

For Erica. Obviously.

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**THERE WILL
COME A
DARKNESS**

AN AGE OF DARKNESS NOVEL

KATY ROSE POOL

Henry Holt and Company

New York

THE FOUR BODILY GRACES

THE GRACE OF HEART

Enhances strength, agility, speed, and senses

Wielded by: elite fighters

THE GRACE OF BLOOD

Gives and takes energy to heal or harm

Wielded by: healers

THE GRACE OF MIND

Creates objects imbued with unique properties

Wielded by: alchemists and artificers

THE GRACE OF SIGHT

Senses and locates living beings

Wielded by: scryers

I

HARBINGER

1

EPHYRA

IN THE MOONLIT ROOM OVERLOOKING THE CITY OF FAITH, A PRIEST KNELT before Ephyra and begged for his life.

“Please,” he said. “I don’t deserve to die. Please. I won’t touch them anymore, I swear. Have mercy.”

Around him, the lavish private room at the Thalassa Gardens taverna lay in disarray. A sumptuous feast spilled from overturned platters and filigreed pitchers. The white marble floor was littered with ripe berries and the smashed remains of a dozen tiny jewel-like bottles. A pool of blood-dark wine slowly spread toward the kneeling priest.

Ephyra crouched down, placing her palm upon the papery skin of his cheek.

“Oh, thank you!” the priest cried, tears springing into his eyes. “Thank you, blessed—”

“I wonder,” Ephyra said. “Did your victims ever beg you for mercy? When you were leaving your bruises on their bodies, did they ever cry out in Behezda’s name?”

He choked on a breath.

“They didn’t, did they? You plied them with your monstrous potion to make them docile so you could hurt them without ever having to see their pain,” she said. “But I want you to know that every mark you left on them left a mark on you, too.”

“Please.”

A breeze rustled in from the open balcony doors behind Ephyra as she tilted the priest’s chin toward her. “You’ve been marked for death. And death has come to collect.”

His terror-struck eyes gazed up at Ephyra as she slid her hand to his throat, where she could feel the rapid tap-tap-tap of his pulse. She focused on the rush of blood beneath his flesh and drew the *esha* from his body.

The light drained from the priest’s eyes as his lungs sputtered out their last breath. He collapsed to the floor. A handprint, as pale as the moon, glowed against the sallow skin of his throat. Dead, and only a single mark to show for it.

Drawing the dagger from her belt, Ephyra leaned over the corpse. The priest had not been alone when she’d found him. The two girls he’d had with him—hollow-eyed girls, their wrists mottled with green and purple bruises—had fled the moment Ephyra had told them to run, as if they couldn’t help but obey.

Ephyra slid the tip of her blade into the flesh of the priest’s throat, cutting a line of red through the pale handprint. As dark blood oozed out, she turned the dagger over and opened the compartment in its hilt to extract the vial within. She held it under the flow of his blood. The priest’s desperate words had been a lie—he *did* deserve death. But that wasn’t why she’d taken his life.

She had taken his life because she needed it.

The door burst open, startling Ephyra from her task. The vial slipped from her hand. She fumbled with it but caught it.

“Don’t move!”

Three men spilled into the suite, one holding a crossbow, and the other two with sabers. Sentry. Ephyra wasn’t surprised. Thalassa sat at the edge of Elea Square, just within the High City gates. She’d known from staking it out that the Sentry ran their foot patrols through the square every night. But they’d gotten here quicker than she’d expected.

The first Sentry through the door stopped short, staring at the priest’s body, stunned. “He’s dead!”

Ephyra sealed the vial of blood and hid it back within the dagger’s hilt. She drew herself up, touching the black silk that covered the bottom of her face to make sure it was still in place.

“Come quietly,” the first Sentry said slowly, “and you don’t have to get hurt.”

Ephyra’s pulse hammered in her throat, but she made her voice calm. Fearless. “Take another step and there will be more than one body in this room.”

The Sentry hesitated. “She’s bluffing.”

“No, she isn’t,” the one with the crossbow said nervously. He glanced down at the priest’s corpse. “Look at the handprint. Just like the ones they found on the bodies in Tarsepolis.”

“The Pale Hand,” the third Sentry whispered, frozen as he stared at Ephyra.

“That’s just street lore,” the first Sentry said, but his voice was trembling slightly. “No one is so powerful that they can kill with only the Grace of Blood.”

“What are you doing in Pallas Athos?” the third Sentry asked her. He stood with his chest out and his feet apart, as if staring down a beast. “Why have you come here?”

“You call this place the City of Faith,” Ephyra said. “But corruption and evil fester behind these white walls. I will mark them the way

I mark my victims, so the rest of the world can see that the City of Faith is the city of the fallen.”

This was a lie. Ephyra had not come to the City of Faith to stain it with blood. But only two other people in the world knew the real reason, and one of them was waiting for her.

She moved toward the window. The Sentry tensed, but none tried to go after her.

“You won’t get away with killing a priest so easily,” the first said. “When we tell the Conclave what you’ve done—”

“Tell them.” She tugged her black hood over her head. “Tell them the Pale Hand came for the priest of Pallas. And tell them to pray that I don’t come for them next.”

She turned to the balcony, throwing open the satin drapes to the night and the moon that hung like a scythe in the sky.

The Sentry shouted after her, their blustering voices overlapping as Ephyra flew to the edge of the balcony and climbed over the marble balustrade. The world tipped—four stories below, the steps of Thalassa’s entrance gleamed like ivory teeth in the moonlight. She gripped the edge of the balustrade and turned. To her left, the roof of the public baths sloped toward her.

Ephyra leapt, launching herself toward it. Squeezing her eyes shut, she tucked her knees and braced for impact. She hit the roof at a roll and waited for her own momentum to slow before picking herself up and racing across it, the voices of the Sentry and the lights of Thalassa fading into the night.

Ephyra moved through the mausoleum like a shadow. The sanctum was still and silent in the predawn darkness as she picked her way through

broken marble and other rubble around the tiled scrying pool in the center, the only part of the shrine left unscorched. Above, the caved-in roof gave way to the sky.

The ruins of the mausoleum sat just outside the High City gates, close enough that Ephyra could easily sneak back into the Low City without drawing notice. She didn't know exactly when the mausoleum had been burned down, but it was all but abandoned now, making it the perfect hideout. She slipped through the scorched shrine into the crypt. The stairwell creaked and moaned as she climbed down and wrenched open the rotted wood door to the alcove that had served as her home for the past few weeks. Shedding her mask and hood, she crept inside.

The alcove used to be a storeroom for the acolyte caretakers who had tended to the shrine. Now it was abandoned, left for rats, rot, and for people like Ephyra who didn't mind the other two.

"You're late."

Ephyra peered through the darkened room to the bed that lay in the corner, shadowed by the tattered sheets that hung over it. Her sister's dark eyes peered back at her.

"I know," Ephyra said, folding the mask and hood over the back of the chair.

A book slid from Beru's chest as she sat up, its pages fluttering as it bounced onto the sheets. Her short, curly hair was raked up on one side. "Everything go all right?"

"Fine." No point telling how close her escape had been. It was done now. She forced a smile on her face. "Come on, Beru, you know my days of falling off slyhouse roofs are behind me. I'm better than that now."

