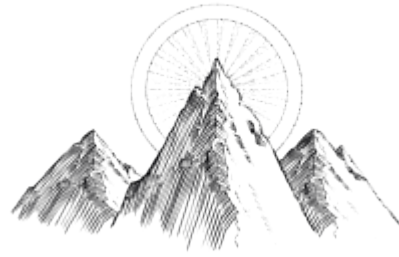


**MURDER
at the
KINNEN HOTEL**



Brian McClellan

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Twenty-two years before the events of Promise of Blood...

Adamat trudged through the slush and snow of the streets and onto the shoveled walkway that led up to the home of the Viscount Brezé. The four-story townhome in the Samalian district was surrounded by a ten-foot wrought iron fence, the tiny yard blanketed in snow.

Half a dozen constables swarmed the street in front of the townhome, and there were probably twice that number inside. Two large police wagons were parked in the street, creating a blockage that only encouraged the growing crowd of onlookers.

Subtlety, Adamat reflected, *was not a quality of the Adopest police of the First Precinct*. His old precinct would never have been so sloppy. He'd have to mention it to the captain. A word to the drivers, instructing them to park out of traffic, was all it would take. He stepped inside and removed his overcoat and hat, shaking off the melted snow before handing them to the butler.

"Who are you?" the butler asked, more than a little hostile. "No one else is allowed. Everyone is already tramping in and out and the lady of the house—"

"My name," Adamat cut him off, "is Special Detective Constable Adamat. I'm here at the bequest of the captain of the precinct. Kindly point me to the crime scene."

The butler's mouth snapped shut and formed into a hard line. He took Adamat's hat and cane and pointed down the hall. "The dining room."

Adamat cursed himself for a fool as he proceeded onward. He should have let the butler finish his sentence. The lady of the house was in a rage? Grieving? Ambivalent? It would have given him more information to go on, even if only to give him the slightest sense of the politics of the household. And politics there would be. For every noble that plays his or her games in the greater arena of Adran politics, there was an entire household where similar games played out every day on a smaller scale.

Sometimes, as was the case this morning, they led to murder.

He blamed his short temper on the weather and slipped between two constables gawking at the dining room entrance, pausing just inside to slip the handkerchief out of his pocket and hold it over his nose.

He'd seen worse crime scenes in his young career with the Adopest police, but not many.

Viscount Brezé had been a tall, slender man in his thirties, prematurely bald with a mustache grown long to cover a protruding upper lip. He lay near the cold fireplace, sprawled facedown in a dark red splotch on the rug. Blood, brain, and bits of his skull were scattered across half the dining room.

Adamat examined the scene, casting the entire thing to memory in the blink of an eye using his Knack—a minor sorcery that allowed him to remember absolutely everything—and wondered how any police investigator got on without such a tool.

He noted the bloody frying pan discarded in the corner and the gore-slick candlestick next to the body.

A middle-aged man with a narrow waist and square shoulders knelt over the viscount's body. Like Adamat, he wore a brown suit jacket and matching vest and pants instead of the black and silver of the Adopest police, but his presence and the scrutiny with which he examined the body was enough to surmise his identity.

"Lieutenant Dorry?" Adamat asked.

"That's me," Dorry responded. He gestured to the two constables in the doorway without looking up. "Let's get him turned over, shall we?" he said.

"Wait for a moment," Adamat said. "I'd like a few moments with the body before it's disturbed."

Dorry looked up sourly. "And you are?"

"Special Detective Constable Adamat."

"Oh. *You*." Dorry sniffed. "You came over from the Twelfth Precinct with the new captain?"

"I did," Adamat responded. "The captain sent me this morning as soon as I arrived. I can take over from here."

Dorry looked up at the two constables with an exasperated expression of disbelief. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-three," Adamat answered, trying not to let his annoyance show. Everyone always wanted to bring up his age. Age didn't matter more than it was an indication of experience, and Adamat had more investigative experience than most of the Adran police force.

"Right. And since when," Dorry asked, "do constables give the orders around here?"

"At the Twelfth Precinct I took the lead on nine murder investigations, every one of which was resolved satisfactorily," Adamat said, drawing himself up.

"Detective constable," Dorry said with a false laugh. "*I* have the lead on this investigation. This precinct works directly beneath the commissioner, so whatever leeway the captain gave you at your old precinct, it won't be happening here. Detective constables do not take the lead on a case, especially not one involving the nobility."

Adamat blinked back at Dorry, trying to readjust his thinking. He wasn't in the Twelfth any more. And it was true, constables didn't usually take the lead on these sorts of cases. He didn't know these policemen yet, and they didn't know him or his skills. He would have to be patient.

"I'm just here to help," Adamat said, spreading his arms amicably.

Dorry eyed him for a few moments then said, "Yes, well, I'm afraid we won't be needing your talents today, constable."

Adamat did a circuit of the corpse, careful to avoid stepping in the gore. He noted several splotches of blood leading away from the body. "You have a suspect already?"

"We do."

"And they've confessed?"

"Not yet, but she will by the end of the day. It's an easy case. I'm sure even you can see that."

Adamat finished his circuit and paused to force down his frustration, sorting through what he had heard about Dorry. He was a bull-headed investigator, lazy on the worst days and negligent on the best—and that was information gleaned from Dorry's own friends. He was also the commissioner's nephew.

"So who did it?" Adamat asked.

Dorry stood up and let the two constables roll the body over. The front of Brezé's evening jacket was caked with dry blood, his face frozen with the mouth open, the eyes dull and empty. Dorry crossed his arms and gave Adamat a thin smile. "You're the Twelfth's prize investigator. You tell me."

"I suspect," Adamat said, "that you've accused the cook."

The two constables exchanged a glance. "Took Dorry two hours to get there," one of them whispered.

Dorry shot them both a glare. "And how did you come to that?"

"The frying pan is a start," Adamat said. He shuffled through his neatly stored memories, searching a dozen years worth of newspapers, gossip, and miscellaneous information for anything concerning Viscount Brezé. "The viscount was known to get handsy with the help. The last cook he hired was a sturdy woman with powerful forearms more than capable of delivering these kinds of blows but attractive enough to still catch his eye."

"How the pit," Dorry asked, "could you possibly have known the last bit?"

"The gossip column of the newspaper seventeen days ago," Adamat responded. "Where is she?"

"Being questioned in the sitting room," Dorry said.

"And the Lady Brezé?"

"Upstairs. She won't see anyone until this whole thing is over. Her sister is marshalling the staff and speaking with us."

Adamat tilted his head slightly. He thought he heard a woman crying—no, blubbering hysterically—from down the hall. The sound of someone who's been accused of killing a nobleman, no doubt.

"It was likely self-defense," Dorry said. "Perfectly understandable. He must have tried to force her."

"But she killed a nobleman. She'll get the guillotine for sure." Adamat paused. "The viscount was knocked out then beaten with terrible ferocity. Does that tell you anything?"

"Yeah," Dorry said shortly. "That she wanted to kill him."

"Yes." Adamat sighed inwardly. This was a crime of rage, not of desperation. Someone had to drop the frying pan, then pick up the candlestick and *make sure* Brezé was dead, bashing his skull in for thirty or forty seconds straight. Not to say the cook wasn't capable of rage. He'd have to get her alone for an interview.

Dorry nodded slowly, eyes narrowed. He raised his chin in challenge. "All right, constable. What do *you* think happened?"

"I'm not sure," Adamat said. "I try not to jump to conclusions. But I don't think we can rule out any other kind of foul play."

"Oh, and who else could have done this?"

"We'll have to find out. Look for motive, capability. I *would* rule out self-defense—the motive of the cook—because he was struck from behind. I'll need to interview the staff."

Dorry sneered. "My men are already doing that. The cook is the only one with the strength to pull this off. You saw the butler. He's ancient, and he's about the most hale of everyone who was in building at the time."

"Could it have been a burglary?"

"The windows and doors were all locked last night and this morning."

"What about Lady Brezé?"

"As a witness?"

"As a suspect."

Dorry scoffed. "Lady Brezé is a twig."

"Lady Brezé was a championship boxer at Jileman University and has publically castigated her husband for his dalliances."

"She's also a second cousin to our esteemed monarch," a voice said from the door.

Adamat, Dorry, and the two constables all ducked their heads. Commissioner Aleksandre was a bear of a man with a red face and long blond hair tied sharply back behind his head. He was the type of person that dominated any room with both his size and sheer force of presence. His nostrils flared as he examined the crime scene down the bridge of his nose.

"I overheard something about the cook?" Aleksandre asked.

"Yes, sir," Dorry said. "Our current suspect."

"Our first suspect, sir," Adamat amended. "I'm sure there will be more."

Aleksandre's eyebrows rose, and he glanced at Dorry. "I'm sorry, what was your name, constable?"

"Special Detective Constable Adamat, sir."

"Ah," Aleksandre said shortly. "I've heard of you. The Knacked with the memory?"

"Yes, sir."

"Constable," Dorry said quietly, "may I speak with you outside?"

Adamat followed Dorry out into the hallway, where Dorry took him by the sleeve and forced him into the kitchen. "What the pit do you think you're doing?"

"Introducing myself to the commissioner," Adamat said, tongue in cheek. Dorry was

getting on his nerves and that tended to make him behave petulantly. Adamat wasn't interested in playing politics. He wanted to solve a murder.

"Are you being intentionally daft?" Dorry demanded. "I made it clear you are not the lead on this investigation."

"But I am *on* the investigation. The captain made *that* clear. We can't jump to conclusions," Adamat said.

"The captain doesn't know how things work in the First Precinct quite yet, constable. Neither do you." Dorry jabbed a finger at Adamat's chest. "I recommend that you learn your place quickly. And you will never, ever correct me in front of the commissioner."

"Are we quite done?" Adamat asked.

"We are," Dorry said. "Now get the pit out of here. I won't have a detective barely out of the academy lording over my crime scene."

Adamat had been annoyed before. Now he was furious. To be ordered off an investigation by a self-righteous imbecile ... "And I won't see an innocent cook sent to the guillotine because you're being sloppy, *lieutenant!*" Adamat's mouth snapped shut as the last word left his mouth, and his stomach sank. That had been a mistake.

"The captain will hear about this," Dorry growled.

"Yes, she will," Adamat responded with a bluster he didn't feel. His talents notwithstanding, he'd crossed the line mouthing off to the lieutenant like that. He forced his breathing to remain steady and strode to the foyer, demanding his hat and coat from the butler.

He took a hackney cab to the precinct building in the center of the city and immediately went to the captain's office. He knocked once and entered at a terse "come."

Captain Hewi was a no-nonsense officer about thirty years old. She had brown hair and eyes that seemed to take in everything at once. She'd risen through the ranks from constable to captain in less than ten years thanks to her ability to balance competence with the needs of city politics and had, for some reason, decided to bring Adamat with her on her transfer to the First Precinct.

"What are you doing here, Adamat?" Hewi asked. "Didn't I just send you over to the Brezé townhome?"

"I had an altercation with Lieutenant Dorry," Adamat had the presence of mind to look ashamed of it. Inside, he was still fuming. Dorry was a prig.

"You're joking," Hewi said.

"No ma'am. I suspect he'll make a formal complaint."

The captain made a sour face. "We've been here two days and you're already making friends. How wonderful. What have I told you about keeping your damn mouth shut?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am."

Hewi waved off his apology. "Never mind that. I'm glad you're back. I've got two constables waiting for a detective to come take a look at another murder scene and you're the first one that's free."

"Ma'am?"

"A businessman was just discovered with the body of his mistress. Looks very much like he shot the girl in a drunken stupor. It's not high profile like Brezé, but big enough to warrant a proper investigation. I want you to take the lead."

"Of course, ma'am. Thank you." Adamat breathed a sigh of relief. There would still be consequences from his altercation with Dorry, especially if he went to the commissioner. But at least Hewi wasn't taking it seriously.

"Don't thank me quite yet," Hewi said. "You haven't heard it all. The businessman is a troublemaker and has a number of very rich enemies. I understand you went to school together. Does the name Ricard Tumblar spark your memory?"

The Kinnen Hotel was less than quarter of a mile from the precinct headquarters. It was a fortress of a building, with hundred-year-old stonework wrought in an austere, ugly

fashion that belied the wealth inside. Only three stories tall, it took up an entire city block and had been the destination of visiting dignitaries, merchants, and nobility for decades. Adamat stopped by the desk and showed his credentials to the concierge, who revealed that Ricard Tumblar had leased the smallest suite on the second floor of the building for a two-week period. Adamat refused an escort and took the main staircase in the grand hall up to the second floor.

The situation was being handled far more discretely than the one at the Brezé townhome but, then again, this was a place of business. A single bag boy stood outside room 211, hands held behind his back, opening the door for Adamat when he showed his papers again.

The suite was a three-room affair with a bedroom, sitting room, and bath complete with running water. A single constable Adamat didn't recognize stood at the side of a distraught-looking Ricard in the sitting room, while the door to the bedroom was closed.

Ricard surged to his feet at the sight of him. "Adamat?"

"Detective constable," Adamat introduced himself to the policeman. "Captain Hewi has given me the lead on the investigation." He ignored Ricard and opened the door to the bedroom.

There was a four-post bed, the curtains pulled back, as well as a mirror and vanity and a pair of chairs by a breakfast table. The two windows faced east, bathing the room in bright white mid-morning light. The room smelled heavily of whiskey.

