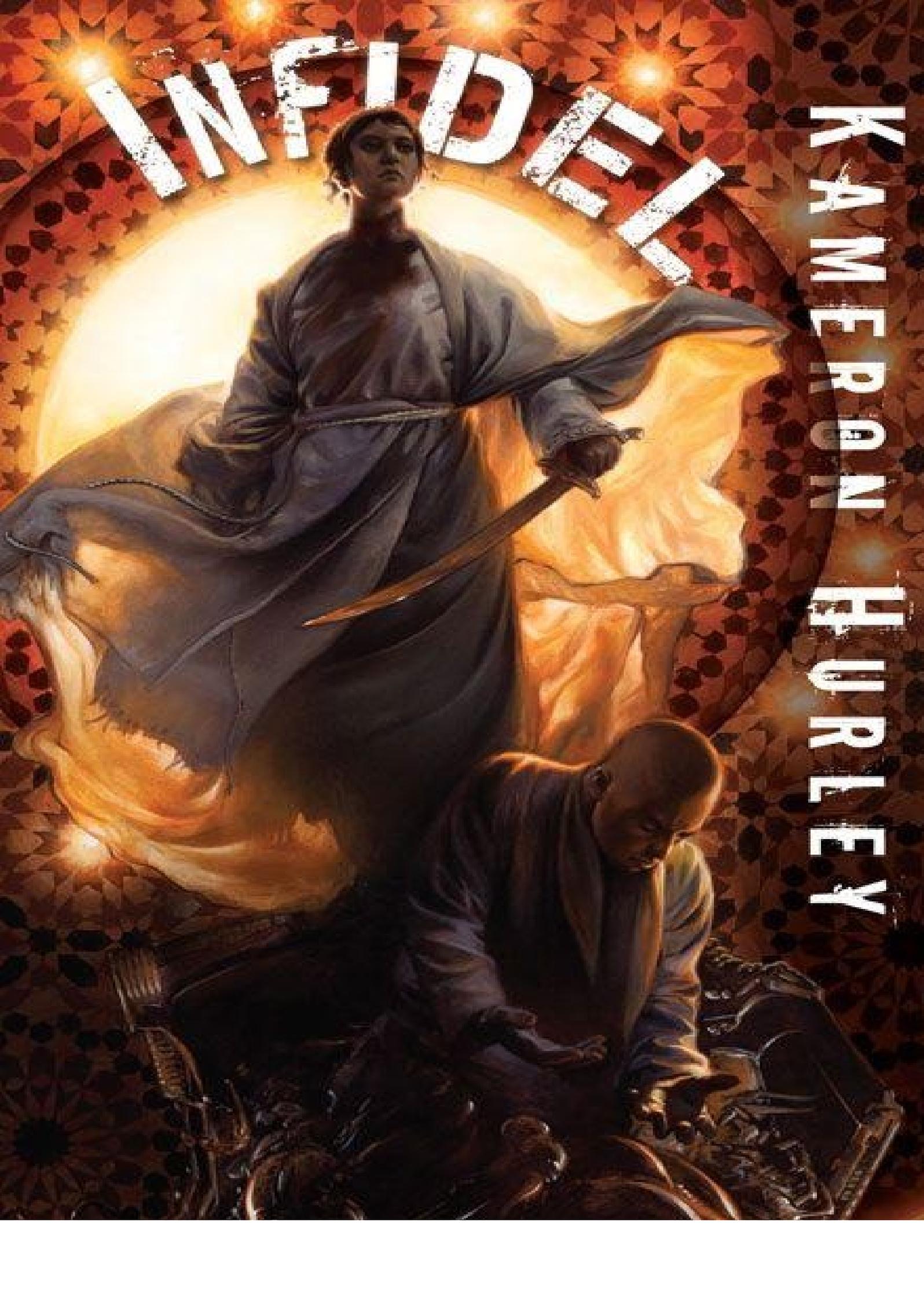


KAMMERON HURLEY



INFIDELITY

INFIDEL

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KAMERON HURLEY

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*For Joanna.*

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*So long, and thanks for all the brutal women.*

*Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for Allah loveth not transgressors.*

*(Quran, 2.19)*

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*Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals."*

*(Bible, Corinthians 15:33)*

The smog in Mushtallah tasted of tar and ashes; it tasted like the war. Mushtallah was nearly a thousand miles from the front but the organic filter surrounding the city couldn't keep out the yeasty stink of spent bursts and burning flesh blowing in from the desert.