When Ephyra had first assumed the mask of the Pale Hand, she hadn't been quite as good at sneaking around and climbing as she was now. Having the Grace of Blood didn't help her sneak into crime dens or scale rich merchants' balconies. She'd had to gain such skills the

traditional way, spending countless nights honing her balance, reaction time, and strength, as well as gathering information necessary for specific targets. Beru had joined her, when she was well enough, racing Ephyra to see who could climb a fence faster or leap between rooftops more quietly. They'd spent many nights stealing through the shadows, tailing behind a potential mark to learn vices and habits. After years of training and close calls, Ephyra knew how to get in and out of the dangerous situations she courted as the Pale Hand.

Beru returned her sister's smile weakly.

Ephyra's own smile faded, seeing the pain in Beru's eyes. "Come on," she said softly.

Beru lifted the rough blanket away from her body. Beneath it, she was shivering, her brown skin ashen in the low light. Tired lines had etched themselves into the skin below her bloodshot eyes.

Ephyra frowned, turning to the crate beside Beru's bed, where a shallow bowl rested. She opened the compartment in her dagger's hilt and poured the contents of the vial into the bowl. "We let this go for too long."

"It's fine," Beru hissed through clenched teeth, "I'm fine." She unwrapped the cotton from her left wrist, revealing the black handprint that marred the skin beneath it.

Ephyra pressed her hand into the bowl, coating it with wet blood. Placing her bloody palm over the dark handprint on her sister's skin, she closed her eyes and focused on the blood, guiding the *esha* she'd taken from the priest and directing it into her sister.

The blood Ephyra collected from her victims acted as a conduit to the *esha* she drained from them. If she were a properly trained healer, she would have known the correct patterns of binding that would tether her victims' *esha* to Beru. She wouldn't need to use the binding of blood.

Then again, if Ephyra were properly trained, she wouldn't have been killing in the first place. Healers with the Grace of Blood took an oath that forbid drawing *esha* from another person.

But this was the only way to keep her sister alive.

"There," Ephyra said, pressing a finger into Beru's skin, which was starting to lose that worrying grayish tinge. "All better."

For now, Beru didn't say, but Ephyra could see the words in her sister's eyes. Beru reached over and opened the drawer of the table beside the bed, withdrawing a thin black stylus. With careful, practiced motions, she pressed the stylus against her wrist, drawing a small, straight line there. It joined the thirteen others, permanently etched in alchemical ink.

Fourteen people killed. Fourteen lives cut short so that Beru could live.

It wasn't lost on Ephyra, the way Beru marked her skin each time Ephyra marked another victim. She could see the way the guilt ate at her sister after every death. The people Ephyra killed were far from innocent, but that didn't seem to matter to Beru.

"This could be the last time we have to do this," Ephyra said quietly.

This was the real reason they'd come to Pallas Athos. Somewhere in this city of fallen faith and crumbling temples, there was a person who knew a way to heal Beru for good. It was the only thing Ephyra had hoped for in the last five years.

Beru looked away.

"I brought you something else," Ephyra said, making her voice light. She reached into the little bag that hung at her belt and held out a glass bottle stopper she'd picked off the ground in the priest's room. "I thought you could use it for the bracelet you're making."

Beru took the bottle stopper, turning it over in her hand. It looked like a little jewel.

“You know I’m not going to let anything happen to you,” Ephyra said, covering her sister’s hand with her own.

“I know.” Beru swallowed. “You’re always worrying about me. Sometimes I think that’s all you do. But, you know, I worry about you, too. Every time you’re out there.”

Ephyra tapped her finger against Beru’s cheek in reproach. “I won’t get hurt.”

Beru brushed her thumb across the fourteen ink lines on her wrist. “That’s not what I mean.”

Ephyra drew her hand away. “Go to sleep.”

Beru rolled over, and Ephyra climbed into the bed beside her. She lay listening to her sister’s even breaths, thinking about the worry that Beru would not give name to. Ephyra worried, too, on nights like tonight, when she felt her victims’ pulse slow and then stop, when she pulled the last dregs of life from them. Their eyes went dark, and Ephyra felt a sweet, sated relief, and in equal measure, a deep, inescapable fear—that killing monsters was turning her into one.

2

HASSAN

HASSAN TUGGED AT HIS TUNIC AS HE MADE HIS WAY UP THE SACRED ROAD. THE servant he'd borrowed it from was a tad taller than he was, and it hung awkwardly on Hassan's frame. He wasn't used to the clothing they wore in Pallas Athos. The way it draped and flowed made him long for the sturdiness of Herati brocade, for clothes that fastened shut and covered his chest and throat.

But he would have been too conspicuous in his own clothes, and all the effort he'd put into sneaking out of his aunt's villa would have been for naught if he were recognized on the street. Not to mention the danger he might be in.

That had been Aunt Lethia's reasoning, anyway, when Hassan had first asked to leave the confines of her cliffside home.

"You came to this city to be safe," she had insisted. "The Witnesses don't know for sure that the Prince of Herat escaped them in Nazirah, and I intend to keep it that way as long as we can. The Hierophant has influence even here, and I fear that if his followers knew you had escaped, they would make it their mission to deliver you to him."

After two weeks of this argument, Hassan had decided to take matters into his own hands. His aunt had gone into the city for the afternoon, and Hassan had taken his chance. He was going to find out what was happening in his kingdom since he'd left—all the things his aunt didn't know, or wouldn't tell him.

The afternoon was warm, and the Sacred Road bustled with activity. Olive trees, the emblem of Pallas Athos, lined the limestone street all the way from the marina to the agora, then on to the Temple of Pallas, at the highest point of the city. Colonnaded porticos opened to shops, tavernas, and public baths on either side of the road.

The cold marble and austere limestone of this city made Hassan miss the bursting colors of Herat's capital, Nazirah—rich gold, warm ochre and carmine, verdant green, and vivid blue.

"You there! Stop!"

Hassan froze. He'd barely made it a mile from the villa, and already he'd been caught. Regret and embarrassment heated him.

But when he turned toward the voice, he realized they hadn't been addressing him. A butcher stood beside his market stall, calling out to someone else in the street. "Thief! Stop!"

Several other people stopped, looking around. But one small boy kept running, and before Hassan could decide what to do, the boy crashed straight into him.

Hassan stumbled but managed to catch the boy so that they didn't both tumble onto the paved street.

"Thief! Thief!" the butcher cried. "That's the thief!"

Hassan held the boy by the shoulders, taking in his tattered, knee-length pants and grimy face. He clutched a brown paper package to his chest. His dark features and bronze skin were unmistakably Herati—here was a child of Hassan's homeland. Hassan glanced back at the butcher, who was huffing his way over to them, red-faced.

“Thought you’d get away with it, did you?” the butcher said to the boy. “You won’t like what they do to thieves in this city.”

“I’m not a thief!” the boy growled, stepping out of Hassan’s hold. “I paid for this.”

Hassan turned to the butcher. “Is that true?”

“The boy gave me a meager few coins, not even half what that cut is worth!” the butcher said indignantly. “Thought I wouldn’t notice and you could sneak off, did you?”

The boy shook his head. “I’m sorry! I thought it was enough. I counted, but all the money is different here, and I was confused.”

“This sounds like a simple misunderstanding,” Hassan said, putting on his most diplomatic smile. He reached into the coin purse that hung from his belt. “I’ll make up what’s owed. How much was it?”

The butcher eyed the boy. “Three virtues.”

Hassan counted out three silver coins stamped with the olive tree of Pallas Athos and held them out to the butcher.

The butcher sneered, closing his hand around the money. “You refugees think you can get by on our charity forever.”

