

## PART ONE

### FORSAKEN

#### 1

##### Retvenko

Retvenko leaned against the bar and tucked his nose into his dirty shot glass. The whiskey had failed to warm him. Nothing could get you warm in this Saintsforsaken city. And there was no escaping the smell, the throat-choking stew of bilge, clams, and wet stone that seemed to have seeped into his pores as if he'd been steeping in the city's essence like the world's worst cup of tea.

It was most noticeable in the Barrel, even more so in a miserable dump like this one—a squat tavern tucked into the lower floor of one of the slum's grimmest apartment buildings, its ceiling bowed by weather and shoddy construction, its beams blackened by soot from a fireplace that had long since ceased to function, the flue clogged by debris. The floor was covered in sawdust to soak up spilled lager, vomit, and whatever else the bar's patrons lost control of. Retvenko wondered how long it had been since the boards had been swept clean. He buried his nose more deeply in the glass, inhaling the sweet perfume of bad whiskey. It made his eyes water.

"You're supposed to drink it, not snort it," said the barkeep with a laugh.

Retvenko put his glass down and gazed at the man blearily. He was thick necked and barrel chested, a real bruiser. Retvenko had seen him toss more than one rowdy patron into the street, but it was hard to take him seriously dressed in the absurd fashion favored by the young men of the Barrel—a pink shirt with sleeves that looked fit to split over huge biceps, a garish red-and-orange plaid waistcoat. He looked like a dandified softshell crab.

"Tell me," said Retvenko. His Kerch wasn't good to begin with, and it was worse after a few drinks. "Why does city smell so bad? Like old soup? Like sink full of dishes?"

The barman laughed. "That's just Ketterdam. You get used to it."

Retvenko shook his head. He didn't want to get used to this city or its stink. His job with Councilman Hoede had been dull, but at least his rooms had been dry and warm.

As a treasured Grisha indenture, Retvenko had been kept in comfort, his belly full. He'd cursed Hoede at the time, bored with his work shepherding the merchant's expensive cargo shipments across the sea, resenting the terms of his indenture, the foolish bargain he'd made to get himself out of Ravka after the civil war. But now? Now he couldn't help but think of the Grisha workshop at Hoede's house, the fire burning merrily in the grate, brown bread served with slabs of butter and thick cuts of ham. After Hoede had died, the Kerch Merchant Council had let him take on sea voyages to pay his way out of the indenture. The money was terrible, but what other options did Retvenko have? He was a Grisha Squaller in a hostile city with no skills but the gifts with which he'd been born.

"Another?" the barman asked, gesturing at Retvenko's empty glass.

Retvenko hesitated. He shouldn't waste his money. If he was smart with his pennies, he would only need to rent himself out for one more voyage, maybe two, and he'd have enough money to pay off his indenture and buy himself a ticket to Ravka in a third-class berth. That was all he needed. He was due on the docks in less than an hour. Storms had been predicted so they were relying on Retvenko to master the air currents and guide the ship calmly to whatever port they were headed to. He didn't know where and he didn't care. The captain would call coordinates; Retvenko would fill the sails or calm the skies. And then he would collect his pay. But the winds hadn't picked up yet. Maybe he could sleep through the first part of the voyage. Retvenko tapped the bar and nodded. What was a man to do? He deserved some comfort in this world.

"I am not errand boy," he muttered.

"What's that?" the barman asked as he poured out another drink.

Retvenko gave a dismissive wave. What could this man understand? He toiled away in obscurity. What did he hope for? An extra dollar? A warm glance from a pretty girl? He knew nothing of glory in battle, what it was to be revered.

"You Ravkan?"

Through the muzzy blur the whiskey had created, Retvenko came alert. "Why?"

"No reason. You just sound Ravkan."

Retvenko told himself to relax. Plenty of Ravkans came through Ketterdam looking for work. There was nothing on him that said Grisha. His cowardice filled him with disgust—at himself, the barman, this city.

He wanted to sit and enjoy his drink. There was no one in the bar to jump him, and despite the barman's muscles, Retvenko knew he could handle him easily. Still, when you were Grisha, even staying still could mean courting trouble. There had been more rumors of disappearances in Ketterdam recently—Grisha vanishing from the streets or their homes, probably snapped up by slavers and sold to the highest bidder. Retvenko would not let that happen to him, not when he was so close to buying his way back to Ravka.

He downed his whiskey, slammed a coin on the counter, and rose from the bar stool. He left no tip. A man could work for a living.

Retvenko felt a little unsteady as he headed outside, and the moist stink of the air didn't help. He put his head down and set his feet toward Fourth Harbor, letting the walk clear his head. *Two more voyages*, he repeated to himself, a few more weeks at sea, a few more months in this city. He'd find a way to make it bearable. He wondered if some of his old friends might be waiting for him in Ravka. The young king was said to be handing out pardons like penny candy, eager to rebuild the Second Army, the Grisha military that had been decimated by the war.

"Two more trips," he muttered to himself, stamping his boots against the spring damp. How could it be this cold and wet this late in the year? Living in this city was like being trapped in the chilly armpit of a frost giant. He passed along Grafcanal, shivering as he glimpsed Black Veil Island tucked into the water's bend. That was where the Kerch wealthy had once buried their dead, in little stone houses above water level. Some trick of the climate kept the island shrouded in shifting mists, and there were rumors the place was haunted. Retvenko hastened his steps. He wasn't a superstitious man—when you had power like his there was no reason to fear what might lurk in the shadows—but what man liked to walk by a graveyard?

He burrowed deeper into his coat and made quick time down Havnstraat, keeping alert to the movements in every twisting alley. Soon he'd be back in Ravka where he could stroll the streets without fear. Assuming he got his pardon.

Retvenko squirmed uncomfortably in his coat. The war had pitted Grisha against Grisha, and his side had been particularly brutal. He'd murdered former comrades, civilians, even children. But what was done could not be undone. King Nikolai needed soldiers, and Retvenko was a very good soldier.

