin as humble farmers. Having said that, if you do have someone interfering with your business, it is possible that we could help you bring the situation to a satisfactory conclusion...for an appropriate level of compensation, of course."

Since the Emperor's death (may his soul fly free), I have no doubt that business has been very good indeed for this particular Guild.

Guild Head: The **Council of Architects**. No one knows much about the leadership of the Consultants, but it seems that the Architects collectively vote on Guild policy, coming to decisions through careful deliberation and long experience.

Crest: Gardening Shears

The Blackwatch:

Thanks to generations of legends and misinformation perpetuated by the Luminians, many of you have certain preconceived notions about the Blackwatch. They're hated by many, feared by all, and I urge you not to heed the rumors. Every Watchman I've ever met has been professional, focused, and inquisitive--very few of them actually worship the Elders.

Let me put a few of your unfounded fears to rest: no, they do not eat human flesh for power. No, they do not conduct dark rituals involving blood sacrifice. No, they do not kidnap babies from their cradles.

Yes, they do use certain powers and techniques of the Elders. That's no reason to treat them like cultists.

The Blackwatch was originally founded by the Emperor for two purposes: watching over the graves of the Great Elders, and studying the Elder Races to twist their great powers for the good of the Empire. It is thanks to the Blackwatch that Urg'Naut or the Dead Mother have not risen and devoured our living world.

Members of this Guild are known as **Watchmen**. They respond to calls for help and reports of Elder activity. Each Watchman carries seven long, black nails invested with the power to bind Lesser Elders for vivisection and study.

The goals of the Blackwatch often bring them into conflict with Knights and Pilgrims of the Luminian Order, who hunt down Lesser Elders with the goal of destroying them completely.

If the two would only work together, it's possible that Aurelian lands would never be troubled by Elder attacks again.

Guild Head: The current head of the Blackwatch is a young-seeming woman known only as **Bliss**. Her origins are shrouded in mystery, though tenuous evidence suggests that she was born in a Kanatalia research facility.

Like every Blackwatch Head before her, she carries the **Spear of Tharlos**, a weapon supposedly carved from the bone of a Great Elder. I have never interviewed anyone who witnessed the Spear in battle and survived with their sanity intact.

Crest: the Elder's Eyes (six eyes on a mass of tentacles)

The Champions:

I doubt there is a single child in any corner of the Aurelian Empire who does not know some story of the Champion's Guild, but I will still labor to separate fact from romantic fiction.

The Champions as we know them today rose out of an old Izyrian tradition. In ancient days, before the Empire, the continent of Izyria was divided into a thousand clans. When two clans had a dispute, instead of going to war, they would send two representatives into a formal duel. The winner's clan, of course, won the dispute. These clan champions were often Soulbound, strengthened by some secret alchemical technique, and highly skilled fighters.

When the Emperor (may his soul fly free) originally crossed the Aion Sea with the aim of enfolding Izyria into his fledgling Empire, he created his own collection of duelists to defeat the natives at their own cultural game.

Thus, the Champions were born.

Champions became, as we have all seen, the best fighters in the Empire. They singlehandedly quell rebellions, reinforce Imperial troops in the field, and put down dangerous Kameira. And sometimes, when the Empire still needed to fight its own duels, the existence of this Guild ensured that the Emperor never lost.

Since the death of the Emperor, this Guild has become—dare I say it—a dangerous liability. Each Champion has largely gone his or her own way. The Guild still trains initiates according to the old traditions, but it doesn't have the organizational stability or control it once did.

Guild Head: **Baldezar Kern**, an undefeated duelist and the man who singlehandedly pacified the South Sea Revolutionary Army. Though he is known as a gentle man with an easy sense of humor, when he straps on his trademark horned helmet, he becomes a force of carnage on the battlefield like none I have ever seen. I had the opportunity to witness Kern on the warpath almost fifteen years ago, and the sight of this man in battle will haunt me until the day of my death.

Crest: the Golden Crown

The Consultants: See “The Am’haranai.”

The Greenwardens:

While the Greenwardens do protect us from wild Kameira and keep the Imperial Parks that we all know and enjoy, you may not be aware that they were originally intended to save the world.

The Guild of Greenwardens was founded at a time in our history when alchemy was first coming into its own, and we were afraid that a combination of alchemy, then-modern weaponry such as the cannon, and unregulated human Intent would tear the world apart.

Greenwardens were created to preserve Kameira, preventing us from driving them extinct, and to monitor and repair the effects of alchemical and gunpowder weapons on the environment. They each carry an Awakened talisman, which for some has become their Soulbound Vessel: a shining green jewel that they use to heal wounds and promote the growth of plants.

Guild Head: **Tomas Stillwell** is a practicing physician and a fully inducted Magister of the Vey Illai as well as the Guild Head of the Greenwardens, proving that no physical infirmity can prevent you from contributing to your Empire. Though he lost his legs in a childhood encounter with a wild Kameira, he never let that experience make him bitter. Instead, it drove him to study Kameira, their habits, and how they function. He is now one of the most famous natural scientists in the Empire, and he has done much to prevent the extinction of species such as the stormwing and the shadowrider.