A Deliv woman with chocolate skin lay face-up on the bed, her nudity covered partially by a sheet. She was young and quite striking, with gentle features, the perfect skin of her face only disrupted by the congealed blood around the bullet wound just above her temple. The white linen beneath her was soaked a deep crimson. The bed, Adamat noted absently, would be a total loss for the hotel.

He poked his head into the sitting room. "Constable ... ?"

"Jain," the man replied.

"I see. Constable Jain, would you come here please?"

Jain glanced meaningfully at Ricard.

"He's a local businessman," Adamat said. "He's not going anywhere."

"Adamat," Ricard said. "I didn't know you were ..."

Adamat held up a finger to silence Ricard, and then stepped to the side so Jain could enter the bedroom.

"When was the body discovered?" Adamat asked.

"About two and a half hours ago. There was a gunshot from the room, and the concierge forced the door to find Mr. Tumblar holding a pistol in one hand and shaking the body with the other. The concierge had to wrestle the pistol from Mr. Tumblar's hands. They summoned the police immediately."

"Where is the pistol now?"

"The concierge has it."

"Good. When did you arrive?"

"Two hours ago."

"And you're the only constable here?"

"My partner went out for an early lunch, sir."

"From a crime scene? Wonderful." Adamat sighed, then looked around the room once more, searching for the small details. He crossed the room to the window, feeling the cold breeze through a crack about an inch wide. "Was the window open when you arrived?"

"It was."

"And the blinds?"

"They were open as well."

"Did the maid do that?"

"I didn't ask."

"I see." Adamat tapped his chin for a moment. "The bed curtains were like that?"

Jain said, "Also open upon arrival."

"Do me a favor and ask the concierge if he opened either the bed curtains or the blinds after getting the gun away from Mr. Tumblar. Ask if he or any of the other staff opened the window after the body was discovered. Oh, and bring me the pistol."

"Of course. But begging your pardon, I don't think anyone climbed in or out through that window. There's still snow on the sill outside."

"Good observation," Adamat said, though he'd already made note of it.

Jain headed out into the hall to find the concierge, and Adamat finally steeled himself to approach Ricard in the sitting room.

Ricard Tumblar was only a few months younger than Adamat himself. He had short, curly brown hair and a prominent forehead that suggested had already started to go bald. Despite that, Adamat knew that women found Ricard's full features handsome. He had an easy, genuine charm that had gained him dozens of investors and allies even at such a young age, and a natural mind for business that Adamat had seen first-hand during their first semester together at the university.

They stared at each other for several long moments. Ricard was wearing a rumpled evening suit, likely what he'd been in last night, and Adamat could smell the alcohol on his breath and clothes.

Ricard swallowed visibly and cleared his throat. "Hello, Adamat."

"Ricard."

"It's been what, six months?"

"A year," Adamat corrected.

"Right." Ricard stared at his shoes. "Wish our meeting was under better circumstances."

"You know I work just down the street, right?"

"Well, I figured after the thing with Cora maybe you wouldn't want to see me for a while."

You were right about that, Adamat thought to himself. "That's not important." He waved to the bedroom. "What happened?"

Ricard ran fingers through his thinning hair and stared through the door at the bed. His features contracted, his mouth tightening, and Adamat thought he might begin to weep. He seemed to gain control of himself. "I don't ... I don't really know. I was out raising funds for a new venture last night. The last thing I remember was Melany half-carrying me up the stairs. I was awoken by a pistol shot. I rolled over to find her like ... "

Ricard choked back a sob and cleared his throat.

"You keep a pistol in the room?" Adamat asked.

Ricard nodded.

"Where?"

"The drawer of the vanity."

Adamat went to the vanity and opened the drawer to find a wooden pistol case. The pistol was missing, as well as one of the eight prepared powder charges.

"The pistol was in your hand when you awoke?"

"Beside me on the bed. I picked it up ... I don't even know what I was thinking."

"Have you fought?" Adamat asked.

"With Melany?"

"Yes."

"Lover's quarrels. Nothing serious. I was thinking about asking her to marry me."

You're always thinking about asking someone to marry you. Adamat grimaced and stepped back into the sitting room to find that Constable Jain had returned. "Well?" Adamat asked the constable.

"The concierge said that the window and the bed and window curtains were all open when he came in this morning," Jain said. "The bag boys that helped him subdue Mr.

Tumblar agree.”

“And the pistol?”

Jain handed it over. It was a fine, smoothbore flintlock with engraving on the stock and silverwork around the mechanism. It was a weapon meant to impress one’s friends rather than intimidate one’s enemies.

“Thank you,” Adamat said.

“What do you think happened, sir?”

Adamat glanced at Ricard and hoped that, had the possible suspect been a nobleman, Jain would have the sense not to ask such a question in their presence.

“It *appears*,” Adamat said, “that Mr. Tumblar awoke in an inebriated fog and shot his mistress.”

“I would never!” Ricard protested.

“Be quiet, Ricard,” Adamat said, feeling a twitch of annoyance. Ricard had always gotten away with everything. The women he bedded, the money he gained and lost on risky ventures. Adamat had always known something about his charmed lifestyle would catch up to him eventually.

But, it seemed, it had yet to do so.

“I said it *appears* that way,” Adamat said. “Run to the precinct building and tell Captain Hewi that I’ll need four more men to help me with searches and interviews.”

“Should I tell her we have a suspect?” Jain eyeballed Ricard.

“No. Not yet.”

“Sir?”

“Whatever happened here, Ricard Tumblar didn’t kill his mistress.”

Jain’s eyes went wide. “How can you be sure?”

Adamat handed the pistol back to Jain. “Ricard, have you told many people about your prowess with a pistol?”

“I may have boasted about it from time to time,” Ricard said.

Adamat cocked an eyebrow at Ricard.

“Okay,” Ricard admitted, “I mention it fairly often.”

“Now,” Adamat said, “Constable Jain, observe the pan of the pistol closely. Now the barrel. When would you say it was last fired?”

Jain lowered the pistol uncertainly. “I don’t have a lot of experience with firearms, sir. I can’t be certain.”

“I would bet my pension,” Adamat said, taking the pistol from Jain and rubbing his thumb in the pan. It was polished, with no traces of gunpowder or even firing residue, “that it hasn’t been fired since the gunsmith tested it. I think that Mr. Tumblar has been framed.”

“But sir,” Jain protested, “a shot went off in here! The whole hotel heard it, and the door was locked from the inside when the concierge arrived. I could still smell the sulfur of the shot when I came in.”

Adamat tapped the butt of the pistol against one palm. “That’s the problem.”

“Captain Hewi will want to hear something.”

“Tell her,” Adamat said slowly, “that Ricard Tumblar’s mistress was murdered by a powder mage.”

Later that day, Adamat took the short ride to the precinct building to recall everything he knew about powder mages.

It wasn’t much, to be honest. Powder mages commanded one of the three primary methods of sorcery. Theirs depended on the use of common black powder to make them stronger and faster, and to increase their senses well beyond those of a normal human. They could detonate powder at a small distance and even use it to manipulate bullets in flight.

Powder mages were also very rare. Most royal cabals of Privileged sorcerers saw

powder magery as a threat to their power and so openly sought to suppress them. It wasn't illegal to be a powder mage in Adro, as it was in many neighboring countries, but it certainly made life more difficult.

Adamat had only ever heard of a single powder mage with any public influence, but General Tamas was on campaign with the Adran army in the far east and would be no help at all on this matter.

He arrived at the precinct building at about six o'clock, having spent the day interviewing hotel employees and guests, as well as working his way through the surrounding neighborhood.

He slipped in through the back, hoping that Captain Hewi was still in her office, only to find Lieutenant Dorry and three of his constables lounging in the main recreation area just inside the back door.

Dorry saw him immediately and got to his feet, tossing aside a handful of playing cards. "Detective constable," he said, glancing over his shoulder at his companions with a sly smile. "I understand you've allowed the prime suspect of a murder investigation to leave the scene."

"Mr. Tumblar isn't a suspect. And how did your investigation go today, lieutenant?" Adamat asked. "Did you beat a confession out of an innocent cook yet?"

"Oh, she confessed," Dorry said. "Just like I told you she would." He gave a self-satisfied smile. "The beating was just for a little extra fun."

Adamat returned his smile, putting every ounce of disgust he could behind it. "How civilized." He stepped around Dorry and headed for the hall to Captain Hewi's office.

"The captain is furious," Dorry said. "She doesn't even want to see your face after what you pulled this morning. And now the thing with this Ricard Tumblar murder. I'll be surprised if you last the week. You'll be lucky if they demote you to constable and ship you back to the Twelfth."

Adamat bristled, but he wouldn't give Dorry the satisfaction of seeing him angry.

"A powder mage?" Dorry called after him. "Is that the best you can come up with? You'll have the whole precinct chasing a ghost next!"

"More original than the cook," Adamat said over his shoulder.

"You'll have to find a job as one after my report to the commissioner!"

Adamat rounded the corner and went to the captain's door, knocking once before entering.

Hewi looked up from a report on her desk and eyed Adamat as if she'd swallowed something sour. "A powder mage? Really?"

"Funny," Adamat said, pointing down the hall as he shut the door. "Lieutenant Dorry just asked a similar question." He watched Hewi's face; no sign of amusement was forthcoming. "Sorry, captain, that was in poor taste."

"Don't get me started on that idiot Dorry," Hewi said. "I've just read a report from our mortician that claims Dorry flagrantly robs the unclaimed corpses of murder victims. It appears the mortician has filed seven such reports over the last three years with my predecessor and I can't do a damn thing about it because of the commissioner."

"I'm sorry, ma'am."

"Don't be sorry. Just do your job. Now sit down and tell me about your investigation."

Adamat reviewed his initial impression of the hotel room and his interview with Ricard, all the way up till he found that the pistol had never been fired.

"Well," Hewi said, "I can see how you'd assume foul play after that. Did you do a full search of the room?"

"The room and the road beneath his window. There was no other weapon to be found."

"Could he have had an accomplice?" Hewi asked. "Someone to catch a discarded pistol and spirit it away?"

"Ricard can be daft at times, but he's a smart man. If he wanted to kill his mistress he

could have done it a hundred ways that wouldn't have implicated him."

"So you think someone set him up?"

"I'm convinced of it," Adamat said.

"Give me your theory."

"The first part of my theory," Adamat said, "is that a powder mage entered Ricard's room sometime yesterday and planted a sufficient enough amount of black powder to sound like a pistol shot when set off. They entered his room again in the middle of the night to put the gun beside him in the bed. This morning they proceeded to a rooftop a quarter mile away, where they took a shot with a rifle, killing the poor girl. It would have been an easy shot with their sorcery. They then returned to the hotel where they set off the hidden powder charge with their sorcery in order to alert the staff."

"That's ... quite a story," Hewi said. Her expression was halfway between bemused and entirely annoyed. "Do you have anything to back this theory up, beyond the unfired pistol?"

Adamat was ready for her skepticism. "Powder residue in the bath. Reports of a shot fired at six this morning from the roof of a tenement east of the Kinnen Hotel—and, by the way, tracks in the snow on the rooftop. The window was open two inches and a straight line can be drawn from the victim's head to the window, and to the distant rooftop."

Hewi's annoyance seemed to ebb. She let out a whistle. "This has all been documented?"

"The precinct artist is giving me a likeness of each location, including the footprints on the roof."

"All right, detective constable. What about the shot from the room? Powder fired from a pistol makes a different sound than powder burned in the bottom of a bathtub. How do you account for that?"

"I understand that powder mages can warp the blast of the powder with their minds. Replicating the sound would take practice, but it's entirely possible."

Hewi reached across her desk for a jar of tobacco then packed a pipe before lighting it with a match. She puffed it to life then pointed the stem at Adamat. "You know, you have a hard time getting along with the other constables because you always have the answers."

"They're just theories, ma'am," Adamat said. He understood that it had been meant as a compliment, but frankly it annoyed him that other constables couldn't see what he saw. Investigative police work was not common practice in any force that he'd heard of. It was considered right and proper to take everything at face value.

"They're damn good ones," Hewi replied. "And it's why I brought you with me from the Twelfth." She let out a sigh. "It's damn good police work, but it may be for nothing."

Adamat blinked at her. "Excuse me?"

"Commissioner Aleksandre came by about an hour ago. He heard about your powder mage theory, and the fact that you let Ricard Tumblar go home. He ordered that we arrest Tumblar and charge him immediately."

"That's preposterous!" Adamat sat up straight.

"I'm aware," Hewi said, her tone level.

"You said yourself that it was damn good police work. And the pistol was clean. It couldn't have been Ricard."

Hewi gave a slow nod. "I told the commissioner that you had a good reason not to suspect Ricard. Do you know what he said?"

"I don't know."

"He didn't give a damn. He wanted Ricard arrested, and he wanted Lieutenant Dorry given the lead on the case. The commissioner said, and I quote, 'I want Ricard facing the guillotine within two weeks.'" Hewi snorted.

Adamat set his jaw. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. "I smell something foul in the air, captain."

"So do I, but I had no choice. We've already arrested Mr. Tumblar. You should head home and get some sleep. No doubt the commissioner will be around within the next few days about Dorry's complaint."

Adamat got to his feet, feeling deflated. He'd finished the first leg of the investigation with confidence. He knew he was right about the powder mage, just as he knew that someone other than the cook had possibly killed Viscount Brezé. And he'd had his investigation taken right out from under him. He went to the door and stopped there, staring at his hat.

