

INTO THE CROOKED PLACED

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Feiwei and Friends

New York

A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK

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This is for you, whoever you are.

*Because you deserve the world,
but all I have is this book and the one I imagined.*

THE CITY OF GREIJE



THE STEADY MOUNTAINS



Creije Railway Station

Onnela Sea

High Town

The Crook

Busker DORMS

Old Steam Station

The Magic Markets

1

TAVIA

Tavia Syn made a living on magic and it was rarely the legal kind.

That sort of thing was far too weak and the only way to sell it was to give the illusion of power through sleight of hand and good old-fashioned bullshit. It had been that way ever since the war—not that Tavia had been alive to remember those days—and so most of the time she got by on the markets using the bare minimum of magic and the bare maximum of trickery.

Her love elixirs were usually the first to go, so Tavia made a point to line them up in front of the trick bags. It transformed her flat-pack stall into a mosaic of color, ranging from soft pink—watered down for lust—to burnt red. Which was also watered-down, because magic wasn't cheap and Tavia didn't fancy selling obsession. Besides, with a little dye in the mix, nobody was any wiser.

When it came to magic, all that really mattered was timing. And showmanship. Perhaps a mark was a mark and money was money, but there was a difference in how you got that mark and took their money. Style was everything.

And if there was one thing Tavia had in spades, then it was style.

"Gather around," Tavia said, and then, a little louder and a lot more theatrical, "What you will see here is magic made into miracle."

The crowds swarmed by the dozen.

It was like that on market days. People came in packs with a jingle in their step and, it was worth noting, their pockets. They stopped in the

middle of the cobblestone to eye the wares or play spectator to whatever the buskers were selling. That was the legal side of Tavia's work. Which her underboss—otherwise known as Wesley Thornton Walcott, otherwise known as a complete jackass—kept going because he liked to dip a toe in clean water every now and again.

If for nothing else than to wash away the blood.

“Straight from the holy realm of Wrenyal, taken from the hands of a seer.” Tavia moved a fortune orb fluidly between her hands. “Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the power of foresight.”

She blew discreetly on the wick of a nearby spice paste candle and a flame burst into being. It was the perfect backdrop for any stories about Wrenyal, whose magic was said to be a gift from the Indescribable God itself.

Which was utter nonsense, of course, but nonsense was Tavia's greatest commodity.

In the magic markets, the best way to find a mark was to create one, and there was no better way to do that than to woo them with false magic.

Tavia moved the fortune orb carefully from one hand to another as though it were delicate and sacred, and not something she'd cooked up on a whim with her bastard of an underboss, under the influence of far too many reverie charms. Though, in fairness to Wesley, that was before he became the underboss and so before he actually became a bastard.

“I suppose you have proof your magic is legit?” a skeptical man in the crowd asked.

He eyed her with distrust, which was a look Tavia had not only grown used to, but almost relished in. After all, with so much trick magic mastered, sometimes her greatest challenge came from convincing the inconvincible, taking the feeble magic the law allowed and turning it into something great. Something miraculous, if the light hit her hands just right.

Perhaps Tavia wasn't a Crafter, creating new magic out of thin air, but that didn't mean she couldn't create *something*. A sense of awe and wonder for her audience.

“It'd be my pleasure to give you a demonstration,” Tavia said, tipping her hat to the man.

He looked at her dubiously, his smile both a challenge and a somewhat hopeful invitation to prove him wrong.

An invitation she was more than willing to accept, because though Tavia might not have liked working for a king of criminals, she did very much like magic.

Back when she was just another street kid, trying to learn the busking ropes, Tavia didn't think she would ever get the hang of it. Magic seemed like nonsense, a fairy tale within a story she couldn't understand. But time passed—days and weeks and months—until finally, Tavia realized that magic was not at all like fairy tales.

It was like math.

It was like the intricate clapping games she played with the other kids to fend off hunger. It seemed complex at first, but all it took was knowing the rhythm, understanding the formula.

After that, the rest came quick.

After that, it was kind of fun.

Now, Tavia was a natural. The best busker in all of Creije. This city was both her prison and her playground. And if it was a show this man wanted, then she was more than happy to give him one.

Her routine was flawless.

Tavia knew this because she had done it a hundred times. First, she danced her hand over the orb, using her smallest finger to flip the trick switch that made it glow just that bit brighter. Then she prepared for the levitation, readying the wind device stowed up her sleeve.

Tavia swooped her free hand up and down in dramatic movements, and then, quicker than a blink, she brought her wrists together. The wind coin propelled under the orb, nestling perfectly, unseen as it ascended into the air.

The crowd pointed and chuckled while Tavia motioned theatrically, letting the orb drop and rise back up. Turning it in circles and swooping it from side to side.

Mechanics, far more impressive than the weak fortune magic inside.

"Tell us our future!" someone called.

"Make a prediction!" another said.

Tavia smirked.

Whatever the customer wants, she thought, reaching into her pocket with fast fingers to grab a proficiency charm. She squeezed the small marble of not-so-legal magic artfully in her hands, careful not to be seen by the crowds or any lingering guards, and let its power soak into her skin. She rested her palms atop the orb, wiping the magic from her to the device.

It glowed bright green and the crowd jumped back, thrilled.

In Tavia's hands the orb muddled, and the intricate mechanisms she and Wesley threw together started to whistle. There were riddles hard-coded into it, and though Tavia couldn't remember how many—it seemed like a lifetime ago when she and Wesley crafted cons as a team—she knew them by heart. She would recognize them anywhere: the silly proverbs and vague predictions about the day ahead. All things that Wesley found obnoxiously funny.

Only Tavia didn't recognize the riddle this time. The words were tiny and jumbled and a sinking feeling crawled inside her when she tried to decipher them, so awful that she lost the will to speak the riddle out loud. But in moments the charm had gone from her and into the air, and the breeze blew by in a gentle hum, shaping itself into a croon.

And then, just like that, the wind began to sing.

*Time will be carried in strange hands,
across the realms and through stranger lands.
What is done will be undone,
a battle lost is a battle won.
When midnight rings on a child's betrayal,
your every success is doomed to fail.*

Panicked, Tavia dropped the orb and the wind shattered.

She didn't know what in the fire-gates that was, but it was definitely *not* something she and Wesley had planted. No matter how many reverie charms they'd been under, no matter how powerful and infinite they might have felt

with empty vials by their hands and the glow of moonlight on their faces, even they wouldn't have concocted something so peculiar.

Riddles were like jokes, in that someone had to be in on them in order for it to be funny.

And Tavia wasn't laughing.

But the crowd was overjoyed, none the wiser to the oddity. They broke into a frenzy, pulling coin from their pockets and shoving it under Tavia's nose like they were asking her to smell their worth.

Tavia swallowed, pushing away the strange feeling in her chest that the magic had left behind. The taste in her mouth, bitter as clovers.

Whatever that riddle was didn't matter. It was all underhand nonsense anyway, and Tavia wouldn't have been surprised if Wesley had planted something into the orb without her knowing. He specialized in secrets, and there was nothing Wesley liked more than going behind people's backs. All that truly mattered was that the show was a success.

Tavia checked her timepiece and sighed.

It was fast approaching the hour when the air shifted and zealots spat out onto the streets, in search of buskers with magic black enough to soot their skin.

In other words, it was time for Tavia to head to the Crook.

Time for her to really get to work.



THE CROOK was so named because, like most of the city, it was full of crooked things. The most crooked of which was Wesley Thornton Walcott, who was both Tavia's underboss and the closest thing Creije had to a gangster.

He'd single-handedly turned the Crook into the most profitable enterprise in the realm, both over the table and under it. Sitting on the riverbank beside the bridge that separated the two halves of the city—the tourists from the poor—the old clock tower had been converted into a fight club that served as the hub of Creije, where anyone interested in a lawless eye gathered. Thanks to Wesley, its reach was beyond compare.