Retvenko nodded once to the guard stashed in the little booth at the entrance to Fourth Harbor and glanced over his shoulder, making sure he hadn't been followed. He made his way past the cargo containers to the docks, found the appropriate berth, and stood in line to register with the first mate. Retvenko recognized him from past voyages, always harried and ill-humored, scrawny neck poking from the collar of his coat. He held a thick sheaf of documents, and Retvenko glimpsed the bright green wax seal of one of the members of the Kerch Merchant Council. Those seals were better than gold in this city, guaranteeing the best berths in the harbor and preferred access to the docks. And why did the councilmen garner such respect, such advantage? Because of coin. Because their missions brought profit to Ketterdam. Power meant something more in Ravka, where the elements bent to the will of the Grisha and the country was ruled by a proper king instead of a cadre of upstart merchants. Admittedly, Retvenko had tried to depose that king's father, but the point remained the same.

"We're not ready for the rest of the crew just yet," the first mate said as Retvenko gave his name. "You can keep warm in the harbormaster's office. We're waiting on our signal from the Council of Tides."

"Good for you," Retvenko said, unimpressed. He glanced up at one of the black obelisk towers that loomed over the harbor. If he thought the high and mighty Council of Tides could see him from their watchtower, he would have let them know exactly what he thought with a few choice gestures. They were supposedly Grisha, but had they ever lifted a finger to help the other Grisha in the city? To help those down on their luck who might have welcomed a bit of kindness? "No, they have not," he answered himself.

"*Ghezen*, Retvenko. Have you been drinking?"

"No."

"You stink of whiskey."

Retvenko sniffed. "Little bit whiskey."

"Just dry out. Get yourself some coffee or strong *jurda*. This cotton has to be in Djerholm in two weeks' time, and we aren't paying you to nurse a hangover belowdecks. Understood?"

"Yes, yes," Retvenko said with a dismissive wave, already heading toward the harbormaster's office. But when he was a few steps away, he flicked his wrist. A tiny

whirlwind caught the papers the first mate was holding, sending them flying over the docks.

“Damn it!” the first mate shouted as he went scrambling over the wooden planks trying to capture the pages of his manifest before they blew into the sea.

Retvenko smiled with grim pleasure, then felt a wave of sadness overtake him. He was a giant among men, a gifted Squaller, a great soldier, but here he was just an *employee*, a sad old Ravkan who spoke broken Kerch and drank too much. *Home*, he told himself. *Soon I'll be home*. He would get his pardon and prove himself once more. He would fight for his country. He would sleep under a roof that didn't leak and wear a blue wool *kefta* lined with silver fox fur. He would be Emil Retvenko again, not this pathetic shadow.

“There's coffee,” said the clerk when Retvenko entered, gesturing toward a copper urn in the corner of the harbormaster's office.

“Tea?”

“There's coffee.”

*This country*. Retvenko filled a mug full of the dark sludge, more to warm his hands than anything. He couldn't bear the taste of it himself, certainly not without a healthy dousing of sugar, which the harbormaster had neglected to supply.

“Wind blowing in,” said the clerk as a bell clanged outside, shaken by the rising breeze.

“I have ears,” Retvenko grumbled.

“Don't think it will amount to much here, but once you get out of the harbor—”

“Be silent,” Retvenko said sharply. He was on his feet, listening.

“What?” said the clerk. “There's—”

Retvenko put a finger to his lips. “Someone cries out.” The sound had come from where the ship was docked.

“It's just gulls. Sun's coming up soon and—”

Retvenko raised a hand, and a gust of air slammed the clerk back into the wall. “I said *be silent*.”

The clerk's mouth dropped open as he hung pinned to the slats. "You're the Grisha they got for the crew?"

For Saints' sake, was Retvenko going to have to pull the air from this boy's lungs and suffocate him into quiet?

Through the waxy windows, Retvenko could see the sky beginning to turn blue as dawn arrived. He heard the squawking of gulls searching the waves for breakfast. Maybe the liquor was muddling his mind.

Retvenko let the clerk drop to the ground and refilled his coffee cup.

"Told you it was nothing," said the clerk as he dragged himself to his feet. "Didn't have to get all heated up." The clerk dusted himself off and got resettled behind the desk. "I never met one of you before. Grisha." Retvenko snorted. The clerk probably had and simply didn't know it. "You get paid pretty good for the voyages?"

"Not good enough."

"I—" But whatever the clerk was going to say next was lost as the door to the office exploded in a hail of splinters.

Retvenko's hands went up to shield his face. He ducked and rolled behind the clerk's desk for cover. A woman entered the office—black hair, golden eyes. *Shu*. The clerk reached for a shotgun Retvenko saw strapped beneath the desk. "They've come for the payroll!" he shouted. "Ain't no one taking the payroll."

Retvenko watched in shock as the gangly clerk stood like some kind of avenging warrior and opened fire. By all that was holy, nothing could motivate the Kerch like cash.

Retvenko peeked around the desk in time to see the shotgun blast strike the woman directly in the chest. She was thrown backward and collided with the doorjamb, crumpling to the floor. He smelled the sharp burn of gunpowder, the metallic tang of blood. Retvenko's belly gave a shaming lurch. It had been a long time since he'd seen someone shot down in front of him—and that had been in a time of war.

"Ain't no one taking the payroll," the clerk repeated with satisfaction.

But before Retvenko could reply, the Shu woman wrapped her bloody hand around the doorjamb, hauling herself to her feet.

Retvenko blinked. Just how much whiskey had he had?

The woman marched forward. Through the remains of her tattered blouse, Retvenko saw blood, flesh pocked with buckshot, and the glint of what looked like metal.

The clerk fumbled to reload, but the woman was too fast. She grabbed the gun from his hands and swatted him down with it, knocking him sideways with terrible force. She tossed the gun aside and turned her golden eyes on Retvenko.