"Adamat," Hewi said, "you said that was only the first part of your theory. What was the second?"

Adamat turned around and gave her a tight smile. "That the success of framing Ricard Tumblar depended in part on the incompetence of the police of the First Precinct."

"I see."

"I'm thinking now that they depend on a little more than just incompetence."

Hewi tapped the bowl of her pipe in the palm of one hand. "Adamat."

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Promise me you won't do anything stupid."

Adamat ducked his head. "Of course, ma'am. Would never dream of it."

Adamat left the precinct building and made his way to his favorite cafe just off the public square. He needed someplace he could think, and oftentimes the buzz of a busy cafe gave him just the right amount of useless noise that allowed him to focus on the task at hand.

What task at hand? he asked himself as he was seated at one of the window tables on the second floor. He *had* no task. Just a few days at his newest assignment, and he had already been kicked off one investigation by the leading officer and another by the commissioner himself. He should be focusing on how his career could recover from this whole debacle.

Adamat ordered his tea and stared out the window. He found himself wondering about Melany, Ricard's mistress. A beautiful girl and, knowing Ricard, intelligent and witty. Who was she? Did she have friends or family in the city, or was she a foreigner, as suggested by her dark skin? In the rush of the afternoon he'd overlooked sending someone to notify her next of kin. Clumsy and inconsiderate of him. He would have to rectify that in the morning.

Adamat could see out the window and down the street where a city worker was clearing the snow off a scaffold in the center of the square. The middle of the scaffold was dominated by an immense guillotine—a tool of the Iron King that reminded both his friends and enemies who held the power of life and death in Adro.

The guillotine saw use almost every day for all manner of crimes, and Adamat recalled reading that this particular guillotine had been in service for almost nine years straight. The blade was removed and polished regularly, the mechanisms replaced to account for rust, but the main frame was the original.

He still remembered reading about the first guillotine in the newspapers when he was a boy. The Iron King claimed it would bring dignity to and remove suffering from state executions. The newspaper had called it "industrialized death."

Thanks to the commissioner and whoever was pulling his strings, Ricard would face that blade within the next few weeks. And Melany, his mistress, would be a byline in the scandal that would ruin Ricard's dreams of unionization.

Adamat, ever the good public servant, would be expected to bury his powder mage theory and quietly follow orders. Perhaps in a few years his obedience would be remembered and he'd receive a promotion. Granted, of course, that he not stir up

trouble between now and then.

That was the system. That was how it was supposed to work for the men and women who held power. Everyone was expected to fall in line behind them.

Adamat considered himself a quiet man. Even at his age he preferred to spend his free time with his wife than late nights playing billiards at the tavern. He didn't like attention, and he considered it the duty of the police to do their work with discretion.

There were times, he decided as he drained the last of his tea, that discretion wouldn't get the job done.

This might be the stupidest idea he'd ever considered. This might end his career, or even get him killed. But then what was one man's career against the life of another? Or against justice for a slain woman?

He held his hand up to attract the waiter. "A pencil and paper, please."

"What the pit do you think you're doing?"

Captain Hewi had intercepted Adamat as he came into the precinct building the next morning and hurried him into her office, slamming the door behind her.

"I'm not sure what you mean, ma'am," Adamat said, giving her his best blank look.

Hewi slapped his chest with a handbill and rounded her desk, where she quickly packed a pipe and began smoking up a storm. Adamat looked down at the handbill. It was a single sheet of paper, the kind that newsies handed out on the street corners once they were out of proper newspapers. They often contained advertisements for plays or local businesses.

This particular handbill belonged to the *Yellow Caller*, the publication of a disreputable and widely despised printer that specialized in sensational and misleading headlines.

"Police of the First Precinct cover up murder committed by mad powder mage," Adamat read aloud. "Local businessman takes fall. Powder mage still at large, quite dangerous."

"This was your doing, wasn't it?" Hewi demanded.

Adamat held the handbill at length to examine it. Cheap quality paper. Several words misspelled. Typical of the *Yellow Caller*. "I know nothing about it."

Hewi glared at him. "I'm certain you don't, and you better stick to that story when the commissioner gets here. He'll arrive any minute, and he wants your head."

"Why my head?" Adamat asked. He tried to keep his breathing steady. He wanted attention and this was not unexpected. But he'd hoped to attract a different kind of attention first.

"Don't patronize me," Hewi said, pointing her pipe at the handbill. "Officers are forbidden from speaking to the newspaper about an existing case without permission from their superior."

"They do it all the time," Adamat said.

"Just because no one follows a rule doesn't mean that the commissioner won't enforce it at his leisure."

Adamat gripped the head of his cane, not looking the captain in the eye. "Well," he said quietly, "It's a good thing the *Yellow Caller* isn't a newspaper."

Hewi seemed to consider this then shook her head. "You're too clever by half, Adamat. The commissioner can still ruin your career."

"Everyone knows the *Yellow Caller* is rubbish. This handbill will be forgotten by the end of the week."

Hewi threw her arms wide. "Then why bother at all?"

Adamat opened his mouth to answer but closed it again as the door to Hewi's office burst open. Commissioner Aleksandre strode into the small room, his face red, his chest heaving. Adamat took an involuntary step backwards and reflected on the resemblance between Aleksandre and Lieutenant Dorry.

"What," Aleksandre said, throwing a handbill identical to the one Adamat still held down on Hewi's desk, "is that?"

Adamat considered informing him that it was a cheap handbill, but one look at Hewi and he swallowed the quip.

"I was just discussing that with the special constable here," Hewi said. She stared Adamat in the eye as she said it, and her face clearly said, *This is your problem. You deal with it.*

"Oh?" Aleksandre whirled on Adamat. "Would you like to explain it to me, then?"

Adamat pretended to examine the handbill in his hand. "It appears that my investigation yesterday was leaked to someone at the *Yellow Caller* and they've printed a gross misinterpretation of my conclusions."

"A gross ..." Aleksandre sputtered, his face growing even more red.

"I can start an internal investigation immediately if you'd like the culprit found," Adamat continued, "but I think it's better to ignore this entirely. After all, you've instructed us to disregard the powder mage theory and focus on Ricard Tumblar. It's just the *Yellow Caller*, sir. No one will remember this within days."

Hewi made a strangled sound in the back of her throat and began coughing pipe smoke.

Aleksandre's eyes narrowed. "You think I'm a fool? You think I don't know you did this?" He snatched the handbill out of Adamat's hands and tore it in two, letting the pieces flutter to the floor. "What do you hope to accomplish, aside from the complete destruction of your career?"

Adamat glanced at Hewi, who gave the slightest shake of her head.

"Sir," Adamat said, "I swear I had nothing to do with this. I'm not even on this investigation anymore. I have no interest in the proceedings." He prayed that Hewi had not mentioned Adamat's previous relationship with Ricard.

"The constable has an impeccable record," Hewi said. "That's why I brought him with me from the Twelfth. He's honest to a fault."

Adamat felt the sweat beading and rolling down the small of his back. Hewi had just put her head on the block next to his, and now all he could do was hope that Aleksandre chose to ignore the entire debacle until it went away. Based on the quality of police work at this precinct, it wasn't out of the question.

Aleksandre slowly let his smoldering gaze fall then began to pace the length of the room. He continued to do this in silence for almost a full moment before turning on Adamat once more.

"You are going to the newspaper this instant. The *Adopest Daily*. The owner is a friend of mine. You're going to give an interview that will be on the front page first thing tomorrow morning, in which you state that your theory of a powder mage assassination was a foolish, silly proposition, and you have no idea what came over you. You'll tell the newspaper that you've gladly handed the investigation off to Lieutenant Dorry, who will no doubt close the case in a matter of days."

Adamat swallowed. This was not what he'd expected at all. The commissioner's anger? Absolutely. An attack on his credentials and his career? Certainly. But for the commissioner to order Adamat to debase himself publically?

"Those aren't the facts of the case, sir," he said, ignoring Hewi's furious hand signals to shut up.

"This is the First, constable," Aleksandre said, "and the facts are what I say they are."

Adamat's hands were trembling. He was furious now, and he knew there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it but bite his tongue and head to the *Adopest Daily* where he would sully his own name and be glad to do it.

There was a knock at the door.

"Tell me," Aleksandre said, "that you understand me perfectly."

Adamat looked at Hewi, then at his hands. The knock came again, more insistent.

"Oh, what is it?" Aleksandre snapped.

The door opened to reveal a woman in her fifties. Of medium height, with long bony fingers and a gaunt, pockmarked face, she wore a frayed brown suit that had seen many years of use and held a matching bowler hat in her left hand. Her hair was short and gray, cut just above the ear. She was the type of person who looked like she had somewhere particular to be but you couldn't quite put your finger on where.

"Constable White reporting for duty, sir," the woman said to Commissioner Aleksandre. "I'm here to help Special Detective Adamat in his investigation."

Aleksandre looked at Hewi, then back at White. "I don't know who the bloody pit you think you are, but I'm going to give you until I finish this sentence to get out of this room."

There was something peculiar about White's eyes. They had a vibrancy that defied her dour, pockmarked appearance, and they seemed to smile when the rest of her face appeared to not know the meaning of the word. White's long fingers rolled gently and she produced a small slip of paper as if from thin air. "My card," she said.

Aleksandre's chest puffed out as he drew himself up, taking a step toward White. "You will damn well leave when I ... " the rest of his sentence disappeared in a wheeze when White turned the card to face him so he could see the front of it.

It was stamped with the high mountain flanked by two lesser peaks over the teardrop of the Adsea. It was a common symbol, found on the Adran flag and most everything associated with the government. Beneath the symbol was the title Attaché White, monogrammed in gold. A government employee of some kind. Certainly not a common constable.

"Step into the hallway with me for a moment, commissioner," White said in a quiet, confident voice.

Aleksandre followed White without a word, and White pulled the door closed, leaving Adamat alone with Captain Hewi. Adamat glanced at the captain, feeling like he'd missed something entirely.

Hewi slowly lowered herself into her seat, tapping one finger thoughtfully on the side of her pipe.

Whatever White was saying to the commissioner, their voices were too quiet for Adamat to make out through the door. He rocked back on his heels, trying to decide what, exactly, was happening. Answers, or at least theories, came to him so easily that it always left him feeling a bit disconcerted when they didn't.

"What," he finally asked Hewi, "is happening?"

Hewi's eyes were half-lidded, fixed on the door. For a moment Adamat thought she hadn't heard him, then she said softly, "I've seen one of those cards before."

"I haven't."

"No, I suspect you haven't. They're very rare."

"Looks like a card any government employee might carry."

"No," Hewi said, "not just any."

"Then who?"

"What do you know about the Adran Royal Cabal?"

Adamat knew that his note to the *Yellow Caller* last night had been in the hope of attracting the cabal's attention. But that woman out there, Attaché White, was not a Privileged. She didn't have the gloves or the telltale mismatched skin discoloration from her hands to her wrists that indicated someone who wore gloves for most of their lives.

"As much as anyone else. Elemental sorcerers who serve the king."

"Who do the king's dirty work, more like," Hewi said. "Well they have people that do their own dirty work and I very much suspect that White is one of them."

The door opened as Hewi finished speaking. White returned without the commissioner and closed the door behind her. "Detective constable."

"Yes, ma'am?" Adamat said.

"I'm just a constable," White said with that smile that touched her eyes but not her lips. "White will do."

Adamat swallowed, wondering if perhaps he hadn't thought his idea out entirely. He'd expected a Privileged to sweep into the precinct building with their bodyguards and take over Ricard's case, overruling the commissioner and tracking down the real killer as a matter of public security. He hadn't expected ... whatever White was.

"Yes, Constable White?"

"I'm here to assist you in tracking and apprehending a powder mage. You have the lead on this case. I will be junior constable."

Adamat glanced at Hewi. "Does this mean I'm back on the murder at the Kinnen Hotel?"

"The murder does not concern me," White said. "That will be left in the hands of Lieutenant Dorry. Our mission, our only mission, is to find the powder mage. Do you understand?"

Adamat was sweating now. This had gone so suddenly and horribly wrong. Ricard would be left to the guillotine, justice would not be served to Melany, and now he was going to be working with a servant of the royal cabal hunting down a rogue powder mage?

He wondered if a very swift career change was a possibility before saying, in a croaking voice, "Yes, Constable White."

"Good. Does this work for you, Captain Hewi?"

Hewi nodded.

"If anyone asks, Detective Constable Adamat and I are on special assignment for the crown. Now then, my dear Adamat, we have not a moment to lose."

Adamat made to follow White out of the room when Hewi rose to her feet and rounded her desk, catching him by the sleeve. Adamat met the captain's eyes and was surprised to see worry in them.

"Adamat," she said, "Be very, very careful. This is the type of woman who leaves behind a very large body count."

"Do you have any questions?"

It was an innocuous inquiry, the kind that a secretary might ask after you'd filled out several pages of paperwork. Coming from Attaché—or rather, Constable—White, it seemed laced with dire undertones. Of course Adamat had questions. He had hundreds of them. But they weren't the kind of questions you asked to a person like White.

He examined the side of her face while she stared out the window of their hackney cab. Their cab sat in front of the precinct building, going nowhere. White seemed to be staring inward, gears turning behind those vibrant eyes. She turned to him suddenly and he averted his gaze, ashamed to be caught staring.