Hassan seethed. A small part of him wished he could reveal who he was to this butcher, to publicly castigate him for saying such things to the Prince of Herat. Instead, with a smile fixed in place, he said, “Your charity inspires us all.”

The butcher’s jaw twitched, like he wasn’t sure if Hassan was mocking him or not. With a grunt and a nod, he returned to his stall.

As soon as the butcher’s back was turned, the boy spun away from Hassan.

Hassan caught him by the shoulder. “Slow down. We’re not done here. You weren’t really confused by the coins, were you?”

The boy looked up sharply.

“It’s all right,” Hassan said gently. “I’m sure you had a good reason.”

"I wanted to get it for my mom," the boy said. "Lamb stew is her favorite. But we haven't had any since . . . since we left home. I thought if I could make it for her, it would make her feel like we were back there, and maybe she wouldn't cry so much."

Hassan couldn't help but think of his own mother, who *was* back home, though he would give anything to have her here with him. To comfort her, the way this boy, barely older than ten, wanted to comfort his own mother. To tell her everything would be all right. Or maybe to have her tell him that. If she was even still alive. *She is*, he thought. *She has to be.*

He swallowed, looking down at the boy. "We'd better get this back to her, then. You're in the camps, aren't you?"

The boy nodded. Together, they set off, Hassan's anticipation growing as they trekked up the final stretch of the Sacred Road. The High City of Pallas Athos had been built into a mountainside, three tiers stacked on top of one another like a towering crown. The Sacred Gate welcomed them to the highest tier, upon which the agora spread out, overlooking the entire city.

Above, the marble edifice of the Temple of Pallas gleamed, grander than any of the temples in Nazirah. Broad white steps led up the hillside to the temple portico, bracketed by rows of columns. Light spilled from the massive doors like a beacon.

This was one of the six great monuments of the world, where the founder of this city, the Prophet Pallas, had once given guidance to the priests who ruled, and spread the word of his prophecies to the rest of the world. According to *The History of the Six Prophetic Cities*, people from all over the Pelagos continent used to come to the agora on pilgrimage to the City of Faith, to consecrate themselves with chrism oil and leave offerings of incense and olive branches on the steps of the temple.

But no pilgrims had set foot here in the hundred years since the Prophets had disappeared. The structures of the agora—the store-rooms, public baths, arenas, and acolytes' living quarters—had begun to crumble and grow over with weeds and tall grass.

Now, the agora was brimming with people and activity again. In the two weeks since the coup, Herati refugees had gathered here under the protection of the Archon Basileus and the Priests' Conclave of Pallas Athos. This was the reason Hassan had left the villa—to finally see with his own eyes the others who, like him, had escaped Nazirah. People like this boy.

The earthy scent of woodsmoke filled Hassan's nose as he and the boy passed through the Sacred Gate and into the makeshift village. Tents, lean-tos, and crudely built shelters crowded the spaces between the weathered structures. Scraps of cloth and debris littered the dirt-caked ground. The wails of crying children and the brusque tones of argument punctuated the air. Straight ahead, a long line of people spilled out from a colonnaded structure, carrying jugs and buckets full of water, moving carefully to ensure that not a single precious drop was wasted.

Hassan stopped, taking in the sight. He wasn't sure what he'd expected to find in the agora, but it wasn't *this*. He thought shamefully of the pristine gardens and palatial rooms in his aunt's villa, while here, just over a mile away, his own people were crammed into crumbling, ramshackle ruins.

Yet even in the overcrowded disarray, Hassan felt a pang of familiarity. The crowds were made up of dark-skinned desert settlers, and sun-bronzed delta folk like himself. He was struck by the thought that he could never have walked so casually into a place like this back home. There were celebrations like the Festival of the Flame and the Festival of the Flood, of course, but even then Hassan and the royal court were

removed from the chaos and crowds, looking out from the palace steps or the royal barge on the Herat River.

Exhilaration and a strange sense of trepidation washed over him. This wasn't just the first time he was seeing his people since the coup—this was his first time seeing his people as one of them.

"Azizi!" a frantic voice broke through the din of the crowd surrounding the fountainhouse. A woman with plaited dark hair came rushing toward them, trailed by a silver-haired woman holding a baby at her hip.

Azizi ran at a tripping pace toward the black-haired woman, who was clearly his mother. She wrapped him up in an unrestrained embrace. Then she pulled away and began yelling at him, tears in her eyes, before sweeping him up in another tremendous hug.

"I'm sorry, Ma. I'm sorry," Hassan heard as he approached. Azizi looked plaintive.

"I told you not to leave the agora!" his mother scolded. "Anything could have happened to you."

Azizi looked like he was struggling valiantly not to cry.

The older woman sidled over to stand at Hassan's shoulder. "Where did you find him?"

"In the market, just outside the gate," Hassan replied. "He was buying lamb."

The woman made a soft noise as the child in her arms tried to squirm away. "He's a good kid." Then abruptly, she asked, "Are you a refugee, too?"

"No," Hassan lied quickly. "Just in the right place at the right time."

"But you are Herati."

"Yes," Hassan said, trying not to rouse her suspicion. "I live in the city. I came here to find out if there's been any more news out of Nazirah. I . . . I have family there. I need to know if they're safe."

“I’m so sorry,” the woman said gravely. “There are too many of us who don’t know what’s happened to our loved ones back home. The Witnesses have stopped almost all the ships going in and out of the harbor. The only information we have is coming from whoever’s managed to escape east, to the desert and the South Sea.”

Hassan knew exactly how that felt. In his bedchambers in the villa, he had a leather-bound notebook filled with every measly piece of information he’d gained about what had happened to his city. He still didn’t know what had happened to his parents. He wasn’t sure if this was because his aunt Lethia herself didn’t know, or because she was protecting him from the truth.

He didn’t want to be protected. He just wanted to *know*, one way or another. He steeled himself as he asked, “What about the king and queen? Has there been any word about what happened to them?”

“The king and queen still live,” the woman said. “The Hierophant has them captive somewhere, but they’ve been sighted in public at least twice since the coup.”

Breath gusted out of Hassan’s chest. He felt faint. He had needed to hear those words so badly. His parents were alive. They were still in Herat, though at the mercy of the leader of the Witnesses.

“There’s no word about the prince,” the woman continued. “He hasn’t been seen in Nazirah since the coup. He’s completely vanished. But many of us think he survived. That he managed to escape.”

It was only by chance that Hassan hadn’t been in his rooms when the Hierophant attacked the palace. He’d fallen asleep down in the library over a volume of *The Fall of the Novogardian Empire*, and he’d woken to the sounds of shouting voices and the smell of acrid smoke. One of his father’s guards had found him there and snuck him out over the garden walls and down to the harbor, telling him his mother and father were waiting for him on one of the ships. By the time Hassan

realized the guard had been lying, he was already sailing away from his city and the lighthouse that stood like a sentinel at its harbor.

“What is the Hierophant doing with the king and queen?” Hassan asked.

The woman shook her head. “I don’t know. Some say he’s keeping them alive to placate the populace. Others say he’s using them to demonstrate his power—both to his followers and the Graced in Nazirah.”

“His power?” he echoed, sensing she meant something more than just the command the Hierophant seemed to have over his followers.

“The Witnesses claim that the Hierophant can stop the Graced from using their abilities,” the woman said. “That simply by being in his presence, the Graced are rendered powerless. His followers believe that if they prove themselves, the Hierophant will teach them to wield this power, too.”

