

LEIGH BARDUGO

SIX
OF
CROWS

HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY

NEW YORK

Henry Holt and Company, LLC
Publishers since 1866
175 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10010
macteenbooks.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bardugo, Leigh.

Six of crows / Leigh Bardugo.—First edition.

pages cm

Summary: "Six dangerous outcasts. One impossible heist. Kaz' crew is the only thing that might stand between the world and destruction—if they don't kill each other first"—

Provided by publisher.

ISBN 978-1-62779-212-7 (hardback)—ISBN 978-1-62779-509-8 (international)—

ISBN 978-1-250-07696-0 (trade paperback, square fish edition) [1. Fantasy.] I. Title.

PZ7.B25024Sk 2015 [Fic]—dc23 2015005469

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First Edition—2015/Designed by April Ward

Printed in the United States of America by

R.R. Donnelley & Sons Company, Harrisonburg, Virginia

To Kayte—

secret weapon, unexpected friend

PART ONE

SHADOW BUSINESS



Joost had two problems: the moon and his mustache.

He was supposed to be making his rounds at the Hoede house, but for the last fifteen minutes, he'd been hovering around the southeast wall of the gardens, trying to think of something clever and romantic to say to Anya.

If only Anya's eyes were blue like the sea or green like an emerald. Instead, her eyes were brown—lovely, dreamy . . . melted chocolate brown? Rabbit fur brown?

"Just tell her she's got skin like moonlight," his friend Pieter had said. "Girls love that."

A perfect solution, but the Ketterdam weather was not cooperating. There'd been no breeze off the harbor that day, and a gray milk fog had wreathed the city's canals and crooked alleys in damp. Even here among the mansions of the Geldstraat, the air hung thick with the smell of fish and bilge water, and smoke from the refineries on the city's outer islands had smeared the night sky in a briny haze. The full moon looked less like a jewel than a yellowy blister in need of lancing.

Maybe he could compliment Anya's laugh? Except he'd never heard her laugh. He wasn't very good with jokes.

Joost glanced at his reflection in one of the glass panels set into the double doors that led from the house to the side garden. His mother was right. Even in his new uniform, he still looked like a baby. Gently, he brushed his finger along his upper lip. If only his mustache would come in. It definitely felt thicker than yesterday.

He'd been a guard in the *stadwatch* less than six weeks, and it wasn't nearly as exciting as he'd hoped. He thought he'd be running down thieves in the Barrel or patrolling the harbors, getting first look at cargo coming in on the docks. But ever since the assassination of that ambassador at the town hall, the Merchant Council had been grumbling about security, so where was he? Stuck walking in circles at some lucky mercher's house. Not just any mercher, though. Councilman Hoede was about as high placed in Ketterdam government as a man could be. The kind of man who could make a career.

Joost adjusted the set of his coat and rifle, then patted the weighted baton at his hip. Maybe Hoede would take a liking to him. *Sharp-eyed and quick with the cudgel*, Hoede would say. *That fellow deserves a promotion.*

"Sergeant Joost Van Poel," he whispered, savoring the sound of the words. "Captain Joost Van Poel."

"Stop gawking at yourself."

Joost whirled, cheeks going hot as Henk and Rutger strode into the side garden. They were both older, bigger, and broader of shoulder than Joost, and they were house guards, private servants of Councilman Hoede. That meant they wore his pale green livery, carried fancy rifles from Novyi Zem, and never let Joost forget he was a lowly grunt from the city watch.

"Petting that bit of fuzz isn't going to make it grow any faster," Rutger said with a loud laugh.

Joost tried to summon some dignity. "I need to finish my rounds."

Rutger elbowed Henk. "That means he's going to go stick his head in the Grisha workshop to get a look at his girl."

“Oh, Anya, won’t you use your Grisha magic to make my mustache grow?”
Henk mocked.

Joost turned on his heel, cheeks burning, and strode down the eastern side of the house. They’d been teasing him ever since he’d arrived. If it hadn’t been for Anya, he probably would have pleaded with his captain for a reassignment. He and Anya only ever exchanged a few words on his rounds, but she was always the best part of his night.

And he had to admit, he liked Hoede’s house, too, the few peeks he’d managed through the windows. Hoede had one of the grandest mansions on the Geldstraat—floors set with gleaming squares of black and white stone, shining dark wood walls lit by blown glass chandeliers that floated like jellyfish near the coffered ceilings. Sometimes Joost liked to pretend that it was his house, that he was a rich mercher just out for a stroll through his fine garden.

Before he rounded the corner, Joost took a deep breath. *Anya, your eyes are brown like . . . tree bark?* He’d think of something. He was better off being spontaneous anyway.

He was surprised to see the glass-paneled doors to the Grisha workshop open. More than the hand-painted blue tiles in the kitchen or the mantels laden with potted tulips, this workshop was a testimony to Hoede’s wealth. Grisha indentures didn’t come cheap, and Hoede had three of them.

But Yuri wasn’t seated at the long worktable, and Anya was nowhere to be seen. Only Retvenko was there, sprawled out on a chair in dark blue robes, eyes shut, a book open on his chest.

Joost hovered in the doorway, then cleared his throat. “These doors should be shut and locked at night.”

“House is like furnace,” Retvenko drawled without opening his eyes, his Ravkan accent thick and rolling. “Tell Hoede I stop sweating, I close doors.”

Retvenko was a Squaller, older than the other Grisha indentures, his hair shot through with silver. There were rumors he’d fought for

the losing side in Ravka's civil war and had fled to Kerch after the fighting.

"I'd be happy to present your complaints to Councilman Hoede," Joost lied. The house was always overheated, as if Hoede were under obligation to burn coal, but Joost wasn't going to be the one to mention it. "Until then—"

"You bring news of Yuri?" Retvenko interrupted, finally opening his heavily hooded eyes.

Joost glanced uneasily at the bowls of red grapes and heaps of burgundy velvet on the worktable. Yuri had been working on bleeding color from the fruit into curtains for Mistress Hoede, but he'd fallen badly ill a few days ago, and Joost hadn't seen him since. Dust had begun to gather on the velvet, and the grapes were going bad.

"I haven't heard anything."

"Of course you hear nothing. Too busy strutting around in stupid purple uniform."

What was wrong with his uniform? And why did Retvenko even have to be here? He was Hoede's personal Squaller and often traveled with the merchant's most precious cargos, guaranteeing favorable winds to bring the ships safely and quickly to harbor. Why couldn't he be away at sea now?

"I think Yuri may be quarantined."

"So helpful," Retvenko said with a sneer. "You can stop craning neck like hopeful goose," he added. "Anya is gone."

Joost felt his face heat again. "Where is she?" he asked, trying to sound authoritative. "She should be in after dark."

"One hour ago, Hoede takes her. Same as night he came for Yuri."

"What do you mean, 'he came for Yuri'? Yuri fell ill."

"Hoede comes for Yuri, Yuri comes back sick. Two days later, Yuri vanishes for good. Now Anya."

For good?

"Maybe there was an emergency. If someone needed to be healed—"

"First Yuri, now Anya. I will be next, and no one will notice except poor little Officer Joost. Go now."

"If Councilman Hoede—"

Retvenko raised an arm and a gust of air slammed Joost backward. Joost scrambled to keep his footing, grabbing for the doorframe.

"I said *now*." Retvenko etched a circle in the air, and the door slammed shut. Joost let go just in time to avoid having his fingers smashed, and toppled into the side garden.

He got to his feet as quickly as he could, wiping muck from his uniform, shame squirming in his belly. One of the glass panes in the door had cracked from the force. Through it, he saw the Squaller smirking.

"That's counting against your indenture," Joost said, pointing to the ruined pane. He hated how small and petty his voice sounded.

Retvenko waved his hand, and the doors trembled on their hinges. Without meaning to, Joost took a step back.

"Go make your rounds, little watchdog," Retvenko called.

"That went well," snickered Rutger, leaning against the garden wall.

How long had he been standing there? "Don't you have something better to do than follow me around?" Joost asked.

"All guards are to report to the boathouse. Even you. Or are you too busy making friends?"

"I was asking him to shut the door."

Rutger shook his head. "You don't ask. You tell. They're servants. Not honored guests."

Joost fell into step beside him, insides still churning with humiliation. The worst part was that Rutger was right. Retvenko had no business talking to him that way. But what was Joost supposed to do? Even if he'd had the courage to get into a fight with a Squaller, it would be like brawling with an expensive vase. The Grisha weren't just servants; they were Hoede's treasured possessions.

What had Retvenko meant about Yuri and Anya being taken, anyway? Had he been covering for Anya? Grisha indentures were kept to the house

for good reason. To walk the streets without protection was to risk getting plucked up by a slaver and never seen again. *Maybe she's meeting someone*, Joost speculated miserably.

His thoughts were interrupted by the blaze of light and activity down by the boathouse that faced the canal. Across the water he could see other fine mercher houses, tall and slender, the tidy gables of their rooftops making a dark silhouette against the night sky, their gardens and boat-houses lit by glowing lanterns.

A few weeks before, Joost had been told that Hoede's boathouse would be undergoing improvements and to strike it from his rounds. But when he and Rutger entered, he saw no paint or scaffolding. The *gondels* and oars had been pushed up against the walls. The other house guards were there in their sea green livery, and Joost recognized two *stadwatch* guards in purple. But most of the interior was taken up by a huge box—a kind of freestanding cell that looked like it was made from reinforced steel, its seams thick with rivets, a huge window embedded in one of its walls. The glass had a wavy bent, and through it, Joost could see a girl seated at a table, clutching her red silks tight around her. Behind her, a *stadwatch* guard stood at attention.

Anya, Joost realized with a start. Her brown eyes were wide and frightened, her skin pale. The little boy sitting across from her looked doubly terrified. His hair was sleep-mussed, and his legs dangled from the chair, kicking nervously at the air.

"Why all the guards?" asked Joost. There had to be more than ten of them crowded into the boathouse. Councilman Hoede was there, too, along with a merchant Joost didn't know, both of them dressed in mercher black. Joost stood up straighter when he saw they were talking to the captain of the *stadwatch*. He hoped he'd gotten all the garden mud off of his uniform. "What is this?"

Rutger shrugged. "Who cares? It's a break in the routine."

Joost looked back through the glass. Anya was staring out at him, her gaze unfocused. The day he'd arrived at Hoede house, she'd healed a

bruise on his cheek. It had been nothing, the yellow-green remnants of a crack he'd taken to the face during a training exercise, but apparently Hoede had caught sight of it and didn't like his guards looking like thugs. Joost had been sent to the Grisha workshop, and Anya had sat him down in a bright square of late winter sunlight. Her cool fingers had passed over his skin, and though the itch had been terrible, bare seconds later it was as if the bruise had never been.

When Joost thanked her, Anya smiled and Joost was lost. He knew his cause was hopeless. Even if she'd had any interest in him, he could never afford to buy her indenture from Hoede, and she would never marry unless Hoede decreed it. But it hadn't stopped him from dropping by to say hello or to bring her little gifts. She'd liked the map of Kerch best, a whimsical drawing of their island nation, surrounded by mermaids swimming in the True Sea and ships blown along by winds depicted as fat-cheeked men. It was a cheap souvenir, the kind tourists bought along East Stave, but it had seemed to please her.

Now he risked raising a hand in greeting. Anya showed no reaction.

"She can't see you, moron," laughed Rutger. "The glass is mirrored on the other side."

Joost's cheeks pinked. "How was I to know that?"

"Open your eyes and pay attention for once."

First Yuri, now Anya. "Why do they need a Grisha Healer? Is that boy injured?"

"He looks fine to me."

The captain and Hoede seemed to reach some kind of agreement.

Through the glass, Joost saw Hoede enter the cell and give the boy an encouraging pat. There must have been vents in the cell because he heard Hoede say, "Be a brave lad, and there's a few *kruge* in it for you." Then he grabbed Anya's chin with a liver-spotted hand. She tensed, and Joost's gut tightened. Hoede gave Anya's head a little shake. "Do as you're told, and this will soon be over, *ja?*"

She gave a small tight smile. "Of course, Onkle."

Hoede whispered a few words to the guard behind Anya, then stepped out. The door shut with a loud clang, and Hoede slid a heavy lock into place.

Hoede and the other merchant took positions almost directly in front of Joost and Rutger.

The merchant Joost didn't know said, "You're sure this is wise? This girl is a Corporalnik. After what happened to your Fabrikator—"

"If it was Retvenko, I'd be worried. But Anya has a sweet disposition. She's a Healer. Not prone to aggression."

"And you've lowered the dose?"

"Yes, but we're agreed that if we have the same results as the Fabrikator, the Council will compensate me? I can't be asked to bear that expense."

When the merchant nodded, Hoede signaled to the captain. "Proceed."

The same results as the Fabrikator. Retvenko claimed Yuri had vanished. Was that what he'd meant?

"Sergeant," said the captain, "are you ready?"

The guard inside the cell replied, "Yes, sir." He drew a knife.

Joost swallowed hard.

"First test," said the captain.

The guard bent forward and told the boy to roll up his sleeve. The boy obeyed and stuck out his arm, popping the thumb of his other hand into his mouth. *Too old for that*, thought Joost. But the boy must be very scared. Joost had slept with a sock bear until he was nearly fourteen, a fact his older brothers had mocked mercilessly.

"This will sting just a bit," said the guard.