White's nostril's flared. "I have no interest in playing games. You have some idea of who I am and while our mission may very well be a dangerous one, you are not in danger from me. We are both public servants in our own way. If you have questions, you may ask them candidly."

Adamat couldn't tell whether he should feel a wave of relief or allow his suspicion to deepen. Doublespeak was just a matter of course to a public servant. Anything he said to her could find him without a career—or pit, facing the guillotine.

"Why me?" he asked.

The smile returned to her eyes, once again avoiding her face. "That should be obvious, Adamat. May I call you Adamat?"

"Yes ma'am—er, Constable White. I apologize, but it's not obvious to me."

"I suppose it wouldn't be." She paused briefly, and Adamat suspected that if she were the type of woman to sigh she would have inserted one there. "I am a servant who has hundreds of specialties. Some of them tend toward espionage, some of them toward violence. Finding people in a crowded city is not, perhaps surprisingly, one of them."

"I'm not well thought of in the First," Adamat said. "In fact, I've barely arrived. Someone else would have been better." He had the sneaking suspicion that fact made him disposable.

"I doubt it," she said. "I'm familiar with the First and with their capabilities. They are far more interested—rightfully so—in maintaining the illusion of order than in actually getting things done. You, on the other hand, are a proper investigator. The police just want results, any results, while you want *actual* results. I need the latter."

Adamat licked his lips. No weaseling out of this, it seemed. "How do you know so much about me?"

"Do I?" she asked. "I read your file immediately before arriving at your captain's office, as well as your report regarding your investigation yesterday. It was enough to convince me you were the man for the job."

"Thank you," Adamat said. *I think.*

That damned smile in her eyes again. "Don't thank me until we've survived an encounter with the powder mage."

She makes it sound like a walk in the park. Maybe it's an average day for her, but sorcery isn't something I deal with on a regular basis. "White," Adamat said slowly.

"About the murder investigation."

"This is not a murder investigation."

"But it stemmed from one."

The smile left White's eyes. "I thought I made it clear that we are not involved with that. My masters have one concern: find the powder mage."

"I ... " Adamat let his sentence trail off. There was no use objecting. White would not give him any leeway on this, and that left Ricard to face the guillotine—in less than a month, if the commissioner had his way.

Suspicions and half-formed theories whirled around in Adamat's head. He tried to keep them at bay—theories grounded in suspicion, rather than fact, would help absolutely no one. He would either have to convince White that Ricard taking the fall for his mistress's murder was against the Royal Cabal's interests or figure out another way to help his friend.

"I understand," Adamat finally said.

White gave a curt nod and pounded on the roof. The cab began to move.

"Where are we going?" Adamat asked.

"Wherever you say," White said. "You're the lead on this investigation. How are we going to find this powder mage?"

Adamat considered this for a moment. As much as White wanted to avoid touching upon Melany's murder, Adamat's whole theory started and ended there. He would have to talk to Ricard sooner rather than later. He would rather do it without White present.

"Do you have any leads of your own?" Adamat asked. "I, um, assume that you have a rather substantial network of informants at your fingertips. Has there been any sign of a powder mage on the loose in the city?"

"Powder mages are kept under the strictest watch by the cabal, but they are kept under even stricter constraints by General Tamas. He's a powder mage himself and, though he's the king's favorite, he doesn't want to attract the cabal's attention by allowing any of his brothers in sorcery to have the run of the city. I suspect that if he or his wife were currently in the country that they would do our job for us. He is almost as efficiently brutal as we are."

The last words were said begrudgingly, and White rolled her tongue around her mouth as if contemplating a bad taste.

"So that's a no?" Adamat asked.

White made a frustrated noise in the back of her throat. "There was a rumor a few months back that a powder mage was working for one of the gangs in the docklands."

Our people could find nothing to substantiate it. That's the best I have for you."

"We'll start there, then," Adamat said. He pulled his mind away from his concerns—the myriad of dangers surrounding this investigation, as well as the uncertainty of his career once White had returned to her masters—and focused entirely on the task at hand. He stuck his head out the window. "Driver, take us to Willam's Tavern on Seaside."

"Are you familiar with the Black Street Barbers?" Adamat asked his companion as they neared their destination.

The docklands of Adopest were a sprawling wasteland of dilapidated buildings, putrid streets, and roving gangs along the western crescent of the teardrop of the Adsea. While vast swaths of Adopest had been rebuilt over the Iron King's long reign, the docklands remained an ancient armpit in desperate need of modernization. Decent people avoided this section of the city like they might a visit from the dentist.

White said, "I've heard the name before. One of the petty gangs that roams this part of the city, correct?"

"Yes," Adamat said. Petty seemed like an easy word to toss around when you worked for the Adran Royal Cabal. To normal people, the Black Street Barbers were terrifying. "My contact at Willam's Tavern is a young initiate. Nervous lad, flicks a blade back and forth."

"Are you warning me to not be frightened?" There was a tinge of amusement in White's voice, as if to say, *That's adorable*.

"No," Adamat said, "I'm warning you so that you don't kill him just because he has a nervous twitch."

White looked down her nose at her long fingernails. "You should know, Adamat, that *my* nervous twitch is *not* immediately murdering someone when they flick open a blade." She lifted her chin, glancing at him sidelong. If he didn't know any better, he'd have thought he hurt her feelings.

The cab let them out at a tavern a stone's throw from the waterfront. It was one of those large, sprawling establishments frequented by all manner of the type of lowlifes constantly coming to the city, finding work at the docks, and then moving on.

Adamat let his eyes adjust to the darkness inside before he threaded his way through the tables. At eleven o'clock on a weekday morning most of the clientele consisted of dockmen who'd not gotten the call for a desperately needed job and were waiting until tomorrow to try again. They tended to be either dead sober or dead drunk.

Adamat finally spotted a boy of about fifteen with mangy, matted hair, pale skin and a black jacket that looked like it had been taken off a year-old corpse. The boy lounged in a far corner of the tavern, back on a dirty wooden bench and feet propped on an old crate stamped "canned fish." He was flicking open the blade of an old shaving razor, closing it, and flipping it open again while trying not to look interested in the game of dice being played by a pair of younger boys.

"Teef," Adamat said, standing just over his head.

The boy scowled up at him. "Thought you left this part of the city."

"Need to talk to you, Teef."

"I'm busy."

Adamat felt White's hand on his shoulder. "This brat is your snitch?" she asked in a soft voice.

"We work with what we have. Teef, come on." Adamat tapped the boy on the chest with his cane. Teef shoved the cane away.

"I told you I'm busy, I ... "

Adamat grabbed a handful of Teef's shirt and dragged him off the bench and across the floor, ignoring his flailing arms and legs. Any other day he may have been more patient, dancing around with Teef to get his attention. Not today. He deposited Teef in a chair off to one side of the great room and threw himself into one across from the boy. Teef

immediately made to stand, and Adamat pressed the end of his cane against his chest, pinning him in place.

White remained standing, her gaunt figure looming and eerie in the low light.

"Who the bloody pit is this?" Teef said, looking at White, his voice coming out as a whine.

"My new partner," Adamat said.

"I don't know her." Teef flicked his razor open and closed with greater force, as if he very much wanted to use it. He'd be a damned fool to do so against a police officer but anyone who joined the Black Street Barbers had at least a little brain damage as far as Adamat was concerned, so he kept a close eye on the state of the blade.

"Her name is White. White, meet Teef. There, now you know each other." Adamat pressed a little harder on his cane until Teef began to squirm.

"Mornin', ma'am," Teef finally said petulantly.

"Very good. Now Teef, I'm looking for information on a powder mage. Rumor has it that there was one down in the docklands over the autumn, working for one of the gangs. I want to know who he is, who he worked for, and where I can find him."

Teef had begun shaking his head even before Adamat finished speaking. "No, no, no. I'm not talkin' about any powder mage. Nothing in it. Don't have anything to say."

"Really?" Adamat pressed on his cane.

Teef didn't respond to the pressure. "Yeah, really."

Adamat put his cane to the side and produced his pocketbook, peeling several bank notes out of it and stuffing them in breast pocket of Teef's grimy coat.

"I'm not saying anything," Teef said. "There's nothing to say. Don't know anything about a powder mage."

Adamat produced another couple of bank notes and added them to Teef's pocket.

"Really," Teef said. "There's nothing. And even if there was, I wouldn't say a word. Powder mage is bad luck." He glanced at White, as if seeking some kind of agreement.

"Talk about them, and the royal cabal comes sniffing around."

Adamat leaned back. Teef had not attempted to give the bank notes back. He obviously knew something, even if it was a small tidbit, but perhaps his greed was overcome by fear. Adamat ran his hands through his hair and wondered absently if it was feeling thinner. His father had gone bald early. Was he going down the same road?

"Never the less," Adamat said. "We must know."

Teef shook his head.

"Constable White," Adamat said, "if you please."

White seemed to slither forward. It was a graceful movement from one so thin and awkward. She slid to Teef's side, then around behind him, and to his other side. Teef sank into his chair, turning his head to follow White.

White lowered herself to her haunches just behind and to Teef's side. She threw her right arm over his shoulder, as if they were old friends, and brought her mouth to his ear. Adamat could barely hear her voice come out in a whisper.

"You must be a tough lad," she said, "joining up with a crew like the Black Street Barbers." Her left hand snaked into his lap, grasping the wrist that held his razor. Teef tried to shake her off with no success. "But you're not even old enough to know the surrender that comes with sitting down in a chair, one of these," she squeezed his hand around the razor, "pressing gently against your throat. You don't have the fine respect that every man gains from having to bare their throat to a stranger."

Teef licked his lips. "Adamat, what is ... "

White pressed the bony index finger of her right hand against Teef's lips, then drew it down his chin, tracing a line to his Adam's apple. She drew her fingernail across his throat lengthwise. "Slitting a throat is such a quick, delicate motion that hides such savagery. I'm sure that's why the Black Street Barbers use it as their trademark. But did

you know that if you slit the throat shallow enough, and then grasp the skin just here," she pressed with her fingernail, "that you can carve upwards with the blade and, if you're careful enough, remove a man's entire face while he still lives and breathes?"

A droplet of sweat rolled down Teef's forehead.

White let go of his wrist and squeezed his shoulders with both hands—an almost motherly affection—and said, "You can even do it while they're awake, if you bind the body and head tightly enough. But I wouldn't recommend it. Too much chance for error when they twitch and scream. What do you do with a man's face, you ask?" she shrugged. "Whatever you like. Hang it on a mannequin. Wear it to a party. So many uses."

Teef tried to flick open his razor and fumbled it, sending it clattering to the ground. He groped blindly for a moment before giving up. "The powder mage," he said, his voice ragged. "He came around looking for work about six months ago. Nobody knew what he was at first, just a confident musket for hire. Was given a few jobs by the Brickmen on South Street. Then word got around he was a mage and nobody, I mean nobody, wants the cabal poking around down here. He was, what's the word ... ?"

"Blacklisted?" Adamat suggested, finding there was croak to his own voice. He'd seen officers threaten witnesses before. Pit, he'd played the menacing interrogator from time to time himself but he'd never seen anything like this. Part of him wanted to be impressed. The other part felt slightly queasy.

"Yes, blacklisted," Teef said eagerly. "Nobody would touch him. Word has it he moved on."

The Brickmen was one of the larger gangs in Adopest, mostly consisting of disenfranchised dockworkers that had finally given up on finding consistent work and now terrorized the companies they used to work for. "How did he get work in the first place?" Adamat asked. "Strangers like that don't just walk in and get jobs around here." Teef glanced sidelong at White and licked his lips. "He was cousins or something with one of the ranking Brickmen. Both northerners. A pitrunner, I think. Look, I don't know anything else. I would tell you if I could."

"Not where he went?" White said softly in Teef's ear.

"No! No idea. Maybe someone does, but it's not me."

"Who would?" Adamat asked.

"One of the big bosses, maybe. I dunno."

Adamat removed another two bills from his pocketbook and gave them to Teef. "Thank you, Teef. That will be all."

Teef snatched up his razor and left the tavern at a run, trailing the smell of sweat and urine. Adamat watched him go, then turned to White. He found that he couldn't quite look her in the eye. "What did you make of that?" he asked.

If White was aware that her little display had had a profound effect on Adamat as well as Teef, she didn't show it. She stood up, springing on the balls of her feet like a woman thirty years her junior. "We'll have to talk with one of the big bosses."

"That would be both immensely difficult and, I think, unnecessary."

"Oh?" White asked.

"We have a clue," Adamat said. "Teef said the man was a pitrunner."

"I'm not familiar with the term."

"It's a derogatory slang for a barrowman. Someone who works in the mines up in the northern mountains, rolling wheelbarrows out of the deepest coal pits. It's one of the worst, hardest jobs in Adro."

"You think he's a convict? Someone from the Mountainwatch?"

"No," Adamat said. He half-closed his eyes, running through the information stored in his mind. "If I recall correctly, which I usually do, pitrunner is geographically specific. Refers to barrowmen in the Kemptin Region, in mines owned by the Kemptin family." He

finally forced himself to look White in the eye. "Employment records should be available at the Public Archives. Are you any good at research?"

"Quite."

"We need information on all the barrowmen who worked there over the last two years."

"That sounds ... tedious."