Hassan’s jaw clenched. The thought of his mother and father being subjected to such a demonstration made Hassan feel sick with anger. He couldn’t help but picture it—his mother, proud and tall, refusing to bend. His father, gentle and thoughtful, hiding his own fear for the sake of his people. The Hierophant, standing before them both, his face concealed by a gilded mask.

Hassan had never laid eyes on the man who had taken his country from him, but others told of the mask he wore—gold with a black sun carved into the center of its forehead, obscuring his face and identity.

Over the past five years, reports had built a picture of the masked man. A foreigner, preaching through the eastern regions of Herat. A skilled speaker, able to silence a room with a gesture or incite a riot with a word. It was said the Hierophant had once been an acolyte of the Temple of Pallas, but had turned his back on the Prophets and begun delivering his own message. He taught townsfolk that the powers of the Graced were unnatural and dangerous, his message gathering

a following of others eager to blame the Graced for every ill suffered in their own lives.

Hassan could still remember how troubled his father had been as accounts of violence against the Graced poured in from every corner of the kingdom—and even from within Nazirah. In every attack, the perpetrators said the same thing. The Hierophant had told them to desecrate the village temple. The Hierophant had told them to burn down the healer’s home. The Hierophant had told them they were purifying the world of the Graced.

The Hierophant.

“You should talk to the Herati acolytes,” the woman said, nodding toward the Temple of Pallas. “They’ve been aiding the other refugees. If your family made it here, they’ll know.”

Hassan opened his mouth to thank her, but a bone-shattering shriek cut through the air. The people around them froze. Without pausing to think, Hassan sprinted through the crowd toward the temple. Two boys clipped past him, running in the opposite direction.

“Get the Sentry! Get the Sentry!” one of them yelled.

His alarm growing, Hassan pushed himself faster until he reached the steps of the Temple of Pallas. A crowd of people had formed there, as if waiting to ascend.

“Step back, old man!” a voice barked from the steps above.

Hassan craned his neck to see who had spoken. About two dozen men stood along the temple steps, holding hammers, sticks, and cudgels. They wore robes patterned with black and gold around the sleeve cuffs and hem, their hoods pushed back to reveal close-cropped hair. The one who’d spoken had a short gray beard.

Witnesses—followers of the Hierophant. Just the sight of them made anger roil in Hassan’s stomach, and he found himself pushing through to the front of the crowd. At the top of the stairs, an old man,

dressed in the light green and pale gold chiton of a Herati temple acolyte, stood facing the Witnesses.

“This temple is a holy refuge for those in need,” the old man said, his voice quieter than that of the bearded Witness. “I will not allow you to desecrate it in the name of your lies and hatred.”

“The only people seeking refuge here are the Graced,” the bearded Witness hissed. “They taint the sacred energy of the world with their unnatural powers.”

These last words seemed to be directed at two of the other Witnesses. They were younger. One, short and round-faced; the other, tall and gaunt. The short one clutched a pickax in his shaking hands. He almost looked frightened. But the tall one beside him looked eerily calm, except for his gray eyes, which gleamed with excitement. Instead of a black and gold robe, each wore a white cowl. Initiates, rather than full-fledged members.

The rest of the Witnesses seemed to be waiting for them to make their move.

The bearded Witness’s voice grew louder as he continued. “This city is proof of the corruption of the Graced. The men who call themselves priests spend their time indulging their carnal vices and demanding tribute from the people of this city. A Graced killer is running rampant in the streets, taking lives. And now these cowardly Graced have come here, fleeing from the Immaculate One and his truth.”

The Immaculate One. Hassan knew that phrase. It was what the Witnesses called the Hierophant.

“The Reckoning is coming,” the bearded Witness said. “Soon your corrupt kings and false priests will fall, just like the abomination who sat on the throne of Herat. And the Immaculate One will reward his followers, even his newest disciples. Those who prove their commitment to his message earn the honor of wearing his mark.” The Witness

pushed his sleeve up. Burned into the back side of his varicose hand was the symbol of an eye with a black sun for its pupil. "This is your chance to show him your devotion to our cause and earn your mark. Make these abominations fear his name. Show them the truth of their corruption. Show them all so they cannot look away!"

The other Witnesses followed the man's lead, pushing up their sleeves to reveal the same mark burned into their skin.

The old acolyte stepped up to the round-faced initiate. "You don't need to do this," he said gently. "The Hierophant has preached lies to you, but you don't need to listen to them."

The round-faced initiate tightened his grip on the pickax, his eyes darting from the ringleader of the group to the crowd behind him.

Beside him, the tall, gaunt initiate sneered at the acolyte in disgust. "Your Prophets were the ones who preached lies. I will show the Immaculate One my devotion." Without another word, he stepped up to the acolyte and struck him across the face. The blow was hard enough to send the old man to his knees.

The crowd cried out. Hassan's blood surged in his veins, spurring him up the steps toward the Witnesses. The gaunt initiate turned and spat on the acolyte. Fury overwhelmed thought as Hassan seized the initiate by the cowl and punched him squarely in the face.

He heard the crowd gasp as the initiate stumbled back.

The bearded Witness stepped in front of him, whirling on Hassan. "Who in the Hierophant's name are you?"

"Someone you shouldn't anger," Hassan replied. "But it's much too late for that."

He was aching for a fight, and the Witnesses seemed ready to give it to him. They were kin to the zealots who had taken his kingdom and imprisoned his parents. And they were as close as Hassan was going to get to the Hierophant right now.

The gaunt initiate stepped up to him, lip curled in a snarl. “More Graced scum lording your ill-gotten power over the rest of us. Your Prophets cursed you when they gave you Grace.”

Hassan flushed with rage—and shame. Because Hassan was *not* Graced. Though that fact did not lessen his rage at the Witnesses and their warped ideology. He wanted to correct the initiate—and, at the same time, he wanted to be feared by him, to be thought of as one of the chosen Graced.

In the Six Prophetic Cities and beyond, the Graced were revered for their abilities. The first of the Graced had been given their powers by the Prophets. Though there were only a few thousand Graced born every year, many of them occupied positions of power.

Every queen and king who had sat on the throne of Herat so far had possessed Grace. Hassan had spent much of his life wishing for one of the Four Bodily Graces to manifest in him. To be able to heal with the Grace of Blood, or scry with the Grace of Sight. To be like his father, with the Grace of Mind, able to create objects imbued with sacred *esha*, capable of wondrous things. Or like his mother, whose Grace of Heart made her as strong as an ox, as fast as a viper, able to see in the dark and hear a heartbeat from a thousand feet off.

As the years passed, Hassan’s longing had grown more and more desperate. While Grace was known to manifest in people as old as seventeen, his parents and grandparents had discovered theirs before they were twelve. Now at sixteen, Hassan had long since shut away any hope that he was Graced. The initiate’s words had brought all of that childhood shame bubbling back to the surface.

Hassan lunged at the gaunt initiate, his body acting out of pure fury. His arms reached out, hands flexed and ready to lock around the initiate’s throat. But something collided sideways with him, and when Hassan turned, he saw the short, round-faced initiate above him.

He swung at Hassan again. Hassan ducked, catching himself on one knee. When he looked up, he saw that the tall, gaunt initiate had seized the old acolyte's robe.

"The Immaculate One will know the strength of my devotion!" the gaunt initiate cried, reaching for his belt and pulling out a glinting knife. "The Prophets are gone, and the Graced will follow!"

"No!" Hassan cried, leaping toward them. He shoved the acolyte hard, out of the way, and dove to tackle the gaunt initiate. But the initiate sidestepped and turned toward Hassan, blade flashing in his hand.