Nyx pulled on a pair of goggles and stepped over a dead raven. Dusty feathers, dog shit, and edible receipts clogged the gutter. Ahead of her, the pale, stupid-looking Ras Tiegan kid she was charged with keeping alive made her way down the crowded sidewalk, swinging her shopping bags ahead of her. Her name was Mercia, and she was daughter to the Ras Tiegan ambassador Nasheen. The ambassador's kid covered her hair like most Ras Tiegans, though on choking days like this one, most everyone did. Mercia had big dark eyes and a flat nose like her mother's that gave her a distinctly foreign profile. The rest of her was awkward and gangly. Her hips were so bony she could have forced her way through the crowd without the bags. Rich Ras Tiegan girls were all too skinny.

Nyx moved around a tangle of women dancing outside a cantina blaring southern beat music. The tangy smell of oranges and saffron wafted out over the sidewalk. Nyx kept track of the time by counting the number of wasp, locust, and red beetle swarms buzzing by, delivering messages of a far higher caliber than she'd been entrusted with in years.

A bedraggled young vendor sat at the corner on a mat, holding up a "Paint your own prayer rug!" sign in one hand and a jar of zygotes covered in a sheen of ice flies in the other. Nyx's footsteps slowed as she passed. If she'd still been a bloodletting bel dame she'd have chopped off the woman's head and collected the inevitable bounty on her. These days, women selling illegal genetic goods were policed solely by bel dames. There was a time when the vendor would have been spooked at Nyx's approach. Nyx had been better dressed, better armed, and better supported, once: running with her bel dame sisters instead of a cocky boy shifter and reformed venom addict. Now, instead of collecting blood debt, she was babysitting diplomats and cutting up petty debtors when the First Families paid her in hard currency. It felt more honest. But a lot less honorable.

The woman shoved the jar of zygotes at her.

"Ten hours of viability left," the woman babbled. "Good price in the pits for these!"

"Fuck off," Nyx said, "Or I'll call the bel dames."

Invoking their name produced the desired effect. The woman's eyes got wide. She jerked away from Nyx and collected up her illegal genetic material and her prayer rugs, then disappeared quickly and quietly down an alley.

Nyx looked up to see Mercia stepping into the doorway of a boutique selling conservative swimwear with tunics and hoodies, oblivious of her spat with the vendor. Nyx slowed down. They were already in a better part of town than Nyx was used to—illegal merchants aside. With her whip at her hip and the hilt of a sword sticking up from a slit in the back of her burnous, she looked about like what she was: a bounty hunter, a mercenary, a body guard. Somebody hard up and dishonorable, like a woman just discharged from the front.

Nyx leaned against an unguarded bakkie—real risky, leaving them untended—to ease some of the pain in her back and knee. She wondered where she could get a hit of morphine this early in the day. She'd slept ten hours the night before, and thirteen the night before that. Too much sleep, even for a woman who bartered her organs for bread on occasion—one more reason she wasn't a bel dame anymore. Yet here she was, rubbing at her eyes before noon. She thought about going back and seeing her magician Yahfia, and getting swept for cancers. Frequent trips to the magician kept her team relaxed. Eshe, her kid clerk, and Suha, her broken-nosed weapons tech, were a good crew, but they still had a lot of blind faith in magicians and bug tech. They thought that anybody who could afford to get patched up by a magician lived forever. Nyx knew better.

Nyx's charge walked out of the storefront. Mercia's pale face, flat features, and the cut of her clothes drew the stares of smiling children. A pack of adolescent girls in chain mail and boots snickered at her. The Queen was half Ras Tiegan, and since the brutal turn in Nasheen's war with Chenja five years before, the Queen and Ras Tieg weren't nearly as popular as they'd once been. The war hadn't been going well for Nasheen in almost a decade; there were boy shortages, rogue magicians, problems with the bel dame council, and one of Nasheen's primary munitions compounds had been bombed out the year before; a blister burst that would keep the area contaminated for half a century at least.