"Paperwork is a fantastic way of tracking people down because they rarely bother to cover their trail even when they should. If you can take care of that, I'll do a little sniffing and see if I can find out who the powder mage's cousin is among the Brickmen."

"I thought you said that wouldn't be necessary."

"I don't think it will. But it doesn't hurt to have two leads. I won't try to approach him without you."

White's nostrils flared and she watched Adamat for a moment before giving a curt nod.

Adamat walked with her out to the street, where she took their cab and headed north toward the Public Archives. He waited until the cab had disappeared before going looking for his own. It would have been easier to just share a cab. Their destinations were quite close indeed. But Adamat didn't want her to know that.

He found the closest cab and paid the driver before getting inside.

"Where to, sir?"

"Sablethorn Prison," Adamat said. It was time to talk to Ricard Tumblar.

Across the city square from the precinct building sat Sablethorn Prison. It was a black, basalt obelisk of a building, a nail jutting from the city center high into the sky in testament to the Iron King's merciless imprisonment of those who opposed him. It was as much, if not more, a statement to the public than the guillotine permanently fashioned in the center of the square.

The sheer size of the building meant it served as incarceration for political prisoners and dissidents, as well as the city jail. Its proximity to the First Precinct building only made it all the more convenient.

Adamat showed his credentials to the jailer just inside the big main doors and was directed up three flights of stairs where another jailer took him down a long hall and thumped twice on a thick wooden door before unlocking and opening it for Adamat.

"Just give a yell if you need anything," the jailer said.

It was a small room with a single barred window that faced away from the main square. There was a cot, a chair, and a table with writing implements. The only light came from the glow of coal stove in one corner, next to which squatted Ricard Tumblar.

He still wore the same jacket he had on yesterday morning. His hair was frayed, his clothes rumpled, the collar of his shirt stained with wine and sweat. He glared up at Adamat in hurt confusion.

As if I had anything to do with you being in here. "How much did you have to bribe a guard to get a noble's cell?" Adamat asked.

"Just a hundred krana," Ricard said. "I guess they were told to put me with the rabble, but I did a favor for the head jailor's cousin a few months back. Adamat, why am I here? I've been demanding to see you since they brought me in here yesterday and no one will listen to me. *You* said I wasn't a suspect."

Adamat looked for someplace to hang his hat. He gave up and kept it in hand. "I was taken off the case."

"What? Why?"

"Someone wants you to take the fall for this, Ricard," Adamat said. "Someone who can make it happen."

"Of course they do! That's why they tried to frame me. But I didn't do it, and ... " Ricard trailed off. "You mean someone in the police?"

"Or someone who can exert a great deal of influence on them. The commissioner himself took me off the case and handed it to his incompetent nephew." Adamat thought

of telling Ricard what the commissioner had said about seeing him to the guillotine, but that would have been cruel. Ricard didn't need to hear that now.

"So I'm strapped to the millwheel, am I?"

"It appears so."

"Shit."

"Indeed. Who would do this?" Adamat asked.

"Who wants me dead, you mean?"

"Dead? They don't just want you dead. They want you discredited and imprisoned. I want to know who wants you out of the way so much that they're willing to kill innocent people—people like Melany—to do it."

A slow realization began to spread across Ricard's face. Adamat waited for the candle to light behind his eyes. Ricard had always had the habit of being willfully naive. Everyone was a friend to him, a possible business partner or lover. It had gotten him into trouble on many occasions—but the attitude had also made him a wealthy man.

"What have you been up to, Ricard?" Adamat asked. "We haven't spoken since ... for a while. Last I read in the papers your latest attempt at unionizing the dock workers had been shut down by the police."

Ricard waved dismissively. "That was months ago."

"And you're doing something new?" Adamat urged.

"Yes. I've decided to go straight to the top. I've managed to get a bill sponsored in the House of Nobles that calls for limited legalization of labor unions. It's a small thing, really, but vital to the future of unionization. They'll be voting on it in the House of Nobles next week."

"Is that why you rented a room so close to the House?"

"It is," Ricard said. "I've been in the city all week trying to gather enough support for the nobility to vote it through."

"Why haven't I read about this in the newspapers?"

Ricard snorted. "Because the Wian family owns most every newspaper in Adopest, and they're vehemently against unionization. Everything comes down to a vote by the nobility, but if it has no popular support no one will agree to it."

Adamat scratched his chin, looking at the embers of the coal stove, and shook his head.

"I don't see how this is important enough to kill over."

"The biggest businessmen in Adro are against unionization. It'll force them to pay higher wages for both skilled and unskilled labor. It'll cut millions out of their profits. Some of these blood suckers would kill over a thousand krana, let alone what unionization will cost them."

"I can see that," Adamat agreed. "Can you give me a list of names?"

"What names?" Ricard asked, looking up.

"These businessmen. The ones who are the most vocally against you."

"I thought they took you off the case?"

"They did. But something new has come up and I may have the opportunity to poke at your case." Adamat forced a smile. "For old times' sake."

The look on Ricard's face was almost worth the shit Adamat would get in if the commissioner found out Adamat was going anywhere near Ricard.

"Bless you," Ricard said. "Yes, hold on. I'll write them down."

Adamat waited while Ricard had listed a half dozen family names as well as nineteen particular individuals. He memorized the list over Ricard's shoulder, but folded it and put it in his pocket in case he needed it for evidence later. "I'm curious," he said, "You're a businessman yourself. Why are you for unionization? You'll have to pay your own workers more."

"I already pay my workers more," Ricard said proudly, "and I have hard evidence that better pay and reduced hours actually increase productivity. I'm convinced that

unionization will someday turn Adro into the industrial powerhouse of the Nine."

"And what's in it for you?"

Ricard managed a sly smile despite his disheveled state. "Someone has to head up the union, don't they?"

"Ah. I see." Adamat shook his head, knowing even as he did that he'd had little faith in Ricard's ventures before, and a surprising number of them had worked. He sobered his tone. "I can't promise anything. I don't want to get your hopes up."

"The very fact that you're here to help gets my hopes up."

Adamat grinned. "I was afraid you'd say something like that. Nothing like a little pressure to make working easier."

Ricard grasped Adamat's hand. "Really. Thank you so much. This means a lot to me. I'll be in your debt forever."

Adamat called for the jailer, wishing he had more time to spend with his friend, and that they could be meeting over better circumstances. As annoying as Ricard's optimism could be, he was a good man. Why had Adamat avoided him?

"And Adamat," Ricard said as the jailer unlocked the door.

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry about Cora. I really am."

Adamat felt his jaw tighten. Oh yes. That was why. He gave a brisk nod, not trusting himself to speak, and stepped out into the hallway. He reached in his pocket to feel the paper with the names of Ricard's enemies, and slowly went over them in his mind. These were powerful businessmen and nobles. People with fortunes and connections and some even with private armies.

And the only thing keeping them from sending Ricard's head tumbling from a guillotine was him.

"One last thing," Adamat said, returning to Ricard's side and handing him the paper. "Who among these people would have the money and guts to hire a powder mage so close to the Adran Royal Cabal?"

Ricard seemed to think about this for a minute then circled four names. Adamat eyed them for a moment. "Good," he said quietly. "I'll do what I can."

He was on the main floor, reaching for his pocketbook to give the jailer something to ease Ricard's stay in Sablethorn, when his hand came up empty. His pocketbook was gone. He sent the jailer up to Ricard's cell to look for it but the man came back five minutes later shaking his head.

Adamat left the jail and stepped out into the public square, where he leaned on his cane and replayed the last several hours in his head. He had paid off Teef. And the driver that brought him to the city center. After that he had not touched his pocketbook. He thought through the brushes he had with a dozen different people as he moved through afternoon foot traffic. One of them must have snatched his wallet, but none stood out in his memory.

He swore under his breath and lifted his eyes to look for his cab.

It was just where he'd left it, the driver huddled at the reins. And standing beside it, her eyes lacking that disturbing smile, was Constable White. Adamat swallowed hard and approached the cab.

"Employment records?" White said. "In the Public Archives?"

"They're legally required to have them," Adamat said.

"And you and I both know that employment records are as reliable as the rain. You wanted to get rid of me so you could visit the accused from that murder case."

Adamat looked around. This conversation seemed to beg privacy, but he didn't think he wanted to be alone with White. Then again, she could probably smell his hesitance. He climbed inside the cab.

She followed him in and closed the door, folding her hands serenely in her lap. Adamat

remembered the quiet, almost sensual voice she had used on Teef, calmly explaining how to remove a man's face with a straight razor. He positioned his cane where he could bring it to bare easily, but didn't think it would help much if she attacked him.

"The powder mage was hired to frame Ricard," Adamat said, "And finding the powder mage could very well depend on finding out who hired him. I simply went to visit Mr. Tumblar to get a list of his enemies."

"And did you?" White asked coldly.

Adamat produced the list that Ricard had given him and handed it to White. "These are the people and families whose interests are threatened by Mr. Tumblar's push to unionize. The names he circled are the ones he suspects would risk the wrath of the cabal to hire a powder mage. Note the second name from the bottom."

White's eyes skimmed the list. "This includes some of the most powerful noble and merchant families in Adro." Her eyes reached the end. "Kempton. Walis Kempton."

"He's a na-baron," Adamat said. "A member of the Kempton family and, if I'm not mistaken, he's in charge of the Kempton mines in the north."

White looked at Adamat over the list. Some of the anger had gone out of her eyes, but she was still definitely annoyed. "If he's angering all these people, I'm surprised no one has just up and killed him yet." She folded the scrap of paper neatly and ran her fingernails along the crease before depositing it in her pocket. "I will have to get permission to proceed. Continue your search. I'll find you in the morning."

"Of course."

"Adamat, do not try to sneak anything past me again. You will regret it."

Adamat thought of White leaning in and whispering in Teef's ear, drawing her fingernail along the boy's throat. Yes, he imagined he would regret it deeply.

"What else do we have?"

White sat down at the cafe table across from Adamat, glancing surreptitiously at the newspaper in Adamat's hand before raising her chin and waiting for an answer.

Adamat let her wait. It was still early in the morning, not yet eight, the sky still dark, and he was nursing a significant headache and trying to keep his eyes open enough to drink two cups of the cafe's stoutest Fatrastan coffee. Very little sleep was a hallmark of police work. He'd managed to get used to it, but that didn't mean he enjoyed it. Nor did he enjoy spending so much time away from his wife.

"Very little," Adamat responded. He couldn't help the spike of annoyance when White's eyebrows rose. Cold-blooded killer or not, have a little damned decency. "I managed to find two more of my informants yesterday. Neither of them had any idea who in the Brickmen gang might be related to the powder mage. One said it wasn't a relation at all, just someone who happened to be in the right place at the right time and was hired to kill a rival gang member. Regardless, the story is the same: as soon they found out he was a powder mage no one in the docklands would come near him."

"Did you find out a name?"

Adamat shook his head. It was one of his greatest frustrations from the previous night. A name would let him ask more specific questions, peruse employment, prison, or even church records. It was so much more useful than "powder mage."

"Did you find anything at all of use to us?" White drummed her fingernails on the table.

"I left the Public Archives just an hour ago," Adamat said. "Found something curious about the Kempton family."

"That applies to our search?"

"I think so." Adamat raised his eyes from his newspaper. "The Kempton family is much larger than I thought. None of them are particularly high in the peerage, nothing more than a baron, but they have to be the most prevalent example of nepotism in the whole country. Members of their family occupy public office and high station throughout most of central and northern Adro."

“So?”

“Commissioner Aleksandre is one of them. A second cousin of Walis Kemptin.”

“You’re looking for a conspiracy.” White narrowed her eyes at him.

Adamat almost balked at that look, but he forced himself to go on with confidence. “I’m not looking. I’m being smacked in the face with it. Ricard Tumblar was framed for murder. Tumblar is trying to get the House of Nobles to legalize his union. The Kemptins are a prevalent family who employ thousands of laborers, giving them vested interest in seeing his efforts fail. They’ve put dozens of family members in useful positions all over the country, and they would damn well make use of them. They could have hired an assassin to frame Ricard Tumblar, and then when someone like myself fingered the real killer, had cousin Aleksandre step in and make sure Tumblar would still take the fall.”

Adamat was out of breath by the time he finished. He leaned back, finding his heart racing. The outburst had done more to wake him up than the coffee had, but now his mouth was dry. Had he said too much? He gestured for the waiter to bring another cup.

“It could just be coincidence,” White said. “The commissioner’s relation to the Kemptin family.”

“It could be, but I very much doubt it was.”

“You’re forgetting the most important thing, Adamat,” White said. “It doesn’t matter. Tumblar will take the fall for this because my masters don’t give a damn what happens to him. All we want is the powder mage.”

Adamat slammed his fist on the table. “Are you being willfully ignorant? If the Kemptin family hired a powder mage to perform a political assassination once then they may do it again. They’re defying the cabal and by letting Ricard go to the guillotine you allow it to happen!”

He took his cup of coffee from the waiter and raised it to his lips. Oh pit, what had he done? This time he had gone too far. His hand trembled violently and he had to set the coffee down so as not to spill it. He shrank into his seat.

White examined her fingernails. “I’ll be honest, Adamat. I find your earnestness endearing. Don’t mistake that for us being friends. You have not proven that Kemptin is even involved with this powder mage.”

“I can,” Adamat said.

“And you better. I have permission to proceed. We’re going to see Walis Kemptin in an hour. I can see,” she said slowly, “why your captain chose to bring you with her on her transfer to the First.”