“Take payroll!” Retvenko shouted, clambering backward. He dug in his pockets and tossed his nearly empty wallet at her. “Take what you want.”

The woman smiled slightly at that—with pity? Amusement? Retvenko did not know. But he understood that she had not come for the money at all. She had come for him. And it didn’t matter if she was a slaver or a mercenary or something else entirely. She would face a soldier, not some cowering weakling.

He leapt to his feet, muscles responding reluctantly to his demands, and shifted into fighting stance. His arms arced forward. A howling wind swept through the room, tossing a chair, then the clerk’s desk, then the steaming coffee urn at the woman. She batted each item away with little interest, as if she was brushing aside stray cobwebs.

Retvenko focused his power and shoved both his hands forward, feeling his ears pop as the pressure dropped and the wind swelled in a surging stormfront. Maybe this woman couldn’t be stopped by bullets. Let’s see how she fared against the fury of a storm.

The woman growled as the gale seized her, hurtling her back through the open doorway. She seized the jamb, trying to keep hold.

Retvenko laughed. He’d forgotten how good it felt to fight. Then from behind him, he heard a loud *crack*, the shriek of nails torn free and rending timber. He looked over his shoulder and caught the briefest glimpse of the dawn sky, the wharf. The wall was gone.

Strong arms seized him, claspings his hands to his sides, preventing him from using his power. He was rising, sailing upward, the harbor shrinking beneath him. He saw the roof of the harbormaster’s office, the body of the first mate in a heap on the dock, the ship Retvenko had been meant to sail on—its deck a mess of broken boards, bodies piled near the shattered masts. His attackers had been there first.

The air was cold on his face. His heart pounded a ragged rhythm in his ears.

“Please,” he begged, as they soared higher, unsure of what he was pleading for. Afraid to move too suddenly or too much, he craned his neck to look at his captor. Retvenko released a terrified moan, somewhere between a sob and the panicked whine of an animal caught in a trap.

The man holding him was Shu, his black hair pulled into a tight bun, his golden eyes narrowed against the rush of the wind—and from his back emerged two vast wings that beat against the sky, hinged, gracefully wrought in looping silver filigree and taut canvas. Was he an angel? A demon? Some strange mechanical come to life? Had Retvenko simply lost his mind?

In the arms of his captor, Emil Retvenko saw the shadow they made cast upon the glittering surface of the sea far below: two heads, two wings, four legs. He had become a great beast and yet that beast would devour him. His prayers became screams, but both went unanswered.

2

Wylan

*What am I doing here?*

That thought had run through Wylan’s head at least six times a day since he’d met Kaz Brekker. But on a night like this, a night when they were “working,” it rose and fell in his head like a nervous tenor practicing his scales: *Whatamldoingherewhatamldoingherewhatamldoinghere.*

Wylan tugged at the hem of his sky-blue jacket, the uniform worn by the waiters of Club Cumulus, and tried to look at ease. *Think of it as a dinner party*, he told himself. He’d endured countless uncomfortable meals at his father’s house. This was no different. In fact, it was easier. No awkward conversations about his studies or when he planned to start classes at the university. All he had to do was stay quiet, follow Kaz’s instructions, and figure out what to do with his hands. Clasp them in front? Too much like a singer at a recital. In back? Too military. He tried just dangling them at his sides, but that didn’t feel right, either. Why hadn’t he paid better attention to the way waiters stood? Despite Kaz’s assurances that the second-floor parlor was theirs for the night, Wylan felt certain that, at any minute, a real member of the staff would enter the room, point at him, and shout, “Impostor!” Then again, Wylan felt like an impostor most days.



It had been just under a week since they'd reached Ketterdam, almost a month since they'd left Djerholm. Wylan had been wearing Kuwei's features for most of that time, but whenever he caught a glimpse of his reflection in a mirror or a shop window, it took a long moment to realize he wasn't looking at a stranger. This was his face now—golden eyes, wide brow, black hair. His old self had been scrubbed away, and Wylan wasn't sure he knew the person who remained—the person who was standing in a private parlor in one of the Lid's most luxurious gambling dens, caught up in another of Kaz Brekker's schemes.

A player at the table lifted his champagne glass for a refill, and Wylan darted forward from his perch against the wall. His hands were shaking as he took the bottle from the silver ice bucket, but there were some benefits to the years he'd spent at his father's social functions. He at least knew how to pour a proper glass of champagne without it foaming over. Wylan could almost hear Jesper's mocking voice. *Marketable skills, merchling.*

He dared a glance at Jesper now. The sharpshooter was seated at the table, hunched over his cards. He wore a battered navy waistcoat embroidered with small gold stars and his rumpled shirt shone white against his dark brown Zemeni skin. Jesper rubbed a tired hand over his face. They'd been playing cards for more than two hours. Wylan couldn't tell if Jesper's fatigue was real or part of the act.

Wylan filled another glass, focusing on Kaz's instructions.

"Just take the players' orders and keep one ear on Smeet's conversation," he'd said. "It's a job, Wylan. Get it done."

Why did they all call it a job? It didn't feel like working. It felt like missing a step and suddenly finding yourself falling. It felt like panic. So Wylan took stock of the room's details—a trick he'd used to steady himself whenever he arrived someplace new or when his father was in a particularly foul mood. He inventoried the pattern of interlocking starbursts that formed the polished wood floor, the shell-shaped nodes of the blown glass chandelier, the cobalt silk wallpaper flocked with silver clouds. No windows to allow in natural light. Kaz said none of the gambling dens had them because the bosses wanted players to lose track of time.