Bad for Nasheen—good for business.

Nyx watched the Ras Tiegan kid. She wondered what the hell the kid had found in there that required another three bags. She probably. The foreign kids were all buying shit these days.

"Carry this, will you?" the kid said, holding out the bags.

Nyx crossed her arms and spit a bloody wad of sen on the sidewalk. She was trying to give up whiskey. Replacing it wholesale with upping her sen habit had seemed like a good idea. Better to dull pain than dull thought. The kid, though, said she was allergic to sen and didn't like the smell. Ras Tiegans were frail little roaches.

"I'm not a sherpa," Nyx said.

"A what?" the kid said. Daughters of diplomats took to languages like terrorists to water reservoirs, which meant the kid didn't have an accent. Nyx sometimes forgot that most Nasheenian slang was beyond her.

"I don't do shopping," Nyx said.

The kid looked put out. "My mother says you're to do what I say."

“Well, you and me can chat with your mother about that when we next see her,” Nyx said. Nyx had acted babysitter to the daughters of diplomats enough times during the Queen’s summits to know that the bugs would be silent for a good long while. Hopefully after the kid’s mother deposited Nyx’s fee.

“You need a sherpa, I’ll hire a girl for you,” Nyx said, and eyed the tail-end of the pack of girls in boots. Nyx wasn’t so washed up yet that getting one of the girls into bed was all that ridiculous an idea. Young girls loved old bel dame stories.

“You’re not very accommodating,” the kid said. She sounded like some rich nose, one of the First Family women who lived up the hills and sneered down at the sprawl of humanity they still called “the colonials,” a thousand years after the last battered ship planetless refugees was allowed onto the planet. Anybody who happened to bump into Umayma these days en route to somewhere else was either rerouted or left to orbit the planet and die a slow death by asphyxiation. Nyx had heard that when they still had the ability, the Families had the magicians blow up the ships. On those nights there was enough light in the sky to read by. That’s what the old folks nattered about, anyway.

“My mother says you’re the best in the business,” Mercia said.

Nyx started moving down the street again, and the kid tagged after her. “No, just the cheapest,” Nyx said. That was mostly true.

“But not easy to buy out?” the kid said slyly. Nyx had already considered pulling out the kid’s sharp tongue. Probably be some monetary penalty for that, though.

“Sadly, no.”

“My mother wouldn’t have hired you if you were.” The kid pulled out a berry-smelling sweet stick and started sucking at it like a coastal infant. How old was she? Ras Tiegans all looked younger than Nasheenians. She might have been eighteen or nineteen but didn’t look or act a day over fifteen.

“Takes some faith in your mother’s smarts to trust that,” Nyx said.

“She’s a diplomat,” the kid said, like that meant something.

“I’ve known some stupid diplomats.” Hell, Nyx had *killed* some stupid diplomats. Countries like Heidia and Druce paid good money to diplomats who “lost” family members while on foreign assignments, especially in Nasheen and Chenja. The first illegality note she took during her short bel dame career was for a Heidian deputy ambassador’s husband.

“My mother isn’t one of the stupid ones.”

Nyx watched a woman stepping out of a storefront ahead of them. The pitch to her walk as she came out told Nyx that she had begun the movement from a standstill, loitering in the doorway, and the bag at her hip was holding something far heavier than the shoe brand it advertised.

Ahead of them, Nyx saw two more women standing alongside an otherwise unguarded bakkie. Never could say what made her watch some women closer than others. Maybe they tried too hard to look like they had nothing to do.

The bakkie was missing its tags. Missing tags meant the women were either bel dames or somebody doing black work. Generally the sorts of people who illegally trafficked in bugs, people, and organs were gene pirates, mixing and matching blood codes and selling them illegally to the breeding programs in Nasheen and Chenja. Nyx had run that kind of black work before. She knew enough about it to know she didn’t want to have anything to do with the people running it.

As Nyx moved to get herself between the kid and the sidewalk, the women hanging around the bakkie too-casually turned their backs to her.