“Because I’m good at my job,” Adamat said. It came out a whisper. Permission to proceed was an enormous breakthrough.

“No,” White replied. “I suspect that she grew to like you at the Twelfth, and she brought you along because without her protection you would very quickly get yourself wrapped up in something too big for yourself and get killed.”

“The cabal’s involvement is not to be mentioned,” White said as their cab pulled up in front of the Kemptin townhome. “As far as anyone is concerned, I am your junior partner.”

Adamat stopped a snide comment about White being twice his age before it could slip out of his lips. He nodded and climbed from the cab. The townhome was very similar to that belonging to the late Viscount Brezé and, in fact, was less than two blocks away. Adamat wondered how soon that poor cook was going to face the guillotine and who, exactly, was the real killer.

Nothing could be done for that. He had more than enough to focus on, and his own luck had already been more than stretched.

The butler, an aged woman in a black suit, answered the door and showed them to the sitting room, where they were left to their own devices, the door closed behind them.

Adamat did a long circuit of the room. "Silk wallpaper," he noted aloud, absently. "Recently repapered. Probably to cover the plaster repairs after they installed this gas lighting." Adamat ran his finger over the wallpaper then tapped on a glass lamp hanging from the wall beside the door. "The coal business must be doing very well. Though I can't imagine Kemptin would be nearly as receptive to gas if it was used for heating as well."

Adamat stopped in front of the fireplace and looked down. "Speaking of heating," he muttered.

White joined him. "The flames have been doused," she said. "The logs are wet."

"About fifteen years ago," Adamat said with a sigh, "the Iron King ordered the nobility to be accessible to the police at our convenience. They weren't used to having to answer to commoners, which so many of us are, so in protest they would douse their fires during a winter visit and leave the constables in the cold room for as many as several hours. It's terribly petty."

"I made an appointment," White said, looking slightly annoyed.

"As a constable," Adamat reminded her. "Not as a representative of the cabal."

White's nostril's flared, but she remained silent.

Their wait, it turned out, was only about fifteen minutes. Walis Kemptin turned out to be a man in his mid-thirties. He was well kept, freshly shaven with short black hair clinging to the sides of his head while the center of his skull shone baldly. His skin was darker than most you'd find in Adro—a Deliv mother, perhaps—and his manner was easy, giving Adamat and White a friendly smile as he entered.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," he said. "By Kresimir, it's cold in here. Let's make this quick, shall we? I don't want to keep you officers any longer than needed."

Adamat glanced at White. Walis acted as if it was *he* that made the appointment. Despite his friendly demeanor, Walis didn't offer them a chair or summon a maid to relight the fire. Why would he? He was a busy man and to most nobility the police were nothing more than a nuisance to be paid off or ignored.

A superior at the academy had always told Adamat not to antagonize the nobility. It was the quickest way to end your career. Smile, bow, defer to them in all things, even if they were the most vile human being you'd ever had the misfortune to meet.

Adamat bowed. "Lord Walis," he said, "I'm Special Detective Constable Adamat. This is Constable White. I'll make this very quick indeed." He paused to laugh, as if what he said were of little consequence. "I don't want to alarm you, my lord. This is more of a courtesy visit than anything else."

Walis raised his eyebrows. "Oh? What would possibly alarm me?"

"There's been a row going about the city involving a powder mage. You may have heard about it?"

"That thing from the *Yellow Caller*? I thought that was some kind of joke."

Adamat chuckled into his hand. "Sorry to say, it's not a joke. The investigation leaked to the Caller somehow, but that's not important. What's important is that there's a small—a very small, I assure you—chance that you're in danger."

"How could I possibly be in danger?" Walis's easy stance had changed. His body had stiffened, his eyes become more cautious. He was listening carefully now.

"We've reason to believe that this assassin—this powder mage—is a former pitrunner. He used to work in your mines up north. I'm sorry to be so blunt, sir, but the conditions of the northern coalmines are well known and, to be honest, we're worried that he may target you or your family for assassination next. He already tried to kill a local businessman and barely missed, killing his mistress instead."

"I see," Walis said slowly. His breathing had tightened up. He wasn't showing it, not much, but he was nervous now. Adamat had him. Now just to lay out the trap.

"We just recommend staying away from any open windows or public places over the

next forty-eight hours.”

“Forty-eight hours?” Walis echoed.

“Yes, sir. We’re closing in on the bloke,” Adamat said. “We should have him captured and taken in for questioning within a day or two. Once we do we’ll send someone around to give you the all clear.” Adamat ducked his head. “That’s all we needed. Thank you so much for your time, my lord.”

“Of course. Thank you for the ... warning.”

Adamat bowed his way out of the room and took his hat and coat from the butler. White followed him out to the front of the house where he stopped and took a long, shaky breath.

“That,” White said, “was not quite what I was expecting.”

“It was a bit spur of the moment I must admit,” Adamat said. His palms were sweaty, and he dried them on his pant legs.

“I’m not entirely sure what you accomplished there,” White said. “If he’s truly connected to the powder mage, Walis will make the man disappear.”

“I think not,” Adamat answered. He searched his pocket for his pipe before remembering it was back home on the windowsill where he always left it. “And I’m certain he’s connected. Did you see the way we had his attention the moment the powder mage was mentioned?”

“I did,” White admitted.

“Good. Glad I didn’t imagine it.”

White made a vexed sound in the back of her throat. “And why won’t Walis make his pet powder mage go into hiding or just have him killed?”

“Because you don’t up and kill an asset like that. And he’s probably already in hiding. No,” Adamat said, “there are far easier options available to a man like Walis.”

“Like?”

“Well, he’ll check with his second cousin, the commissioner, and find out that we’re on a special assignment for the crown. He’ll panic when he thinks you’re on his trail, and then he’ll do the logical thing.”

White was growing impatient. “Which is?” she demanded.

Adamat adjusted his hat and gripped his cane by the head, walking toward their cab.

“He’ll have me killed.”

Adamat and White were together in the Public Archives later that day when four constables arrived with a warrant for Adamat’s arrest.

Adamat noted that a reporter from the *Adopest Daily* was hanging around the front of the Archives when he was trundled out the door in irons and into the back of a police wagon. He was joined a moment later by one of the constables. He heard an interchange between White and one of the men outside.

“I’m going with him,” White said.

“This isn’t your arrest, love,” the officer said.

“He’s my partner.”

“Not my problem. You can visit him in Sablethorn if you want.”

The arresting constables had not, it seemed, been informed of White’s status. He could practically see the coldness seeping into her eyes as the man spoke just outside the wagon.

“Give me a ride back to the precinct building, then,” White said.

“Fine, fine. But you’ll have to ride inside. Nothing funny from you, hear?”

The door opened and White climbed in to sit beside Adamat.

“Interesting plan of yours,” she said as they began to move.

Adamat glanced at the arresting constable. Someone from the First that he didn’t recognize. Likely someone chosen by the commissioner. “Honestly,” Adamat said, “I’m surprised by their restraint. I expected someone to come and try to stick a knife in my

back. Someone who doesn't know about you. We'd capture them, find out who hired them, then ... " he trailed off with a shrug.

The arrest would complicate things. But what did the commissioner have on Adamat? He hadn't done anything wrong. White had barely left his side in the last two days.

"And what if they had just had their friend put a bullet through your skull from a thousand yards?" White asked. "Or sent him after your wife? These aren't the kind of people who play by your rules."

"My wife," Adamat said, "is visiting family out of the city for the next few months." Adamat felt a bead of sweat roll down the center of his back. The former notion was not a pleasant one. It hadn't even occurred to him. How daft could he be?

"Well," he said, licking his lips, "looks like they haven't."

"Yet," White responded.

They were taken to the precinct building and immediately up to the second floor, where the commissioner had a spacious office that overlooked the public square. It was easily eight times the size of Captain Hewi's office and decorated with foreign trophies, maps of the city, and done out with fine ironwood paneling.

Commissioner Aleksandre sat at his desk. Adamat was surprised to find Captain Hewi standing just over the commissioner's shoulder, hands clasped behind her back. She looked less than pleased. The constables escorted Adamat inside and immediately withdrew. White entered the room a moment later.

"I'm assuming you have a good reason for interrupting our investigation," White said. She matched Hewi's attentive stance, looking for all the world like she was in charge of what happened within this room.

Commissioner Aleksandre was not taken in by the performance. "We did, Attaché White," he said. "We regret to inform you that you've been working with this man under false pretences."

White raised her eyebrows. Adamat took a step forward. "Excuse me?"

"Is this," Aleksandre said, his eyes moving slowly toward Adamat, "your pocketbook?" he asked.

Adamat looked down to see a brown leather pocketbook resting beneath the commissioner's thick fingers. SCDA was monogrammed in the upper corner. "It is," he said. "It was pickpocketed from my jacket sometime yesterday afternoon."

"Did you report the theft?"

"I hadn't yet had the chance. I'm not certain this is relevant to our investigation?"

Adamat's mind raced, trying to keep up. Where was the commissioner going with this?

Aleksandre lifted the pocketbook and spread it open with two fingers, holding it forward so that Adamat and White could see the contents. It was fat with what looked like several thousand krana worth of bank notes. Aleksandre plucked a folded piece of paper out from among the bank notes.

"We took this off a pickpocket who was brought in by routine just this morning," Aleksandre said. "We were surprised to find this much in cash, for a constable like yourself, but even more surprised by this." He waved the paper in the air. "Do you mind telling me what it is?"

Adamat approached the desk warily and took the paper with his manacled hands. His throat went dry. "It appears to be a cheque, made out from Ricard Tumblar to myself."

"Found in your wallet," Aleksandre said. "Hewi admitted to me that you are friends with Ricard. She gave you his case as a favor, thinking you above petty bribery. Thinking it would give you the chance to see your friend cleared and that if he was guilty, you'd either do your duty or recuse yourself"

Adamat felt his jaw drop. "Excuse me? I have not seen this before. And I've never so much as seen that much money, let alone carried it in my pocketbook."

"And yet it was there, along with the cheque," Aleksandre said.

Hewi spoke up. Her voice was low, full of disappointment. "Ricard Tumblar denies having written it. But it comes from his own cheque book, the one found in his hotel room. And we've already checked with the bank. The signature is his."

"Forged, likely," Adamat snapped. "This is preposterous. The cheque book was in custody, here at the precinct building."

"Constable Jain says you were alone with Ricard Tumblar for several minutes yesterday morning at the crime scene. He says you sent him away."

"I did," Adamat said, "to get information from the hotel staff."

"So you don't deny it," Aleksandre said. "And you don't deny that you're friends with the accused?"

Adamat wanted to reach out and put his hands around the commissioner's thick neck. He was getting close on this investigation, he could taste it. He was going to catch both this powder mage and the people who hired him, and they knew it. He looked at White, who'd remained silent through the entire exchange. She looked back at him, her eyes unreadable.

"I'm sorry, Attaché White," Aleksandre said. "But in light of this discovery, we're going to terminate Special Detective Constable Adamat's employment with the Adran police."

"You can't," Adamat said. He stepped forward, jerking at the wrist-irons. Everything was crumbling around him. His job, his reputation. If he didn't wind up in prison he would be ruined.

"I can," Aleksandre said. "You aren't under arrest. Not yet." He rolled his eyes. "Captain Hewi has insisted we investigate further before throwing you in Sablethorn. But you're not to leave the city until we have reached a conclusion. We'll keep an eye on you." He removed the banknotes from Adamat's pocketbook, collecting them with the forged cheque, and tossed the pocketbook on the edge of the desk. "The constables outside will release your wrist-irons. You're free to go."

Adamat took his empty pocketbook. "You believe this?" he asked Hewi.

"The evidence, as you've so often said, is there."

He took a deep breath and turned to White. Surely she should see the absurdity of it all? The timing? How fortunate this was for Aleksandre and his silent allies? He'd expected someone to put a knife in his back. Nothing this insidious.

He'd been a fool.

White met his gaze. "Well," she said, "It was good working with you, Adamat. Pity this turned out the way it did."

"I didn't ..." Adamat started.

White stepped past him to stand in front of Commissioner Aleksandre. "I'll continue my investigation," she said. "Without Adamat. My priority is still to find the powder mage."

"Of course, Attaché," Aleksandre said. "Adamat," he barked, "you're dismissed!"

Adamat left the office. Outside, his hat and cane were returned to him, the brim of the former badly bent, and his wrist-irons were removed. He felt as if in a daze, walking through the precinct building, the eyes of dozens of constables on him as he left. He reached the front door when a voice stopped him.

"Well look at that, lads," Lieutenant Dorry said. "If it isn't the captain's sweet little favorite. Where are you going, Adamat?"

Adamat put his hand on the door. He could hear Dorry's footsteps coming up quickly behind him. Dorry grabbed the door handle and pulled it shut, forcing Adamat to turn around and face him.

Dorry bent over, leering in Adamat's face. He was taller than Adamat and thicker at the shoulders. Adamat guessed the extent of his exercise tended toward striking unarmed witnesses and walking to and from a carriage.

"Are you going to answer me, smart man? The Knacked with the memory? Did you remember that I told you you'd get yours."

"You never said such a thing," Adamat said quietly. "You just told me the captain would hear about it." He raised his voice so the rest of the constables in the recreation room would hear him. "That was right after I implied that you were a sloppy investigator."