The boy kept his thumb in his mouth and nodded, eyes round.

"This really isn't necessary—" said Anya.

"Quiet, please," said Hoede.

The guard gave the boy a pat then slashed a bright red cut across his forearm. The boy started crying immediately.

Anya tried to rise from her chair, but the guard placed a stern hand on her shoulder.

“It’s all right, sergeant,” said Hoede. “Let her heal him.”

Anya leaned forward, taking the boy’s hand gently. “Shhhh,” she said softly. “Let me help.”

“Will it hurt?” the boy gulped.

She smiled. “Not at all. Just a little itch. Try to hold still for me?”

Joost found himself leaning closer. He’d never actually *seen* Anya heal someone.

Anya removed a handkerchief from her sleeve and wiped away the excess blood. Then her fingers brushed carefully over the boy’s wound. Joost watched in astonishment as the skin slowly seemed to reform and knit together.

A few minutes later, the boy grinned and held out his arm. It looked a bit red, but was otherwise smooth and unmarked. “Was that magic?”

Anya tapped him on the nose. “Of a sort. The same magic your own body works when given time and a bit of bandage.”

The boy looked almost disappointed.

“Good, good,” Hoede said impatiently. “Now the *parem*.”

Joost frowned. He’d never heard that word.

The captain signaled to his sergeant. “Second sequence.”

“Put out your arm,” the sergeant said to the boy once again.

The boy shook his head. “I don’t like that part.”

“Do it.”

The boy’s lower lip quivered, but he put out his arm. The guard cut him once more. Then he placed a small wax paper envelope on the table in front of Anya.

“Swallow the contents of the packet,” Hoede instructed Anya.

“What is it?” she asked, voice trembling.

“That isn’t your concern.”

“*What is it?*” she repeated.

“It’s not going to kill you. We’re going to ask you to perform some simple tasks to judge the drug’s effects. The sergeant is there to make sure you do only what you’re told and no more, understood?”

Her jaw set, but she nodded.

“No one will harm you,” said Hoede. “But remember, if you hurt the sergeant, you have no way out of that cell. The doors are locked from the outside.”

“What is that stuff?” whispered Joost.

“Don’t know,” said Rutger.

“What do you know?” he muttered.

“Enough to keep my trap shut.”

Joost scowled.

With shaking hands, Anya lifted the little wax envelope and opened the flap.

“Go on,” said Hoede.

She tipped her head back and swallowed the powder. For a moment she sat, waiting, lips pressed together.

“Is it just *jurda*?” she asked hopefully. Joost found himself hoping, too. *Jurda* was nothing to fear, a stimulant everyone in the *stadwatch* chewed to stay awake on late watches.

“What does it taste like?” Hoede asked.

“Like *jurda* but sweeter, it—”

Anya inhaled sharply. Her hands seized the table, her pupils dilating enough that her eyes looked nearly black. “Ohhh,” she said, sighing. It was nearly a purr.

The guard tightened his grip on her shoulder.

“How do you feel?”

She stared at the mirror and smiled. Her tongue peeked through her white teeth, stained like rust. Joost felt suddenly cold.

“Just as it was with the Fabrikator,” murmured the merchant.

“Heal the boy,” Hoede commanded.

She waved her hand through the air, the gesture almost dismissive,

and the cut on the boy's arm sealed instantly. The blood lifted briefly from his skin in droplets of red then vanished. His skin looked perfectly smooth, all trace of blood or redness gone. The boy beamed. "That was definitely magic."

"It *feels* like magic," Anya said with that same eerie smile.

"She didn't touch him," marveled the captain.

"Anya," said Hoede. "Listen closely. We're going to tell the guard to perform the next test now."

"Mmm," hummed Anya.

"Sergeant," said Hoede. "Cut off the boy's thumb."

The boy howled and started to cry again. He shoved his hands beneath his legs to protect them.

I should stop this, Joost thought. *I should find a way to protect her, both of them.* But what then? He was a nobody, new to the *stadwatch*, new to this house. *Besides,* he discovered in a burst of shame, *I want to keep my job.*

Anya merely smiled and tilted her head back so she was looking at the sergeant. "Shoot the glass."

"What did she say?" asked the merchant.

"Sergeant!" the captain barked out.

"Shoot the glass," Anya repeated. The sergeant's face went slack. He cocked his head to one side as if listening to a distant melody, then unslung his rifle and aimed at the observation window.

"Get down!" someone yelled.

Joost threw himself to the ground, covering his head as the rapid hammer of gunfire filled his ears and bits of glass rained down on his hands and back. His thoughts were a panicked clamor. His mind tried to deny it, but he knew what he'd just seen. Anya had commanded the sergeant to shoot the glass. She'd *made* him do it. But that couldn't be. Grisha Corporalki specialized in the human body. They could stop your heart, slow your breathing, snap your bones. They couldn't get inside your head.

For a moment there was silence. Then Joost was on his feet with

everyone else, reaching for his rifle. Hoede and the captain shouted at the same time.

“Subdue her!”

“Shoot her!”

“Do you know how much money she’s worth?” Hoede retorted.
“Someone restrain her! Do not shoot!”

Anya raised her hands, red sleeves spread wide. “Wait,” she said.

Joost’s panic vanished. He knew he’d been frightened, but his fear was a distant thing. He was filled with expectation. He wasn’t sure what was coming, or when, only that it would arrive and that it was essential he be ready to meet it. It might be bad or good. He didn’t really care. His heart was free of worry and desire. He longed for nothing, wanted for nothing, his mind silent, his breath steady. He only needed to *wait*.

He saw Anya rise and pick up the little boy. He heard her crooning tenderly to him, some Ravkan lullaby.

“Open the door and come in, Hoede,” she said. Joost heard the words, understood them, forgot them.

Hoede walked to the door and slid the bolt free. He entered the steel cell.

“Do as you’re told, and this will be over quickly, *ja?*” Anya murmured with a smile. Her eyes were black and bottomless pools. Her skin was alight, glowing, incandescent. A thought flickered through Joost’s mind—*beautiful as the moon*.

Anya shifted the boy’s weight in her arms. “Don’t look,” she murmured against his hair. “Now,” she said to Hoede. “Pick up the knife.”



Kaz Brekker didn't need a reason. Those were the words whispered on the streets of Ketterdam, in the taverns and coffeehouses, in the dark and bleeding alleys of the pleasure district known as the Barrel. The boy they called Dirtyhands didn't need a reason any more than he needed permission—to break a leg, sever an alliance, or change a man's fortunes with the turn of a card.

Of course they were wrong, Inej considered as she crossed the bridge over the black waters of the Beurskanal to the deserted main square that fronted the Exchange. Every act of violence was deliberate, and every favor came with enough strings attached to stage a puppet show. Kaz *always* had his reasons. Inej could just never be sure they were good ones. Especially tonight.

Inej checked her knives, silently reciting their names as she always did when she thought there might be trouble. It was a practical habit, but a comfort, too. The blades were her companions. She liked knowing they were ready for whatever the night might bring.

She saw Kaz and the others gathered near the great stone arch that

marked the eastern entrance to the Exchange. Three words had been carved into the rock above them: *Enjent*, *Voorhent*, *Almhent*. Industry, Integrity, Prosperity.

She kept close to the shuttered storefronts that lined the square, avoiding the pockets of flickering gaslight cast by the streetlamps. As she moved, she inventoried the crew Kaz had brought with him: Dirix, Rotty, Muzzen and Keeg, Anika and Pim, and his chosen seconds for tonight's parley, Jesper and Big Bolliger. They jostled and bumped one another, laughing, stamping their feet against the cold snap that had surprised the city this week, the last gasp of winter before spring began in earnest. They were all bruisers and brawlers, culled from the younger members of the Dregs, the people Kaz trusted most. Inej noted the glint of knives tucked into their belts, lead pipes, weighted chains, axe handles studded with rusty nails, and here and there, the oily gleam of a gun barrel. She slipped silently into their ranks, scanning the shadows near the Exchange for signs of Black Tip spies.

"Three ships!" Jesper was saying. "The Shu sent them. They were just sitting in First Harbor, cannons out, red flags flying, stuffed to the sails with gold."

Big Bolliger gave a low whistle. "Would have liked to see that."

"Would have liked to *steal* that," replied Jesper. "Half the Merchant Council was down there flapping and squawking, trying to figure out what to do."

"Don't they want the Shu paying their debts?" Big Bolliger asked.

Kaz shook his head, dark hair glinting in the lamplight. He was a collection of hard lines and tailored edges—sharp jaw, lean build, wool coat snug across his shoulders. "Yes and no," he said in his rock salt rasp. "It's always good to have a country in debt to you. Makes for friendlier negotiations."

"Maybe the Shu are done being friendly," said Jesper. "They didn't have to send all that treasure at once. You think they stuck that trade ambassador?"

Kaz's eyes found Inej unerringly in the crowd. Ketterdam had been buzzing about the assassination of the ambassador for weeks. It had nearly destroyed Kerch-Zemeni relations and sent the Merchant Council into an uproar. The Zemeni blamed the Kerch. The Kerch suspected the Shu. Kaz didn't care who was responsible; the murder fascinated him because he couldn't figure out how it had been accomplished. In one of the busiest corridors of the Stadhall, in full view of more than a dozen government officials, the Zemeni trade ambassador had stepped into a washroom. No one else had entered or left, but when his aide knocked on the door a few minutes later, there had been no answer. When they'd broken down the door, they'd found the ambassador facedown on the white tiles, a knife in his back, the sink still running.

Kaz had sent Inej to investigate the premises after hours. The washroom had no other entrance, no windows or vents, and even Inej hadn't mastered the art of squeezing herself through the plumbing. Yet the Zemeni ambassador was dead. Kaz hated a puzzle he couldn't solve, and he and Inej had concocted a hundred theories to account for the murder—none of which satisfied. But they had more pressing problems tonight.

She saw him signal to Jesper and Big Bolliger to divest themselves of weapons. Street law dictated that for a parley of this kind each lieutenant be seconded by two of his foot soldiers and that they all be unarmed. *Parley*. The word felt like a deception—strangely prim, an antique. No matter what street law decreed, this night smelled like violence.

“Go on, give those guns over,” Dirix said to Jesper.

With a great sigh, Jesper removed the gun belts at his hips. She had to admit he looked less himself without them. The Zemeni sharpshooter was long-limbed, brown-skinned, constantly in motion. He pressed his lips to the pearl handles of his prized revolvers, bestowing each with a mournful kiss.

“Take good care of my babies,” Jesper said as he handed them over to Dirix. “If I see a single scratch or nick on those, I’ll spell *forgive me* on your chest in bullet holes.”

“You wouldn’t waste the ammo.”

“And he’d be dead halfway through *forgive*,” Big Bolliger said as he dropped a hatchet, a switchblade, and his preferred weapon, a thick chain weighted with a heavy padlock, into Rotty’s expectant hands.

Jesper rolled his eyes. “It’s about sending a message. What’s the point of a dead guy with *forg* written on his chest?”

“Compromise,” Kaz said. “*I’m sorry* does the trick and uses fewer bullets.”

Dirix laughed, but Inej noted that he cradled Jesper’s revolvers very gently.

“What about that?” Jesper asked, gesturing to Kaz’s walking stick.

Kaz’s laugh was low and humorless. “Who’d deny a poor cripple his cane?”

“If the cripple is you, then any man with sense.”

“Then it’s a good thing we’re meeting Geels.” Kaz drew a watch from his vest pocket. “It’s almost midnight.”

Inej turned her gaze to the Exchange. It was little more than a large rectangular courtyard surrounded by warehouses and shipping offices. But during the day, it was the heart of Ketterdam, bustling with wealthy merchers buying and selling shares in the trade voyages that passed through the city’s ports. Now it was nearly twelve bells, and the Exchange was deserted but for the guards who patrolled the perimeter and the rooftop. They’d been bribed to look the other way during tonight’s parley.

The Exchange was one of the few remaining parts of the city that hadn’t been divvied up and claimed in the ceaseless skirmishes between Ketterdam’s rival gangs. It was supposed to be neutral territory. But it didn’t *feel* neutral to Inej. It felt like the hush of the woods before the snare yanks tight and the rabbit starts to scream. It felt like a trap.

“This is a mistake,” she said. Big Bolliger startled; he hadn’t known she was standing there. Inej heard the name the Dregs preferred for her whispered among their ranks—*the Wraith*. “Geels is up to something.”

“Of course he is,” said Kaz. His voice had the rough, abraded texture

of stone against stone. Inej always wondered if he'd sounded that way as a little boy. If he'd ever been a little boy.

"Then why come here tonight?"

"Because this is the way Per Haskell wants it."

Old man, old ways, Inej thought but didn't say, and she knew the other Dregs were thinking the same thing.

"He's going to get us all killed," she said.

Jesper stretched his long arms overhead and grinned, his teeth white against his dark skin. He had yet to give up his rifle, and the silhouette of it across his back made him resemble a gawky, long-limbed bird. "Statistically, he'll probably only get *some* of us killed."

"It's not something to joke about," she replied. The look Kaz cast her was amused. She knew how she sounded—stern, fussy, like an old crone making dire pronouncements from her porch. She didn't like it, but she also knew she was right. Besides, old women must know something, or they wouldn't live to gather wrinkles and yell from their front stoops.

"Jesper isn't making a joke, Inej," said Kaz. "He's figuring the odds."