Tavia eyed the tail of customers that stretched from the doors and into the folds of the city, hugging her jacket tighter as the wind grew in strength. The icy ends of her black hair sparked by the point of her chin as she looked up to the skies in wonder.

It was winter in Creije, and though that meant the days were short and the nights were long, with any darkness came the Everglow. A web of color that pulled across the sky like a curtain. Flares of pink and green lighting up the dark, so that every night for the latter half of the year, even the locals leaned out their windows to watch the sky explode. There was magic in the air, among the stars and on the fingertips of anyone who walked the streets.

Tavia approached the doors to Wesley's club.

She didn't like coming to the Crook on Sundays, because that was when Karam Talwar tended door, and she was the kind of person nobody saw in broad daylight.

Karam was from Wrenyal, in the five-river city of Granka, which drew missionaries from across the realms, learning magic like it was a holy calling rather than a skill. But there was nothing holy in her. Karam's fists were perpetually sliced across the knuckles and there was a permanent bruise under her left eye.

When Karam saw Tavia she grunted, which seemed to be more of a greeting than something to be taken personally.

"Karam," Tavia said, trying to ignore the aroma of peppermint that lingered on the girl's clothes—a common salve used by fighters. "Living well, I see."

In a heavy Grankan accent, she said, "Why are you here?"

Always the charmer.

"Aren't you happy to see me?" Tavia asked.

Karam shot her a look that was a little too murderous.

She always seemed so deadly, from the stark hair long enough to slash at her elbows, to the thick eyebrows that hooded large golden irises. Her clothes were richly embroidered in a contrast of midnight and moonlight that grazed her ankles, and Tavia wasn't entirely sure how she managed to fight rowdy customers in such an outfit, but fighting was what Karam did best.

That and glaring.

Karam moved to let Tavia through. “Just so you know, you ruin your face when you talk,” she said.

“Flatterer,” Tavia shot back, and then winked, because Karam may have been a killer with no social skills, but she was also quite pretty.

Tavia stepped through the doors of the Crook and though she was in no mood to smell cheap tricks and even cheaper liquor, the tower was in full swing, all flashing lights and magic she could practically taste. The music moved like a virus through the air, across the fighters and into the flurry of patrons who placed their bets on a winner.

Tavia walked past the fighters and the entertainers who flung themselves across the room in aerial silk, taking care not to get kicked in the face. She pulled back a curtain at the far end and pressed her hand against the indiscreet slab of black glass, allowing her palm—her identity and her desires—to be read.

Once the glass was satisfied, a doorway slid open, and on the other side stood Tavia’s underboss, a pack of four-leaf clovers in hand.

Wesley Thornton Walcott was only nineteen, but he had a name that made most people think he came out of his muma wearing a suit and suspenders. Tavia knew that wasn’t true, but she did know that he wore a three-piece on every even day and a bow tie on all the odd ones.

She wasn’t too sure how he worked out which days were which—the streets of Creije always seemed so odd to her—but Wesley had assigned them such attributes and got away with it, because getting away with things was what Wesley did best.

“Tavia,” he said, and smiled in a way that was half dimples and all sadist. “Come on, the fight’s just getting started.”

He brushed past her and headed for the fighting ring.

Reluctantly, Tavia followed.

A path cleared for Wesley, as if by habit, and when he approached a small set of sofas cordoned off by gold chains, half a dozen buskers surrounded the area, keeping everyone else at a distance.

Perhaps, so they couldn't hear what Wesley would tell Tavia.

Perhaps, because they knew Wesley just didn't like people very much.

The crowd cheered, waving their betting tickets at the fighters, and Wesley watched them with a face far too youthful for someone who had killed his way to the top. His black-brown hair was immaculately styled and his skin was deep and dark. A pair of mirrored sunglasses perched on the hilltop hitch of his nose.

"Sit down," Wesley said.

Tavia didn't, but she did take a moment to relish in the joy of what an utter jackass Wesley looked in those glasses.

Unfortunately, it was short-lived, because once Wesley noticed the smug grin on her face—which he should have been used to by now, since she learned it from him—he slipped the glasses off to reveal the graveyard dirt of his eyes.

"I just came to pick up some extra magic," Tavia said. "Make it quick if you want to talk. My time is your money."

Wesley popped a four-leaf clover into his mouth, a habit he'd picked up when they were kids.

"I want to talk about the new elixir from the Kingpin," Wesley said. "You've had it for a couple of weeks now and I don't have a report of any sales."

Tavia's spine tingled at the thought of the strange magic vials, still untouched at the very bottom of her backpack. The so-called happiness elixir twisted her gut inexplicably whenever she caught sight of it and that was saying something, considering the kind of magic she usually sold without issue. And so Tavia had simply stopped looking at it altogether, leaving the elixir to the depths of her backpack, piled under so many other vials of potent magic.

"I'm working on my sales pitch," Tavia said, though she knew that didn't sound convincing.

Wesley was hard to sway at the best of times, even when Tavia attempted charm, and most definitely when she lied through her teeth.

“You know how important this is,” Wesley said. “We’re already the magical mecca of Uskhanya, but if we make this a success, then we can put the other realms on the ropes too. I went out on a limb giving your name as the best busker to bring it to market. Don’t make me regret it. This could earn us both a lot of money.”

Tavia laughed and not just because Wesley already had too much money for his own good.

Everyone in Creije wanted to get rich or kill someone trying. The more money someone had, the more money they wanted. Round and round until all that was left were guys like Wesley Thornton Walcott, standing in his three-piece suit with a briefcase full of magic.

But Tavia didn’t want to get rich.

Street kids became buskers because they needed to survive, and survival was what Tavia had always been most interested in. Getting rich was just one possible side effect.

“I’m flattered my face came to mind when you thought of the word *con*,” Tavia said.

“I must’ve forgotten the part where I said it was a scam.”

Tavia could barely stop herself from rolling her eyes. “I’m not a child, Wesley. I know there’s no such thing as new magic. The Crafters are all gone. The War of Ages saw to that. If you’re going to feed me a story, at least make it a good one.”

Wesley only shrugged, which was the closest thing he ever gave to an answer. “Then let’s just call it something old that’s been repackaged,” he said. “Either way, it’s in your best interest to pass it on.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because it’ll cut your life debt short and give you enough money to leave Creije for good.”

Tavia bristled.

Like every busker in Uskhanya, she owed a life debt to the Kingpin. He saved kids from the streets and in exchange they gave him their childhood, because children made the best crooks, lulling anyone into anything.

Sweet faces with deadly magic.

It was only when a busker turned eighteen, became an adult, and aged out of their childhood debt, that they were given two choices: leave and never come back, or take everything they'd learned and use it to become a career criminal, swell in coin.

Most buskers went for option two, but Tavia was counting the time until it was over.

Just seven more months to go.

She'd already spent six years under the Kingpin's thumb, forced to do his dirty work as payment for not starving to death. Forced to jump when she was told and ruin lives on the whim of a power-crazed crook. Never free to do the magic she wanted, when she wanted. Trapped in the city her muma died in, unable to leave and explore the charms the rest of the realms surely held.

As far as Tavia was concerned, she was little more than a captive of the Kingpin's command.

"That's not funny," she said. "You don't just wipe out a life debt to Dante Ashwood."

The crowd hissed as one of the fighters fell to their knees.

"It's not a joke," Wesley said, though even he didn't sound sure. "The Kingpin's consort just told me there'd be a day less on your debt for every vial you sell. Make sure you give it to the good kind of customer though, will you? The people who can afford to keep buying when we officially bring it to market."

"So not the good kind," Tavia said. "The wealthy kind."

"Isn't that what I said?"

Tavia resisted the urge to glare.

There were plenty of wealthy folk in Creije, but these days most of them were also wide-eyed romantics, or tourists who wandered from the floating railways with thirsty hearts and idealism ripe on their tongues. Creije was a place for dreamers and Tavia stole enough from people that she thought she ought to draw the line at dreams.