Crest: the Emerald

The Imperial Guard:

I trust that all of you understand the purpose of the Imperial Guard: to protect the Emperor's person, and to shield him from attack and unwanted attention. Some suggest that they failed, that the death of the Emperor proves that the Guard were unequal to their task.

I can assure you that this is not the case.

Through a secret alchemical process known only to the Guild of Alchemists, the Imperial Guard replaces some of their original body parts with those of Kameira. Some Guardsmen have patches of armored Nightwurm hide grafted onto their skin, or their eyes substituted with those of a Cloud Eagle. The process is said to be long and unbearably painful, and it results in guardians with the appearance of monsters.

However, in the twelve hundred years that the Emperor reigned, not a single assassination attempt reached his person. We owe that fact solely to the power and extraordinary sensitivity of the Imperial Guard.

I know that many outside the Capital are wondering what the Guard are up to, now that they have no Emperor to guard. Well, in the words of their Guild Head, "We may no longer have an Emperor, but we have an Empire. That, we will preserve until the sun rises in the west."

The resolve of a true patriot, gentle readers.

Guild Head: **Jarelys Teach**, a General in the Emperor's military and Head of his Imperial Guard, does not at first strike you as an imposing woman. I have met her on many occasions, and found her to be singularly devoted to her job. Popular legend says that she swallowed the blood of a Nightwraith, thereby absorbing its powers, but that's little more than speculation. It's a matter of Imperial record that she carries Tyrfang, the Awakened blade used to execute the Emperor's rivals over a thousand years ago.

Crest: the Aurelian Shield (a shield bearing the sun-and-moon symbol of the Aurelian Empire)

Kanatalia, the Guild of Alchemists:

As I write this guide, I sip a glass of enhanced wine that slowly shifts flavor from cherry to apple to lemon. A cart rumbles by my house, with a hawker loudly announcing his remedies for sale. A quicklamp provides my light, glowing a steady blue, never smoking or flickering like a candle.

Truly, one cannot escape the advances of alchemy in our modern society.

Though alchemists have existed since long before the Empire, Kanatalia is one of the more recent additions to the Ten Guilds. It was the first organization to unify the previously contentious brotherhood of alchemists, allowing them to collectively achieve what they never could separately.

Matches, quicklamps, potions, invested alloys, healing salves, enhanced soldiers, vaccines...practically every scientific advance in the past century, including the advance of science itself, can be traced back to Kanatalia's door.

Just don't ask too many questions. A true Kanatalian alchemist can be very protective of his secrets, and you might find yourself a drooling vegetable if you get on the wrong side of an experienced potion-maker.

Guild Head: **Nathanael Bareius** did not become one of the richest men in the Empire by relaxing on his inheritance. After receiving a substantial fortune from his late father, Lord Bareius went on to receive a full education at the Aurelian National Academy. He graduated as a licensed Imperial alchemist and a member of Kanatalia. At that point, he wagered all of his capital on a single risky investment: alchemy. He opened his vaults, spending every bit he had to make sure that every corner and crevice of the

Empire had a licensed Kanatalian alchemist there to provide illumination, potions, medical care, and Guild-approved recreational substances.

Lord Bareius has personally earned back triple his initial investment over the past ten years, and is now poised as the most prominent leader in the Capital. Even more significantly, he seems to have won the battle of public opinion—I haven't seen a street in the Capital unlit by alchemical lanterns, and no one has died of dysentery or plague since before the Emperor's death. No matter what you think of his politics, Nathanael Bareius has made great strides in moving our Empire forward into this new century.

Crest: the Bottled Flame

The Luminian Order:

Ah, the Luminians. A more versatile Guild you won't find anywhere: they're responsible for building cathedrals, policing Imperial roads, hunting down Elders, and generally acting heroic.

Luminian Knights, the martial arm of the Order, march around in their powerfully invested steel armor, fighting deadly monsters chest-to-chest. Their swords are bound with light so they reflect the sun even in the dead of night, burning through creatures of darkness.

The trademark representatives of the Luminian Order are **Pilgrims**, humble wanderers in simple robes. They are each Readers—some of them Soulbound—charged to remove harmful Intent and the maddening influence of the Elders.

The Luminian Order and the Blackwatch have each held a knife to the other's back for hundreds of years, arguing over the best way to protect the populace, to prevent the rise of the Great Elders, and to keep the Empire whole. Perhaps if one of them would learn to compromise, we would all feel safer after midnight.

Guild Head: **Father Jameson Allbright** is an old man, but his vigilance has never dimmed in the fight against darkness. He is one of the oldest Soulbound on record, wielding his shining Vessel to bring the purifying light to Elder worshipers and malicious Readers alike.