Big Bolliger cracked his huge knuckles. "Well, I've got lager and a skillet of eggs waiting for me at the Kooperom, so I can't be the one to die tonight."

"Care to place a wager?" Jesper asked.

"I'm not going to bet on my own death."

Kaz flipped his hat onto his head and ran his gloved fingers along the brim in a quick salute. "Why not, Bolliger? We do it every day."

He was right. Inej's debt to Per Haskell meant she gambled her life every time she took on a new job or assignment, every time she left her room at the Slat. Tonight was no different.

Kaz struck his walking stick against the cobblestones as the bells from the Church of Barter began to chime. The group fell silent. The time for talk was done. "Geels isn't smart, but he's just bright enough to be trouble," said Kaz. "No matter what you hear, you don't join the fray unless I give the command. Stay sharp." Then he gave Inej a brief nod. "And stay hidden."

“No mourners,” Jesper said as he tossed his rifle to Rotty.

“No funerals,” the rest of the Dregs murmured in reply. Among them, it passed for “good luck.”

Before Inej could melt into the shadows, Kaz tapped her arm with his crow’s head cane. “Keep a watch on the rooftop guards. Geels may have them in his pocket.”

“Then—” Inej began, but Kaz was already gone.

Inej threw up her hands in frustration. She had a hundred questions, but as usual, Kaz was keeping a stranglehold on the answers.

She jogged toward the canal-facing wall of the Exchange. Only the lieutenants and their seconds were allowed to enter during the parley. But just in case the Black Tips got any ideas, the other Dregs would be waiting right outside the eastern arch with weapons at the ready. She knew Geels would have his crew of heavily armed Black Tips gathered at the western entrance.

Inej would find her own way in. The rules of fair play among the gangs were from Per Haskell’s time. Besides, she was the Wraith—the only law that applied to her was gravity, and some days she defied that, too.

The lower level of the Exchange was dedicated to windowless warehouses, so Inej located a drainpipe to shinny up. Something made her hesitate before she wrapped her hand around it. She drew a bonelight from her pocket and gave it a shake, casting a pale green glow over the pipe. It was slick with oil. She followed the wall, seeking another option, and found a stone cornice bearing a statue of Kerch’s three flying fishes within reach. She stood on her toes and tentatively felt along the top of the cornice. It had been covered in ground glass. *I am expected*, she thought with grim pleasure.

She’d joined up with the Dregs less than two years ago, just days after her fifteenth birthday. It had been a matter of survival, but it gratified her to know that, in that short time, she’d become someone to take precautions against. Though, if the Black Tips thought tricks like this would keep the Wraith from her goal, they were sadly mistaken.

She drew two climbing spikes from the pockets of her quilted vest and wedged first one then the other between the bricks of the wall as she hoisted herself higher, her questing feet finding the smallest holds and ridges in the stone. As a child learning the high wire, she'd gone barefoot. But the streets of Ketterdam were too cold and wet for that. After a few bad spills, she'd paid a Grisha Fabrikator working in secret out of a gin shop on the Wijnstraat to make her a pair of leather slippers with nubbly rubber soles. They were perfectly fitted to her feet and gripped any surface with surety.

On the second story of the Exchange, she hoisted herself onto a window ledge just wide enough to perch on.

Kaz had done his best to teach her, but she didn't quite have his way with breaking and entering, and it took her a few tries to finesse the lock. Finally she heard a satisfying *click*, and the window swung open on a deserted office, its walls covered in maps marked with trade routes and chalkboards listing share prices and the names of ships. She ducked inside, refastened the latch, and picked her way past the empty desks with their neat stacks of orders and tallies.

She crossed to a slender set of doors and stepped onto a balcony that overlooked the central courtyard of the Exchange. Each of the shipping offices had one. From here, callers announced new voyages and arrivals of inventory, or hung the black flag that indicated that a ship had been lost at sea with all its cargo. The floor of the Exchange would erupt into a flurry of trades, runners would spread the word throughout the city, and the price of goods, futures, and shares in outgoing voyages would rise or fall. But tonight all was silence.

A wind came in off the harbor, bringing the smell of the sea, ruffling the stray hairs that had escaped the braided coil at the nape of Inej's neck. Down in the square, she saw the sway of lamplight and heard the thump of Kaz's cane on the stones as he and his seconds made their way across the square. On the opposite side, she glimpsed another set of lanterns heading toward them. The Black Tips had arrived.

Inej raised her hood. She pulled herself onto the railing and leapt soundlessly to the neighboring balcony, then the next, tracking Kaz and the others around the square, staying as close as she could. His dark coat rippled in the salt breeze, his limp more pronounced tonight, as it always was when the weather turned cold. She could hear Jesper keeping up a lively stream of conversation, and Big Bolliger's low, rumbling chuckle.

As she drew nearer to the other side of the square, Inej saw that Geels had chosen to bring Elzinger and Oomen—exactly as she had predicted. Inej knew the strengths and weaknesses of every member of the Black Tips, not to mention Harley's Pointers, the Liddies, the Razorgulls, the Dime Lions, and every other gang working the streets of Ketterdam. It was her job to know that Geels trusted Elzinger because they'd come up through the ranks of the Black Tips together, and because Elzinger was built like a stack of boulders—nearly seven feet tall, dense with muscle, his wide, mashed-in face jammed low on a neck thick as a pylon.

She was suddenly glad Big Bolliger was with Kaz. That Kaz had chosen Jesper to be one of his seconds was no surprise. Twitchy as Jesper was, with or without his revolvers, he was at his best in a fight, and she knew he'd do anything for Kaz. She'd been less sure when Kaz had insisted on Big Bolliger as well. Big Bol was a bouncer at the Crow Club, perfectly suited to tossing out drunks and wasters, but too heavy on his feet to be much use when it came to a real tussle. Still, at least he was tall enough to look Elzinger in the eye.

Inej didn't want to think too much on Geels' other second. Oomen made her nervous. He wasn't as physically intimidating as Elzinger. In fact, Oomen was made like a scarecrow—not scrawny, but as if beneath his clothes, his body had been put together at wrong angles. Word was he'd once crushed a man's skull with his bare hands, wiped his palms clean on his shirtfront, and kept right on drinking.

Inej tried to quiet the unease roiling through her, and listened as Geels and Kaz made small talk in the square while their seconds patted each of them down to make sure no one was carrying.

“Naughty,” Jesper said as he removed a tiny knife from Elzinger’s sleeve and tossed it across the square.

“Clear,” declared Big Bolliger as he finished patting down Geels and moved on to Oomen.

Kaz and Geels discussed the weather, the suspicion that the Kooperom was serving watered-down drinks now that the rent had been raised—dancing around the real reason they’d come here tonight. In theory, they would chat, make their apologies, agree to respect the boundaries of Fifth Harbor, then all head out to find a drink together—at least that’s what Per Haskell had insisted.

But what does Per Haskell know? Inej thought as she looked for the guards patrolling the roof above, trying to pick out their shapes in the dark. Haskell ran the Dregs, but these days, he preferred to sit in the warmth of his room, drinking lukewarm lager, building model ships, and telling long stories of his exploits to anyone who would listen. He seemed to think territory wars could be settled as they once had been: with a short scuffle and a friendly handshake. But every one of Inej’s senses told her that was not how this was going to play out. Her father would have said the shadows were about their own business tonight. Something bad was going to happen here.

Kaz stood with both gloved hands resting on the carved crow’s head of his cane. He looked totally at ease, his narrow face obscured by the brim of his hat. Most gang members in the Barrel loved flash: gaudy waist-coats, watch fobs studded with false gems, trousers in every print and pattern imaginable. Kaz was the exception—the picture of restraint, his dark vests and trousers simply cut and tailored along severe lines. At first, she’d thought it was a matter of taste, but she’d come to understand that it was a joke he played on the upstanding merchers. He enjoyed looking like one of them.

“I’m a businessman,” he’d told her. “No more, no less.”

“You’re a thief, Kaz.”

“Isn’t that what I just said?”

Now he looked like some kind of priest come to preach to a group of

circus performers. A *young* priest, she thought with another pang of unease. Kaz had called Geels old and washed up, but he certainly didn't seem that way tonight. The Black Tips' lieutenant might have wrinkles creasing the corners of his eyes and burgeoning jowls beneath his sideburns, but he looked confident, experienced. Next to him Kaz looked . . . well, seventeen.

"Let's be fair, *ja?* All we want is a bit more scrub," Geels said, tapping the mirrored buttons of his lime-green waistcoat. "It's not fair for you to cull every spend-happy tourist stepping off a pleasure boat at Fifth Harbor."

"Fifth Harbor is ours, Geels," Kaz replied. "The Dregs get first crack at the pigeons who come looking for a little fun."

Geels shook his head. "You're a young one, Brekker," he said with an indulgent laugh. "Maybe you don't understand how these things work. The harbors belong to the city, and we have as much right to them as anyone. We've all got a living to make."

Technically, that was true. But Fifth Harbor had been useless and all but abandoned by the city when Kaz had taken it over. He'd had it dredged, and then built out the docks and the quay, and he'd had to mortgage the Crow Club to do it. Per Haskell had railed at him and called him a fool for the expense, but eventually he'd relented. According to Kaz, the old man's exact words had been, "Take all that rope and hang yourself." But the endeavor had paid for itself in less than a year. Now Fifth Harbor offered berths to merchant ships, as well as boats from all over the world carrying tourists and soldiers eager to see the sights and sample the pleasures of Ketterdam. The Dregs got first try at all of them, steering them—and their wallets—into brothels, taverns, and gambling dens owned by the gang. Fifth Harbor had made the old man very rich, and cemented the Dregs as real players in the Barrel in a way that not even the success of the Crow Club had. But with profit came unwanted attention. Geels and the Black Tips had been making trouble for the Dregs all year, encroaching on Fifth Harbor, picking off pigeons that weren't rightfully theirs.

"Fifth Harbor is ours," Kaz repeated. "It isn't up for negotiation. You're

cutting into our traffic from the docks, and you intercepted a shipment of *jurda* that should have docked two nights ago.”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I know it comes easy, Geels, but try not to play dumb with me.”

Geels took a step forward. Jesper and Big Bolliger tensed.

“Quit flexing, boy,” Geels said. “We all know the old man doesn’t have the stomach for a real brawl.”

Kaz’s laugh was dry as the rustle of dead leaves. “But *I’m* the one at your table, Geels, and I’m not here for a taste. You want a war, I’ll make sure you eat your fill.”

“And what if you’re not around, Brekker? Everyone knows you’re the spine of Haskell’s operation—snap it and the Dregs collapse.”

Jesper snorted. “Stomach. spine, What’s next, spleen?”

“Shut it,” Oomen snarled. The rules of parley dictated that only the lieutenants could speak once negotiations had begun. Jesper mouthed “sorry” and elaborately pantomimed locking his lips shut.

“I’m fairly sure you’re threatening me, Geels,” Kaz said. “But I want to be certain before I decide what to do about it.”

“Sure of yourself, aren’t you, Brekker?”

“Myself and nothing else.”

Geels burst out laughing and elbowed Oomen. “Listen to this cocky little piece of crap. Brekker, you don’t own these streets. Kids like you are fleas. A new crop of you turns up every few years to annoy your betters until a big dog decides to scratch. And let me tell you, I’m about tired of the itch.” He crossed his arms, pleasure rolling off him in smug waves. “What if I told you there are two guards with city-issue rifles pointed at you and your boys right now?”

Inej’s stomach dropped. Was that what Kaz had meant when he said Geels might have the guards in his pocket?

Kaz glanced up at the roof. “Hiring city guards to do your killing? I’d say that’s an expensive proposition for a gang like the Black Tips. I’m not sure I believe your coffers could support it.”

Inej climbed onto the railing and launched herself from the safety of the balcony, heading for the roof. If they survived the night, she was going to kill Kaz.

There were always two guards from the *stadwatch* posted on the roof of the Exchange. A few *kruge* from the Dregs and the Black Tips had ensured they wouldn't interfere with the parley, a common enough transaction. But Geels was implying something very different. Had he really managed to bribe city guards to play sniper for him? If so, the Dregs' odds of surviving this night had just dwindled to a knife's point.

Like most of the buildings in Ketterdam, the Exchange had a sharply gabled roof to keep off heavy rain, so the guards patrolled the rooftop via a narrow walkway that overlooked the courtyard. Inej ignored it. It was easier going but would leave her too exposed. Instead she scaled halfway up the slick roof tiles and started crawling, her body tilted at a precarious angle, moving like a spider as she kept one eye on the guards' walkway and one ear on the conversation below. Maybe Geels was bluffing. Or maybe two guards were hunched over the railing right now with Kaz or Jesper or Big Bolliger in their sights.

"Took some doing," Geels admitted. "We're a small operation right now, and city guards don't come cheap. But it'll be worth it for the prize."

"That being me?"

"That being you."

"I'm flattered."

"The Dregs won't last a week without you."

"I'd give them a month on sheer momentum."

The thought rattled noisily around in Inej's head. *If Kaz was gone, would I stay? Or would I skip out on my debt? Take my chances with Per Haskell's enforcers?* If she didn't move faster, she might well find out.

"Smug little slum rat." Geels laughed. "I can't wait to wipe that look off your face."

"So do it," Kaz said. Inej risked a look down. His voice had changed, all humor gone.