Wylan watched Kaz deal another hand. He was seated at the round table across from Cornelis Smeet, wearing the same sky-blue staff jacket as Wylan. His hands were bare, and Wylan had to fight not to stare at them. It wasn't just the strangeness, the wrongness of seeing Kaz without his gloves, it was that his hands seemed animated by a secret machinery Wylan didn't understand. When he had started to

learn figure drawing, Wylan had studied anatomy illustrations. He had a good grasp of musculature, the way bones and joints and ligaments fit together. But Kaz's hands moved as if they'd been made for no other purpose than to manipulate cards, long white fingers flexing in easy rhythm, the shuffle precise, each turn economical. Kaz had claimed he could control any deck. So why was Jesper losing so badly?

When Kaz had outlined this part of the plan at the hideout on Black Veil, Wylan had been incredulous, and for once, he hadn't been the only one with questions.

"Let me get this straight," Nina had said. "Your grand scheme is to give Jesper a line of credit and let him play cards with Cornelis Smeeth?"

"Smeeth likes high stakes Three Man Bramble and blondes," said Kaz. "So we're going to give him both. I'll deal the first half of the night, then Specht will take over."

Wylan didn't know Specht well. He was a former navy seaman, a member of the Dregs who had piloted their ship to and from the Ice Court. If Wylan was honest, between the grizzled jaw and the tattoos that ran halfway up Specht's neck, he found the sailor slightly frightening. But even Specht had looked concerned when he said, "I can deal cards, Kaz, but I can't control a deck."

"You don't have to. From the time you sit down, it will be an honest game. The important thing is to keep Smeeth at the tables until midnight. The shift change is when we risk losing him. As soon as I stand up, he's going to start thinking about moving on to another game or calling it a night, so you all need to do everything you can to keep his ass firmly planted at that table.

"I can handle it," Jesper said.

But Nina had just scowled. "Sure, and maybe for phase two of this plan I can masquerade as a *jurda parem* dealer. What could possibly go wrong?"

Wylan wouldn't have put it that way exactly, but he agreed. Strongly. They should be keeping Jesper away from gambling dens, not encouraging his love of risk. But Kaz hadn't been moved.

"Just do your job and keep Smeeth thoroughly enthralled until midnight," he'd said. "You know what's on the line." They all did. Inej's life. And how could Wylan argue with that? He felt a pang of guilt every time he thought about it. He knew he couldn't have prevented his father from double-crossing the crew and kidnapping Inej. He *knew* that, but he still felt responsible.

"What am I supposed to do with Cornelis Smeeth after midnight?" Nina asked.

“Try to talk him into spending the night with you.”

“What?” Matthias had sputtered, red flooding his face all the way up to his ears.

“He won’t say yes.”

Nina sniffed. “Like hell he won’t.”

“Nina—” Matthias growled.

“Smeet never cheats at cards or on his wife,” Kaz said. “He’s like half the amateurs strutting around the Barrel. Most of the time he’s respectable, scrupulous, strict economies and half a glass of wine at dinner. But once a week he likes to feel like he’s an outlaw matching wits with the high rollers on East Stave, and he likes a pretty blonde on his arm when he does it.”

Nina pursed her lips. “If he’s so moral, then why do you want me to try to—”

“Because Smeet’s rolling in coin and any self-respecting girl from West Stave would at least make the effort.”

“I don’t like this,” said Matthias.

Jesper had smiled his reckless gunslinger’s grin. “To be fair, Matthias, you don’t like much.”

“Keep Smeet at Club Cumulus from eight bells until midnight,” Kaz said. “That’s four hours of play, so stay smart about it.”

Nina was certainly doing her best, and Wylan didn’t know whether to be impressed or concerned. She was dressed in a sheer lavender gown rigged with some kind of corset that pushed her cleavage to alarming heights, and though she’d lost weight since her battle with *parem*, there was still plenty of her for Smeet to grab onto. She’d settled her rump firmly on his knee, arm around his shoulder, and was cooing prettily in his ear, her hands caressing his chest and occasionally slipping beneath his jacket like a beagle searching for treats. She stopped only to order oysters or another bottle of champagne. Wylan knew Nina could handle just about any man and any situation, but he didn’t think she should have to sit half-dressed in a drafty gambling parlor, perched on some leering lawyer’s lap. At the very least, she was probably going to catch cold.

Jesper folded yet again and blew out a long, exasperated breath. He’d been losing slowly for the last two hours. He’d kept his bids cautious, but neither luck nor Kaz

seemed to be on his side tonight. How were they supposed to keep Smeet at the tables if Jesper ran out of funds? Would the other high-stakes players be enough of a lure? There were a few other players in the room, each hoping to nab a seat if someone cashed out. None of them knew the real game Kaz was running.

As Wylan leaned down to refill Nina's glass, he heard Smeet murmur, "A card game is like a duel. It's the little cuts and slashes that set the stage for the final killing stroke." He glanced across the table to Jesper. "That lad is bleeding all over the table."

"I don't know *how* you keep the rules straight in your head," Nina said with a giggle.

Smeet grinned, clearly pleased. "This is nothing to managing a business."

"Oh, I can't imagine how you do that, either."

"Sometimes I don't know myself," Smeet said on a sigh. "It's been a hard week. One of my clerks never came back from his holiday and that meant I was stuck short-handed."

Wylan nearly dropped the bottle he was holding, and champagne splashed over the floor.

"I'm paying to drink it, not wear it, boy," snapped Smeet. He wiped at his trousers and muttered, "That's what comes of hiring foreigners."

*He means me*, Wylan realized as he backed hurriedly away, still unused to the reality of his new Shu features. He couldn't even speak Shu, a fact that hadn't worried him until two Shu tourists with a map in hand had waylaid him on East Stave. Wylan had panicked, made an elaborate shrugging gesture, and bolted for the servants' entrance to Club Cumulus.

"Poor baby," Nina said to Smeet, running her fingers through his thinning hair and adjusting one of the flowers tucked into her silky blonde tresses. Wylan didn't know if she'd actually told Smeet she was from the House of the Blue Iris but he certainly would have assumed.

Jesper leaned back in his seat, fingers tapping the handles of his revolvers. The movement seemed to draw Smeet's eye.