Nyx rolled her shoulders. The kid said something about a Ras Tiegans holiday where children wore funny hats.

Nyx saw a gap in the sidewalk traffic and grabbed the kid by the elbow. She steered her into the street.

Ravens’ feathers stirred around their ankles. The kid tensed under her fingers and went real quiet. One of the benefits of working with kids used to kidnapping attempts was that they knew when to shut up.

With her other hand, Nyx reached behind her where she kept a scattergun strapped to her back. She was a bad shot, but the scattergun would hit just about anything in the general direction she aimed it.

As they walked into the street, Nyx felt a rush of dizziness, as if her head was floating somewhere over her right shoulder. A gray haze ate at the edges of her vision. She shook her head and blinked. Too old for this, she thought.

A cat-pulled cart rolled past. A rickshaw driver swore at her. Dust clotted the air. The cats stank. The kid started sneezing. Mercia’s mother had said she was allergic to cats, too. And oranges. And cardamom. And a hundred other things. Nyx half-expected the kid to burst into hives at the sound of raised voices.

Nyx pushed the kid ahead of her and glanced at the cart window. She saw the reflection of the sidewalk behind her where the woman with the shoe bag was hastily stepping after them.

The kid dropped the slobbery sweet stick into the street.

“Suha,” Nyx said. Saying Suha’s name triggered the bug tucked into the whorl of cartilage at the entrance to her ear canal.

“Where are you?” Suha’s voice had the tinny whine of the red beetle in the casing. “Eshe lost you back on south Mufuz.”

Mufuz, near the cantina. Nyx remembered the stir of women hanging around outside, the smell of saffron and oranges. Saffron perfume shifter-dogs and foxes off the scent, and the smell of oranges confused the parrot and raven shifters—magicians, too. She should have noticed that. She was getting too tired and dizzy to think straight. Muddled heads in her business got chopped off.

Nyx chanced a look behind them, just over her right shoulder. Her head felt light again, as if attached to a string.

Hold it together, she thought. You don’t make forty notes a day if your charge ends up dead. She tightened her grip on the kid.

“Nyxnissa—” the kid began, her voice low and cautious.

Nyx heard angry voices behind them, and moved.

She drew her scattergun as she turned. A hooded woman with a leashed cat in hand cried out and ducked. Several more women

scurried out of the line of fire, leaving the woman with the shoe bag in the open. The woman crouched low and reached into the bag. Nyx put herself between the woman and the kid and fired.

The woman on the ground pulled and rolled. Nyx ducked away and pushed the kid ahead of her, behind another rickshaw. She heard the shot. The back end of the rickshaw exploded.

“Move, move!” Nyx said, choking on yellow smoke. Pain blistered across her skin. She half-feared she was on fire, but the smoke in her nostrils didn’t stink like scorched hair or flesh. She’d been set on fire enough times to know what it smelled like.

Nyx kept shoving the kid through the crowd. People were panicking now, screaming about terrorists and timed bursts as they flooded up the street. Nyx pushed the kid into the melee and tore off her burnous, leaving it to be trampled by the mob. The kid had dropped her bags.

Nyx needed to split from the kid, but Suha was holed up back at their storefront half a kilometer away, and there was no sign of Eshe. She didn’t have anyone to pass the kid to.

Not for the first time, Nyx resented not having a bigger team.

Nyx put an arm around the kid’s waist and hauled her back onto the sidewalk and into the doorway of a Heidian deli that stank of peppercorns and overcooked cabbage. Nyx went right on past the counter and through the kitchen, eliciting startled cries from squawking tawny Heidian immigrants. A big matron held up a bigger knife and swore at her in Heidian.

Nyx pressed right past her and kicked through the back door and into the reeking alley. She heard the breathy flapping of wings and turned in time to see a black raven descend from the rooftop. Her vision swam. Her heart pounded in her chest as if she’d run five or ten kilometers. She gulped air. The kid wasn’t even out of breath. Some vague part of her registered that something was wrong.

The raven alighted on a dumpster and shivered once, shook out a hail of feathers, and started to morph. Dusty feathers rolled down the alley.