“Should I have them put a bullet in your good leg, Brekker?”

Where are the guards? Inej thought, picking up her pace. She raced across the steep pitch of the gable. The Exchange stretched nearly the length of a city block. There was too much territory to cover.

“Stop *talking*, Geels. Tell them to shoot.”

“Kaz—” said Jesper nervously.

“Go on. Find your balls and give the order.”

What game was Kaz playing? Had he expected this? Had he just assumed Inej would find her way to the guards in time?

She glanced down again. Geels radiated anticipation. He took a deep breath, puffing out his chest. Inej’s steps faltered, and she had to fight not to go sliding straight off the edge of the roof. *He’s going to do it. I’m going to watch Kaz die.*

“Fire!” Geels shouted.

A gunshot split the air. Big Bolliger let loose a cry and crumpled to the ground.

“Damn it!” shouted Jesper, dropping to one knee beside Bolliger and pressing his hand to the bullet wound as the big man moaned. “You worthless podge!” he yelled at Geels. “You just violated neutral territory.”

“Nothing to say you didn’t shoot first,” Geels replied. “And who’s going to know? None of you are walking out of here.”

Geels’ voice sounded too high. He was trying to maintain his composure, but Inej could hear panic pulsing against his words, the startled wing beat of a frightened bird. Why? Moments before he’d been all bluster.

That was when Inej saw Kaz still hadn’t moved. “You don’t look well, Geels.”

“I’m just fine,” he said. But he wasn’t. He looked pale and shaky. His eyes were darting right and left as if searching the shadowed walkway of the roof.

“Are you?” Kaz asked conversationally. “Things aren’t going quite as planned, are they?”

“Kaz,” Jesper said. “Bolliger’s bleeding bad—”

“Good,” said Kaz.

“Kaz, he needs a medik!”

Kaz spared the wounded man the barest glance. “What he needs to do is stop his bellyaching and be glad I didn’t have Holst take him down with a head shot.”

Even from above, Inej saw Geels flinch.

“That’s the guard’s name, isn’t it?” Kaz asked. “Willem Holst and Bert Van Daal—the two city guards on duty tonight. The ones you emptied the Black Tips’ coffers to bribe?”

Geels said nothing.

“Willem Holst,” Kaz said loudly, his voice floating up to the roof, “likes to gamble almost as much as Jesper does, so your money held a lot of appeal. But Holst has much bigger problems—let’s call them urges. I won’t go into detail. A secret’s not like coin. It doesn’t keep its value in the spending. You’ll just have to trust me when I say this one would turn even your stomach. Isn’t that right, Holst?”

The response was another gunshot. It struck the cobblestones near Geels’ feet. Geels released a shocked bleat and sprang back.

This time Inej had a better chance to track the origin of the gunfire. The shot had come from somewhere near the west side of the building. If Holst was there, that meant the other guard—Bert Van Daal—would be on the east side. Had Kaz managed to neutralize him, too? Or was he counting on her? She sped over the gables.

“Just shoot him, Holst!” Geels bellowed, head tilted back, desperation sawing at his voice. “Shoot him in the head!”

Kaz snorted in disgust. “Do you really think that secret would die with me? Go on, Holst,” he called. “Put a bullet in my skull. There will be messengers sprinting to your wife and your watch captain’s door before I hit the ground.”

No shot came.

“How?” Geels said bitterly. “How did you even know who would be

on duty tonight? I had to pay through the gills to get that roster. You couldn't have outbid me."

"Let's say my currency carries more sway."

"Money is money."

"I trade in information, Geels, the things men do when they think no one is looking. Shame holds more value than coin ever can."

He was grandstanding, Inej saw that, buying her time as she leapt over the slate shingles.

"Are you worrying about the second guard? Good old Bert Van Daal?" Kaz asked. "Maybe he's up there right now, wondering what he should do. Shoot me? Shoot Holst? Or maybe I got to him, too, and he's getting ready to blow a hole in your chest, Geels." He leaned in as if he and Geels were sharing a great secret. "Why not give Van Daal the order and find out?"

Geels opened and closed his mouth like a carp, then bellowed, "Van Daal!"

Just as Van Daal parted his lips to answer, Inej slipped up behind him and placed a blade to his throat. She'd barely had time to pick out his shadow and slide down the roof tiles. Saints, Kaz liked to cut it close.

"Shhhh," she whispered in Van Daal's ear. She gave him a tiny jab in the side so that he could feel the point of her second dagger pressed against his kidney.

"Please," he moaned. "I—"

"I like it when men beg," she said. "But this isn't the time for it."

Below, she could see Geels' chest rising and falling with panicked breaths. "Van Daal!" he shouted again. There was rage on his face when he turned back to Kaz. "Always one step ahead, aren't you?"

"Geels, when it comes to you, I'd say I have a running start."

But Geels just smiled—a tiny smile, tight and satisfied. *A victor's smile*, Inej realized with fresh fear.

"The race isn't over yet." Geels reached into his jacket and pulled out a heavy black pistol.

“Finally,” Kaz said. “The big reveal. Now Jesper can stop keening over Bolliger like a wet-eyed woman.”

Jesper stared at the gun with stunned, furious eyes. “Bolliger searched him. He . . . Oh, Big Bol, you idiot,” he groaned.

Inej couldn’t believe what she was seeing. The guard in her arms released a tiny squeak. In her anger and surprise, she’d accidentally tightened her grip. “Relax,” she said, easing her hold. But, all Saints, she wanted to put a knife through something. Big Bolliger had been the one to pat down Geels. There was no way he could have missed the pistol. He’d betrayed them.

Was that why Kaz had insisted on bringing Big Bolliger here tonight—so he’d have public confirmation that Bolliger had gone over to the Black Tips? It was certainly why he’d let Holst put a bullet in Bolliger’s gut. But so what? Now everyone knew Big Bol was a traitor. Kaz still had a gun pointed at his chest.

Geels smirked. “Kaz Brekker, the great escape artist. How are you going to wriggle your way out of this one?”

“Going out the same way I came in.” Kaz ignored the pistol, turning his attention to the big man lying on the ground. “Do you know what your problem is, Bolliger?” He jabbed at the wound in Big Bol’s stomach with the tip of his cane. “That wasn’t a rhetorical question. Do you know what your biggest problem is?”

Bolliger mewled. “Noooo . . .”

“Give me a guess,” Kaz hissed.

Big Bol said nothing, just released another trembling whimper.

“All right, I’ll tell you. You’re lazy. I know it. Everyone knows it. So I had to ask myself why my laziest bouncer was getting up early twice a week to walk two extra miles to Cilla’s Fry for breakfast, especially when the eggs are so much better at the Kooperom. Big Bol becomes an early riser, the Black Tips start throwing their weight around Fifth Harbor and then intercept our biggest shipment of *jurda*. It wasn’t a tough connection

to make.” He sighed and said to Geels, “This is what happens when stupid people start making big plans, *ja*?”

“Doesn’t matter much now, does it?” replied Geels. “This gets ugly, I’m shooting from close range. Maybe your guards get me or my guys, but no way you’re going to dodge this bullet.”

Kaz stepped into the barrel of the gun so that it was pressed directly against his chest. “No way at all, Geels.”

“You think I won’t do it?”

“Oh, I think you’d do it gladly, with a song in your black heart. But you won’t. Not tonight.”

Geels’ finger twitched on the trigger.

“Kaz,” Jesper said. “This whole ‘shoot me’ thing is starting to concern me.”

Oomen didn’t bother to object to Jesper mouthing off this time. One man was down. Neutral territory had been violated. The sharp tang of gunpowder already hung in the air—and along with it a question, unspoken in the quiet, as if the Reaper himself awaited the answer: How much blood will be shed tonight?

In the distance a siren wailed.

“Nineteen Burstraat,” Kaz said.

Geels had been shifting slightly from foot to foot; now he went very still.

“That’s your girl’s address, isn’t it, Geels?”

Geels swallowed. “Don’t have a girl.”

“Oh yes, you do,” crooned Kaz. “She’s pretty, too. Well, pretty enough for a fink like you. Seems sweet. You love her, don’t you?” Even from the rooftop, Inej could see the sheen of sweat on Geels’ waxen face. “Of course you do. No one that fine should ever have looked twice at Barrel scum like you, but she’s different. She finds you charming. Sure sign of madness if you ask me, but love is strange that way. Does she like to rest her pretty head on your shoulder? Listen to you talk about your day?”

Geels looked at Kaz as if he was finally seeing him for the first time. The boy he'd been talking to had been cocky, reckless, easily amused, but not frightening—not really. Now the monster was here, dead-eyed and unafraid. Kaz Brekker was gone, and Dirtyhands had come to see the rough work done.

"She lives at Nineteen Burstraat," Kaz said in his gravelly rasp. "Three floors up, geraniums in the window boxes. There are two Dregs waiting outside her door right now, and if I don't walk out of here whole and feeling righteous, they will set that place alight from floor to rooftop. It will go up in seconds, burning from both ends with poor Elise trapped in the middle. Her blonde hair will catch first. Like the wick of a candle."

"You're bluffing," said Geels, but his pistol hand was trembling.

Kaz lifted his head and inhaled deeply. "Getting late now. You heard the siren. I smell the harbor on the wind, sea and salt, and maybe—is that smoke I smell, too?" There was pleasure in his voice.

Oh, Saints, Kaz, Inej thought miserably. *What have you done now?*

Again, Geels' finger twitched on the trigger, and Inej tensed.

"I know, Geels. I know," Kaz said sympathetically. "All that planning and scheming and bribing for nothing. That's what you're thinking right now. How bad it will feel to walk home knowing what you've lost. How angry your boss is going to be when you show up empty-handed and that much poorer for it. How satisfying it would be to put a bullet in my heart. You can do it. Pull the trigger. We can all go down tonight. They can take our bodies out to the Reaper's Barge for burning, like all paupers go. Or you can take the blow to your pride, go back to Burstraat, lay your head in your girl's lap, fall asleep still breathing, and dream of revenge. It's up to you, Geels. Do we get to go home tonight?"

Geels searched Kaz's gaze, and whatever he saw there made his shoulders sag. Inej was surprised to feel a pang of pity for him. He'd walked into this place buoyed on bravado, a survivor, a champion of the Barrel. He'd leave as another victim of Kaz Brekker.

"You'll get what's coming to you someday, Brekker."

"I will," said Kaz, "if there's any justice in the world. And we all know how likely that is."

Geels let his arm drop. The pistol hung uselessly by his side.

Kaz stepped back, brushing the front of his shirt where the gun barrel had rested. "Go tell your general to keep the Black Tips out of Fifth Harbor and that we expect him to make amends for the shipment of *jurda* we lost, plus five percent for drawing steel on neutral ground and five percent more for being such a spectacular bunch of asses."

Then Kaz's cane swung in a sudden sharp arc. Geels screamed as his wrist bones shattered. The gun clattered to the paving stones.

"I stood down!" cried Geels, cradling his hand. "I stood down!"

"You draw on me again, I'll break both your wrists, and you'll have to hire someone to help you take a piss." Kaz tipped the brim of his hat up with the head of his cane. "Or maybe you can get the lovely Elise to do it for you."

Kaz crouched down beside Bolliger. The big man whimpered. "Look at me, Bolliger. Assuming you don't bleed to death tonight, you have until sunset tomorrow to get out of Ketterdam. I hear you're anywhere near the city limits, and they'll find you stuffed in a keg at Cilla's Fry." Then he looked at Geels. "You help Bolliger, or I find out he's running with the Black Tips, don't think I won't come after you."

"Please, Kaz," moaned Bolliger.

"You had a home, and you put a wrecking ball through the front door, Bolliger. Don't look for sympathy from me." He rose and checked his pocket watch. "I didn't expect this to go on so long. I'd best be on my way or poor Elise will be getting a trifle warm."

Geels shook his head. "There's something wrong with you, Brekker. I don't know what you are, but you're not made right."

Kaz cocked his head to one side. "You're from the suburbs, aren't you Geels? Came to the city to try your luck?" He smoothed his lapel with one gloved hand. "Well, I'm the kind of bastard they only manufacture in the Barrel."

Despite the loaded gun at the Black Tips' feet, Kaz turned his back on them and limped across the cobblestones toward the eastern arch. Jesper squatted down next to Bolliger and gave him a gentle pat on the cheek. "Idiot," he said sadly, and followed Kaz out of the Exchange.

From the roof, Inej continued to watch as Oomen picked up and holstered Geels' gun and the Black Tips said a few quiet words to each other.

"Don't leave," Big Bolliger begged. "Don't leave me." He tried to cling to the cuff of Geels' trousers.

Geels shook him off. They left him curled on his side, leaking blood onto the cobblestones.

Inej plucked Van Daal's rifle from his hands before she released him. "Go home," she told the guard.

He cast a single terrified glance over his shoulder and sprinted off down the walkway. Far below, Big Bol had started trying to drag himself across the floor of the Exchange. He might be stupid enough to cross Kaz Brekker, but he'd survived this long in the Barrel, and that took will. He might make it.

Help him, a voice inside her said. Until a few moments ago, he'd been her brother in arms. It seemed wrong to leave him alone. She could go to him, offer to put him out of his misery quickly, hold his hand as he passed. She could fetch a medik to save him.

Instead, she spoke a quick prayer in the language of her Saints and began the steep climb down the outer wall. Inej pitied the boy, who might die alone with no one to comfort him in his last hours or who might live and spend his life as an exile. But the night's work wasn't yet over, and the Wraith didn't have time for traitors.