Though if she were to say that to Wesley, he'd laugh and tell her that a mark was a mark and could never be something so complicated as innocent. Even so, Tavia had decided that the best way to survive after Creije—which was an important distinction to surviving *in* Creije—was to cling to any morality she could salvage.

"People have been bottling happiness for decades," Tavia said. "You haven't told me what's so great about this version."

"Don't fix what isn't broken," Wesley said.

Tavia cast a meaningful glance in his direction. "There isn't a thing in this realm that isn't broken. Including the people."

Which meant her, too, she supposed. After all, buskers weren't exactly the poster children for sunny upbringings.

For a second, Wesley paused and Tavia half-expected him to call her out for being sage in a place like the Crook, in front of a person like him, while two people pummeled each other with tricks and fists in the background.

Tavia expected him to give her a look that said she was too serious sometimes and not serious enough every other time.

Instead, Wesley brought another clover to his lips and turned his attention back to the fight.

He didn't look at her again.

"If that's all," Wesley said, "you can see yourself out."

2

TAVIA

“You’re a cheat,” Saxony said, throwing a small pouch against Tavia’s chest.

Tavia grinned as she caught it. The pouch was a little charred around the edges and carried the distinctly woody smell of a fire charm.

A solid win for the day.

“You’re such a sore loser,” Tavia said.

Saxony gave her the finger by way of reply. Her ring, emblazoned with leaves, curled over her knuckle and then circled in brightly colored vines up to her wrist. It was a fascinating piece of jewelry, equal parts delicate and deadly, just like most things in the realm.

Tavia threw her new fire charm in the air, letting the magic jingle each time it bounced back into her grasp. The two of them had been making nonsense bets for half an hour and she was up by three.

“Victory is sweet,” Tavia said. “You really *can’t* have too much of a good thing.”

“There’s nothing good in there,” Saxony told her, and then, a little resentful, “That’s why I’m so put out for losing it.”

Saxony let out a wistful sigh and tipped her head back against the temple wall, her tight black curls splayed across the brick, threaded with gold coins, which was all the rage back in Rishiya, where Saxony was from.

Tavia smirked and leaned beside her, letting the walls of the old temple scrape across her jacket.

She liked it best when the days ended this way, with a friend by her side rather than an enemy, which was so often the case. During days like this, Creije smelled of magic and endlessness, and Tavia got a giddy feeling in her chest when she set up her stall at the magic market. When the hustle and glow of Creije streamed across her skin and she could close her eyes and hear the cogs of the city churning.

Tavia liked that it was never too quiet and never too repetitive, and there was beauty in the streams of water that curled through the city and played host to the floating railways. In the sprawling marketplaces, surrounded by pathways that served as portals from one stretch of the city to another in a glorious labyrinth, or the jugglers that performed against a backdrop of street art as bright as the buildings.

If Tavia wasn't forced to stay here, she might just find it wonderful.

"Don't make bets you can't win," Tavia said. "I think I've pretty much cleaned you out."

Saxony shoved her hands into her pockets, in what Tavia assumed was the only way to stop from throwing her another filthy gesture.

"Another round," Saxony said. "Winner takes all."

Tavia laughed. "I'll pass."

"*Sugj*," Saxony said, which Tavia was pretty sure was Rishiyat slang for *coward*.

She elbowed her friend in the ribs. "Don't insult me in your farm lingo," Tavia said. "I'm not scared, I'm just busy."

She pointed to the sky, where the sun was low enough for night to crawl into view and the clouds had already started to spill across rooftops, obscuring any chance of moonlight.

Creije was such a city of juxtapositions and though the day was full of wonder, when night came it welcomed the shadows with open arms, delighting in the wicked things it could hide.

"Everyone's busy," Saxony said. "Everyone always has a job to do."

"*You* have a job to do," Tavia said. "Unless you're going to march into the underboss's office, look him straight in the eye, and quit."

Saxony scoffed. "The day I look Wesley in the eye is the day I lose my mind."

“Afraid you’ll fall madly in love with his baby browns?”

“I’m afraid of what I’ll see in them,” Saxony said. “Haven’t you heard that eyes are the windows to the soul?”

Tavia pushed herself from the wall and gave Saxony a smile that was as criminal as she was. “Wesley Thornton Walcott doesn’t have a soul,” she said.

“Speaking of.” Saxony nodded uneasily into the distance. “There’s your first customer of the night.”

Tavia followed her gaze to a man lingering at the edge of the temple steps. His face was obscured by a large top hat that hid everything except his mustache, but Tavia took note of his suit and how his broad chest puffed out, like just standing was something he excelled at. Tavia hated men for a lot less than standing like that.

She glanced back at Saxony, giving her a small salute.

“Duty calls,” she said.

Saxony didn’t offer her a smile in return.

For someone who was always so curious about magic, who seemed to love it as much as she did, Saxony never quite liked watching it being sold on the streets, given to the desperate and the dastardly.

“I need a little luck,” the strange man said to Tavia, once she had approached him.

He thrust out a handful of coin.

“That’s market magic.” Tavia was surprised at the innocence of the request. “Come back when the sun’s up.”

“Not the good kind.” The man looked over his shoulder, checking they were still alone in the darkness. He was clearly not used to crossing over to the wrong side of the bridge. “I know someone who needs to be taught a lesson.”

Tavia’s surprise faded, along with her smile.

Not so innocent after all, then.

Maybe such a thing didn’t exist. Wesley told her once—told her constantly, actually—that there wasn’t a person alive who couldn’t be corrupted by power.

There are no good people, he said. Just ones who haven't made bad choices yet.

Tavia really hated it when Wesley was right.

"I've got two vials left," she said, her voice low.

Not that there was anybody around the derelict temple to hear them. Except maybe the gods.

"Everything in your hand."

The man's jaw dropped. "For two vials? Can't we slice another arrangement?"

"Sure," Tavia said, ever accommodating. "Give me half of what you've got and I'll arrange for you to have one vial."

The man sneered, but kept his hand out.

Tavia reached into her backpack, which held the mix of dark elixirs and charms never sold during the magic markets, from seeds that grew indestructible blades to voodoo dolls with a set of pins included. Some were not even magic to be used, but collected and put on shelves for people to admire alongside trophies.

Magic made to collect dust, destined for a life inside finely crafted cabinets, too valuable to bother using.

In the darkness, Tavia had to rely more on the shape of the magic than what she could see: the different cuts of the vials, the smoothness of charms and how some of the loose trick dust felt like liquid in her hands, while others were as gritty as she was.

When she handed the luck to the man, he sloshed the liquid inside to check the quality. Which was a little ridiculous, because with bad luck the worse the better. That's what happened when you fermented clovers for long enough. It was kind of the point.

"Don't you worry about getting caught with all this?" he asked. "Doyen Fenna Schulze is looking to have you lot thrown into a cell."

Tavia took in a breath. She should have known this man was the government type. Nobody outside of politics had a mustache like that.

"Our fearless leader is cracking down on the criminal element," Tavia said, all faux innocence. "I'm more than lawful."

Though Tavia spun crap better than most, even she had a hard time selling that line. Everyone knew that a busker at night was up to no good, and since her election to Realm Doyen, Fenna Schulze was on a crusade to prove it.

Tavia was kind of rooting for her. Maybe once the Doyen was through, no more kids like Tavia would be pulled from the streets and taught to be crooks.

“Is there anything else you might be interested in?” Tavia asked.

Her hand grazed the new elixir in the corner of her backpack and an odd feeling of dread cast over her.

Happiness, Wesley had said, his promise like an echo in Tavia’s mind.

One day less on her life debt for every piece she sold.

And as soon as Tavia was free, she’d leave Creije and all of this behind. It didn’t matter if she had a single coin to her name; she’d travel the realms and give offerings to gods she couldn’t remember the names of. Sail across the Onnela Sea, only ever laying anchor to steady her feet. She’d travel to her muma’s home realm of Volo and the city of Gila she was born in, and maybe find a family or a purpose.