"Those guns are remarkable. Real mother-of-pearl in the handles if I'm not mistaken," Smeet said in the tones of a man who is rarely mistaken. "I have a fine

collection of firearms myself, though nothing in the line of Zemeni repeating revolvers.”

“Oh, I’d love to see your guns,” Nina cooed, and Wylan looked at the ceiling in an attempt to avoid rolling his eyes. “Are we going to sit here all night?”

Wylan tried to hide his confusion. Wasn’t the whole point to get him to stay? But apparently Nina knew what she was about because Smeet’s face took on a slightly mulish cast. “Hush now. If I win big, I may buy you something pretty.”

“I’ll settle for some more oysters.”

“You haven’t finished those.”

Wylan didn’t miss Nina’s slight purse of the lips. She’d had no appetite since she’d recovered from her bout with *parem*, and he had no idea how she’d managed to slurp down nearly a dozen oysters.

Now he watched her swallow the last of them with a shudder. “Delicious,” she managed with a glance at Wylan. “Let’s have some more.”

That was the signal. Wylan swooped in and picked up the big dish laden with ice and discarded shells.

“The lady has a craving,” Smeet said.

“Oysters, miss?” Wylan asked. His voice sounded too high. “Buttered prawns?” Too low.

“She’ll have both,” said Smeet indulgently. “And another glass of champagne.”

“Marvelous,” Nina said, looking slightly green.

Wylan rushed through the swinging door to the servants’ pantry. It was full of glassware, napkins, and a tin tub full of ice. A dumbwaiter took up a large section of the far wall, and there was a trumpet-shaped speaking tube next to it to allow the staff to communicate with the kitchen. Wylan set the dish of ice and shells on the table, then called down to the kitchen for oysters and buttered prawns.

“Oh, and another bottle of champagne.”

“What vintage?”

“Uh . . . more of the same?” Wylan had heard his father’s friends talk about which wines made for good investments, but he didn’t quite trust himself to choose a year.

By the time he returned to the parlor with Nina’s order, Kaz was standing up from the table. He made a gesture as if he was dusting off his hands—the sign that a dealer had finished his shift. Specht sat down, a blue silk cravat tied at his throat to hide his tattoos. He shook out his cuffs and called for players to ante up or cash out.

Kaz’s eyes met Wylan’s as he vanished into the pantry.

This was the moment. According to Kaz and Jesper, a player often thought his luck was bound to the dealer and would stop play at the shift change.

Wylan watched in distress as Smeet stretched and gave Nina’s bottom a firm pat. “We’ve had a good run,” he said, glancing at Jesper who was staring dejectedly at his meager pile of remaining chips. “We may find fatter game elsewhere.”

“But my food just came,” pouted Nina.

Wylan stepped forward, unsure of what to say, only knowing they had to delay Smeet. “Is everything to your liking, sir? Can I offer you and the lady something more?”

Smeet ignored him, hand still hovering over Nina’s rump. “There’s finer vittles and better service to be had all over the Lid, my dear.”

A big man in a striped suit approached Smeet, eager to snag his seat. “Cashing out?”

Smeet gave Jesper a friendly nod. “Looks like we both are, eh, lad? Better luck next time.”

Jesper didn’t return the smile. “I’m not done here.”

Smeet gestured to Jesper’s sad stack of chips. “Certainly looks like you are.”

Jesper rose and reached for his guns. Wylan clutched the bottle of champagne in his hands, as the other players all pushed back from the table, ready to grab their own weapons or dive for cover. But all Jesper did was unsling his gun belt. Gently, he laid the revolvers on the table, fingers brushing over their high gloss ridges with care.

“How much for these?” he asked.

Wylan tried to catch Jesper’s eye. Was this part of the plan? And even if it was, what was Jesper thinking? He loved those guns. He might as well cut off his own hand and throw it into the pot.

Specht cleared his throat and said, “The Cumulus isn’t a pawnshop. We accept cash and credit from the Gemenbank only.”

“I’ll stake you,” Smeet said with studied disinterest, “if it will get the game moving again. One thousand kruge for the guns?”

“They’re worth ten times that.”

“Five thousand *kruge*.”

“*Seven*.”

“Six and that’s only because I’m feeling generous.”

“Don’t!” Wylan blurted. The room went silent.

Jesper’s voice was cold. “I don’t remember asking for your advice.”

“The insolence!” said Smeet. “Since when do waiters involve themselves in gameplay?”

Nina glared at Wylan, and Specht’s tone was furious with disbelief when he said, “Gentlemen, shall we get this game rolling again? Ante up!”

Jesper shoved his revolvers across the table to Smeet, and Smeet slid a tall stack of chips over to Jesper in return.

“All right,” said Jesper, his gray eyes bleak. “Deal me in.”

Wylan stepped back from the table and disappeared into the pantry as quickly as he could. The dish of ice and shells was gone, and Kaz was waiting. He’d thrown a long orange cape over his blue jacket, and his gloves were already back in place.

“Kaz,” Wylan said desperately. “Jesper just put his guns up.”

“How much did he get for them?”

“Why does that matter? He—”

“Five thousand *kruge*?”

“Six.”

“Good. Not even Jesper should be able to run through that in less than two hours.” He tossed Wylan a cape and mask, the trappings of the Madman, one of the characters of the Komodie Brute. “Let’s go.”

“Me?”

“No the idiot behind you.” Kaz picked up the speaking trumpet. “Send up another waiter. This one managed to spill champagne on some high roller’s shoes.”

Someone in the kitchen laughed and said, “You got it.”

They were down the stairs and out the servants’ entrance bare moments later, their costumes allowing them to move anonymously through the crowds of East Stave.

“You knew Jesper would lose. You made sure of it,” Wylan said as he jogged to keep up with Kaz despite his lopsided gait. Kaz rarely used his cane when they were roaming the crowded parts of the city. It made him too recognizable.

“Of course I did. I control the game, Wylan. Or I don’t play. I could have made sure Jesper won every hand.”