Though Hassan lacked her Graced speed and strength, his mother had taught him how to defend himself. He pivoted on his heel and flung his arm out toward the knife. The blade caught him just below the elbow, slicing into the flesh of his bare arm. Pain seared into him, but he did not let it jar his focus. With his other hand, he reached for the knife and forced it away from his body.

The gaunt initiate and he were in a deadlock, their grips pushing against each other, forcing the knife high. Warm blood dripped down toward Hassan's shoulder, his whole arm pulsing and hot with pain. He looked into the initiate's wide eyes. The deep, burning rage that had been left to fester for the past two weeks coursed through Hassan as he tore the knife away.

He looked down at the blade in his hand, overcome by the urge to plunge it straight into the initiate's heart. As if he could make him pay with blood for all the pain these people, and their leader, had caused his home.

But before he could act, an attack from behind knocked him forward. The knife clattered to the ground, and the world became a dizzying jumble as Hassan crashed onto the temple steps. He threw his arms up to protect himself as the other Witnesses advanced, brandishing their weapons.

But the blows never came. Hassan heard a sharp grunt and the sound of three bodies hitting the marble steps.

When he looked up, he saw only light.

On the steps, in the midst of three sprawled Witnesses, stood a girl. She was unmistakably Herati, shorter than Hassan but muscular, with smooth dark brown skin and thick black hair swept into a bun. The sides were cropped close to her head, in the style of Herati Legionnaires. The blinding light, he saw now, had been the reflection of the afternoon sun on the curved sword she held in her hands.

Two other Herati swordsmen flanked her, their eyes narrowed at the Witnesses, who quickly retreated.

“Get out of here now,” she said to the Witnesses on the steps. Her voice was low and commanding. “If you set foot at this temple again, it will be the last place you ever go.”

The Witnesses, who had seemed plenty bold when faced with an acolyte and unarmed refugees, were not as keen to face down Graced Herati Legionnaires with blades in their hands. They scattered down the temple stairs, looking over their shoulders as they fled.

Only the bearded Witness remained behind. He scraped himself off the steps. “The Reckoning is coming for you all!” he raged at the crowd as he turned to follow the others away from the temple.

“You scared them off,” one of the other swordsmen said to the girl.

She shook her head. “They’ll be back, just like rats. But we’ll be ready for them.”

“Oh, look,” the other swordsman said, pointing down the steps of the temple. “The Sentry’s here. Just in time to miss all the action.”

Hassan turned to see the familiar light blue uniforms of the city Sentry as they marched through the dispersing crowd. In the time of the Prophets, the city and the Temple of Pallas had been protected by the Paladin of the Order of the Last Light—the Graced

soldiers who served the Prophets. But when the Prophets disappeared, so had the Order, and now the city's protection fell to the Sentry, a cobbled-together force of Graceless mercenaries and hired swords.

"Are you all right?" the Herati girl asked.

It took Hassan a moment to realize the question was directed at him. He turned back toward the girl and then followed her gaze down to his arm. It was a mess of drying blood.

"It's just a scratch," he replied. His anger had kept the pain at bay, but looking at the wound made him feel suddenly queasy. The thrum of his earlier rage had dissipated to a low simmer. He felt a headache coming on.

"That was very stupid what you did," she said. In one fluid motion, she sheathed the curved blade at her belt. "Stupid, but brave."

Hassan's stomach flipped.

"I haven't seen you around the camps before," she said, tilting her head.

"I'm not a refugee," he blurted. "I'm a student here."

"A student," the girl repeated. "The Akademos is pretty far from here, isn't it?"

Hassan was saved from having to say more when the old acolyte appeared beside him.

"Emir!" the girl said. "You aren't hurt, are you?"

The acolyte waved her off. "No, no, I'm perfectly all right, Khepri. No need to fret." He turned to Hassan. "I believe you dropped something." He held out his hand.

"My compass!" Hassan reached for it.

"I couldn't help but notice it has a peculiar bearing," Emir said. "It points to the lighthouse of Nazirah, doesn't it?"

Hassan nodded slowly. The lighthouse was the symbol of Nazirah

the Wise, the Prophet for whom Herat's capital was named, and whose prophecy had led to its founding.

Hassan's father had given the compass to him on the day he turned sixteen. He'd said he knew Hassan would keep the compass safe and, when the time came, he knew he'd keep the kingdom safe, too. Before that moment, Hassan had given up hope of succeeding his father as King of Herat.

"I can't," Hassan had choked out to his father. "I'm not—I don't have a Grace. Even if the scholars say there's still time for it to manifest, you and I both know it's too late."

His father had traced the compass's etched lighthouse with his thumb. "When the Prophet Nazirah founded this city, she saw a vision of this lighthouse, a beacon to learning and reason. She saw that as long as the lighthouse of Nazirah stood, the Seif line would rule the Kingdom of Herat. Your Grace could manifest tomorrow. Or never," he'd said. "But Grace or no Grace, you are my son. The heir to the Seif line. Should you ever lose faith in yourself, this compass will guide you back to it."

With his father's words echoing in his head, Hassan tucked the compass away and met the acolyte's curious gaze. Was that simple interest in his eyes, or something more knowing? Had he recognized Hassan?

"Nazirah?" the Herati girl said. "Are you from there?"

"It's my father's," he replied. It wasn't a lie. "He was born there."

Thinking of his father made Hassan's chest feel heavy. What would he say if he could see how Hassan had reacted today? Shame flooded him at how easily he had let his anger take over.

"I—I should go."

"You should see a healer," the Herati girl said. "There are some in the camps. I'm sure they would be glad to look at that arm for you, especially if they knew how you—"

“No,” Hassan broke in. “Thank you. That’s very kind, but I need to be getting back now.”

Afternoon was cooling into evening, and Hassan knew he had less than an hour before his aunt’s servants would call him to supper and realize he wasn’t in his quarters. He needed time to get back and hide his wound.

“Well,” the acolyte said warmly. “Perhaps you’ll come again.”

“Yes,” Hassan said, his eyes on the Herati girl. “I mean, I’ll try.”

He hurried away from the temple and back to the Sacred Road. But as he reached the gate, he turned and looked up at the agora and the makeshift camps nestled beneath the Temple of Pallas. Behind him, the sun was sinking down below the shimmering turquoise sea, and Hassan could see the first campfires catch light, flickering to life, sending smoke into the sky like prayers.

3

ANTON

SOMETHING HAD HAPPENED AT THALASSA GARDENS.

There were always more Sentry in the streets once Anton passed through the gates that separated the Low City from the High City. But today, they were more than just noticeable. Dozens of Sentry dressed in pale blue uniforms emblazoned with a white olive tree clustered around the sides of the tavernas and public baths that lined Elea Square. An entire squad of them stood outside Thalassa, swords at their sides.

Anton nudged his way past whispering shopkeepers and other curious onlookers to where he could see a small knot of people wearing the same olive-green uniform he had on.

“Finally, you’re here!” a cheerful voice crooned, seizing Anton’s wrist and tugging him through the crowd toward the outer wall of Thalassa Gardens. “You picked a terrible day to come late to work.”

“Lo, Cosima,” Anton said, blinking at his fellow server. “What’s going on?”

Cosima took a drag of her cigarillo and blew a thick stream of

valerian smoke directly into his face, her pale brown eyes lighting up. “There’s been a murder.”

“What—*here?*” Anton asked. “A guest?”