Tavia pulled out the vial. It felt oily and slick, like she shouldn’t even be touching it.

“I have everything I want,” the man said. “Unless you’re offering yourself.”

Tavia’s jaw tightened.

Usually she could handle just about anything people threw at her, whether it was charms or punches, but the notion of being bought and sold—passing through hands like magic and whatever else the rich liked to collect—was different. It was different because Tavia didn’t belong to herself yet. Not like the man in front of her, in his fine suit, with his fine, fine mustache.

He had enough money and freedom to go where he liked and treat people how he liked. He thought he was better than her.

That she was just some petty criminal who’d be stuck selling charms forever.

Tavia clenched the vial.

"This elixir is the latest thing to hit the market," she said, letting her features fall into practiced complacency.

What was that line Wesley liked to feed her?

The customer is always right.

Except in this case, of course. When the customer was clearly a bastard. She hoped the magic came with awful side effects.

"It can make all of your fantasies come true," Tavia said. "Think of it like a wish-granter. A dream-giver."

She shook the vial and the magic glowed purple. It felt lighter than any elixir she had handled before, like if she popped the cork it might just carry through the air.

The hunger in the man's eyes was fast, transforming him from trite arrogance to the kind of curious Tavia could make use of. This was what she did best. Lied and conned people. Got them hooked on dark magic and prayed to the Many Gods not to hold it against her. Prayed that her muma would forgive her for sullyng her memory.

"You'd be the first person in all four realms to have it," Tavia said.

The man pulled out more coin, enthralled. "Would this cover it?"

Tavia nodded and only moments after she passed it to him did he scurry away like an insect, afraid she might change her mind. She almost sneered at his retreating shadow, hoping with all her might that the magic would give him a hangover to rival any other.

"What was *that*?" Saxony asked.

Tavia tried to avoid her gaze.

She hadn't told Saxony about the bargain to ease her life debt and if she did, Saxony would surely rip her a new one for trusting Wesley.

"Some new magic from the underboss," was all Tavia said.

"*New* magic," Saxony repeated, eyebrows flaring.

"Different magic," Tavia corrected, because they both knew the former was impossible.

"You're acting weird." Saxony peeked into Tavia's backpack. "What's it really?"

“Whatever they want it to be.”

Saxony gave her a look, but Tavia only shrugged.

“It’s harmless. Wesley said to think of it like happiness.”

Though she suspected there was more to it, Tavia tried not to care. Caring in Creije never ended well and the more magic Tavia sold, the sooner she could escape and never have to think about it again.

Saxony held out a hand. “Give it over.”

Sighing, Tavia pulled another vial from her backpack.

Saxony was always intrigued by the magic Tavia dealt, especially the kind of magic she dealt after sunset, and Tavia had gotten used to her many questions. If she was honest, sometimes she liked being seen as the library of knowledge for magic, offering her friend answers and explanations as though it wasn’t just her job, but her calling.

“Did the underboss say it was new or different?” Saxony asked. “What were his exact words?”

Tavia arched an eyebrow. “Since when do you care about anything Wesley has to say?”

Saxony examined the elixir, moving it from side to side as the magic swarmed. “Did he say it was dangerous?”

“Just that it tailors to the customer. I haven’t got specifics. You know how vague Wesley likes to be. He just said to sell it.”

Saxony nodded, the disdain curling her top lip. “The underboss loves a good secret.”

“A bad one too,” Tavia said.

“New magic, though,” Saxony mused. “I guess there’s only one way to find out.”

And then she popped the cork.

Tavia blanched.

Selling a strange elixir to a strange man was one thing, but she didn’t trust the Kingpin nearly enough to give it to someone she loved.

“Saxony, don’t,” Tavia said, making a grab for it.

But before Tavia could get out another word, Saxony put the vial to her lips and tipped her head back.

In moments, the whole thing was drained.

Saxony blinked as the vial fell against the stone, a single spark of magic left hanging from her lips.

"Are you okay?" Tavia asked, panicked.

Saxony swallowed and her head lolled, eyes fluttering and then sharpening to near-black pits. She swayed a little, not unsteady, but like she thought the world had tilted and decided to follow suit.

"Everything is fine," Saxony said.

Her words were pronounced and purposeful, the Rishiyat inflection nearly gone from her voice.

Tavia felt cold.

There was a new emptiness around Saxony's eyes, *inside* her eyes, shooting straight through her, making every part of her still and blank. Leaving only a smile, halved and ghostly.

"Are you sure you're good?" Tavia asked.

"I feel good," Saxony said. "Don't I look good?"

Tavia wasn't sure what to say to that.

"Though now you mention it," Saxony pressed a hand to her temple. "I think there's someone . . ."

She wavered on her feet before grabbing a hand around the back of her neck.

Tavia thought instantly of a puppet on a string, trying to hold itself up.

"It's too loud!" Saxony yelled, and in the time it took for Tavia to blink, she had a charm in her hands.

Tavia didn't know anyone other than Wesley with hands that fast.

"Saxony!" Tavia looked around to make sure nobody was in sight. "If the amityguards catch us flashing dark magic around like that, then we're done for."

But Saxony wasn't listening. She brought the charm to her temple, hands shaking.

"I'm too loud," Saxony said, and then, as if correcting herself, "*She's* too loud."

She swallowed and the light from a nearby streetlamp flickered with her

breath, casting a sequential torch onto the lines that made up her face. In the night, Saxony's freckles almost looked like blood splatters.

"There's someone in my head," she said, squeezing her eyes shut.

It was only when they opened again that Tavia saw the stillness. That ghost of a smile.

Her chest tugged.

There was something familiar about it—about that damned *look*—and her heart thundered.

"We need to find Wesley," Tavia said. "Whatever this is, he can fix it."

Saxony didn't answer.

There was blood curling from her nose and when she lifted a hand to wipe it away, her eyes widened.

"Tavia," she said. "Run."

But before she could even process the words, let alone think about reacting to them, Saxony thrust her arm out and Tavia flew across the ground.

She barely had time to register the pain before a beam of light shot from Saxony's palm.

Tavia rolled across the ground to avoid being hit again.

"*Djnff*," she swore.

She hadn't even noticed the charm up Saxony's sleeve until it was too late.

Saxony wasn't a busker and she wasn't trained in magic, so how was she suddenly so quick?

Tavia scrambled to her feet and ran behind a nearby pillar, dodging another skewer of light.

It shattered into the temple wall beside her.

Sooner or later, people were going to hear the scuffle, or see the blinding lights of magic. If the crowds swarmed, then the amityguards wouldn't be far behind.

And the last thing anyone with black magic wanted was to be caught by the amityguards.

“Many Gods damn this day,” Tavia seethed, ripping her hand from her pocket and pulling out a trick bag.

Half magic, half firecracker.

Tavia threw her shoulder back and sent the explosive hurtling toward her friend. It burst at Saxony’s feet with enough sparks to set her shoes on fire.

Saxony let out a furious cry, jumping backward.

“Get a grip!” Tavia yelled.

“I’m trying,” Saxony said. “I don’t want to hurt you. I . . .”

She trailed off and Tavia wished she could remember the name of at least one of the gods this side of the Onnela Sea, so that she could insult them personally.

With her backpack thrown across the temple steps, Tavia fumbled in her pockets once more, searching for the few pieces of magic she had on standby for if somebody tried to kill her. Though usually those people weren’t her *friends*.

Probably because she didn’t have any other friends.

The moment Tavia’s hand touched the invisibility charm, she felt cold. The bead was dewy between her fingers and then completely fluid as it ran up her arm, soaking her skin. It itched a little, but Tavia held back from scratching it away. Instead, she closed her eyes and let the prickling embed into her bones.

There was a rhythm to it, each sting timed to a pulse. Tavia counted in her head.

Math. She always liked the math.