“Then why—”

“We aren’t here to win at cards. We need Smeet to stay at the tables. He was ogling those guns almost as much as Nina’s cleavage. Now he’s feeling confident, like he’s in for a good night. Even if he loses, he’ll keep playing. Who knows? Jesper may even win his revolvers back.”

“I hope so,” said Wylan as they hopped onto a browboat crowded with tourists and headed south down East Stave.

“You would.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Someone like Jesper wins two hands and starts to call it a streak. Eventually he loses and that just leaves him hungrier for the next run of good luck. The house relies on it.”

*Then why make him walk into a gambling den?* Wylan thought but didn’t say. And why make Jesper give up something that meant so much to him? There had to be



another way to keep Smeet playing. But those weren't even the right questions. The real question was why Jesper did it all without hesitating. Maybe he was still looking for Kaz's approval, hoping to earn back his favor after Jesper's slip had led them into an ambush and nearly ended the Ice Court job before it had begun. Or maybe Jesper wanted something more than forgiveness from Kaz.

*What am I doing here?* Wylan wondered again. He found himself gnawing on his thumb and forced himself to stop. He was here for Inej. She'd saved their lives more than once, and he wasn't going to forget that. He was here because he desperately needed the money. And if there was another reason, a tall, lanky reason with a too-strong taste for games of chance, he wasn't going to think about that right now. As soon as they made it to the outskirts of the Barrel, they ditched their capes and sky-blue jackets, and wended their way east into the Zilver district.

Matthias was waiting for them beneath a darkened doorway on Handelcanal.

"All clear?" Kaz asked.

"All clear," said the big Fjerdan. "The lights went out on the top floor of Smeet's house over an hour ago, but I don't know if the servants are awake."

"He only has a daily maid and cook," Kaz said. "He's too cheap for full-time servants."

"How is—"

"Nina is fine. Jesper is fine. Everyone is fine except for me because I'm stuck with a gang of hand-wringing nursemaids. Keep a watch."

Wylan shrugged apologetically at Matthias, who looked like he was considering dashing Kaz's skull against a wall, then hurried along the cobblestones. Smeet's home also served as his office, and it was located on a dark street with little foot traffic. The lamps were lit along the canal and candles burned in some of the windows, but after ten bells, most of the neighborhood's respectable citizens had already retired.

"Are we just going in through the front door?"

"Use your eyes instead of running your mouth," said Kaz, lockpicks already flashing in his gloved hands.

*I am*, Wylan thought. But that wasn't strictly true. He'd taken in the house's proportions, the pitch of its gabled roof, the roses beginning to bloom in its window boxes. But he hadn't looked at the house as a puzzle. With some frustration, Wylan could admit this was an easy solve. The Zilver district was prosperous, but not truly wealthy, a place for successful artisans, bookkeepers, and barristers. Though the houses were well built and tidy with views of a wide canal, they were tightly packed together and there were no grand gardens or private docks. To access the windows of the upper floors, he and Kaz would have had to break into a neighboring home and go through two sets of locks instead of one. Better to risk the front door, to simply act as if they had every right to be there.

*Use your eyes.* But Wylan didn't like looking at the world the way that Kaz did. And once they'd gotten their money, he'd never have to again.

A bare second later, Kaz pressed down on the handle and the door swung open. Immediately, Wylan heard the patter of paws, claws on hard wood, low snarls, as Smeet's pack of hounds rushed the door, white teeth flashing, growls rumbling deep in their chests. Before they could realize someone other than their master had come to call, Kaz pushed Smeet's whistle between his lips and blew. Nina had managed to slip it from the chain the lawyer always wore around his neck, then tucked it beneath an empty oyster shell for Wylan to whisk into the kitchen.

There was no sound from the whistle—at least not one that Wylan could hear. *It's not going to work*, he thought, imagining a pair of those huge jaws tearing into his throat. But the dogs skittered to a halt, bumping into each other in a confused tangle.

Kaz blew again, lips pursing in time with the pattern of a new command. The dogs quieted and flopped to the floor with a disgruntled whine. One even rolled over on his back.

"Now why can't people be this easily trained?" Kaz murmured as he crouched to oblige the dog with a belly rub, black-gloved fingers smoothing the short fur. "Close the door behind you."

Wylan did and stood with his back pressed to it, keeping a wary eye on the pile of slavering hounds. The whole house smelled of dog—damp fur, oily hides, warm breath slaked on stacks of raw meat.

"Not fond of animals?" Kaz asked.

"I like dogs," Wylan said. "Just not when they're the size of bears."

Wylan knew the real puzzle of Smeet's house hadn't been a simple one for Kaz to solve. Kaz could pick just about any lock and outthink any alarm system, but he hadn't been able to come up with a simple way around Smeet's bloodthirsty hounds that wouldn't give them away. During the day, the dogs were kept in a kennel, but at night they were given free run of the house while Smeet's family slept peacefully in the tastefully appointed rooms of the third floor, the staircase closed off by an iron gate. Smeet walked the dogs himself, up and down the Handelcanal, trailing after them like a tubby sled in an expensive hat.

Nina had suggested drugging the dogs' food. Smeet went to the butcher every morning to select cuts of meat for the pack, and it would have been easy enough to switch the parcels. But Smeet wanted his dogs hungry at night, so he fed them in the mornings. He would have noticed if his prized pets had been sluggish all day, and they couldn't risk Smeet staying home to care for his hounds. Smeet had to spend the night on East Stave, and when he returned home, it was essential he find nothing amiss. Inej's life depended upon it.

Kaz had arranged for the private parlor in the Cumulus, Nina had caressed the whistle from beneath Smeet's shirt, and piece by piece the plan had come together. Wylan did not want to think about what they'd done to obtain the whistle commands. He shivered when he remembered what Smeet had said: One of my clerks never came back from his holiday. He never would. Wylan could still hear the clerk screaming as Kaz dangled him by the ankles from the top of the Hanraat Point Lighthouse. I'm a good man, he'd shouted. I'm a good man. They were the last words he'd spoken. If he'd talked less, he might have lived. Now Wylan watched Kaz give the drooling dog a scratch behind the ears and rise. "Let's go. Watch your feet."