Dorry glanced over his shoulders. "What is that, meant to hurt my feelings?"

"I didn't mention at the time," Adamat said, "That you were also a bloody imbecile. That you wouldn't be able to properly solve a murder if it happened right in front of your face. I may be disgraced, but you're a failure and a fool. And this, all of this bluster, hides that you know exactly what I'm talking about."

Something in Dorry's face—the reddening of his cheeks, the widening of his eyes—told Adamat that he'd struck Dorry right where it hurt the most. Dorry flexed his fingers and took quick, shallow breaths.

"May I speak to you from one citizen to another?" Adamat asked. He felt numb inside. A little part of him, distant and still in control of his emotions, told him he was digging his own grave. He didn't care.

"I don't know what the pit that means," Dorry growled.

"It's an archaic phrase, but it's still on the books. Rather silly if you ask me, but if you say it to a police officer in front of at least three neutral witnesses, and give him five seconds to say no, you can then punch him in the face without being arrested for striking an officer of the law."

Dorry squinted at him.

Adamat balled up his fist and planted it between Dorry's eyes. The lieutenant went down in a spray of blood and curses, crimson streaming from between his fingers as he clutched at his face.

"Bloody pit!" he yelled in a nasally tone, "He just broke my nose!"

Adamat rubbed his fist. The brief moment of satisfaction he felt left him almost immediately. There would be reprisal for this, regardless of any archaic law. He was just as big a fool as Dorry. Best to leave the scene immediately and go somewhere he could figure out how to put his life back together.

He pushed open the door, vaguely conscious of the constables rushing to help Dorry. The lieutenant called out after him. "You're not just a failure, Adamat! You're a disgrace! Everyone's always going to know it, from me down to that stupid cook Genetrie that you tried to convince me didn't kill her master! You're a bloody disgrace, and that's something I'll never be."

Adamat kept walking, trudging through the snow. He still had his spare pocketbook on him, but he had the feeling he should save his krana for when he needed to pay the fines that would no doubt be levied when they convicted him for bribery. He'd walk home instead of taking a cab tonight.

He was three blocks from the precinct building when something clicked in his mind.

The cook. Dorry had said her name. Genetrie. Adamat had read that name recently, and not just in the newspapers. He ran through his memories until he found it.

By Kresimir, *Dorry was right about the cook*. She *did* murder her master. But not for the reason Dorry thought.

Adamat set off at a run.

Adamat caught up to White as she left by the front door of the precinct building about forty minutes later. He was out of breath and panting as he reached her, a large book from the Public Archives stuffed under his arm. She did not stop, forcing him to walk at a quick pace beside her.

"I've nothing to say to you," White said.

"I wasn't bribed," Adamat said. "I swear this to you. And even if I was, would it matter to our investigation? I can still help you!"

"I don't need your help."

"Yes," Adamat said, "you do. Otherwise you wouldn't have come to me in the first

place.”

White’s brisk pace increased. “It’s not about being bribed. It’s that you have vested interest in steering my attention back to the murder at the Kinnen Hotel, something I’ve expressed to you in no uncertain terms I will not become involved with.”

“But I *don’t* have vested interest, I wasn’t ...” Adamat stifled a shout. As White said, she didn’t care whether or not he had been bribed. Out of the corner of his eye he could see that they were growing near to White’s cab. He had the feeling that if he tried to get inside with her he would get himself gutted.

“Look,” he said, “whether or not you believe Aleksandre’s accusations—which, I might add, are all too damn convenient coming after I visited his cousin—our search does have to do with the murder at the Kinnen Hotel. It began there, it will end there. There is something far bigger at work that includes Ricard Tumblar’s attempts at unionization. If we only catch the powder mage and do nothing about the root of the problem, Walis Kemptin and his family will continue to make a mockery of our laws, of the king, of the cabal!”

White stopped walking and slowly turned toward Adamat. “You still have no first-hand evidence that connects the Kemptin family to any of this. Perhaps it aligns with their interests, but that does not prove anything.”

Adamat said, “Listen to me for just another minute. Let me show you something intriguing and if it doesn’t catch your interest I will walk away immediately.” He hefted the book in his arms.

“Where did you get that?”

“I stole it from the Public Archives about twenty minutes ago.”

White’s eyes were cold and calculating. She produced a pocket watch and sprang the lid with her thumb. “You have fifty-five seconds left.”

Adamat opened the book, flipping through the pages as fast as he could. He found the right one and then drew a finger down it, searching for a name. “Genetrie Kemptin,” he said, “is the name of a cousin of the Kemptin family, four times removed from the main branch. Her name doesn’t appear in the official family tree, but it does show up in the Family Codex, which is right here in my hand. Her father was a disgrace, all but disowned by the main family.”

He showed White the entry in the Family Codex, then closed the book and shifted it to one arm, removing several newspapers from his pocket. “If you’ll look here, on the very last page, in very small letters, it announces tomorrow’s execution of Genetrie Kemptin, a distant relative of the Kemptin family, for the murder of her master the Viscount Brezé.”

“You have ten seconds,” White said.

Adamat shifted to the second paper. “Four days ago, in the *Adran Herald*, which is not owned by any of the Kemptin family’s allies, the Viscount Brezé announced his intention to support Ricard Tumblar’s bid for the legalization of unions in the House of Nobles. That,” Adamat slapping the paper with the back of his hand, “cannot be a coincidence!”

“Your time is up,” White said, closing her pocket watch with a click.

“If the Kemptin family is willing to order one of their own cousins to murder a viscount in cold blood, they would be willing to hire a powder mage to frame a competing businessman. They will go to any lengths to protect their interests and that has to catch the interest of the royal cabal!” Adamat could hear the desperation in his own voice as he finished talking. White’s eyes remained cold, her demeanor unconvinced.

Slowly, as if with great regret, she took the paper from his hands. Her eyes scanned the article announcing Viscount Brezé’s intentions.

“Why,” she asked, “would a distant cousin of the Kemptin family commit a crime that sends her to the guillotine?”

“Her execution isn’t until tomorrow,” Adamat said. “Let’s go ask her.”

White handed the paper back to Adamat. "Return the codex to the Public Archives," she said.

"Of course."

"You have my attention, Adamat. Let us pray you keep it."

"I have nothing more to say to the police."

Genetrie Kemptin was a stout woman in her mid-twenties. She had a round face and thick, powerful arms, and she still wore the soiled uniform of a Brezé family servant. Her cell in Sablethorn was tiny, hardly bigger than an outdoor privy. Adamat and White had to stand in the hallway, talking to her through the cell bars.

"I think you do," Adamat said gently.

Genetrie sat in the dirty straw on the floor, shoulder toward them, staring straight ahead at the wall. There were bruises on her faces and arms, likely from Lieutenant Dorry's "interrogation."

"I do not."

"We can help you," Adamat said.

"If you please," she said, "I will face my sentence with some dignity."

Adamat could see no hope in her eyes. No interest in talking or begging for a stay of execution. This, he realized, was a woman who already considered herself dead. He put his back to the wall of the prison hallway and sank down to sit in the filth on the floor. What were his options? Was he going to open the cell and beat the woman until she confessed to, what? Brezé's murder? She'd already done that.

"It's interesting," he said, "that your execution was scheduled so swiftly. These things normally take months of sitting around in prison, even after the sentence has been passed. What has it been, three days since you bludgeoned the viscount to death?"

"He was a vile man and got what he deserved."

"Perhaps he did," Adamat said. "But even nobles often have to wait weeks to see a judge and weeks after that for their sentence to be handed out. You must have powerful friends indeed to receive such swift treatment." He looked over at White, who stood against the opposite wall, watching Genetrie through the bars. She didn't look to be in a patient mood.

Genetrie stiffened. "I don't have any friends. If I did, do you think I would be facing the guillotine tomorrow?"

"Family, then."

"My family doesn't care about me."

Adamat looked up at the prison ceiling. Black stone, cut in immense slabs, weighty and oppressive for anyone unlucky enough to be put in these lower cells. Genetrie's swift execution was no doubt phrased as some sort of a gift, so that she wouldn't have to rot in the cells, when in fact it was convenience for the Kemptin family to get her out of the way so much sooner.

"I'm a policeman, you know," Adamat said.

"Yes, you told me that when you came in."

Adamat climbed to his feet. "I do have some powerful friends," he lied. "Your situation intrigues me. I believe I can have your execution put off for at least six months."

There was a sound inside the cell as Genetrie scrambled to the bars. "No," she said, pressing her face against them. "I cannot live like that. Please don't do it."

"It's for your own good," Adamat said. "It'll give you another chance at life and give you more opportunity to think about what else you have to tell us."

Adamat had never seen so much anguish on a person's face before, and he knew it was going to keep him awake for many nights. But he needed to do this. For his own career, for Ricard's life, and to find justice for Melany.

"There's nothing else," Genetrie said, the words coming out a whimper. She slid down the bars and rested her face against their base. "So be it," she whispered.

White suddenly stepped forward, looking down on the woman clinically. "The child," she said.

"What?" Genetrie lifted her head.

"There's a child, isn't there? Probably a bastard, someone with no one else to care for him or her."

"You know nothing of my son," Genetrie said quietly.

"No, but I will." White produced her card and held it down where Genetrie could see it.

"This is my card. It marks me as a servant of the royal cabal of Adro. If you don't believe me you can describe it to your lawyer. He'll know of it, or know someone who does."

She put the card back in her pocket. "Your parents were disgraced, no longer members of the Kemptin clan. Someone must have come to you and told you that if you were to kill Viscount Brezé that your son would later be quietly adopted back into the family and given the opportunities that you never were. Whimper once if I'm right."

Genetrie let out a low moan.

Adamat almost stepped forward. White's voice was unnecessarily cold, her demeanor cruel. He found himself transfixed.

"You'll tell me who this was," White continued, "and you'll sign a confession which names the relatives that put you up to this crime."

"I can't!"

"If you don't, I will find your son and I will see that he goes to the guillotine in your place tomorrow. I don't care if he's nothing more than a babe. I'll make it happen, and I'll force you to watch. Then I will deposit you back in this cell where you will spend the rest of your life remembering that you could have saved your child."

Genetrie pressed her face to the floor of the cell, and her whole body was wracked with sobs.

"White," Adamat said, hearing the cracking of his own voice, "that is really too far."

White looked over her shoulder at Adamat. Her eyes were distant, a fire to them he had not yet seen. He thought for a moment she would turn her cruelty on him, but the fire slowly drained from her face.

She hunkered down on her haunches and reached through the bars to run her fingers gently through Genetrie's hair. Genetrie stiffened at the touch, her body shaking with fear.

"If you do this," White said, "you will still go to the guillotine for your crimes. But your boy will not. I give you my word that he will be looked after, educated, and connected. He will be given a better life than that of an unwanted bastard in a second-rate noble family."

Genetrie slowly got a hold of herself. When she finally looked up, her eyes were wet, face streaked with tears, but there was a resolve that hadn't been there before. "You swear on the royal cabal? On the king?"

"I do."

"Then I'll do it."

White stood up and looked back at Adamat. Adamat forced himself to meet her gaze. The horrible smile had returned to her eyes. What kind of creatures did the cabal create in their employ that were capable of such things?

Thirty minutes later they had a written confession from Genetrie. Adamat held it at arm's length, partially to let the ink dry and partially because of how shocked he was to have it in his possession.

He felt emotionally drained, exhausted by having taken part in such an exchange. He forced himself to straighten, summoning all his faculties. He would need every bit of his nerve for the next bit.

"White," he said, reading the confession one more time and checking the ink before tucking it into a leather folder. "You said you were given leave by your masters with

regard to the Kemptin family. How far, exactly, are you allowed to go?"

"Not as far as you'd like, I can tell you that."

"But you have permission to make arrests? Force changes."

"Within reason."

Adamat tapped the side of his chin thoughtfully. "I have an idea. We'll need a copy of this," he said, waving the confession, "and I need to borrow one of your cards."

Adamat stood outside a townhome in West Laden. It was a modest building, three stories divided among three families in a well-to-do neighborhood in Adopest. The sun had just set and it was colder than he expected. He stomped his feet to try to keep warm and hammered once more on the door.

"Coming, coming!" an angry voice answered from inside. The lock was drawn a moment later and the deeply wrinkled face of a stooped old man stared out at him. "What do you want?"

"I'm here to see Captain Hewi," Adamat said.

"She didn't tell me she was expecting visitors."

"It's an emergency," Adamat said, "from the precinct building."

"Oh," the man said. "Why didn't you say that in the first place? Come in, come in!"

Adamat gratefully slipped inside and stood in the hallway, rubbing his arms to restore warmth, while the old man—Hewi's landlord, he assumed—teetered half way down the hallway and pulled on a cord that led up into the ceiling. Adamat heard the distant ringing of a bell.

"She's usually down within a minute or two," the old man said, continuing down the hallway. "If you don't hear her, just ring the bell again. I'll show you out when you're finished."

Adamat waited about forty-five seconds before he heard the creaking of bare feet on wooden stairs.

"Adamat?" Hewi's voice came from the dark landing above him.

"Ma'am," he said. "Sorry to visit after hours, but it's an emergency."

"Adamat, you shouldn't be here. You've been dismissed. I've done everything I can to keep the commissioner from destroying your life completely and keep my own career."

"I do appreciate that ma'am," Adamat said. "That's why I brought you something."