Tavia squeezed her hands into fists and then dissolved before Saxony’s eyes.

It wasn’t a pretty sight.

Tavia had done it a dozen times and it never ceased to make her queasy. The first to go was her skin, paling to reveal the pink of her muscles, then her organs and vessels, shriveling like tree roots until all that was left was polished bone.

Saxony blinked and, in that moment, Tavia disappeared completely.

“Are you still there?” Saxony asked. “Tavia, you need to help me.”

I will if you give me a damn minute, she thought.

Tavia stepped toward Saxony and reached into her pocket for the last dregs of her magic.

The trick bag wasn’t elegant, but desperate times called for desperate magic. Tavia poured the contents of the drawstring into her palm and blew. The moment the sand-grain crystals whirled through the air Saxony stilled, the breeze washing each particle over her skin until there wasn’t a part of her left that didn’t carry a spark of starlight.

Saxony opened her mouth to speak.

And then collapsed onto the ground, her head hitting the concrete.

Tavia closed the gap between them, the temporary invisibility shattering around her. She nudged Saxony’s leg with the edge of her boot to be sure the paralyzer took, and when Saxony didn’t move, Tavia took in a grateful breath.

“What was that?” she asked, though her friend had lost consciousness.

Tavia knelt down beside her.

And then she saw it.

So small and almost hidden under the fold of Saxony’s jaw, a vivid pink against the deep brown of her skin, a mark that had been seared into Tavia’s mind for years.

The clearest and most awful memory she had of her muma.

Don’t cry, ciolo. It’ll all be okay.

“How did you—?”

Tavia broke off as warning buzzers shrieked through the streets.

The amityguards were coming for them.

“*Skeht*,” Tavia swore.

If she and Saxony got hauled to the precinct, then Wesley was going to have to haul them back out, and with Doyen Schulze monitoring them all so closely, he wouldn’t be happy to do it.

Tavia looked down at Saxony.

The paralyzer would still take another hour to wear off and it wasn't like Tavia could carry her.

The warning buzzers grew louder.

She swallowed and took in the mark on Saxony's neck once more.

And then, bleeding and cursing in equal amounts, Tavia ran, leaving her friend behind.

3

WESLEY

Wesley Thornton Walcott had killed eleven men.

Most of them were not good men. A few of them were not altogether bad men. But all of them were men who stood in the Kingpin's way.

Of course, eleven was not a particularly large number compared to how many people everyone seemed to think Wesley had killed, and since it also included the old underboss—who was quite possibly more of a bastard than he was—Wesley thought only ten should count.

"Skeht," Stelios said. "Take it out."

It had been ten minutes since the knife went in, and though Stelios had given up trying to pull it out, he hadn't given up on pleading for someone else to.

He was on his knees and sweating, the tongue of his tie licking up the blood that drained from his hand. Wesley was hoping it wouldn't stain. He quite liked the knife and the table and the carpet, and right now his fellow underboss was dripping blood all over them.

"I wasn't planning to make you a permanent fixture in my club," Wesley told him. He watched his carpet continue to smudge. "But we might as well finish our conversation, while I've got you here."

Stelios squeezed his eyes shut and bared his teeth in a gold-rimmed sneer.

"It's only a matter of time," Ilaria said. "The Kingpin's new elixir will get to us eventually. You're just cutting the wait short by passing it on."

Wesley placed a clover on his tongue, considering.

“So you want me to do you a favor,” he said.

“It’s professional courtesy,” Ilaria said. “We may all enjoy taking a stab at each other every now and again”—she looked down at Stelios’s hand, a little smug—“but when it comes down to it, we’re one and the same. We’re all underbosses in this realm. We’re a team.”

Her words made for a nice sentiment, but they were a sentiment all the same. Loyalty or betrayal. Allies or enemies. Wesley didn’t think anything could be that black and white. Even this meeting, which happened each month like clockwork, had turned so quickly from touching base in the regular fashion, to a near-ambush, with Wesley’s fellow underbosses clambering in a tag team, trying relentlessly to sway him into giving them magic they hadn’t earned.

The elixir the Kingpin had handed exclusively, personally, to him.

“You’re like hungry animals, begging for scraps,” Wesley said. “Why not just wait until Ashwood feeds you himself if you’re so sure he will?”

Ilaria all but snarled. “You forget who you’re dealing with.”

But that wasn’t true and Wesley smiled to show it.

“If there’s one thing I never do,” he said, “it’s forget.”

Because he remembered just fine how all three of these underbosses—Uskhanya’s most deadly, before Wesley had arrived—thought him unworthy of their inner circle. It was almost funny to think of it now, how they’d looked down on him, as they did underbosses of the far less grand central cities, thinking he was too young, not ravaged enough by sin.

Now they grew nervous whenever he paused.

Now they saw what he could do with a city under his command.

Of course, just because the underbosses were wary, that didn’t mean they weren’t still dangerous. Nobody was entrusted to run the magic trade for an entire city because they were good and reasonable. Wesley knew that better than anyone.

In fact, he was acutely aware of how awful the people in front of him were.

Crooks and killers, who'd stop at nothing to rise to the top.
And Wesley was the worst of them.

Casim smirked. "Maybe we don't have your oh-so-special elixir because it's just not good enough for the rest of us."

"Or maybe," Wesley said, "I'm the Kingpin's favorite."

Ilaria sucked on her teeth and the look she gave him was tired and unflattering. "Just tell us what the magic does and what the Kingpin is planning. We outnumber you, after all."

Wesley sighed.

He really didn't like it when people implied threats instead of making them. It seemed like a waste of good conversation.

Better to kill them all and just be done with it, the voice inside him whispered.

Wesley adjusted his cuff links, and the air around him grew cold, his magic humming with the possibility of such destruction.

"It's a little rude to come into someone's house and make demands like that," he said.

Wesley slid a hand into his pocket and thumbed the tiny piece of metal he always carried with him.

Casim shifted uncomfortably.

"Someone back down," Stelios said, wincing. "I'm not having this blade in my hand all night because you lot want to prove your power."

"I don't need to prove anything," Wesley said.

Though part of him always thought he did.

Wesley leaned forward and stood the small silver bullet in the center of the table.

He inclined his head upward and it rose obediently.

"You're going to shoot us with a magic bullet?" Ilaria asked.

She stared at him, ripe with disbelief, as though she had only just remembered what a bastard Wesley was.

It wasn't her fault, of course. Wesley had two faces, and he was wearing a far nicer one when the underbosses first arrived. Now the face that belonged alongside his reputation appeared, smug and a little dead around the eyes.

Tavia would have hated it.

“Do it.” Stelios laughed and banged his uninjured hand against the table. “It’s about time my blood had some company.”

“That’s a little much, even for you,” Ilaria said, eyeing Wesley. “Think carefully about what you’re doing.”

Wesley ran a thumb over his lip and slid as far back as his chair would allow. The bullet teetered. “I am thinking,” he said. “About how much of you guys I’m willing to have scrubbed off my floor.”

Ilaria’s laugh was brittle. “Just like Ashwood’s lapdog to try to bite off more than he can chew.”

Wesley exhaled and without warning, without him really meaning for it to, the bullet shot through the air, spitting through the narrow gap between Ilaria’s arm and her ribs. She jumped up as it tore into the sofa behind her and continued its blazing path until the mirror at the far end of the room shattered.

“Are you out of your mind?” Ilaria roared.

It was a fair question.

“You could have killed me!”

“I’m aware of that,” Wesley said. “I just wanted to make sure you were.”

Ilaria only glared, which meant that Wesley had made his point.

Perhaps the underbosses were resentful that the Kingpin gave him his pick of the magic and that this new elixir, this thing Ashwood was so excited about, shrouded in awful mystery, was only Wesley’s to sell. Perhaps he should have made nice and fed their egos. But the truth was, they weren’t allies and they weren’t on the same side.

Wesley had earned every advantage he had over them.