They sidestepped the pile of dog bodies in the hall and made their way quietly up the stairs. The layout of Smeet's house was familiar to Wylan. Most businesses in the city followed the same plan: public rooms and kitchen on the ground floor for meeting with clients, offices and storage on the second floor, sleeping rooms for the family on the third floor. Very wealthy homes had a fourth floor for servants' quarters. As a boy, Wylan had spent more than a few hours hiding from his father in his own home's upper rooms.

"Not even locked," Kaz murmured as they entered Smeet's office. "Those hounds have made him lazy."

Kaz closed the door and lit a lamp, turning the flame down low.

The office had three small desks arranged by the windows to take advantage of the natural light, one for Smeet and two for his clerks. I'm a good man.

Wylan shook off the memory and focused on the shelves that ran from floor to ceiling. They were lined with boxes full of documents and ledgers, each carefully labeled with what Wylan assumed were the names of clients and companies.

"So many pigeons," Kaz murmured, eyes scanning the boxes. "Dryden, Boreg, that self-righteous skiv Jellen Raddmaker. Smeet represents half the Merchant Council."

Including Wylan's father. Smeet had served as Jan Van Eck's attorney and property manager for as long as Wylan could remember.

"Where do we start?" Wylan whispered.

Kaz pulled a fat ledger from the shelves. "Let's make sure your father has no new acquisitions under his name, then we search under your stepmother's name, and yours."

"Don't call her that. Alys is barely older than I am. And my father won't have kept property in my name."

"You'd be surprised at what a man will do to avoid paying taxes."

They spent the better part of the next hour digging through Smeet's files. They knew all about Van Eck's public properties—the factories, hotels, and manufacturing plants, the shipyard, the country house and farmland in Southern Kerch. But Kaz believed Wylan's father had to have private holdings, places he'd kept off of the public registers, places he'd stash something—or someone—he didn't want found.

Kaz read names and ledger entries aloud, asking Wylan questions and trying to find connections to properties or companies they hadn't yet discovered. Wylan knew he owed his father nothing, but it still felt like a betrayal.

"Geldspin?" asked Kaz.

"A cotton mill. I think it's in Zierfoort."

"Too far. He won't be keeping her there. What about Firma Allerbest?"

Wylan searched his memory. "I think that one's a cannery."

“They’re both practically printing cash, and they’re both in Alys’ name. But Van Eck keeps the big earners to himself—the shipyard, the silos at Sweet Reef.”

Wylan knew just how important those silos would be once they had Inej back. “I told you,” he said, fiddling with a pen on one of the blotters. “My father trusts himself first, Alys only so far. He wouldn’t leave anything in my name.”

Kaz just said, “Next ledger. Let’s start with the commercial properties.”

Wylan stopped fiddling with the pen. “Was there something in my name?”  
Kaz leaned back. His look was almost challenging when he said, “A printing press.”

The same old joke. So why did it still sting? Wylan set the pen down. “I see.”

“He’s not what I would call a subtle man. Eil Komodie is in your name, too.”

“Of course it is,” Wylan replied, wishing he sounded less bitter. Another private laugh for his father to enjoy—a broken-down amusement park, a worthless place for his worthless, illiterate son. He shouldn’t have asked.

As the minutes ticked away, and Kaz continued reading aloud, Wylan became increasingly agitated. If he could just read, they’d be moving twice as fast through the files. In fact, Wylan would already know his father’s business inside out. “I’m slowing you down,” he said.

Kaz flipped open another sheaf of documents. “I knew exactly how long this would take. What was your mother’s family name?”

“There’s nothing in her name.”

“Humor me.”

“Hendriks.”

Kaz walked to the shelves and selected another ledger. “When did she die?”

“When I was eight.” Wylan picked up the pen again. “My father got worse after she was gone.” At least that was how Wylan remembered it. The months after his mother’s death were a blur of sadness and silence. “He wouldn’t let me go to her funeral. I don’t even know where she’s buried. Why do you guys say that anyway? No mourners, no funerals? Why not just say good luck or be safe?”

“We like to keep our expectations low.” Kaz’s gloved finger trailed down a column of numbers and stopped. His eyes moved back and forth between two of the ledgers, then he snapped the leather covers shut. “Let’s go.”

“Did you find something?”

Kaz nodded once. “I know where she is.”

Wylan didn’t think he imagined the tension in the rasp of Kaz’s voice. Kaz never yelled the way that Wylan’s father did, but Wylan had learned to listen for that low note, that bit of black harmony that crept into Kaz’s tone when things were about to get dangerous. He’d heard it on the ship when Inej was injured, then when Kaz had learned Pekka Rollins had tried to ambush them, again when they’d been double-crossed by Wylan’s father. He’d heard it loud and clear atop the lighthouse as the clerk screamed for his life.

Wylan watched as Kaz set the room to rights. He moved an envelope a little more to the left, pulled a drawer on the far file cabinet out a bit farther, tilted the chair back just so. When he was done he scanned the room, then plucked the pen from Wylan’s hands and set it carefully back in its place on the desk.

“A proper thief is like a proper poison, merchling. He leaves no trace.” Kaz blew the lamp out. “Your father much for charity?”

“No. He tithes to Ghezen, but he says charity robs men of the chance at honest labor.”

“Well, he’s been making donations to the Church of Saint Hilde for the last ten years. If you want to pay your respects to your mother, that’s probably the place to start.”

Wylan stared at Kaz dumbly in the shadowy room. He’d never heard of the Church of Saint Hilde. And he’d never known Dirtyhands to share any bit of information that wouldn’t serve him. “What—”

“If Nina and Jesper did their jobs right, Smeet will be home soon. We can’t be here when he gets back or the whole plan goes to hell. Come on.”