The stairs creaked and Hewi emerged from the gloom to stand several steps above Adamat. She was wearing a robe and slippers, and smelled of pipe smoke. Her eyes tightened suspiciously. "What is that?"

"A promotion."

There was a gentleman's club in Centesteshire called the King's Knee. It was not far from the middle of Adopest, a location where hundreds of members of the elite of Adro—nobles, merchants, politicians, and the like—could meet for recreation in the quiet halls away from prying eyes. The most popular games were cards and billiards, but Adamat had heard rumors that the King's Knee had bought the building next door and installed handball courts for the pleasure of its clientele.

None of that particularly concerned Adamat. What concerned him was that the doorman politely but firmly informed him—based entirely on his working man's suit, no doubt—that he had found the wrong building.

Until Adamat held up one of Attaché White's cards. The doorman's eyes grew slightly wider. "What can I do for you, sir?" he asked.

"I'm looking for Lord Walis Kemptin."

"Lord Walis is at his usual table, sir."

"Is he alone?"

"He is."

"Take me to him."

"Right away, sir."

Adamat felt a rush as the doorman took his hat and cane and he was led through the warm, smoke-filled room. This card in his hand had just gained him entrance to one of the most exclusive clubs in Adopest without so much as a blink. And once he was inside, his comparatively shabby attire didn't receive a second glance.

They passed the card and billiards tables in the well-lit gaming hall with its vaulted ceilings, where Adamat recognized a handful of faces that he'd only ever seen in the papers. Field Marshal Beravich and two of his generals occupied a billiards table while the Novi ambassador, a woman named Michala, gambled with the king's chamberlain. Adamat proceeded through them all as if in a dream. They entered the next room, where the ceilings and the light were both lower, and the smell of food made Adamat's stomach rumble. The tables had Adran blue cloths and the booths were of fine, crimson-dyed leather.

At one of the tables, neither the best nor the worst of them, sat Lord Walis Kemptin. His head was back against the leather of the booth, the remnants of a meal being cleaned away by a waiter. The acrid smell of mala hung in the air above him.

The doorman cleared his throat. "My Lord Walis," he said, "Attaché White to see you."

Walis' eyelids opened a fraction. Mala smoke curled out through his nose. "White?" he asked as the doorman excused himself. "I thought that was the woman. Your partner."

"It is," Adamat said. "It was necessary to borrow one of her cards to have access to this club. May I sit?"

Walis pulled himself up and seemed to try and shake the mala haze. "I don't see why not. I can always call to have you removed at a moment's notice."

"I wouldn't recommend that," Adamat said, setting White's card face up on the table.

"You already admitted the card does not belong to you."

"But I'm using it with permission, my lord. Or did you think me daft enough to steal one from her pocket?" A waiter passed by with a tray containing cigars and tobacco and mala pipes. Adamat took a tobacco pipe, found it already packed, and took a light from the waiter before letting him move on.

Sweat rolled down Adamat's sides and under his arms. It took every bit of his will to keep from trembling. He was an imposter here and he knew it. But he had to play the part to end this entire debacle tonight.

"You obviously know what this is," Adamat said, tapping the card with one finger. "Your cousin the commissioner would have told you of White's interest in the powder mage you hired."

"I can't imagine what you ... " Walis started.

"Please," Adamat said, cutting him off gently with a raised hand. "Don't patronize me, my lord. I wouldn't be here if we didn't already have a confession from another of your cousins you may remember." Adamat produced a paper from his pocket and smoothed it on the table before pushing it over to Walis. "A somewhat distant cousin, I fear, but a relative nonetheless. She confessed to myself and Attaché White that you personally hired her to kill the Viscount Brezé."

Adamat held up his hand to forestall Walis's inevitable protest and continued. "This very moment, Attaché White and the newly promoted Commissioner Hewi are arresting your cousin Aleksandre under the charges of treason, theft from the crown, conspiracy against the royal cabal, and half a dozen other bits and pieces that they've decided to pin him with. I think it's unnecessary, but I'm told the cabal likes to be very thorough."

"If any of this was true," Walis said, "The new commissioner and Attaché White would be here right now. Not some damned constable."

"I think," Adamat said with a confidence he didn't feel, "You underestimate the gravity of removing the commissioner of the Adran Police. However, I understand your doubt. I'm not here to arrest you. A politician and businessman such as yourself may have guessed right now that we have various ... options."

Walis lifted a finger and a moment later a waiter appeared at his side. "Novi vodka."

"For you, sir?" the waiter asked Adamat.

Adamat shook his head. Once the waiter had gone, he continued. "There are two paths available to us. The first is that we, the police, pull on this string, beginning with Genetrie Kemptin, and unravel it over the course of the next several years. The Kemptin family will be prosecuted to the full extent of Adran law—with the weight of the Adran Cabal behind it. All of your secrets will be laid bare. Everything put out for the public and your enemies to see."

"We'll have the powder mage within days," he went on. "The cabal has dispatched a number of their Privileged to find him." A lie, but Walis didn't need to know that. "And once they have him, they will ring a confession from him. And trust me, they are far more displeased with your use of a powder mage assassin than with your murder of the Viscount Brezé or a businessman's mistress."

"What is my second option?" Walis licked his fingertips and brushed a bit of hair from his forehead. His hand trembled.

"That you sign this piece of paper," Adamat produced a paper from his shirt pocket and slid it up next to the confession. "And in return you will receive a pardon from the king for whatever ... wrongdoings ... you have been involved with through this whole affair. Aleksandre and a few other members of your family will be sacrificed but you, my lord, will remain safe."

Walis ran his eyes over the paper which Adamat had given him. He paused, picked it up, and read it again. "Do you know what this says?"

"I was not privy," Adamat said. He didn't know, and he didn't want to know. Demands, most likely. A tithe to the Adran cabal. Concession of property to the crown. And, Adamat did know, a promise to point the finger at Aleksandre for this whole affair, including Melany's murder.

Walis read the paper a third time, then a fourth, very slowly. Adamat's shirt soaked completely now. He could feel the perspiration beading on his forehead and hoped Walis was too high on mala to notice.

There would be no investigation if Walis said no, of course. Aleksandre was already under arrest, and the conspiracy would still be pinned on him, but the cabal had no interest in investigating one of the noble families. Adamat needed Walis to sign that paper, or he would get away with this whole affair without even a slap on the wrist.

"Personally," Adamat said as nonchalantly as possible, "I would rather you take the first option, my lord. You and your family tried to destroy my life. I would relish the opportunity to do the same to yours."

Walis' eyes tightened. He leaned forward, examining Adamat over the paper in his hand, and then leaned back again. What was he thinking? Would he call Adamat's bluff?

Walis stared at the paper in his hand for nearly five minutes. Adamat felt the seconds ticking by, willing him to make a decision.

Finally, excruciatingly, Walis reached for his pocket. He produced a pen and smoothed the paper out on the table with one hand and scrawled his signature on the bottom. He slid the paper over to Adamat. "My pardon?" he asked.

"First," Adamat said, "we need the location of your powder mage."

The fight, the newspaper said, was quick and brutal.

Four members of the Adran Royal Cabal and an entire company of their personal guards had descended on a block of tenements in the docklands of Adopest to arrest the powder mage. He managed to kill three guardsmen and wound a Privileged before he himself was killed in the melee. An entire block burned down from the sorcery unleashed, and two dozen civilians were dead.

There was no mention at all of Adamat's involvement in finding the powder mage, and

the newspaper article announcing the disgrace of Commissioner Aleksandre and his involvement in the murder of the mistress of a local businessman was on an entirely different page.

Adamat lowered his paper and picked up his coffee, blowing gently to dispel some of the heat. "Do these horrid clashes of violence and conspiracy always claim innocent lives?" he asked.

"Not always," White said. She sat across from him, having refused coffee, and watched the other people in the cafe as they broke their morning fast. "Usually," she admitted a moment later. "I've seen better results. And far worse."

"The newspaper," Adamat said, "Doesn't even mention his name. Do you know what it was?"

White shook her head. "Walis didn't even know. Just called him the powder mage." Her eyes, Adamat noticed, seemed to smile again, brighter than they had before. The rest of her face remained as unmoved as marble.

"Is this thing over?" Adamat asked. "For certain?"

"It is," White said. "The powder mage has been eliminated and I've passed on the rest of this business with Aleksandre and the Kempton family along to underlings."

"Genetrix was beheaded this morning," Adamat said, noting the small announcement at the bottom of page four of the newspaper. "You'll take care of her son?"

"I'm not a wet nurse." White paused, then the very corners of her cheeks lifted a fraction of an inch. It took Adamat several moments to realize it was a joke. Was that ... a smile? "Another thing I've passed on to subordinates," she went on. "But yes. I keep my word."

Adamat breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me." White looked around, as if seeking a waiter, then seemed to think better of it. "Are you sure you don't want more out of this? You served the cabal well. We have a reputation as vengeful and violent, but we also reward those who deserve it."

"I was doing my civic duty," Adamat said, ducking his head.

"I could give you a job. Something that suits your talents. It pays much better than working for the police."

"I ..." Adamat paused then laughed at himself for even considering it for the slightest moment.

"Is something funny?"

"No, I'm sorry. I have a wife and we're hoping to have children soon. I hope I don't offend when I say that I'd rather not work for the cabal." *And I don't want to be beholden to them, either. Rewards always come with strings attached.*

"I think I understand." White stood and brushed off the front of her jacket. "I've made sure that Walis does not come after you or your family in reprisal. I realize that your talent prevents you from following my advice, but I suggest that you forget this entire affair."

"I would very much like to," Adamat said. "And thank you."

White gazed through the window, as if examining something far away. "Farewell Detective Adamat. I have met very few good men. I think that you are one of them. Do nothing to change that."

Epilogue

The memorial service took place in the middle of the week at one of the small Kresim chapels just outside the old city walls north of Adopest. The weather was cold and blustery, but the sun shone through the chapel's stained-glass windows and warmed the pews and altar. Upon the latter sat an urn decorated in gold and silver leaf.

Adamat entered the chapel, careful not to let the door slam behind him, and turned to find the chapel empty except for one lone figure sitting on the foremost pew with head bowed. He felt his heart fall. Had no one come? He made his way up the rows and up to the front, where he sat down next to Ricard Tumblar.

They sat in silence for several moments. *Was Ricard praying?* Adamat wondered. That was uncharacteristic of him.

Finally, Ricard raised his head. His eyes were bloodshot, but face lined with grief, the front of his suit rumpled. He cleared his throat, looked over his shoulder at the empty chapel, and cleared it again.

Adamat slipped him a thin leather case. "Your cheque book," he said. "Aleksandre admitted to having a forger duplicate your signature. Am I late?"

"What? Oh, no. Melany's family is all in Deliv. I'm the only one in this damned city who knew her."

"I'm sorry, Ricard."

Ricard dragged one sleeve across his nose. "If you thought I had commitment issues before, it's only going to get worse from here." He snorted, a half-laugh half-sob, and took a moment to regain his composure. He shook his head. "Adamat, I'm sorry about that thing with Cora."

Adamat grimaced. This was neither the time nor the place. "My poor cousin, Ricard. You broke her heart."

"I didn't mean to."

"But you should have expected it. She was wounded so deeply she left the country. She won't even return my letters, probably because I'm the one who introduced the two of you."

"I'll try to make it up to her. To you."

"Honestly, you might do more bad than good. Let it go," Adamat said. "I'll try to do the same."

They sat in an awkward silence for several minutes before Ricard wiped his eyes once more and sat up straight. "I heard about your promotion. To full detective. Congratulations."

"Thank you," Adamat said, allowing himself a small smile. "Though I'd rather it not come about as a result of such unfortunate circumstances." He gestured at the urn on the altar.

"It didn't," Ricard said firmly. "It came about because you brought justice to someone who otherwise would have had none. And saved my neck from the blade besides. I was curious about one thing, if you're allowed to talk about it."

"Go ahead."

"There's a rumor going around that you gave Commissioner Hewi her promotion. How did that get started?"

Adamat shook his head. "I did no such thing. I only delivered her the news. The Iron King himself approved the appointment."

"But you had something to do with it, didn't you?"

"I ... " Adamat hesitated, wondering what exactly he was allowed to say. "I convinced certain parties that Hewi was politically unambitious, which is true, and easily controlled, which may be less than true, and that she could be replaced easily. Which I doubt will happen any time soon. She seemed like the best woman for the job."

"You've never ceased to amaze me, Adamat."

"And you, me." Adamat shifted in his seat, uncomfortable talking about the case any further. "You'll send the ashes to Melany's family?" he asked.

"I will. Along with some gifts. Money and the like. I don't care if it comes across as tacky." He let out a long sigh, and Adamat wondered if perhaps Ricard had really loved this woman as deeply as he claimed. Adamat didn't doubt the sincerity of the grief; Ricard could be an emotional man.

Adamat reached over to squeeze Ricard's shoulder. "I heard about the vote."

"We wouldn't have won," Ricard said. "Even with Viscount Brezé's support. I knew that deep down."

"You came close," Adamat said, though "close" might be a generosity. They were dozens of votes short of passing the legislation that would legalize small unions.

"Closer than before." Ricard turned to Adamat and nodded firmly. "I'm going to keep trying. Even if they jail me and try to disgrace me. I'm going to do it, Adamat."

"Form a union?"

“More than that. Even if it costs me everything to do it, I’m going to drag Adro kicking and screaming into the modern era.”

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