Creije was thriving because of him. The city was Uskhanya’s magical mecca because of him. Wesley may not have been in the position for as long as the other underbosses, he may not have killed and tortured as many people as they had, ruined as many lives and burned as many bridges, but he’d done more in those short years to help his city than they could in their entire lives.

Wesley loved Creije, and these people were too awful to love anything.

He picked up the half-empty decanter of Cloverye and refilled his glass. The wind called in through the open window, mingling with every trick Wesley had in his pocket, telling him it was time to go.

"If that's all," he said. "Then you'll have to excuse me. I have places to be and a city to run. I'm sure at least one of you knows what that's like."

Ilaria slammed her fists on the table.

"What happens on the day you don't have any more of the Kingpin's fancy magic to throw around?" she asked. "Because that's the day when we'll come for your city, Walcott. What are you going to do then?"

Wesley stood, straightening out his suit sleeves. "I suppose I'll just have to kill you the old-fashioned way."

"There's only one of you and three of us."

Wesley looked over to Stelios, still bleeding onto his carpet. "Two and a half," he said, and headed for the door.

The moment Wesley turned from the other underbosses, the shroud of magic he kept around himself began to hum, like it always did when his back was turned, ready to protect him in case someone decided to stick a knife in it.

Wesley crossed the Crook with its song in his ears, and pushed open the door to his office.

Of all the ways for a night to end, that wasn't the worst. Nobody had tried to kill him and he'd managed to walk away making everyone think he might just kill them.

All in all, he'd call it a success.

The underbosses needed to know that he wouldn't cower to their demands, because if Wesley gave them the smallest bit of slack, they would use the rope to hang him.

They were envious and Wesley knew it, not just because Ashwood favored him, but because the other Uskhanyan cities were such a stark juxtaposition to his. Places like Ilaria's Eltria to the east, packed with concrete buildings hidden amongst the clouds, sandwiched too close to look like any-

thing other than a jigsaw, broken only by flashing signs that advertised food or pleasure. The southern city of Kythnu that Stelios watched over was older and brimming with a very boring kind of culture that made for pretty architecture and not much else. It was warm, always, but the glow of the sun was the only color in its stark expanse of white buildings. And then there was Rishiya, Casim's territory to the west, the most war-devastated of the realm, where farmers worked the land and buildings were covered in greenery.

They were nothing compared to Creije, where buildings were a mix of colors spread lavishly across the city, so when the sun hit them just right the windows cast paintings on the ground.

Wesley sat on the edge of his desk and reached into his pocket for another clover.

Behind him, the painting he inherited from the old underboss began to shake and Wesley eyed it with a curious smile. It depicted the four elements of the Many Gods, their symbols like watchful eyes that forever despaired over Wesley's secrets and, nestled above them, a shadow moon in the drawn sky.

In the old days, it was called the Crafter Moon and was part of some sacred ritual Wesley had read about, though he couldn't remember in which book. He did remember that the text said whenever a shadow moon appeared, magic increased tenfold. It was only a story, he supposed, and since Crafters were no longer around to ask, he couldn't be sure whether it was true. Still, Wesley always liked the idea of a magical moon imbuing people with power.

It was why he kept the painting, long after he disposed of its owner.

Wesley watched, patiently, as the image continued to shake until it finally creaked open. From the darkness behind, a face slipped through.

"Sir," Falk said, quiet and cautious. "I think I've had a breakthrough."

Though Falk was older than Wesley, it was not by much, and yet still his face was worn with magic. Stretched and then scrunched, making everything about him pointed, from his lips to his small nose.

"A breakthrough," Wesley repeated.

Falk nodded and Wesley's lips drew into a smile.

The other underbosses were so concerned with the Kingpin's elixir, with the things that Ashwood gave to Wesley, that they never thought to worry about the things Wesley would make for himself.

The weapons and the magic, and the infinite possibility they held when paired together.

"Show me," Wesley said.

Falk pushed the door of the painting back wider, erasing the shadow moon from view.

Wesley pillowed his hands into his pockets, and with a whistle to match his magic, he stepped through.

4

TAVIA

Tavia hitched a hand on her waist and looked up.

Saxony's cell was most likely on the sixth floor and Tavia hated heights. She also hated climbing and any task that required athleticism beyond street performing. She had no rope or wall-scaling materials and she certainly didn't have any acrobatic skill.

But she could fly.

Tavia had stolen the hover charms from the old underboss on her fourteenth birthday, as a present to herself, because though she didn't like heights, she did like the idea of being able to escape at a moment's notice.

Ironical that she was now going to use that very thing to break *into* a cell.

Tavia rubbed her hands together, letting the charm warm in her palms, and when she felt air beneath her feet, she winced. She tried her best not to look down.

"Just stare straight," she told herself, counting each of the windows that passed.

The wind swiped against her feet and Tavia jolted forward, hands slamming into the brick.

"Damn."

She dug her nails into the wall. Her feet dangled perilously.

Five. She had floated five floors up and the ledge of the sixth window,

where Saxony was sure to be, hung above her like a tease. That was where they put all the magic junkies on a comedown and so it was scarcely guarded.

Tavia hitched in a breath and she could feel the hover charm faltering from under her—it was *all* she could feel under her. Any second now she was going to fall and break her neck. Or get caught by the amityguards, who'd no doubt tattle to Wesley before they told their captain.

Tavia reached for the window.

Her fingers skimmed the ledge and she gritted her teeth, digging the steel knives of her boots into the wall. Then, summoning a rarely used strength, she hoisted herself up, hands quickly curling around cell bars of the window in a vise grip.

Now she looked down.

“Oh, *skeht*,” Tavia said, eyeing the black cobblestone below.

It was a lot higher looking down than it had been looking up.

Tavia shuffled closer to the bars so that she could see inside.

The holding cell was significantly larger than her bedroom, but that wasn't saying much. It was made from patchwork concrete, with large drips hanging from the ceiling like spears. To the left was a metal toilet barely off the ground, with a tap screwed to the wall beside it. Three mattresses were lined up on the floor, their sheets weathered and damp. On the one closest to the cell door was a man who was definitely not Saxony.

He was wearing the purple jumpsuit most buskers found themselves in at one point or another. Even Tavia had spent a day in the holding cells, dressed in her prison worst, while she waited for Wesley to get out of his meeting and lend her some pull. In Creije, you were guilty until someone faked enough evidence to prove otherwise.

“Hey,” Tavia said.

She didn't bother whispering. She knew the guards' schedules and they wouldn't do their rounds for another eleven minutes.

The man flinched, but kept his hunched back to Tavia.

She sighed, inching closer, keeping her hold on the bars and not daring to look down again. Any minute now she was going to lose her nerve.

“Hey,” she said again. “Has anyone else been brought into the cells tonight?”

The man’s head angled in her direction. The light was steady but dim, a single bulb hanging from string that brushed the floor. When he turned, Tavia had to squint to make out his face, and it wasn’t until he rose from the mattress and walked toward the window that she finally recognized him.

The man she had sold the elixir to earlier that night, before Saxony downed a vial for herself. The man with arrogant eyes and a haughty top hat and a mustache that was now thick with blood.

And what made things worse, was that Tavia somehow knew that blood wasn’t his.

“Are you here to save me?” he asked, and then, far graver, “Everyone keeps screaming.” He looked down at his hands. “They say I killed someone. I’ve never killed someone before.”

Tavia opened her mouth, but no words came.

Whatever had happened to him, the amityguards didn’t even bother to clean him up before throwing him into the holding cell. They’d stripped him down, thrown on the Creijen colors, and let him stew.

“I’m looking for my friend,” Tavia said, trying to pull herself together. “The amityguards picked her up outside the old temple. Have you seen them bring anyone else in?”

The man shook his head.

“What’s your name?” Tavia asked.

“Deniel,” he said. “Deniel Emilsson.”

“What happened to you?”

Part of her hoped he wouldn’t say.