Cheers greeted Kaz as he emerged from the eastern arch, Jesper trailing behind him and, if Kaz was any judge, already working himself into a sulk.

Dirix, Rotty, and the others charged at them, whooping and shouting, Jesper's revolvers held aloft. The crew had gotten the barest glimpse of the proceedings with Geels, but they'd heard most of it. Now they were chanting, "The Burstraat is on fire! The Dregs don't have no water!"

"I can't believe he just turned tail!" jeered Rotty. "He had a loaded pistol in his hand!"

"Tell us what you had on the guard," Dirix begged.

"Can't be the usual stuff."

"I heard about a guy in Sloken who liked to roll around in apple syrup and then get two—"

"I'm not talking," said Kaz. "Holst could prove useful in the future."

The mood was jittery, and their laughter had the frantic serration that came with near disaster. Some of them had expected a fight and were still itching for one. But Kaz knew there was more to it, and he hadn't missed

the fact that no one had mentioned Big Bolliger's name. They'd been badly shaken by his betrayal—both the revelation and the way Kaz had delivered punishment. Beneath all that jostling and whooping, there was fear. *Good.* Kaz relied on the fact that the Dregs were all murderers, thieves, and liars. He just had to make sure they didn't make a habit of lying to *him*.

Kaz dispatched two of them to keep an eye on Big Bol and to make sure that if he made it to his feet, he left the city. The rest could return to the Slat and the Crow Club to drink off their worry, make some trouble, and spread word of the night's events. They'd tell what they'd seen, embroider the rest, and with every retelling, Dirtyhands would get crazier and more ruthless. But Kaz had business to attend to, and his first stop would be Fifth Harbor.

Jesper stepped into his path. "You should have let me know about Big Bolliger," he said in a furious whisper.

"Don't tell me my business, Jes."

"You think I'm dirty, too?"

"If I thought you were dirty, you'd be holding your guts in on the floor of the Exchange like Big Bol, so stop running your mouth."

Jesper shook his head and rested his hands on the revolvers he'd reclaimed from Dirix. Whenever he got cranky, he liked to lay hands on a gun, like a child seeking the comfort of a favored doll.

It would have been easy enough to make peace. Kaz could have told Jesper that he knew he wasn't dirty, reminded him that he'd trusted him enough to make him his only real second in a fight that could have gone badly wrong tonight. Instead, he said, "Go on, Jesper. There's a line of credit waiting for you at the Crow Club. Play till morning or your luck runs out, whichever comes first."

Jesper scowled, but he couldn't keep the hungry gleam from his eye.
"Another bribe?"

"I'm a creature of habit."

"Lucky for you, I am, too." He hesitated long enough to say, "You don't want us with you? Geels' boys are gonna be riled after that."

“Let them come,” Kaz said, and turned down Nemstraat without another word. If you couldn’t walk by yourself through Ketterdam after dark, then you might as well just hang a sign that read “soft” around your neck and lie down for a beating.

He could feel the Dregs’ eyes on his back as he headed over the bridge. He didn’t need to hear their whispers to know what they would say. They wanted to drink with him, hear him explain how he’d known Big Bolliger had gone over to the Black Tips, listen to him describe the look in Geels’ eyes when he’d dropped his pistol. But they’d never get it from Kaz, and if they didn’t like it, they could find another crew to run with.

No matter what they thought of him, they’d walk a little taller tonight. It was why they stayed, why they gave their best approximation of loyalty for him. When he’d officially become a member of the Dregs, he’d been twelve and the gang had been a laughingstock, street kids and washed-up cadgers running shell games and penny-poor cons out of a rundown house in the worst part of the Barrel. But he hadn’t needed a great gang, just one he could make great—one that needed him.

Now they had their own territory, their own gambling hall, and that rundown house had become the Slat, a dry, warm place to get a hot meal or hole up when you were wounded. Now the Dregs were feared. Kaz had given them that. He didn’t owe them small talk on top of it.

Besides, Jesper would smooth it all over. A few drinks in and a few hands up and the sharpshooter’s good nature would return. He held a grudge about as well as he held his liquor, and he had a gift for making Kaz’s victories sound like they belonged to everyone.

As Kaz headed down one of the little canals that would take him past Fifth Harbor, he realized he felt—Saints, he almost felt hopeful. Maybe he should see a medik. The Black Tips had been nipping at his heels for weeks, and now he’d forced them to play their hand. His leg wasn’t too bad, either, despite the winter chill. The ache was always there, but tonight it was just a dull throb. Still, a part of him wondered if the parley was some sort of test Per Haskell had set for him. Haskell was perfectly

capable of convincing himself that he was the genius making the Dregs prosper, especially if one of his cronies was whispering in his ear. That idea didn't sit easy, but Kaz could worry about Per Haskell tomorrow. For now, he'd make sure everything was running on schedule at the harbor and then head home to the Slat for some much-needed sleep.

He knew Inej was shadowing him. She'd been with him all the way from the Exchange. He didn't call out to her. She would make herself visible when she was good and ready. Usually he liked the quiet; in fact, he would have happily sewn most people's lips shut. But when she wanted to, Inej had a way of making you feel her silence. It tugged at your edges.

Kaz managed to endure it all the way past the iron railings of Zentzbridge, the grating covered in little bits of rope tied in elaborate knots, sailors' prayers for safe return from sea. Superstitious rot. Finally he gave in and said, "Spit it out already, Wraith."

Her voice came from the dark. "You didn't send anyone to Burstraat."

"Why would I?"

"If Geels doesn't get there in time—"

"No one's setting fires at Nineteen Burstraat."

"I heard the siren . . ."

"A happy accident. I take inspiration where I find it."

"You *were* bluffing, then. She was never in danger."

Kaz shrugged, unwilling to give her an answer. Inej was always trying to wring little bits of decency from him. "When everyone knows you're a monster, you needn't waste time doing every monstrous thing."

"Why did you even agree to the meet if you knew it was a setup?" She was somewhere to the right of him, moving without a sound. He'd heard other members of the gang say she moved like a cat, but he suspected cats would sit attentively at her feet to learn her methods.

"I'd call the night a success," he said. "Wouldn't you?"

"You were nearly killed. So was Jesper."

"Geels emptied the Black Tips' coffers paying useless bribes. We've

outed a traitor, reestablished our claim on Fifth Harbor, and I don't have a scratch on me. It was a good night."

"How long have you known about Big Bolliger?"

"Weeks. We're going to be short-staffed. That reminds me, let Rojakke go."

"Why? There's no one like him at the tables."

"Lots of sobs know their way around a deck of cards. Rojakke is a little too quick. He's skimming."

"He's a good dealer, and he has a family to provide for. You could give him a warning, take a finger."

"Then he wouldn't be a good dealer anymore, would he?"

When a dealer was caught skimming money from a gambling hall, the floor boss would cut off one of his pinkie fingers. It was one of those ridiculous punishments that had somehow become codified in the gangs. It threw off the skimmer's balance, forced him to relearn his shuffle, and showed any future employer that he had to be watched. But it also made him clumsy at the tables. It meant he was focusing on simple things like the mechanics of the deal instead of watching the players.

Kaz couldn't see Inej's face in the dark, but he sensed her disapproval.

"Greed is your god, Kaz."

He almost laughed at that. "No, Inej. Greed bows to me. It is my servant and my lever."

"And what god do you serve, then?"

"Whichever will grant me good fortune."

"I don't think gods work that way."

"I don't think I care."

She blew out an exasperated breath. Despite everything she'd been through, Inej still believed her Suli Saints were watching over her. Kaz knew it, and for some reason he loved to rile her. He wished he could read her expression now. There was always something so satisfying about the little furrow between her black brows.

“How did you know I would get to Van Daal in time?” she asked.

“Because you always do.”

“You should have given me more warning.”

“I thought your Saints would appreciate the challenge.”

For a while she said nothing, then from somewhere behind him he heard her. “Men mock the gods until they need them, Kaz.”

He didn’t see her go, only sensed her absence.

Kaz gave an irritated shake of his head. To say he trusted Inej would be stretching the point, but he could admit to himself that he’d come to rely on her. It had been a gut decision to pay off her indenture with the Menagerie, and it had cost the Dregs sorely. Per Haskell had needed convincing, but Inej was one of the best investments Kaz had ever made. That she was so very good at remaining unseen made her an excellent thief of secrets, the best in the Barrel. But the fact that she could simply erase herself bothered him. She didn’t even have a scent. *All* people carried scents, and those scents told stories—the hint of carbolic on a woman’s fingers or woodsmoke in her hair, the wet wool of a man’s suit, or the tinge of gunpowder lingering in his shirt cuffs. But not Inej. She’d somehow mastered invisibility. She was a valuable asset. So why couldn’t she just do her job and spare him her moods?

Suddenly, Kaz knew he wasn’t alone. He paused, listening. He’d cut through a tight alley split by a murky canal. There were no streetlamps here and little foot traffic, nothing but the bright moon and the small-boats bumping against their moorings. He’d dropped his guard, let his mind give in to distraction.

A man’s dark shape appeared at the head of the alley.

“What business?” Kaz asked.

The shape lunged at him. Kaz swung his cane in a low arc. It should have made direct contact with his attacker’s legs, but instead it sailed through empty space. Kaz stumbled, thrown off balance by the force of his swing.

Then, somehow, the man was standing right in front of him. A fist

connected with Kaz's jaw. Kaz shook off the stars that rocketed through his head. He spun back around and swung again. But no one was there. The weighted head of Kaz's walking stick whooshed through nothing and cracked against the wall.

Kaz felt the cane torn from his hands by someone on his right. Was there more than one of them?

And then a figure stepped *through* the wall. Kaz's mind stuttered and reeled, trying to explain what he was seeing as a cluster of mist became a cloak, boots, the pale flash of a face.

Ghosts, Kaz thought. A boy's fear, but it came with absolute surety. Jordie had come for his vengeance at last. *It's time to pay your debts, Kaz. You never get something for nothing.*

The thought passed through Kaz's mind in a humiliating, gibbering wave of panic, then the phantom was upon him, and he felt the sharp jab of a needle in his neck. *A ghost with a syringe?*

Fool, he thought. And then he was in the dark.



Kaz woke to the sharp scent of ammonia. His head jerked back as he returned fully to consciousness.

The old man in front of him wore the robes of a university medik. He had a bottle of wuftsalts in his hand that he was waving beneath Kaz's nose. The stink was nearly unbearable.

"Get away from me," Kaz rasped.

The medik eyed him dispassionately, returning the wuftsalts to their leather pouch. Kaz flexed his fingers, but that was all he could do. He'd been shackled to a chair with his arms behind his back. Whatever they'd injected him with had left him groggy.

The medik moved aside, and Kaz blinked twice, trying to clear his vision and make sense of the absurd luxury of his surroundings. He'd expected to wake in the den of the Black Tips or some other rival gang. But this wasn't cheap Barrel flash. A squat decked out like this took real

money—mahogany panels dense with carvings of frothing waves and flying fish, shelves lined with books, leaded windows, and he was fairly sure that was a real DeKappel. One of those demure oil portraits of a lady with a book open in her lap and a lamb lying at her feet. The man observing him from behind a broad desk had the prosperous look of a mercher. But if this was his house, why were there armed members of the *stadwatch* guarding the door?

Damn it, Kaz thought, *am I under arrest?* If so, this merch was in for a surprise. Thanks to Inej, he had information on every judge, bailiff, and high councilman in Kerch. He'd be out of his cell before sunrise. Except he wasn't in a cell, he was chained to a chair, so what the hell was going on?

The man was in his forties with a gaunt but handsome face and a hairline making a determined retreat from his forehead. When Kaz met his gaze, the man cleared his throat and pressed his fingers together.

“Mister Brekker, I hope you’re not feeling too poorly.”

“Get this old canker away from me. I feel fine.”

The merch gave a nod to the medik. “You may go. Please send me your bill. And I would, of course, appreciate your discretion in this matter.”

The medik secured his bag and exited the room. As he did, the mercher rose and picked up a sheaf of papers from his desk. He wore the perfectly cut frock coat and vest of all Kerch merchants—dark, refined, deliberately staid. But the pocket watch and tie pin told Kaz all he needed to know: Heavy links of laurel leaves made up the watch’s gold fob, and the pin was a massive, perfect ruby.

I’m going to pry that fat jewel from its setting and jab the pin right through your mercher neck for chaining me to a chair, Kaz thought. But all he said was, “Van Eck.”

The man nodded. No bow, of course. Merchants didn’t bow to scum from the Barrel. “You know me, then?”

Kaz knew the symbols and jewels of all the Kerch merchant houses. Van Eck’s crest was the red laurel. It didn’t take a professor to make the connection.

“I know you,” he said. “You’re one of those merch crusaders always trying to clean up the Barrel.”

Van Eck gave another small nod. “I try to find men honest work.”

Kaz laughed. “What’s the difference between wagering at the Crow Club and speculating on the floor of the Exchange?”

“One is theft and the other is commerce.”

“When a man loses his money, he may have trouble telling them apart.”

“The Barrel is a den of filth, vice, violence—”

“How many of the ships you send sailing out of the Ketterdam harbors never return?”