Cosima nodded, flicking ash from her cigarillo. “A *priest*. Armando Curio.”

“Who?”

She rolled her eyes. “Of course. I forget you’re not from here. Curio is one of the priests of the Temple of Pallas—but he’s got a different reputation around here.”

Thalassa Gardens was no stranger to members of the priest class with certain reputations. Since the city’s founding, gambling halls, sly-houses, and other impious activities had been restricted to the Low City, where Anton lived. The High City, where the priests and the higher classes lived, was meant to be a paragon of virtue and piety. Maybe once it had been. But now, the priest class seemed only interested in enriching themselves, indulging in their own vices and luxuries in places like Thalassa Gardens—places where those indulgences lurked beneath a veneer of respectability.

Cosima took another drag off her cigarillo. “I guess it’s no surprise why he was chosen.”

Anton glanced at her sharply. “What do you mean, ‘chosen’?”

“They’re saying,” she drawled in the offhand tone she used when she wanted him to hang on to her every word, “that it was the Pale Hand who killed him.”

“Who’s saying?”

Cosima waved a hand vaguely through the smoke. “Stefanos says he saw them bring out the body. Pale handprint around the throat, just like the victims in Tarsepolis.”

“Stefanos is an idiot,” Anton said automatically. But his skin prickled. This was the first Anton had heard of the Pale Hand in Pallas

Athos, but there had been whispers of mysterious deaths, marked by a single pale handprint, when he'd lived near Tarsepolis. He'd heard there were similar rumors in Charis, reaching back almost five years.

They all said the same thing—that the Pale Hand killed only those who deserved it.

“Why do you think she chose him?” Anton asked. “What did he do?”

“The usual,” Cosima replied.

Meaning looting riches from the city's temples to throw lavish gatherings where the priests could eat and drink and satisfy themselves with whatever men and women caught their eye.

“And worse,” she went on. “Curio had the Grace of Mind, and everyone said he was talented at alchemy. Except he wasn't making remedies or luck tinctures. The rumors say Curio's specialty was a draught that makes you docile and obedient. They say he used to go down into the Low City, find boys and girls there and tell them they'd been chosen to serve the temple. He'd drug them with the stuff and, well . . .”

Anton's stomach clenched. He knew the kinds of terrible things powerful men did to vulnerable people.

“What are you two whispering about?”

Anton turned to find none other than Stefanos sidling up to them. Simpering and self-important, Stefanos was a personal attendant at Thalassa whose guests seemed to like him as much as the rest of the staff detested him. He was constantly underfoot in the kitchens, demanding to taste the food to make sure it was up to scratch and bragging loudly about which priest or rich merchant he was attending that night. His sole redeeming quality was his penchant for losing large sums of money to Anton at the staff's after-hours canbarra game.

It didn't surprise Anton that Stefanos was taking this murder as an opportunity to make himself seem important.

Still, he was curious. "Cosima said you saw the body."

Stefanos glanced at Anton, his full lips stretched into a smirk. "That so?"

"Well?" Anton asked, raising his eyebrows. "Did you?"

Stefanos slung his arm around Anton's shoulders. "Look, I've seen a lot of messed-up stuff in my life. But that? In there? That was by far the most Tarseis-cursed thing I've ever seen. The guy didn't have a scratch on him. Just a *touch*, and he was—" He mimed getting his throat cut. "Makes you think—maybe it's time we open our eyes to how dangerous the Graced really are."

Anton shivered, despite himself.

"You're an idiot," Cosima said to Stefanos, echoing Anton's earlier sentiment.

Stefanos turned to her with a sneer. "You'd understand if you'd seen it."

"You sound like you're ready to shave your head like the rest of those hooded fanatics," Cosima said, blowing out another thread of smoke.

"The Prophets aren't here to curb the Graced anymore," Stefanos said. "We've seen the kinds of things the priests do here, just because they're Graced and they think that makes them better than us. And now we've got people like this Pale Hand running around, killing whoever they want with their unnatural powers."

"Wait, so are you saying that Curio deserved it, or that the Pale Hand should be stopped?" Cosima asked pointedly.

Stefanos's eyes flashed. "I'm saying that maybe the Witnesses are right. Maybe it's time the world finally was rid of the Graced."

Anton's throat felt suddenly tight. Stefanos was irritating, but Anton had never been frightened of him before. But now, Stefanos's dark expression chilled him. He didn't—couldn't—know that Anton was one of the very people he and the Witnesses wanted to see wiped away from the world. That like the priests of Pallas Athos and the Pale Hand, Anton was Graced.

Cosima punched Stefanos on the shoulder.

Stefanos jerked back, clutching at his arm. "Ow! What was that for?"

"To get you to stop running your stupid mouth," Cosima replied. "What's next? Are you gonna go burn down a shrine to prove your devotion to the Hierophant? They say anyone who joins the Witnesses has to commit an act of violence against the Graced."

"They're standing up to the Graced," Stefanos said. "Someone has to."

"Oh, really?" Cosima shot back. "And what about what Vasia told us last week at the canbarra game? About the man who butchered his own Graced children in the middle of the night to prove himself to the Witnesses. Or do you think those kids deserved that, since they were Graced?"

"That's just a rumor," Stefanos sneered. "That didn't really happen."

"Come on," Cosima said scathingly. "This Hierophant has got these people tattooing burning eyes onto their skin and convincing them that the Graced are corrupting the world. You really think something like that is beyond these zealots?"

"Whatever," Stefanos said. With a last sneer, he stomped off to regale the next group of Thalassa workers with his story. Cosima glanced at Anton as Stefanos retreated, worry flashing across her sharp features.

Anton put on a bland smile. "That guy really is an idiot."

"It figures he'd eat up all that crap the Witnesses preach," Cosima

said, tossing the stub of her cigarillo onto the ground. “They’re exactly like him—making up stupid horseshit to get attention. Falling all over themselves to gain the favor of whoever claims to have power.”

“Yeah,” Anton said, tacking on a laugh. It rang hollow to his ears, but Cosima didn’t seem to notice.

“Come on,” she said, playfully swatting at his head. “Let’s go inside before we get yelled at. Or *I* get yelled at. Somehow you never do.”

Anton ducked under her hand. “That’s because everyone likes me.”

“Can’t imagine why.”

The cheerful clank and clatter of dinner preparations enveloped them as they made their way through the kitchen to the servers’ basins to wash up. Anton turned on the copper tap, letting warm water fill the bottom of the basin as he tried to clear his mind of the Pale Hand and the Witnesses. They had nothing to do with him. No one in this city even knew he was Graced. There was no reason that had to change.

“Oh, Anton!” a voice at his elbow piped brightly. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

“Oh, *were* you?” Cosima said coyly.

Darius’s round cheeks immediately flushed pink. The newest and youngest of the Thalassa servers, Darius had latched onto Anton almost immediately. Which Anton wouldn’t have minded at all if it weren’t for the fact that Darius seemed to become unaccountably terrible at his job when Anton was around. Hardly a day went by without Darius dropping a tray or crashing into a table in Anton’s presence.

“I—I mean, because there’s a guest,” Darius stammered, avoiding Anton’s eyes. “Who’s asking for you.”

“A *guest*?” Cosima crowed in delight. “Asking for Anton? What kind of guest?”

Aside from the occasional regulars who came in seeking something

a little more than just dinner, no one had ever come to see Anton at Thalassa. This was unending disappointment to Cosima, who had never met another person's business she didn't want to stick her nose into.