Crest: the White Sun (usually on a red banner)

The Magisters:

Magisters are the most accomplished and educated Readers in the world. You probably grew up with a local Reader, who invested your knives and cleansed your graveyard of harmful Intent. Most small-town Readers are powerful and possibly even quite skilled.

But they aren't Magisters.

A Magister is a Reader who has received an extensive education inside the Vey Illai, an extensive forest in the Aurelian heartland, inside what was once the original Imperial Academy. They can use their Intent with a degree of focus, subtlety, and precision that an ordinary Reader could barely comprehend.

Magisters are in charge of regulating Readers and the use of human Intent, in much the same way that a father is in charge of preventing his children from misbehaving.

It's impossible for all Readers to study at the Vey Illai and become Magisters, because there are too many people with a talent for Reading. And of course everyone invests their Intent into objects, to one degree or another.

But the best and most powerful are called Magisters.

Guild Head: **Professor Mekendi Maxeus**, one of the most distinguished researchers at the Aurelian National Academy, retired from his lecture tour to the "relaxing" position as head of one of the largest Imperial Guilds. He isn't seen outside much these days, having received several disfiguring facial scars in the Inheritance Conflict five years ago, but he still lends his overwhelming power of Intent to the construction of new public monuments in the Capital. He carries a black staff, and I have personally witnessed him use it to blast a collapsed building off a pair of trapped children. I have met few heroes in my career, but this man is among them.

Crest: the Open Book

The Navigators:

When I call the Navigators a Guild, I use the term loosely.

Navigators are the only sailors who can cross the deadly, shifting ocean at the heart of our Empire: the Aion Sea. We therefore rely on them for

communication, trade, exploration, and transport between the eastern continent of Aurelia and the western continent, Izyria.

It's too bad that they're the most shifty and unreliable collection of pirates, confidence artists, mercenaries, and outright criminals the Empire has ever seen.

No one knows how they cross the Aion, with its hundreds of deadly Kameira, its disappearing islands, its unpredictable weather, and its host of lurking Elders, but anyone else who sails far enough out into the ocean either vanishes or returns insane.

The best way to recognize a real Navigator from a faker is to ask to see their Guild license, which is unmistakable and cannot be reproduced. Unfortunately, that only tells you which sailor is truly able to cross the Aion: not whether he can be trusted.

Guild Head: **Captain Cheska Bennett** is one of the few reliable Navigators left in this world. She owns *The Eternal*, a most striking ship with billowing red sails and a wake that trails flame. She commands truly shocking prices for her services, but if you hire her, you can be certain that every splinter of your cargo will remain secure between one continent and the other.

Crest: the Navigator's Wheel (a ship's wheel with a single eye at the center)

The Witnesses:

I am proud to count myself among the honorable Guild of Witnesses, the final entry on this written tour of Imperial history. Witnesses are the official record-keepers of the Empire, having chronicled the entirety of the Empire's history since our inception. We also observe momentous events, record battles, produce educational reading materials for the general public, and notarize official documents.

As Sadesthenes once said, "*The Witnesses are the grease that allow the wheels of Empire to turn.*"

Generally speaking, Witnesses travel in pairs:

As a **Chronicler**, I am a Reader with the ability to store my memories inside a special alchemically created candle. I burn the candle while I write, and as the memories flow out, I can record my thoughts without any margin of error even years after the events I have witnessed.

Always, I am accompanied by my **Silent One**, a trained warrior and my bodyguard. Silent Ones bind their mouths to symbolize their inability to betray secret or sensitive events, but contrary to popular belief, we do *not* remove their tongues. We're not barbarians. They are capable of speech, they are simply discouraged from speaking in the presence of outsiders.

Guild Head: The Heads of my own Guild are the twin sisters **Azea and Calazan Farstrider**, natives of exotic Izyria. Though they are young, having risen to prominence after the Emperor's untimely demise, I have never met anyone so dedicated to accuracy and neutrality. Azea works as a Chronicler, and Calazan as her attendant Silent One, though I can personally confirm that either sister can perform either role. Azea is a remarkable fighter in her own right, and Calazan a skilled Reader and clerk.

Crest: the Quill and Candle

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Will Wight lives in Florida, among the citrus fruits and slithering sea creatures. He's the author of the Amazon best-selling *Traveler's Gate Trilogy*, *The Elder Empire* (which cleverly offers twice the fun and twice the work), and his series of mythical martial arts magic: *Cradle*.

He graduated from the University of Central Florida in 2013, earning a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing and a flute of dragon's bone. He is also, apparently, invisible to cameras.

He also claims that ***WillWight.com*** is the best source for book updates, new stories, fresh coriander, and miracle cures for all your aches and pains!



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Underlord

Uncrowned

Cradle: Foundation

The Traveler's Gate Trilogy

House of Blades

The Crimson Vault

City of Light

The Traveler's Gate Chronicles

The Elder Empire

Of Sea & Shadow

Of Dawn & Darkness

Of Kings & Killers

Of Shadow & Sea

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