“That doesn’t—”

“One out of five, Van Eck. One out of every five vessels you send seeking coffee and *jurda* and bolts of silk sinks to the bottom of the sea, crashes on the rocks, falls prey to pirates. One out of five crews dead, their bodies lost to foreign waters, food for deep sea fishes. Let’s not speak of violence.”

“I won’t argue ethics with a stripling from the Barrel.”

Kaz didn’t really expect him to. He was just stalling for time as he tested the tightness of the cuffs around his wrists. He let his fingers feel along the length of chain as far as they were able, still puzzling over where Van Eck had brought him. Though Kaz had never met the man himself, he’d had cause to learn the layout of Van Eck’s house inside and out. Wherever they were, it wasn’t the mercher’s mansion.

“Since you didn’t bring me here to philosophize, what business?” It was the question spoken at the opening of any meeting. A greeting from a peer, not a plea from a prisoner.

“I have a proposition for you. Rather, the Council does.”

Kaz hid his surprise. “Does the Merchant Council begin all negotiations with a beating?”

“Consider it a warning. And a demonstration.”

Kaz remembered the shape from the alley, the way it had appeared and disappeared like a ghost. *Jordie*.

He gave himself an internal shake. *Not Jordie, you podge. Focus.* They’d

nabbed him because he'd been flush off a victory and distracted. This was his punishment, and it wasn't a mistake he'd make again. *That doesn't explain the phantom.* For now, he pushed the thought aside.

"What possible use would the Merchant Council have for me?"

Van Eck thumbed through the papers in his hand. "You were first arrested at ten," he said, scanning the page.

"Everyone remembers his first time."

"Twice again that year, twice at eleven. You were picked up when the *stadwatch* rousted a gambling hall when you were fourteen, but you haven't served any time since."

It was true. No one had managed a pinch on Kaz in three years. "I cleaned up," Kaz said. "Found honest work, live a life of industry and prayer."

"Don't blaspheme," Van Eck said mildly, but his eyes flashed briefly with anger.

A man of faith, Kaz noted, as his mind sorted through everything he knew about Van Eck—prosperous, pious, a widower recently remarried to a bride not much older than Kaz himself. And, of course, there was the mystery of Van Eck's son.

Van Eck continued paging through the file. "You run book on prize fights, horses, and your own games of chance. You've been floor boss at the Crow Club for more than two years. You're the youngest to ever run a betting shop, and you've doubled its profits in that time. You're a blackmailer—"

"I broker information."

"A con artist—"

"I create opportunity."

"A bawd and a murderer—"

"I don't run whores, and I kill for a cause."

"And what cause is that?"

"Same as yours, merch. Profit."

"How do you get your information, Mister Brekker?"

“You might say I’m a lockpick.”

“You must be a very gifted one.”

“I am indeed.” Kaz leaned back slightly. “You see, every man is a safe, a vault of secrets and longings. Now, there are those who take the brute’s way, but I prefer a gentler approach—the right pressure applied at the right moment, in the right place. It’s a delicate thing.”

“Do you always speak in metaphors, Mister Brekker?”

Kaz smiled. “It’s not a metaphor.”

He was out of his chair before his chains hit the ground. He leapt the desk, snatching a letter opener from its surface in one hand, and catching hold of the front of Van Eck’s shirt with the other. The fine fabric bunched as he pressed the blade to Van Eck’s throat. Kaz was dizzy, and his limbs felt creaky from being trapped in the chair, but everything seemed sunnier with a weapon in his hand.

Van Eck’s guards were facing him, all with guns and swords drawn. He could feel the merch’s heart pounding beneath the wool of his suit.

“I don’t think I need to waste breath on threats,” Kaz said. “Tell me how to get to the door or I’m taking you through the window with me.”

“I think I can change your mind.”

Kaz gave him a little jostle. “I don’t care who you are or how big that ruby is. You don’t take me from my own streets. And you don’t try to make a deal with me while I’m in chains.”

“Mikka,” Van Eck called.

And then it happened again. A boy walked through the library wall. He was pale as a corpse and wore an embroidered blue Grisha Tidemaker’s coat with a red-and-gold ribbon at the lapel indicating his association with Van Eck’s house. But not even Grisha could just stroll through a wall.

Drugged, Kaz thought, trying not to panic. *I’ve been drugged*. Or it was some kind of illusion, the kind they performed in the theaters off East Stave—a girl cut in half, doves from a teapot.

“What the hell is this?” he growled.

“Let me go and I’ll explain.”

“You can explain right where you are.”

Van Eck huffed a short, shaky breath. “What you’re seeing are the effects of *jurda parem*.”

“*Jurda* is just a stimulant.” The little dried blossoms were grown in Novyi Zem and sold in shops all over Ketterdam. In his early days in the Dregs, Kaz had chewed them to stay alert during stakeouts. It had stained his teeth orange for days after. “It’s harmless,” he said.

“*Jurda parem* is something completely different, and it is most definitely not harmless.”

“So you did drug me.”

“Not *you*, Mister Brekker. Mikka.”

Kaz took in the sickly pallor of the Grisha’s face. He had dark hollows beneath his eyes, and the fragile, trembling build of someone who had missed several meals and didn’t seem to care.

“*Jurda parem* is a cousin to ordinary *jurda*,” Van Eck continued. “It comes from the same plant. We’re not sure of the process by which the drug is made, but a sample of it was sent to the Kerch Merchant Council by a scientist named Bo Yul-Bayur.”

“Shu?”

“Yes. He wished to defect, so he sent us a sample to convince us of his claims regarding the drug’s extraordinary effects. Please, Mister Brekker, this is a most uncomfortable position. If you’d like, I will give you a pistol, and we can sit and discuss this in more civilized fashion.”

“A pistol and my cane.”

Van Eck gestured to one of his guards, who exited the room and returned a moment later with Kaz’s walking stick—Kaz was just glad he used the damn door.

“Pistol first,” Kaz said. “Slowly.” The guard unholstered his weapon and handed it to Kaz by the grip. Kaz grabbed and cocked it in one quick movement, then released Van Eck, tossed the letter opener onto the desk, and snatched his cane from the guard’s hand. The pistol was more useful, but the cane brought Kaz a relief he didn’t care to quantify.

Van Eck took a few steps backward, putting distance between himself and Kaz's loaded gun. He didn't seem eager to sit. Neither was Kaz, so he kept close to the window, ready to bolt if need be.

Van Eck took a deep breath and tried to set his suit to rights. "That cane is quite a piece of hardware, Mister Brekker. Is it Fabrikator made?"

It was, in fact, the work of a Grisha Fabrikator, lead-lined and perfectly weighted for breaking bones. "None of your business. Get talking, Van Eck."

The mercher cleared his throat. "When Bo Yul-Bayur sent us the sample of *jurda parem*, we fed it to three Grisha, one from each Order."

"Happy volunteers?"

"Indentures," Van Eck conceded. "The first two were a Fabrikator and a Healer indentured to Councilman Hoede. Mikka is a Tidemaker. He's mine. You've seen what he can do using the drug."

Hoede. Why did that name ring a bell?

"I don't know what I've seen," Kaz said as he glanced at Mikka. The boy's gaze was focused intently on Van Eck as if awaiting his next command. Or maybe another fix.

"An ordinary Tidemaker can control currents, summon water or moisture from the air or a nearby source. They manage the tides in our harbor. But under the influence of *jurda parem*, a Tidemaker can alter his own state from solid to liquid to gas and back again, and do the same with other objects. Even a wall."

Kaz was tempted to deny it, but he couldn't explain what he'd just seen any other way. "How?"

"It's hard to say. You're aware of the amplifiers some Grisha wear?"

"I've seen them," Kaz said. Animal bones, teeth, scales. "I hear they're hard to come by."

"Very. But they only increase a Grisha's power. *Jurda parem* alters a Grisha's perception."

"So?"

“Grisha manipulate matter at its most fundamental levels. They call it the Small Science. Under the influence of *parem*, those manipulations become faster and far more precise. In theory, *jurda parem* is just a stimulant like its ordinary cousin. But it seems to sharpen and hone a Grisha’s senses. They can make connections with extraordinary speed. Things become possible that simply shouldn’t be.”

“What does it do to sorry sobs like you and me?”

Van Eck seemed to bristle slightly at being lumped in with Kaz, but he said, “It’s lethal. An ordinary mind cannot tolerate *parem* in even the lowest doses.”

“You said you gave it to three Grisha. What can the others do?”

“Here,” Van Eck said, reaching for a drawer in his desk.

Kaz lifted his pistol. “Easy.”

With exaggerated slowness, Van Eck slid his hand into the desk drawer and pulled out a lump of gold. “This started as lead.”

“Like hell it did.”

Van Eck shrugged. “I can only tell you what I saw. The Fabrikator took a piece of lead in his hands, and moments later we had this.”

“How do you even know it’s real?” asked Kaz.

“It has the same melting point as gold, the same weight and malleability. If it’s not identical to gold in every way, the difference has eluded us. Have it tested if you like.”

Kaz tucked his cane under his arm and took the heavy lump from Van Eck’s hand. He slipped it into his pocket. Whether it was real or just a convincing imitation, a chunk of yellow that big could buy plenty on the streets of the Barrel.

“You could have gotten that anywhere,” Kaz pointed out.

“I would bring Hoede’s Fabrikator here to show you himself, but he isn’t well.”

Kaz’s gaze flicked to Mikka’s sickly face and damp brow. The drug clearly came with a price.

“Let’s say this is all true and not cheap, coin-trick magic. What does it have to do with me?”

“Perhaps you heard of the Shu paying off the entirety of their debt to Kerch with a sudden influx of gold? The assassination of the trade ambassador from Novyi Zem? The theft of documents from a military base in Ravka?”

So that was the secret behind the murder of the ambassador in the washroom. And the gold in those three Shu ships must have been Fabrikator made. Kaz hadn’t heard anything about Ravkan documents, but he nodded anyway.

“We believe all these occurrences are the work of Grisha under the control of the Shu government and under the influence of *jurda parem*.” Van Eck scrubbed a hand over his jaw. “Mister Brekker, I want you to think for a moment about what I’m telling you. Men who can walk through walls—no vault or fortress will ever be safe again. People who can make gold from lead, or anything else for that matter, who can alter the very material of the world—financial markets would be thrown into chaos. The world economy would collapse.”

“Very exciting. What is it you want from me, Van Eck? You want me to steal a shipment? The formula?”

“No, I want you to steal the man.”

“Kidnap Bo Yul-Bayur?”

“Save him. A month ago we received a message from Yul-Bayur begging for asylum. He was concerned about his government’s plans for *jurda parem*, and we agreed to help him defect. We set up a rendezvous, but there was a skirmish at the drop point.”

“With the Shu?”

“No, with Fjerdans.”

Kaz frowned. The Fjerdans must have spies deep in Shu or Kerch if they had learned about the drug and Bo Yul-Bayur’s plans so quickly. “So send some of your agents after him.”

"The diplomatic situation is somewhat delicate. It is essential that our government not be tied to Yul-Bayur in any way."

"You have to know he's probably dead. The Fjerdans hate Grisha. There's no way they'd let knowledge of this drug get out."

"Our sources say he is very much alive and that he is awaiting trial." Van Eck cleared his throat. "At the Ice Court."

Kaz stared at Van Eck for a long minute, then burst out laughing. "Well, it's been a pleasure being knocked unconscious and taken captive by you, Van Eck. You can be sure your hospitality will be repaid when the time is right. Now have one of your lackeys show me to the door."

"We're prepared to offer you five million *kruge*."

Kaz pocketed the pistol. He wasn't afraid for his life now, just irritated that this fink had wasted his time. "This may come as a surprise to you, Van Eck, but we canal rats value our lives just as much as you do yours."

"Ten million."

"There's no point to a fortune I won't be alive to spend. Where's my hat—did your Tidemaker leave it behind in the alley?"

"Twenty."

Kaz paused. He had the eerie sense that the carved fish on the walls had halted midleap to listen. "Twenty million *kruge*?"

Van Eck nodded. He didn't look happy.

"I'd need to convince a team to walk into a suicide mission. That won't come cheap." That wasn't entirely true. Despite what he'd said to Van Eck, there were plenty of people in the Barrel who didn't have much to live for.

"Twenty million *kruge* is hardly cheap," Van Eck snapped.

"The Ice Court has never been breached."

"That's why we need you, Mister Brekker. It's possible Bo Yul-Bayur is already dead or that he's given up all his secrets to the Fjerdans, but we think we have at least a little time to act before the secret of *jurda parem* is put into play."

“If the Shu have the formula—”

“Yul-Bayur claimed he’d managed to mislead his superiors and keep the specifics of the formula secret. We think they’re operating from whatever limited supply Yul-Bayur left behind.”

Greed bows to me. Maybe Kaz had been a bit too cocky on that front. Now greed was doing Van Eck’s bidding. The lever was at work, overcoming Kaz’s resistance, moving him into place.

Twenty million *kruge*. What kind of job would this be? Kaz didn’t know anything about espionage or government squabbles, but why should stealing Bo Yul-Bayur from the Ice Court be any different from liberating valuables from a mercher’s safe? *The most well-protected safe in the world*, he reminded himself. He’d need a very specialized team, a desperate team that wouldn’t balk at the real possibility that they’d never come back from this job. And he wouldn’t be able to just pull from the Dregs. He didn’t have the talent he’d need in their ranks. That meant he’d have to watch his back more than usual.