Watching the tumbling feathers made Nyx’s stomach roil.

She kept hold of the kid, who was saying something Nyx figured should make sense. Some other sound droned in Nyx’s ears.

The raven shook off the rest of the feathers and flapped wings that were now mostly arms. It jumped off the dumpster lid and landed on two human feet while it took on the body of a teenage boy. The ends of his fingers still looked too long and bony. He was covered in a thin film of mucus.

Eshe was still getting used to morphing quickly, but he wouldn’t be good at it for another couple years, about the time he got drafted for the front.

Whether or not the army made better use of raven scouts than Nyx did was debatable.

Nyx let go of Mercia’s arm and pushed her toward Eshe. He wiped off the last of the mucus and feathers as his fingers finished taking on human proportions.

“Take her to the safe house,” Nyx said. “Stay away from our regular front until I figure out who these women are.”

“But you—” Eshe started, his eyes still black as a raven’s, head cocked. Sometimes watching him shift put her off dinner.

“I’m going back and finding those—” Nyx was unsteady on her feet. She pressed a hand against the back wall of the deli to catch her balance. She closed her eyes, shook her head.

“Nyx, are you—” Eshe began again.

She opened her eyes and waved him away. “Get her out.”

Eshe glanced at the girl. “You up for running?” he asked.

Mercia nodded.

Eshe started off down the alley, naked, and turned sharply left down another. Mercia took off after him—surprisingly fast for a soldier-diplomat’s kid.

Nyx heard the door behind her bang open. She turned and fired her scattergun.

The woman at the door had pulled it half-closed, fast enough to catch most of the gun’s spray on the door instead of her belly. She was young, slight, and fast. Her burnous was dusty, and she wore a dark tunic. Nyx wasn’t sure how much damage the scattergun had done.

The woman launched herself at her. Nyx fired again and drew her sword. The woman fell into a roll and came up with a knife.

Screams sounded from inside the deli.

Nyx caught the first thrust of the knife with the gun, pushed it back. She thrust at the woman with her sword. The woman leaned back.

Bloody fucking fast for a mercenary, Nyx thought. Her head swam.

The knife lashed out at her again. Caught Nyx on the cheek. Nyx flinched, retreated. The woman grinned.

Cocky, Nyx thought.

Nyx let the woman push her back to the end of the alley. She parried most of the knife thrusts, but caught a couple on her forearms. There was nothing worse than a knife fight. Fuck around too long and you’d be in ribbons.

Nyx was within an arm’s length of the wall. The knife flicked at her again. The woman’s eyes were shiny—she must be new to the game—and sweat beaded her upper lip. Nyx caught the knife with her blade and pushed—hard. In the same motion, she threw her left hand out—the hand holding the gun—in a hard left hook.

The gun connected with the woman’s temple. Her head lolled to one side. She stumbled. Her hands sagged. Then she crumpled like a drunken kitten.

Nyx raised her head and looked back toward the deli. There had been two of them. Where was the other one?

She slipped just into the next alley and kept her sword out. Sweat trickled into her eyes. She wiped it away, blinked furiously. She heard a noise in the alley, and chanced a look.

The second woman was up on the roof, taking in the full measure of the alley. She had a scattergun drawn. Nyx made herself fit against the wall, waited.

Nyx was a terrible shot from any range.

“Suha,” she said softly. The name triggered the tailored red beetle in her ear. It opened the connection.

“What you got?”

“Two women. Possible assassins. Bagged one in the alley. I got another one on the roof of the deli behind me. You got my position?”

“Yeah.”

“You still on point?”

“I’m moving to intercept. Eshe says you’re in shit shape.”

“I’m fine. But I’ve got a second shooter. I need you to intercept.”

“On it. Got a description?”

Nyx gave her a description of the second shooter. When she looked back, the woman was no longer on the rooftop. “Lost visual on the roof of the deli,” Nyx said. “Check the street outside.”

“I’m six blocks away.”

“Watch your ass. They’re good. Young, but good.”

“So am I,” Suha said.