The elixir. The elixir. The elixir.

“I met you earlier,” Deniel said, frowning as though that was the most bizarre thing. “I wanted . . . There was magic and you said it was a dream.”

He swallowed, took another step forward, so the light hit his face like a beam.

Tavia caught sight of his neck and when she did she felt like crying.

He had it too, the very thing her nightmares were made of.

The mark of the magic sickness.

The mark of her mother's doom.

It was barely the size of a finger, shaped almost like a doorway, with a line across the center that broke left and then right at the singed edges. It was a sign of the dead and the damned.

"There was a voice," Deniel said.

His hands closed over Tavia's, pinning her to the steel bars. Then his nose began to bleed and all she could do was stare.

"It whispered for me to do awful things," he said. "But when I tried not to, it stopped whispering and started screaming." He squeezed his hands tighter over Tavia's and she hissed in pain. "It told me to kill that amityguard."

Tavia pulled against his grip. "Let go," she said.

"Tell me you believe me." Deniel was crying, the blood on his cheeks rolling down with the tears. "I couldn't control myself. It was like someone was there telling me what to do and I couldn't think of anything past it. I just *had* to. You—"

Deniel stopped, hands going slack over Tavia's. For a moment, she thought maybe he was going to pass out. There was a dead look in his eyes and the corners were inked black just like Saxony's had been.

"What did you give me?" he asked, quiet and broken.

Tavia paled. She wanted to know the answer to that too, because if what this man said was true, then it damn sure wasn't happiness.

"Busker."

Tavia looked up at the man, at Deniel Emilsson, his face pale and his bloodied lips drawn to a thin line. He knew he was destined for death, or things far worse.

"What was in that magic?" he asked.

Honestly, Tavia said, "I don't know."

A tear slipped down the side of Deniel's face. His eyes searched the floor, as though written somewhere on the uneven cement there would be a spell to undo it all. Take back the day and whatever horrors he'd committed in the name of a magic Tavia conned him into taking.

Deniel's hands curled back over hers. His head shook slowly from side to side.

"You did this to me," he said. "This is all your fault."

And then he ripped Tavia's hands from the bars and pushed her from the ledge.

5

WESLEY

Wesley had a secret.

Actually, he had hundreds, but there was one in particular that nobody could ever know, and it was that Wesley was not entirely in his right mind.

People threw the word *crazy* around a lot, and Many Gods knew they all thought Wesley was criminally insane. They just didn't know how right they were. Because for years now, Wesley had had voices in his head.

Specifically, one voice.

An impossible voice.

The voice of a girl he knew long ago, who even after she was dead and gone had left her voice to get stuck behind. Perhaps to remind Wesley that he didn't have a conscience and should never try to find one.

She functioned as white noise most days. Images and a sense, a knowing, that she was there, listening to his every move, and he had to be on guard, constantly, to shield himself from her. But every so often, when Wesley wasn't concentrating hard enough, her voice broke through and took on a life of its own.

She scolded him when he was too good and cheered when he was very, very bad, and Wesley didn't know how to stop it. He didn't know how to stop her.

All he could do was push her down into the back of his mind, adjust his tie, fix his cuff links, and *focus*. Bury her deep until she decided to rise to the surface again.

His very own ghost.

Wesley looked at the clock and watched the seconds tick away.

The headquarters for the Kingpin's consort was a grandiose building that wisped out on one side. The sole purpose of a consort was to act as a go-between for Ashwood and the other Kingpins, shaking hands on their deals and ferrying their secrets. She was a cross between a spy and a diplomat, and rumor had it that she kept stashes of the realm's darkest magic in a host of safes. It was a busking legend all of the kids told, though Wesley had never put much stock in it.

Still, the building was grand because the consort liked to think she was. It sat brazenly on the wrong side of the bridge, each of the windows a ruffle of feathers, and to the right it bowed and dipped like the arc of a broad chest.

It was great and mighty, in an obvious way Wesley had never been fond of, but it was also sly and sneaky in a way he quite liked: to the rest of Creije, and especially to the Realm Doyen, this was nothing more than a magic factory where legal elixirs were extracted and repackaged.

The good guys just didn't know about a few hidden floors.

Across the room, a doorway bubbled and Wesley glanced up to see a thin man step out from it. Reynholt Leifsson, the secretary of the building.

He was dressed all in black, hair slicked to one side, his skin so chalky that from a distance he looked a little bit like a floating head making his way toward Wesley.

"Mr. Thornton Walcott," Leifsson said in a smooth Creijen rendition. He extended a gloved hand, which Wesley did not take, and dipped his head.

Wesley glanced down at his gloves and raised an eyebrow. "You're always wearing those."

"One finds it's best not to leave fingerprints when dealing with dark magic."

"That's easily taken care of." Wesley closed the button of his blazer and stood. "If someone doesn't have the skill not to leave a print, you can always cut off their fingers."

The ghost in his mind applauded, as she always did when Wesley was awful.

Leifsson blinked. “Yes,” he said, “that would be quite effective.” He extended a hand over to the doorway he’d emerged from—“Right this way”—and turned on his polished heel, leading Wesley toward the mirror.

Wesley took in the cold gray rendition of himself—the bow tie that signaled this was going to be an odd day indeed—and reached out a hand. The mirror erupted around his touch, ripples curling from his fingertips until his face was obscured.

This was the part he could never get used to. The doorway to his office at the Crook was similar, in that it read palms like any system worth its salt, but this did more than that. It read the person, their intentions and, most importantly, their loyalties. As far as Wesley knew, Ashwood was the only one in the realms to have developed something so sophisticated.

Wesley kept his fingers to the mirror and though it took a few moments, once the magic confirmed his allegiance, the glass stilled.

Wesley slid his hands into his pockets and stepped into his reflection.

The hall on the other side was long enough that it seemed to narrow to a point, and the walls were a solid line of mirrors, marked by silver handles at odd junctions, with no clear lines separating one doorway from the next.

Leifsson inclined his head toward the right and placed a firm grip around the first handle. “After you,” he said, and the doorway dissolved before them.

The room was as much red as it was black, with walls made from the same glass Wesley had come through. The carpet was a midnight ruby and what little light there was came from charcoal-colored candles that hung from glass chains, and the subsequent reflections their dim flames cast.

In the center of the room, a dark figure reclined and the shadows around him cooed.

Leifsson backed slowly from the room.

“Wesley,” the Kingpin said.

His name repeated in an echo.

Dante Ashwood was there and he was not.

He was a man and he was not.

Wesley could see the outlines of his top hat and the streamlined jacket that pinched across his body. But his face—Wesley had never seen the Kingpin's face. Nobody had. In place of skin and eyes there was darkness and smoke, only the faintest smudge of his lips was visible, and the orb of his black cane shone under his transparently pale palm.

Around him, the air flickered like flames.

Though each of the four realms had a Doyen to lead, three also had a Kingpin with a capital *K* that stood for criminal. While the Realm Doyens ran things aboveground, the Kingpins ran the black magic trade, with underbosses to manage their many cities and buskers recruited to sell their dirty magic and consorts to be their messengers. But though the other Kingpins were powerful and evil, possibly soulless, they were still undoubtedly human.

All except for Ashwood.

Not a human, but a god, his ghost said.

Wesley ignored her, as he always tried to, and bowed to the Kingpin.

Ashwood laughed at the formality. "So serious, my boy. Pour yourself something expensive and sit down."

"I'm fine, *tek*."

"Wesley." The Kingpin tapped the orb of his cane. It blinked under the touch of his long, blanched fingers. "Pour yourself a drink."

Wesley cleared his throat and headed to the bar.

The air was dense with the layers of protection they each wrapped around themselves, because you couldn't trust yourself in Creije, let alone anyone else. Though Wesley didn't kid himself, if the Kingpin wanted his magic to be silenced, then it would be.

He only liked to offer Wesley the illusion of power, never really giving him full control over anything, least of all his own life.