But if they managed it, even after Per Haskell got his cut, Kaz’s share of the scrub would be enough to change everything, to finally put into motion the dream he’d had since he’d first crawled out of a cold harbor with revenge burning a hole in his heart. His debt to Jordie would be paid at last.

There would be other benefits, too. The Kerch Council would owe him, to say nothing of what this particular heist would do for his reputation. To infiltrate the impenetrable Ice Court and snatch a prize from the bastion of Fjerdan nobility and military might? With a job like this under his belt and that kind of scrub at his fingertips, he wouldn’t need Per Haskell anymore. He could start his own operation.

But something was off. “Why me? Why the Dregs? There are more experienced crews out there.”

Mikka started to cough, and Kaz saw blood on his sleeve.

“Sit,” Van Eck instructed gently, helping Mikka into a chair and offering the Grisha his handkerchief. He signaled to a guard. “Some water.”

“Well?” prodded Kaz.

“How old are you, Mister Brekker?”

“Seventeen.”

“You haven’t been arrested since you were fourteen, and since I know you are not an honest man any more than you were an honest boy, I can only assume you have the quality I most need in a criminal: *You don’t get caught.*” Van Eck smiled slightly then. “There’s also the matter of my DeKappel.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.”

“Six months ago, a DeKappel oil worth nearly one hundred thousand *kruge* disappeared from my home.”

“Quite a loss.”

“It was, especially since I had been assured that my gallery was impenetrable and that the locks on its doors were foolproof.”

“I do seem to remember reading about that.”

“Yes,” admitted Van Eck with a small sigh. “Pride is a perilous thing. I was eager to show off my acquisition and the lengths I’d gone to in order to protect it. And yet, despite all my safeguards, despite dogs and alarms and the most loyal staff in all of Ketterdam, my painting is gone.”

“My condolences.”

“It has yet to surface anywhere on the world market.”

“Maybe your thief already had a buyer lined up.”

“A possibility, of course. But I’m inclined to believe that the thief took it for a different reason.”

“What would that be?”

“Just to prove that he could.”

“Seems like a stupid risk to me.”

“Well, who can guess at the motives of thieves?”

“Not me, certainly.”

“From what I know of the Ice Court, whoever stole my DeKappel is exactly who I need for this job.”

“Then you’d be better off hiring him. Or her.”

“Indeed. But I’ll have to settle for you.”

Van Eck held Kaz’s gaze as if he hoped to find a confession written between his eyes. At last, Van Eck asked, “We have a deal then?”

“Not so fast. What about the Healer?”

Van Eck looked baffled. “Who?”

“You said you gave the drug to a Grisha from each Order. Mikka’s a Tidemaker—he’s your Etherealnik. The Fabrikator who mocked up that gold was a Materialnik. So what happened to the Corporalnik? The Healer?”

Van Eck winced slightly, but simply said, “Will you accompany me, Mister Brekker?”

Warily, keeping one eye on Mikka and the guards, Kaz followed Van Eck out of the library and down the hall. The house dripped mercher wealth—walls paneled in dark wood, floors tiled in clean black and white, all in good taste, all perfectly restrained and impeccably crafted. But it had the feel of a graveyard. The rooms were deserted, the curtains drawn, the furniture covered in white sheets so that each shadowy chamber they passed looked like some kind of forgotten seascape cluttered with icebergs.

Hoede. Now the name clicked into place. There’d been some kind of incident at Hoede’s mansion on the Geldstraat last week. The whole place had been cordoned off and crawling with *stadwatch*. Kaz had heard rumors of a firepox outbreak, but even Inej hadn’t been able to learn more.

“This is Councilman Hoede’s house,” Kaz said, skin crawling. He wanted no part of a plague, but the merch and his guards didn’t seem remotely concerned. “I thought this place was under quarantine.”

“What happened here is no danger to us. And if you do your job, Mister Brekker, it never will be.”

Van Eck led him through a door and into a manicured garden, thick with the new nectar scent of early crocuses. The smell hit Kaz like a blow to the jaw. Memories of Jordie were already too fresh in his mind, and for a moment, Kaz wasn’t walking through the canal-side garden of a rich

merch, he was knee-deep in spring grasses, hot sun beating down on his cheeks, his brother's voice calling him home.

Kaz gave himself a shake. *I need a mug of the darkest, bitterest coffee I can find*, he thought. *Or maybe a real punch to the jaw.*

Van Eck was leading him to a boathouse that faced the canal. The light filtering out between its shuttered windows cast patterns on the garden path. A single city guard stood at attention beside the door as Van Eck slid a key from his pocket and into the heavy lock. Kaz put his sleeve up to his mouth as the stink from the closed-up room reached him—urine, excrement. So much for spring crocuses.

The room was lit by two glass lanterns on the wall. A group of guards stood facing a large iron box, shattered glass littering the floor at their feet. Some wore the purple uniform of the *stadwatch*, others the sea green livery of the Hoede house. Through what Kaz now understood had been an observation window, he saw another city guard standing in front of an empty table and two overturned chairs. Like the others, the guard stood with his arms loose at his sides, face blank, eyes forward, gazing at nothing. Van Eck turned up the light on one of the lanterns, and Kaz saw a body in a purple uniform slumped on the floor, eyes closed.

Van Eck sighed and crouched down to turn the body over. “We’ve lost another,” he said.

The boy was young, the bare scraps of a mustache on his upper lip.

Van Eck gave orders to the guard who had let them in, and with help from one of Van Eck’s retinue they lifted the corpse and took it from the room. The other guards didn’t react, just continued to stare ahead.

Kaz recognized one of them—Henrik Dahlman, the captain of the *stadwatch*.

“Dahlman?” he queried, but the man made no response. Kaz waved a hand in front of the captain’s face, then gave him a hard flick on the ear. Nothing but a slow, disinterested blink. Kaz raised his pistol and aimed it directly at the captain’s forehead. He cocked the hammer. The captain didn’t flinch, didn’t react. His pupils didn’t contract.

"He's as good as dead," said Van Eck. "Shoot. Blow his brains out. He won't protest and the others won't react."

Kaz lowered his weapon, a chill settling deep into his bones. "What is this? What happened to them?"

"The Grisha was a Corporalnik serving her indenture with Councilman Hoede's household. He thought because she was a Healer and not a Hearttender, he was making the safe choice to test the *parem*."

Seemed smart enough. Kaz had seen Hearttenders at work. They could rupture your cells, burst your heart in your chest, steal the breath from your lungs, or lower your pulse so that you dropped into a coma, all while never laying a finger on you. If even part of what Van Eck said was true, the idea of one of them dosed with *jurda parem* was a daunting proposition. So the merchers had tried the drug on a Healer instead. But apparently things hadn't gone according to plan.

"You gave her the drug, and she killed her master?"

"Not exactly," Van Eck said, clearing his throat. "They had her in that observation cell. Within seconds of consuming the *parem*, she took control of the guard inside the chamber—"

"How?"

"We don't know exactly. But whatever method she used, it allowed her to subdue these guards as well."

"That's not possible."

"Isn't it? The brain is just one more organ, a cluster of cells and impulses. Why shouldn't a Grisha under the influence of *jurda parem* be able to manipulate those impulses?"

Kaz's disbelief must have shown.

"Look at these people," Van Eck insisted. "She told them to wait. And that's exactly what they've done—that's *all* they've done since."

Kaz studied the silent group more closely. Their eyes weren't blank or dead, their bodies weren't quite at rest. They were *expectant*. He suppressed a shiver. He'd seen peculiar things, extraordinary things, but nothing like what he'd witnessed tonight.

“What happened to Hoede?”

“She commanded him to open the door, and when he did, she ordered him to cut the thumb from his own hand. We only know how it all happened because a kitchen boy was present. The Grisha girl left him untouched, but he claims Hoede carved away his thumb, smiling all the while.”

Kaz didn’t like the idea of some Grisha moving things around in his head. But he wouldn’t be surprised if Hoede deserved whatever he’d gotten. During Ravka’s civil war, a lot of Grisha had fled the fighting and paid their way to Kerch by becoming indentures without realizing that they’d essentially sold themselves into slavery.

“The merch is dead?”

“Councilman Hoede lost a great deal of blood, but he’s in the same state as these men. He’s been removed to the country with his family and the staff from his house.”

“Did the Grisha Healer go back to Ravka?” Kaz asked.

Van Eck gestured Kaz out of the eerie boathouse and locked the door behind them.

“She may have attempted it,” he said as they retraced their steps through the garden and along the side of the house. “We know she secured a small craft, and we suspect she was headed to Ravka, but we found her body washed up two days ago near Third Harbor. We think she drowned trying to get back into the city.”

“Why would she come back here?”

“For more *jurda parem*.”

Kaz thought of Mikka’s glittering eyes and waxy skin. “It’s that addictive?”

“It seems to take only one dose. Once the drug has run its course, it leaves the Grisha’s body weakened and the craving is intense. It’s quite debilitating.”

Quite debilitating seemed like a bit of an understatement. The Council of Tides controlled entry to the Ketterdam harbors. If the drugged Healer

had tried to return at night in a smallboat, she wouldn't have had much of a chance against the current. Kaz thought of Mikka's gaunt face, the way his clothes hung from his body. The drug had done that to him. He'd been high on *jurda parem* and already greedy for the next dose. He'd also looked ready to keel over. How long could a Grisha go on that way?

It was an interesting question, but not relevant to the matter at hand. They'd arrived at the front gate. It was time to settle up.

"Thirty million *kruge*," Kaz said.

"We said twenty!" sputtered Van Eck.

"*You* said twenty. It's clear you're desperate." Kaz glanced back in the direction of the boathouse, where a room full of men simply waited to die. "And now I see why."

"The Council will have my head."

"They'll sing your praises once you have Bo Yul-Bayur safely hidden away wherever you intend to keep him."

"Novyi Zem."

Kaz shrugged. "You can put him in a coffeepot for all I care."

Van Eck's gaze locked on his. "You've seen what this drug can do. I assure you it is just the beginning. If *jurda parem* is unleashed on the world, war is inevitable. Our trade lines will be destroyed, and our markets will collapse. Kerch will not survive it. Our hopes rest with you, Mister Brekker. If you fail, all the world will suffer for it."

"Oh, it's worse than that, Van Eck. If I fail, I don't get paid."

The look of disgust on the merch's face was something that deserved its own DeKappel oil to commemorate it.

"Don't look so disappointed. Just think how miserable you would have been to discover this canal rat had a patriotic streak. You might actually have had to uncurl that lip and treat me with something closer to respect."

"Thank you for sparing me that discomfort," Van Eck said disdainfully. He opened the door, then paused. "I do wonder what a boy of your intelligence might have amounted to under different circumstances."

Ask Jordie, Kaz thought with a bitter pang. But he simply shrugged. “I’d just be stealing from a better class of sucker. Thirty million *kruge*.”

Van Eck nodded. “Thirty. The deal is the deal.”

“The deal is the deal,” Kaz said. They shook.

As Van Eck’s neatly manicured hand clasped Kaz’s leather-clad fingers, the merch narrowed his eyes.

“Why do you wear the gloves, Mister Brekker?”

Kaz raised a brow. “I’m sure you’ve heard the stories.”

“Each more grotesque than the last.”

Kaz had heard them, too. Brekker’s hands were stained with blood. Brekker’s hands were covered in scars. Brekker had claws and not fingers because he was part demon. Brekker’s touch burned like brimstone—a single brush of his bare skin caused your flesh to wither and die.

“Pick one,” Kaz said as he vanished into the night, thoughts already turning to thirty million *kruge* and the crew he’d need to help him get it. “They’re all true enough.”



Inej knew the moment Kaz entered the Slat. His presence reverberated through the cramped rooms and crooked hallways as every thug, thief, dealer, con man, and steerer came a little more awake. Per Haskell's favored lieutenant was home.

The Slat wasn't much, just another house in the worst part of the Barrel, three stories stacked tight on top of each other, crowned with an attic and a gabled roof. Most of the buildings in this part of the city had been built without foundations, many on swampy land where the canals were haphazardly dug. They leaned against each other like tipsy friends gathered at a bar, tilting at drowsy angles. Inej had visited plenty of them on errands for the Dregs, and they weren't much better on the inside—cold and damp, plaster sliding from the walls, gaps in the windows wide enough to let in the rain and snow. But Kaz had spent his own money to have the Slat's drafts shorn up and its walls insulated. It was ugly, crooked, and crowded, but the Slat was gloriously dry.

Inej's room was on the third floor, a skinny slice of space barely big enough for a cot and a trunk, but with a window that looked out over

the peaked roofs and jumbled chimneys of the Barrel. When the wind came through and cleared away the haze of coal smoke that hung over the city, she could even make out a blue pocket of harbor.

Though dawn was just a few hours away, the Slat was wide awake. The only time the house was ever really quiet was in the slow hours of the afternoon, and tonight everyone was buzzing with the news of the showdown at the Exchange, Big Bolliger's fate, and now poor Rojakke's dismissal.

Inej had gone straight from her conversation with Kaz to seek out the card dealer at the Crow Club. He'd been at the tables dealing Three Man Bramble for Jesper and a couple of Ravkan tourists. When he'd finished the hand, Inej had suggested they speak in one of the private gaming parlors to spare him the embarrassment of being fired in front of his friends, but Rojakke wasn't having it.