Wylan felt a bit like he’d been cracked over the head with a ledger and then told to just forget about it.

Kaz opened the door. They both stopped short.

A little girl was standing on the landing, leaning on the neck of one of the massive gray dogs. She had to be about five, her toes barely visible beneath the hem of her flannel nightgown.

“Oh Ghezen,” Wylan said.

She looked up at Kaz with big eyes, then removed her thumb from her mouth. “Do you work for my da?”

“No,” said Kaz, pulling the door closed slightly so that the girl couldn’t see Wylan.

The memory came at him again. I’m a good man. They’d ambushed the clerk coming out of the Menagerie and hauled him to the top of the lighthouse. Kaz had held him by his ankles and the clerk had wet himself, screaming and begging for mercy before he’d finally given up Smeet’s whistle commands. Kaz had been about to reel him back up when the clerk had started offering things: money, bank account numbers for Smeet’s clients, and then, I’ve got information on one of the girls at the Menagerie, the Zemeni.

Kaz had paused. What do you have on her?

Wylan had heard it then, that low, dangerous note of warning. But the clerk didn’t know Kaz, didn’t recognize the change in the rough scrape of his voice. He thought he’d found a wedge, something Kaz wanted.

One of her clients is giving her expensive gifts. She’s keeping the money. You know what the Peacock did to the last girl she caught holding out on her?

I do, Kaz said, his eyes glinting like the edge of a straight razor. Tante Heleen beat her to death.

Kaz—Wylan had attempted, but the clerk kept talking.

Right there in the parlor. This girl knows she’s cooked if I tell. She sees me for free just so I keep my mouth shut. Sneaks me in. She’ll do the same for you, your friends. Whatever you want.

If Tante Heleen found out, she’d kill your Zemeni, said Kaz. She’d make an example of her to the other girls.

Yes, the clerk gasped eagerly. She’ll do anything you want, everything.

Slowly, Kaz began to let the man’s legs slide through his grasp. It’s terrible, isn’t it? Knowing someone holds your life in his hands.

The clerk’s voice rose another octave as he realized his mistake. She’s just a working girl, he screamed. She knows the score! I’m a good man. I’m a good man!

There are no good men in Ketterdam, Kaz said. The climate doesn't agree with them. And then he'd simply let go.

Wylan shuddered. Through the crack in the door, he saw Kaz squat down so he could look the little girl in the eye. "What's this big fellow's name?" Kaz said, laying a hand on the dog's wrinkled neck.

"This is Maestro Spots."

"Is that so?"

"He has a very fine howl. Da lets me name all of the puppies."

"Is Maestro Spots your favorite?" asked Kaz.

She appeared to think then shook her head. "I like Duke Addam Von Silverhaunch best, then Fuzzmuzzle, then Maestro Spots."

"That's good to know, Hanna."

Her mouth opened into a little O. "How do you know my name?"

"I know all children's names."

"You do?"

"Oh yes. Albert who lives next door and Gertrude on Amberstraat. I live under their beds and in the backs of the closets."

"I knew it," she breathed, fear and triumph in her voice. "Mama said there was nothing there but I knew it." She cocked her head to one side. "You don't look like a monster."

"I'll tell you a secret, Hanna. The really bad monsters never look like monsters."

Now the little girl's lip trembled. "Did you come to eat me? Da says monsters eat children who don't go to bed when they're told."

"They do. But I won't. Not tonight. If you do two things for me." His voice was calm, almost hypnotic. It had the coarse rasp of an over-rosined bow. "First you must crawl into bed. And second, you must never tell anyone you've seen us, especially your da." He leaned forward and gave Hanna's braid a playful tug. "Because if you do, I'll slit your mother's throat and then your father's, and then I'll cut out the hearts of all these sweet slobbering hounds. I shall save Duke Silverhaunch for last so that you will know it's all your fault." The little girl's face was white as the lace on



the neck of her nightgown, her eyes wide and bright as new moons. “Do you understand?” She nodded frantically, chin wobbling. “Now, now, no tears. Monsters see tears and it only whets their appetites. Off to bed with you, and take that useless Maestro Spots along, too.”

She skittered backward over the landing and up the stairs. When she was halfway up, she cast a terrified glance back at Kaz. He raised one gloved finger to his lips.

When she was gone, Wylan slipped out from behind the door and followed Kaz down the stairs. “How could you say something like that to her? She’s just a child.”

“We were all just children once.”

“But—”

“It was that or snap her neck and make it look like she fell down the stairs, Wylan. I think I showed remarkable restraint. Move.”

They picked their way past the rest of the dogs still flopped down in the hallway.

“Incredible,” Kaz said. “They’d probably stay like that all night.” Kaz blew on the whistle and they leapt up, ears pricked, ready to guard the house. When Smeet returned home all would be as it should: hounds pacing the ground floor, office intact on the second floor, wife snoozing comfortably on the third floor, and daughter pretending to do the same.

Kaz checked the street and then waved Wylan outside, pausing only to lock the door behind them.

They hurried down the cobblestones. Wylan craned his head over his shoulder. He couldn’t quite believe they’d gotten away with it.

“Stop looking around like you think someone’s following you,” Kaz said. “And stop scurrying. You couldn’t look guiltier if you were performing the role of Thief Number Three in a penny play on East Stave. Next time walk normally. Try to look like you belong.”

“There isn’t going to be a next time.”

“Of course not. Keep your collar up.”

Wylan didn't argue. Until Inej was safe, until they'd gotten the money they'd been promised, he couldn't make any grand ultimatums. But there would be an end to this. There had to be, didn't there?

Matthias gave a high bird call from the other end of the street. Kaz glanced at his watch and ran a hand through his hair, ruffling it wildly. "Right on time."

They rounded the corner and slammed directly into Cornelis Smeet.