Wesley picked up a bottle of Cloverye, the drink of choice in Creije, and filled his glass.

"It's not often we get to see each other," Ashwood said. "You're so busy

making Creije into your kingdom. Gone are the days when you relied on me for guidance.”

Wesley took a swig of his drink, back still to the Kingpin.

There was a hint of nostalgia in his voice that Wesley didn't care for.

It wasn't like Ashwood had taken him on as an apprentice and they were some happy little family.

He'd found Wesley on the eve of his seventh birthday, wandering the alleys with his hands in other people's pockets, and Ashwood had been as much a shadow then as he was now, with gloved hands and a face made from chimney smoke. He'd supposed that Wesley was an orphan, surely, with no family and nowhere to go, and wouldn't he very much like both of those things?

Only Wesley did have a family and he did have somewhere to go.

The only difference was that he wished he didn't.

Wesley knew what taking the Kingpin's hand meant, but he wanted to return to the streets only after he'd grown big and strong and could prove his worth to a family that had never wanted him to begin with. But then months became years and magic became life and by the time Wesley was enough of something to show them, it was too late. Magic sickness broke out and the worst batch was in the small street on the outskirts of Creije that he'd grown up on.

His family was probably dead and even if they weren't, the boy who wanted to prove something to them was.

Wesley knew better.

He had discovered Creije now, unlocked its secrets, and he delighted in its delicate twists and rough edges. The glow of lights and stars and magic. He'd fallen under its spell and all he wanted was to keep it safe.

To protect it, the way he knew nobody else could.

“How are my other underbosses?” Ashwood asked.

Wesley took another sip of Cloverye and made his way to the sofa that sprawled parallel to the Kingpin.

“Still necessary,” he said. “For now.”

Ashwood laughed. "And my elixir?"

Wesley paused, unsure how to answer that.

"You look concerned," Ashwood said.

Wesley stared through his mirrored glasses, reflecting the magic of the Kingpin right back into the chasm of his face, because Dante Ashwood could see from a person's eyes and into their soul, wading through their secrets, and Wesley very much liked keeping his secrets.

Besides, he had enough people in his head.

"We haven't made much progress," Wesley admitted. "It's tough to sell something when you don't know that much about it." He tried to choose his next words carefully. "A detailed rundown of the magic could help. If you have plans, I thought I'd be the first person to know."

The Kingpin let a small crack of silence pass between them, and then he said, "You are my right hand, Wesley, more dear to me than any other underboss. But I need a left hand too."

Wesley let the irritation simmer inside him, careful that not even a morsel slipped onto the outside.

"Is the elixir really happiness?" he asked.

"It is," Ashwood said. "And it isn't. This magic is a way to ensure I win my war."

"We're not at war."

"We will be soon."

Though Wesley couldn't see the Kingpin's face, he was sure he felt the smile crawl along it. Wesley may have liked chaos, but he had no desire for war and especially no desire for his city to be a part of it.

"I've always thought that you would make a fine second in command," Ashwood said. "You know you're like family to me, Wesley."

Which was true, Wesley supposed, because the Kingpin had raised him from the streets, crafting him into the man he was today. He'd made him special and turned him into the leader of an entire city.

Wesley owed him everything.

And he hated it.

He hated that Ashwood was family, in a way. Not the one Wesley was born with, or even the one he chose, but one that was made for him. One he was cut from. Besides, Wesley really didn't like the idea of being anyone's son. He already had a father and that man was awful enough for him to never consider having another one.

"Who did you want to go to war with?" Wesley asked. "I thought you and the other Kingpins had an understanding."

The shadows around Ashwood slithered. "I don't care about those fools," he said. "My elixir is going to bring the Doyen to her knees."

Wesley was glad his glasses hid the growing uncertainty in his eyes.

"You're after Schulze," he said.

The Kingpin made a choked sound that straddled the line between laughter and disappointment. "I'm after a new age, my boy. Fenna Schulze thinks she can pass laws in my realm that restrain us, but I was here long before that arrogant little girl took office and I'll be here long after. Magic—black or white—keeps the realms turning. I won't let a politician ruin it all."

He said *politician* like it was the dirtiest word imaginable.

"And the elixir will help you do that," Wesley said. "Is it really that dangerous?"

He couldn't help but ask. He had given Tavia that magic and if she got hurt—

"Risks win wars," Ashwood said. "My elixir allows me to open people's minds so they can see beyond Schulze's propaganda and into my truth. When I bring them to my side, we'll take down this government with as few civilian casualties as possible."

Casualties. Not murders.

"I call it the Loj," Ashwood said proudly.

The light. Or at least the street slang for it.

The old saying used to be *lojisi uf hemga*—the light of happiness—but street kids started to see it as more than that. A peace of mind that became like a goal to attain. It was the feeling in your heart after your first warm meal in days, or when you managed to find shelter in the rain and could sleep on a

firm mattress in place of street floors. It was the relief that came with knowing you could stop worrying for a while and let your bones rest.

It was the reason most street kids became buskers.

They wanted the Loj. The knowing that everything would be okay.

And Ashwood had named his magic after it.

"It's really new magic," Wesley said. "How is that possible?"

Ashwood leaned forward and the tip of his hat flickered with candlelight.

You know how, the ghost whispered.

"It's quite an easy thing to do," Ashwood said. "When you have Crafters by your side."

And there it was.

The thing Wesley hated most about Dante Ashwood.

The most awful line to cross.

The magic Wesley sold now was nothing short of mimicry, with trick dust gathered from the residue of magic, that barely hosted power past practical jokes. Or elixirs to alter the mind and body, extracted from dosed—and handsomely compensated—people in government-funded warehouses, only to then be repackaged and sold. And charms? They may have been the most powerful magic—and also entirely illegal—but with the right amount of training, buskers could wield them or use them to create cursed objects. With the right technology, they could even be duplicated.

But nothing, not a single kind of magic, could be created anew.

Unless you were a Crafter.

Before the War of Ages, Ashwood spent decades in the company of those magical captives. He'd studied them, learned their tricks, and embedded himself in their legends until their power snaked into him and became a dark, nefarious thing.

It was a story every busker in Uskhanya heard the moment they were recruited.

Ashwood was not a man and he was not a Crafter.

He was the embodiment of the in-between. A living shadow.

Powerful enough, people said, to have lived for a century.

And though the war was supposed to have put an end to the Crafter trade for good—though it was said to have put an end to the Crafters themselves, killing many and leaving the rest to flee—it seemed Ashwood wouldn't let petty things like impossibility get in his way.

He had found those rare, hidden beings and turned them into puppets.

"How many Crafters do you have?" Wesley asked.

He didn't want to know the answer.

Yes, yes you do.

"The number is of no consequence," Ashwood said. "But there will be no more hiding in the shadows once I am Doyen. We will rise and make a brighter future, Wesley, filled with magic."

Ashwood's power coated the air like heavy rain, soaking into Wesley's breath.

There wasn't a sane person in all of Uskhanya, crooked or not, who would support Ashwood as Doyen. Politicians may have been criminals, but people didn't like them being so open about it. Even if Ashwood pried the title from Schulze's cold, dead fingers, he would never be accepted. You could kill for a criminal kingdom, but not for a legitimate leadership.

Ashwood would destroy the realms trying to conquer it, because he didn't care about Uskhanya or Creije. He didn't want what was best for the city and he certainly didn't love it like Wesley did.

He would see it burn, if that's what it took.

"When your war comes, what happens to Creije?" Wesley asked.

"Nothing," Ashwood assured him. "As long as the people stand with me. Rebellions won't be tolerated, Wesley. Every player in this game must follow the rules."

"War isn't a game," Wesley said.

"Everything is a game, my boy. And by the time of the shadow moon, my Crafters will be ready to win."

The shadow moon.

Wesley thought back to the picture hanging in his office. He thought of the stories he had read about how it could amplify Crafter magic.