Nyx ducked back into the alley behind the deli and sheathed her sword. She crouched next to the woman and patted her down. The clothes were worn, dirty, but good quality. The burnous was organic, which wasn’t cheap. She found two more knives and about five bucks in loose change—not an insubstantial amount of cash.

“Who the fuck are you?” Nyx muttered. A wave of dizziness passed over her again. She breathed deeply through her nose.

The woman began to stir. Nyx pulled out some sticky bands from the pack at her hip and bound the woman’s hands behind her. As she pulled up the burnous, she saw a flash of red. She paused. Stared. A red letter was tucked into the back of the woman’s trousers.

Nyx went very still for the space of a breath.

Then she pulled out the red letter and yanked it open. It was a bel dame’s assassination note. The note wasn’t written up for Nyx or Mercia, but for some inland kid with a smoky face and big eyes. Only a bel dame would carry one of these notes. What the fuck was a bel dame doing hunting down the daughter to a diplomat without a red letter order to do it? Or was she running some kind of black work?

The woman was groaning now.

“Bel dame, huh?” Nyx said, and snorted. “Might be illegal to kill you... But a buck says you’re running a black note.”

Nyx shoved the note into her pocket. She stood and grabbed the bel dame by the hair.

“This’ll hurt,” Nyx said.

It took three whacks of Nyx’s sword to take off the bel dame’s head. Blood splattered her feet and swam in lazy rivulets down the alley. She tugged off the woman’s organic burnous and wrapped the head with it. The body shuddered.

Bloody fucking bel dames, Nyx thought, and stumbled out the alley and across the next street.

Dust quickly covered the blood that coated her from hip to feet, but she still got cautious looks on the street. She turned down another alley and tried to catch her breath. She set down the head. Fuck, she needed a drink.

Nyx fell against the alley wall. She turned and pressed her forehead to it. Her stomach heaved. She vomited, tasted acid. Blood beetles lit out from beneath the wall, swarmed toward the steaming bile and blood splattered across her sandals.

She moved away from the wall and staggered. She needed to move before somebody else showed up. She needed to take the head to the bel dame office. Might be they’d pay her to bring in a bel dame running black work. She needed to check her accounts. She needed to bring home a nice girl. She needed a drink. She needed to call Rhys, she....

Time stopped.

The world went dark.

“Nyx? Nyx?”

She was staring at the pale lavender sky from the floor of an alley. Eshe was staring down at her, a skinny little Ras Tiegan hair breed with a soft face and pouting mouth, too plain and unremarkable in looks for much of anything but disappearing into crowds.

He pressed a hand to her forehead, like he was trying to measure something.

“Whose head is that?” he asked.

Dark smears blotted out the boy’s face. “I don’t have time for this shit,” Nyx slurred. She tried moving her arms. Everything felt heavy. Something stank like vomit.

“I think you need a magician,” he said.

“What?” she said, but searching for the word took a long time, and even saying it seemed heavy, too difficult. “I think I’m a little tired,” she said.

“I’ll take you to Yahfia.”

“The kid...” Nyx said, and then stopped, unsure about what kid she meant. Some kid. Something important. Maybe it wasn’t important. “I need to call Rhys,” she said.

“Who?” the kid said. “I’ll get Yahfia.”

“There was a little black dog,” Nyx said.

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“A what?”

Eshe started to look like someone she didn’t know. What was a boy doing on the street unchaperoned? Shouldn’t he be at the front?

“I just need to sleep, Fouad,” Nyx murmured. “A little sleep, and maybe Kine can get me some whiskey...”

Something wasn’t right. She saw a body in a tub, bloody, no eyes... Yes, that’s right, Kine was dead. Her sister was dead. “Fouad,” she told her brother, “Kine is dead. I think you’re supposed to be at the front.”

“I’m getting Yahfia,” Fouad said. He stood, and that was fine, because she was tired of talking. She just wanted to lie there a little longer. Blackness clawed at her, but it felt good, like giving in to sleep after a long, hard day.

It didn’t feel like dying at all.

Yahfia's operating theater smelled of death and lavender, and there was something crawling up the far wall where Yahfia kept her jars of organs. The theater was a windowless room built into a storefront along one of the higher-end streets of Mushtallah. It had only been burned out once in four years. Most girls on this side of Mushtallah were training to be sappers and munitions experts. Nobody would have paid good money for a place that didn't attract bored teenage girls with a passion for fire.