"Um," Darius said, biting the edge of his lower lip. "A woman? She looked rich?"

"Of course she's rich," Cosima said dismissively. "What did she want?"

"I don't know?" Darius eyed Anton like he suspected he had the answer.

Anton looked down at the suds wreathed around his fingers. "Thank you, Darius." He turned and gave him his most charming smile. "You'd better get going. Don't let Arctus yell at you on my account."

Darius nodded, cheeks growing pinker, and scurried off, bumping into a tray of honey-drenched desserts on his retreat.

Anton reached to dry his hands, but Cosima snatched the towel before he could get it, leering. "Who's this guest, huh? You holding out on me? Engaging in some after-hours *entrepreneurship*?"

"Respectable boy like me?" Anton said, all wide-eyed innocence, plucking the towel from Cosima's hands.

"Come on, you're not going to tell me anything?"

He let an easy grin slip over his face as he tossed the towel into the basket. "I thought you found my air of mystery charming."

"You've mistaken me for Darius," Cosima snorted. "That poor besotted child."

Anton winked as he slid past her. "I'll see you at the canbarra game tonight."

Before she could answer, he ducked back through the kitchen, dodging a server with a tray piled with baskets of flatbread, and made his way through the doors. Incandescent lights glowed above the courtyard crowded with tables and chairs. Footbridges and tiled walkways

crisscrossed over the tiered reflecting pools, shaded by broad-leafed trees and canopies of soft pink and gold cloth.

As he stepped into the gardens, he felt the familiar low, swelling hum that always enveloped him in crowds. He braced himself for the onslaught of each distinct *esha* emanating off each person seated in the courtyard, from the merchants, priests, and foreign dignitaries sipping alchemical wine, to the servers who whirled about them with trays of glazed lamb and the dancers who teased them in jewel-bright silks. Beneath their cacophonous chatter and the gentle melody of the lyre players was this: the pulse of the world that Anton alone could hear.

Well, not Anton *alone*. There were others like him who had the Grace of Sight, though few who were quite as attuned to the vibrations of the world's sacred energy. Anton had grown used to tuning it out, ignoring the ebb and flow of *esha*, but tonight, as he made his way through the gardens, he let it all in. He was searching for one in particular.

He felt it almost immediately—the high, clear bell ringing through him. It belonged, he knew, to the woman who sat at the table in the far corner of the courtyard, watching his approach with narrow eyes.

No one else would think this woman out of place at Thalassa, dressed as she was in an elegant gown of deep purple, a string of emeralds hanging off her long neck. But to Anton, she stuck out like an ace of crowns in a hand of canbarra. She looked exactly the same as she had the last time he had seen her—the same ink-black hair done up in an intricate coif, the same dark, round face that gave no hint at her age. The same *esha*, which felt like the clang of silver bells.

“Dining out alone?” he asked as he reached her table.

“Actually,” the woman answered, “my dinner companion has just arrived.”

She'd called herself Mrs. Tappan when they'd first met, but Anton knew by now how easily names slipped off her. He didn't know what her real name was, and she'd never offered it to him. Nor did he know what, precisely, she wanted with him. In his more sentimental moments, he could convince himself she genuinely wanted to help him. More often, he thought it just amused her to play games.

That was fine by him. Anton liked games.

"What do you want?"

She folded her hands neatly on top of the marble table. "I've heard the lamb here is exquisite."

"You know what I meant."

"I stopped by your charming little place last night," she commented, as though she hadn't heard him. "I'm sorry to have missed you. Working late, I suppose."

Anton was neither surprised the Nameless Woman had tried to drop in on him at home, nor that she knew where he lived.

"Though, I do wonder why, with this respectable employment, you haven't upgraded to something a bit less . . . cozy."

"This job is new," Anton lied. "I've barely made enough yet to pay off my last month of rent."

From the narrowing of her eyes, he knew she saw the lie for what it was, but he would not give her the satisfaction of saying the truth out loud. He could afford nicer rooms, but he'd kept his tiny flat in the Low City because it would be easy to leave behind if he had to. The past six months were the longest he'd remained in one place since he was a child, but that didn't mean Pallas Athos was his home.

"What do you want?" he asked again.

She sighed, as if his lack of decorum was a personal disappointment to her. "Fetch me a glass of wine, and we'll talk. Something from Endarrion if you have it. Nothing local—the wine here is swill."

Anton turned on his heel, hastening across the courtyard to the wine cellar. At the top of the stairs, he paused, considering whether or not he could just keep walking, out the door of the taverna, into the maze of streets, where he could lose her, and himself.

It wouldn't matter. She'd only track him down again.

The first time she'd done it had been over a year ago in a slyhouse in a canal town just south of Tarsepolis. Anton had spent six straight nights downstairs at the card table, filling his pockets with the coins of rich men who'd come to drink and gamble before they slipped off to enjoy the attentions of the boys and girls in the rooms above.

But on the seventh night that Anton had sat down at the card table, he'd found himself face-to-face with an elegant woman he'd never seen before.

Even then, her *esha* had felt different, distinct from the chorus of others that buzzed within the smoke-filled cardroom. It had reminded him of silver, bright but elusive. She'd poured him a drink and dealt out a hand of canbarra like she'd been waiting for him. Anton had wanted to get up and leave right then, but a quick glance to his side revealed two guards hovering at his elbow.

"Tell me," the woman had said. "How much money have you made at my card table these past few nights?"

He'd blinked at her. "I'm not cheating."

"I never said you were. I asked how much you'd made."

"Why?" Anton had asked. "Do you want to make me a better offer?"

One eyebrow arched, a thick swoop of amusement. "Tell me your name."

"I'm no one."

She had only smiled at him, and Anton had felt stripped bare beneath her gaze. "Anton," he'd said at last.

"And how old are you, Anton?"

His family had never really kept track of his age. Fifteen, perhaps? He knew it had been about four years since he'd run away from his father and grandmother's home. "Old enough."

The answer had amused her more. "Old enough? Whatever for?"

"I don't think you came here to reprimand and question me."

"Why, then? To punish you?"

"No." Anton's voice had been steady. "To use me."

He remembered how the liquid in her glass had gleamed like burnished brass as she took a slow sip. "And what are you best used for, Anton?"

"This is a slyhouse, isn't it?"

"Are you offering your services?" she'd asked. "Seducing rich, drunk men, playing at being their pet?"

"What," he'd said, flashing a smile. "You don't think I'd be any good at it?"

She'd actually laughed at that, a sound that reminded him of how her *esha* had felt, as clear as a bell. "I think it'd be rather a waste of your *abilities*."

A chill slid down Anton's spine.

"You have it wrong. I don't want to use you, Anton. I want to help you."

"How?" Anton had asked, not believing her for a second. No one helped you without getting something out of you in return. The past four years had taught him that much.

"This slyhouse is just for amusement," she'd said with a dismissive wave. "My real enterprise is my scrying agency."

"You're a bounty hunter."

She'd clucked her tongue. "I don't like that name. It makes it sound so terribly mercenary."

Bounty hunting *was* mercenary. Scrying agencies made the bulk

of their money using the Grace of Sight to track down criminals and reaping the reward money for delivering them to whatever enforcers or city rulers wanted to bring them to justice. But there was also money to be made taking cases from anyone who wanted to find someone badly enough, criminal or not. For a steep price, a bounty hunter could find any person you wanted—people who, like Anton, did not want to be found.