"It's not fair," he'd bellowed when she'd told him Kaz's orders. "I ain't no cheat!"

"Take it up with Kaz," Inej had replied quietly.

"And keep your voice down," Jesper added, glancing at the tourists and sailors seated at the neighboring tables. Fights were common in the Barrel, but not on the floor of the Crow Club. If you had a gripe, you settled it outside, where you didn't risk interrupting the hallowed practice of separating pigeons from their money.

"Where's Brekker?" growled Rojakke.

"I don't know."

"You always know everything about everything," Rojakke sneered, leaning in, the stink of lager and onions on his breath. "Isn't that what Dirtyhands pays you for?"

"I don't know where he is or when he's getting back. But I *do* know you won't want to be here when he does."

"Give me my check. I'm owed for my last shift."

"Brekker doesn't owe you anything."

"He can't even face me? Sends a little girl to give me the boot? Maybe

I'll just shake a few coins out of you." He'd reached out to grab her by the collar of her shirt, but she'd dodged him easily. He fumbled for her again.

Out of the corner of her eye, Inej saw Jesper rise from his seat, but she waved him off and slipped her fingers into the brass knuckles she kept in her right hip pocket. She gave Rojakke a swift crack across the left cheek.

His hand flew up to his face. "Hey," he said. "I didn't hurt you none. It was just words."

People were watching now, so she hit him again. Regardless of the Crow Club rules, this took precedence. When Kaz had brought her to the Slat, he'd warned her that he wouldn't be able to watch out for her, that she'd have to fend for herself, and she had. It would have been easy enough to turn away when they called her names or sidled up to ask for a cuddle, but do that and soon it was a hand up your blouse or a try at you against a wall. So she'd let no insult or innuendo slide. She'd always struck first and struck hard. Sometimes she even cut them up a bit. It was fatiguing, but nothing was sacred to the Kerch except trade, so she'd gone out of her way to make the risk much higher than the reward when it came to disrespecting her.

Rojakke touched his fingers to the ugly bruise forming on his cheek, looking surprised and a bit betrayed. "I thought we was friendly," he protested.

The sad part was that they were. Inej *liked* Rojakke. But right now, he was just a frightened man looking to feel bigger than someone.

"Rojakke," she'd said. "I've seen you work a deck of cards. You can get a job in almost any den. Go home and be grateful Kaz doesn't take what you owe him out of your hide, hmm?"

He'd gone, a bit wobbly on his feet, still clutching his cheek like a stunned toddler, and Jesper had sauntered over.

"He's right, you know. Kaz shouldn't send you to do his dirty work."
"It's all dirty work."

“But we do it just the same,” he said with a sigh.

“You look exhausted. Will you sleep at all tonight?”

Jesper just winked. “Not while the cards are hot. Stay and play a bit. Kaz will stake you.”

“Really, Jesper?” she’d said, pulling up her hood. “If I want to watch men dig holes to fall into, I’ll find myself a cemetery.”

“Come on, Inej,” he’d called after her as she passed through the big double doors onto the street. “You’re good luck!”

Saints, she’d thought, if he believes that, he really must be desperate. She’d left her luck behind in a Suli camp on the shores of West Ravka. She doubted she’d see either again.

Now Inej left her tiny chamber in the Slat and headed downstairs by way of the banisters. There was no reason to cloak her movements here, but silence was a habit, and the stairs tended to squeak like mating mice. When she reached the second-floor landing and saw the crowd milling below, she hung back.

Kaz had been gone longer than anyone had expected, and as soon as he’d entered the shadowy foyer, he’d been waylaid by people looking to congratulate him on his routing of Geels and asking for news of the Black Tips.

“Rumor has it Geels is already putting together a mob to move on us,” said Anika.

“Let him!” rumbled Dirix. “I’ve got an axe handle with his name on it.”

“Geels won’t act for a while,” said Kaz as he moved down the hall. “He doesn’t have the numbers to face us in the streets, and his coffers are too empty to hire on more hands. Shouldn’t you be on your way to the Crow Club?”

The raised eyebrow was enough to send Anika scurrying away, Dirix on her heels. Others came to offer congratulations or make threats against the Black Tips. No one went so far as to pat Kaz on the back, though—that was a good way to lose a hand.

Inej knew Kaz would stop to speak to Per Haskell, so instead of

descending the final flight of stairs, she moved down the hallway. There was a closet here, full of odds and ends, old chairs with broken backs, paint-spattered canvas sheeting. Inej moved aside a bucket full of cleaning supplies that she'd placed there precisely because she knew no one in the Slat would ever touch it. The grate beneath it offered a perfect view of Per Haskell's office. She felt slightly guilty for eavesdropping on Kaz, but he was the one who had turned her into a spy. You couldn't train a falcon, then ask it not to hunt.

Through the grate she heard Kaz's knock on Per Haskell's door and the sound of his greeting.

"Back and still breathing?" the old man inquired. She could just see him seated in his favorite chair, fiddling with a model ship he'd been building for the better part of a year, a pint of lager within arm's reach, as always.

"We won't have a problem with Fifth Harbor again."

Haskell grunted and returned to his model ship. "Close the door."

Inej heard it shut, muffling the sounds from the hallway. She could see the top of Kaz's head. His dark hair was damp. It must have started raining.

"You should have gotten permission from me to deal with Bolliger," said Haskell.

"If I had talked to you first, word might have gotten out—"

"You think I'd let that happen?"

Kaz's shoulders lifted. "This place is like anything in Ketterdam. It leaks." Inej could have sworn he looked directly at the vent when he said it.

"I don't like it, boy. Big Bolliger was *my* soldier, not yours."

"Of course," Kaz said, but they both knew it was a lie. Haskell's Dregs were old guard, con men and crooks from another time. Bolliger had been one of Kaz's crew—new blood, young and unafraid. Maybe too unafraid.

"You're smart, Brekker, but you need to learn patience."

"Yes, sir."

The old man barked a laugh. “Yes, sir. No, sir,” he mocked. “I know you’re up to something when you start getting polite. Just what have you got brewing?”

“A job,” Kaz said. “I may need to be gone for a spell.”

“Big money?”

“Very.”

“Big risk?”

“That, too. But you’ll get your twenty percent.”

“You don’t make any major moves without my say so, understood?”

Kaz must have nodded because Per Haskell leaned back in his chair and took a sip of lager. “Are we to be very rich?”

“Rich as Saints in crowns of gold.”

The old man snorted. “Long as I don’t have to live like one.”

“I’ll talk to Pim,” Kaz said. “He can pick up the slack while I’m gone.”

Inej frowned. Just where was Kaz going? He hadn’t mentioned any big job to her. *And why Pim?* The thought shamed her a bit. She could almost hear her father’s voice: *So eager to be Queen of the Thieves, Inej?* It was one thing to do her job and do it well. It was quite another to want to succeed at it. She didn’t want a permanent place with the Dregs. She wanted to pay off her debts and be free of Ketterdam forever, so why should she care if Kaz chose Pim to run the gang in his absence? *Because I’m smarter than Pim. Because Kaz trusts me more.* But maybe he didn’t trust the crew to follow a girl like her, only two years out of the brothels, not even seventeen years old. She wore her sleeves long and the sheath of her knife mostly hid the scar on the inside of her left forearm where the Menagerie tattoo had once been, but they all knew it was there.

Kaz exited Haskell’s room, and Inej left her perch to wait for him as he limped his way up the stairs.

“Rojakke?” he asked as he passed her and started up the second flight.

“Gone,” she said, falling in behind him.

“He put up much of a fight?”

“Nothing I couldn’t handle.”

“Not what I asked.”

“He was angry. He may come back around looking for trouble.”

“Never a shortage of that to hand out,” Kaz said as they reached the top floor. The attic rooms had been converted into his office and bedroom. She knew all those flights of stairs were brutal on his bad leg, but he seemed to like having the whole floor to himself.

He entered the office and without looking back at her said, “Shut the door.”

The room was mostly taken up by a makeshift desk—an old warehouse door atop stacked fruit crates—piled high with papers. Some of the floor bosses had started using adding machines, clanking things crowded with stiff brass buttons and spools of paper, but Kaz did the Crow Club tallies in his head. He kept books, but only for the sake of the old man and so that he had something to point to when he called someone out for cheating or when he was looking for new investors.

That was one of the big changes Kaz had brought to the gang. He’d given ordinary shopkeepers and legitimate businessmen the chance to buy shares in the Crow Club. At first they’d been skeptical, sure it was some kind of swindle, but he’d brought them in with tiny stakes and managed to gather enough capital to purchase the dilapidated old building, spruce it up, and get it running. It had paid back big for those early investors. Or so the story went. Inej could never be sure which stories about Kaz were true and which were rumors he’d planted to serve his own ends. For all she knew, he’d conned some poor honest trader out of his life savings to make the Crow Club thrive.

“I’ve got a job for you,” Kaz said as he flipped through the previous day’s figures. Each sheet would go into his memory with barely a glance. “What would you say to four million *kruge*?”

“Money like that is more curse than gift.”

“My little Suli idealist. All you need is a full belly and an open road?” he said, the mockery clear in his voice.

“And an easy heart, Kaz.” That was the difficult part.

Now he laughed outright as he walked through the door to his tiny bedroom. “No hopes of that. I’d rather have the cash. Do you want the money or not?”

“You’re not in the business of giving gifts. What’s the job?”

“An impossible job, near certain death, terrible odds, but should we scrape it . . .” He paused, fingers on the buttons of his waistcoat, his look distant, almost dreamy. It was rare that she heard such excitement in his raspy voice.

“Should we scrape it?” she prompted.

He grinned at her, his smile sudden and jarring as a thunderclap, his eyes the near-black of bitter coffee. “We’ll be kings and queens, Inej. Kings and queens.”

“Hmm,” she said noncommittally, pretending to examine one of her knives, determined to ignore that grin. Kaz was not a giddy boy smiling and making future plans with her. He was a dangerous player who was always working an angle. *Always*, she reminded herself firmly. Inej kept her eyes averted, shuffling a stack of papers into a pile on the desk as Kaz stripped out of his vest and shirt. She wasn’t sure if she was flattered or insulted that he didn’t seem to give a second thought to her presence.

“How long will we be gone?” she asked, darting a glance at him through the open doorway. He was corded muscle, scars, but only two tattoos—the Dregs’ crow and cup on his forearm and, above it, a black *R* on his bicep. She’d never asked him what it meant.

It was his hands that drew her attention as he shucked off his leather gloves and dipped a cloth in the washbasin. He only ever removed them in these chambers, and as far as she knew, only in front of her. Whatever affliction he might be hiding, she could see no sign of it, only slender lock-pick’s fingers, and a shiny rope of scar tissue from some long ago street fight.

“A few weeks, maybe a month,” he said as he ran the wet cloth under his arms and the hard planes of his chest, water trickling down his torso.

For Saints’ sake, Inej thought as her cheeks heated. She’d lost most of

her modesty during her time with the Menagerie, but really, there were limits. What would Kaz say if she suddenly stripped down and started washing herself in front of him? *He'd probably tell me not to drip on the desk*, she thought with a scowl.

“A month?” she said. “Are you sure you should be leaving with the Black Tips so riled up?”

“This is the right gamble. Speaking of which, round up Jesper and Muzzen. I want them here by dawn. And I’ll need Wylan waiting at the Crow Club tomorrow night.”

“Wylan? If this is for a big job—”

“Just do it.”

Inej crossed her arms. One minute he made her blush and the next he made her want to commit murder. “Are you going to explain any of this?”

“When we all meet.” He shrugged on a fresh shirt, then hesitated as he fastened the collar. “This isn’t an assignment, Inej. It’s a job for you to take or leave as you see fit.”

An alarm bell rang inside her. She endangered herself every day on the streets of the Barrel. She’d murdered for the Dregs, stolen, brought down bad men and good, and Kaz had never hinted that any of the assignments were less than a command to be obeyed. This was the price she’d agreed to when Per Haskell had purchased her contract and liberated her from the Menagerie. So what was different about this job?

Kaz finished with his buttons, pulled on a charcoal waistcoat, and tossed her something. It flashed in the air, and she caught it with one hand. When she opened her fist, she saw a massive ruby tie pin circled by golden laurel leaves.

“Fence it,” Kaz said.

“Whose is it?”

“Ours now.”

“Whose was it?”

Kaz stayed quiet. He picked up his coat, using a brush to clean the

dried mud from it. “Someone who should have thought better before he had me jumped.”

“Jumped?”

“You heard me.”

“Someone got the drop on you?”

He looked at her and nodded once. Unease snaked through her and twisted into an anxious, rustling coil. No one got the better of Kaz. He was the toughest, scariest thing walking the alleys of the Barrel. She relied on it. So did he.

“It won’t happen again,” he promised.

Kaz pulled on a clean pair of gloves, snapped up his walking stick, and headed out the door. “I’ll be back in a few hours. Move the DeKappel we lifted from Van Eck’s house to the vault. I think it’s rolled up under my bed. Oh, and put in an order for a new hat.”

“Please.”

Kaz heaved a sigh as he braced himself for three painful flights of stairs. He looked over his shoulder and said, “Please, my darling Inej, treasure of my heart, won’t you do me the honor of acquiring me a new hat?”

Inej cast a meaningful glance at his cane. “Have a long trip down,” she said, then leapt onto the banister, sliding from one flight to the next, slick as butter in a pan.

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