“And are you here to—?” Fear had thumped beneath his ribs at the thought that this woman had been sent to find him. His grandmother was far too poor and miserable to do business with an elegant city woman like her, much less a bounty hunter. But there was someone else it could be.

“No one gave me your name,” she’d said. “Although now I’m curious who you think would. A scorned lover, perhaps? You look like the type who isn’t careful with hearts that aren’t your own.”

Anton’s pulse had settled. “Then why are you telling me this?”

“I told you. I want to help you.” Placing her glass on the table, she’d leaned toward him and said, in a voice like smoke, “I know what you are. It’s time you stop hiding.”

The thought had made him want to bolt out of the slyhouse and start running.

But he hadn’t. Not that night.

Thalassa’s lyre players were ending their song as he returned to the courtyard armed with a jug of red from a vineyard outside Endarrion. With the applause of the surrounding tables clattering in his ears, Anton poured the wine into a crystalline glass.

“Sit,” the Nameless Woman said, waving a hand at the empty chair across from her. Anton stiffly took a seat as the sounds of scraping forks, indistinct chatter, and the bright first notes of a new song filled the silence between them.

“This certainly is nicer than the dumps I’ve seen you in before,” she said approvingly. “It would seem you’re doing well for yourself. A job, a roof over your head. Friends who have employers instead of madams.”

He shrugged. On paper, at least, Anton was at last a functioning member of society.

She smirked, twirling her wrist so the light caught on the deep red wine in her glass. “Still. One can’t help but feel like you’re wasting your talents.”

Anton blew out a breath, almost a laugh. “This again?”

She was one of only four people in the world who knew that Anton had the Grace of Sight. She was the one, after all, who’d given him his first lesson in scrying, teaching him how to focus on the vibrations of sacred energy around him, how to cast a lodestone into a scrying pool to seek out the frequency of someone’s specific *esha*. His first and only lesson.

“I have a job for you.”

“Not interested,” he replied immediately.

“You haven’t even heard what it is yet.”

“Doesn’t matter,” he said. “You already know my answer.”

“I do,” she agreed, sipping at her wine. “But this isn’t just any job. You’re the only one who can do it.”

The Grace of Sight was the rarest of the Graces, and even among those who had it, most were limited in what their scrying was capable of finding. But before she’d given Anton his one and only scrying lesson, she’d said she’d seen in him a capacity for great power—maybe even greater than hers. Sometimes, he even thought he could feel that power, too. The way he could sense *esha* without trying, the way he knew when someone was Graced and when they were not, the way he could differentiate between its frequencies with ease. It was instinctive.

“Except you know I *can't* do it,” Anton replied. “You’ve known since that day.”

The day she’d tried to harness his capacity, and Anton had wound up with lungs full of water and the realization that his power was shadowed by something else—the nightmares that brought him right back to the past he thought he’d left behind. The nightmares that were summoned whenever Anton tried to use his Grace. The Nameless Woman had seen what they’d done to him, had dragged him out of the scrying waters and watched him gasp for breath.

It was then that he’d started running again, even knowing that she was Graced, like him, and would find him again. And again. And again. It was, after all, what she did. In the canals of Valletta, in towns up and down the Pelagos coast—and now Pallas Athos. He’d no doubt she would chase him all over the Six Prophetic Cities if she had to. By now, the Nameless Woman’s visits were expected. He hadn’t learned to trust her, exactly, but in the last few years, she’d become one of the only things he could count on. Before her, the only invariable part of his life had been leaving it behind.

Every time she found him, she offered him the same proposition: learn to wield his Grace. Every time, Anton gave the same answer.

Since that day in the scrying pool, he’d done everything he could to build a wall between himself and his Grace. He’d learned how to keep the nightmares at bay. But the moment he tried to use his Grace, they bared their teeth again, like wolves drawn to blood.

The Nameless Woman took another sip of her wine. “One day, Anton, you’ll have to get over your silly little fears.”

“Are you done? Because as fun as catching up has been, I really need to get back to work.” He started to rise, but she reached across the table, her palm flat over his hand, stilling him.

“I’m not done.” Her tone had shifted—gone was the teasing lilt.

Her dark eyes burned into his. "You think I came all the way to the City of Faith just to hear a refusal?"

Anton's hand twitched beneath hers. "So if it's not for a job, then why did you come?"

"It is for a job," she said. "You *are* the job."

He went still. The thing he'd been afraid of, the thing he'd suspected the first time the Nameless Woman had found him, had come true. "Someone gave you my name?"

A trill of laughter spilled out from the table beside them, but the Nameless Woman's attention stayed focused on Anton. She nodded. "You know who it is?"

Anton's heart thudded painfully. "No."

"You're lying."

His palms itched with sweat, but the rest of him was ice-cold. She was right. He knew exactly who had given his name to her. The only other person in the world who would be looking for him.

"Oh," the Nameless Woman said over the rim of her glass. "Oh my. You're afraid. You're *terrified*."

Anton clenched his teeth, his breath coming out hot and quick as he gripped the edge of the marble table. "You can't let him know. You can't tell him where I am. Please."

"I can tell him he has bad information," she said. "He knows we can only do the job if the name is correct. I'll simply tell him he has the wrong one."

Anton shook his head. "Don't," he gasped. "Don't do that. He'll know you're lying."

"I'm a far better liar than you are."

The taste of ice burned his throat. "It doesn't matter. He'll know."

"If I turn down his case, he'll only take it elsewhere." She spoke gently now. "He may have done so already. Mrs. Tappan's Scrying

Agency may be the best, but there are others who would hang their own mothers for the kind of money he offered us.”

Anton’s mind stuttered over her words. The man looking for him had apparently amassed a great amount of money—enough to hire a bounty hunter with a reputation for taking on cases no one else could. It should have surprised Anton, but it didn’t. Despite his humble beginnings, this man had always known exactly how to play his cards to get the biggest reward.

“One of them *will* find you, Anton. If they haven’t already.”

He was inside a nightmare, eleven years old, freezing water tearing into his lungs. Hands holding him below dark water.

He pushed away from the table in one rigid motion.

“Anton.” The Nameless Woman grasped his wrist, her grip unexpectedly tight. “There are people who can help you . . . take care of this. You don’t need to run again.”

He could barely hear her words over his own thundering pulse. Pulling from her grasp, he darted across the courtyard, weaving through servers and laughing patrons to the staircase that led up to the roof. He climbed, nausea rising in him like a tide. As long as he kept moving, kept going up, it could not catch him.

There was no water.

There was no ice.

Only fear.

Warm night air rushed over him as he reached the roof. Above him, lit by the glow of a hundred distant fires, the Temple of Pallas looked out over the rest of the city. Anton flew to the edge of the roof. The marble balustrade was cold and solid in his grasp as he looked down past Thalassa’s portico and the fountain and olive trees in the center of Elea Square. The long, pale stretch of the Sacred Road led all the way from the Temple of Pallas, through the main city gates and down into

the Low City, where the streets grew narrow and dark, full of promise and danger.

Before his tiny flat there, Anton had spent many nights sleeping on roofs and in rafters, like a bird coming to roost. From high up, he could see everything that went on below, and none of it could touch him.

He was still afraid, but fear alone could not kill him.

He'd survived before, after all. The man who was looking for him, the man who had given his name to the Nameless Woman—Anton hadn't seen him since that day, out on the ice, the water so cold, darkness pressing in. He sometimes felt trapped in that nightmare, in the memory of what that man had tried to do.

But that scared, drowned boy—that wasn't who he was anymore. He'd left that boy for dead.