Nyx licked at her thumb where a hister beetle had harvested a blood sample. Her head felt heavy now, just like the rest of her. The giant insects and organs inside the jars along the theater wall were all the more expensive sort, the type Nyx saw when she used to work with proper magicians in Faleen and on Palace Hill. Yahfia had done well for herself during the years she'd been back in the country—better than Nyx; maybe better than anyone on Nyx's old crews.

"Sorry you had to wait so long," Yahfia said. "I had a bel dame come in ahead of you. Injured very severely by a deserter she was trying to bring in. Whole face taken off, can you believe it? She couldn't make it back to Bloodmount for care." She wiped her hands on her apron. Her green silk robe was stitched in gold and silver. Magicians did all right in Mushtallah.

"I used to be a bel dame once," Nyx said.

"So you've told me—many times," Yahfia said, and sighed. "I don't want trouble with bel dames, Nyx."

"Yeah, nobody does. So what the hell's wrong with me?" Nyx eased off the marble slab.

"Besides your deviant moral flexibility and severe phobia of emotional commitment?" Yahfia asked.

"I consider those virtues," Nyx said. She fastened the stays on her breast binding and buckled on her baldric.

"What made you finally come in?"

"Passed out today on a job. Eshe found me crawling around the alley looking for water. Felt a lot better after I got some water, but he started blubbering. Wanted me to come in. I humor him when I can."

Yahfia moved a couple of empty jars into the bowl of the freestanding sink and pumped water over them. "I can't blame him for being concerned. He's grown into quite the young man since you took him in."

"You say that like being a man's a good thing," Nyx said. "Men get carted off to the front to die. I'd rather he stayed eight forever the same as when I got him." She folded her arms. "You think it's cancer?" Getting cancer was like getting a cold. Everybody had a tumor or two taken out now and again. Most folks got malignant melanomas scraped off at least once a year.

She watched Yahfia. Yahfia was a head taller than Nyx, and that made her a tall woman, though she was slender in the hands and shoulders and thickening up in the hips. The age showed now in the set to her mouth, the spidery lines at the corners of her dark eyes. She had pretty eyes, big and long-lashed, like a girl dancer's.

"When was the last time you had your breasts out?" Yahfia asked.

"Couple years ago. Wanted to take them out all together, but I like my profile."

Yahfia smiled, but did not look at her. When a magician wouldn't look at you, it meant there was something about you she didn't like—or was afraid of. Never a good sign. Yahfia had never approved of her, certainly, but nobody did. Just because they didn't approve didn't mean they didn't like her.

"How old are you now, forty-five?" Yahfia asked.

"Thirty-eight," Nyx said. Saying it out loud made her feel even older.

A faint smile touched Yahfia's face. "I'm curious, Nyx. When did you go to prison and become exiled from the bel dame order?"

"I don't know. A while ago."

"How old were you?"

Nyx frowned. "Twenty-four."

"That was nearly fourteen years ago. Yet every time you come into my office, you introduce yourself to my staff as a bel dame."

Nyx shrugged. "It gets me in. I'm more concerned about what's wrong with me than about how I get an actual appointment."

"I didn't find any evidence of cancer," Yahfia said. "But there's certainly something wrong. I'm worried about the weight loss and the dizziness."

Nyx grunted. "I need to eat more and lay off the alcohol, that's all." But she hadn't had a drink in two days, and she ate like a starving woman all the time now. Sometimes magicians weren't good for anything but replacing something you already knew was missing.

Yahfia turned away from the sink and wiped her slender hands again. Nyx had always liked magicians' hands. Yahfia did all her body work for free in exchange for a little bit of paper forgery that Nyx had had the Queen take care of on Yahfia's behalf. Yahfia had been born with some boy parts. She was content to head to the front until she hit puberty... and started menstruating. Things were a little more complicated after that, and she'd fought most of her life to get her status changed. A tough thing to do unless you knew the right people in Mushtallah—people who owed you favors. And they had owed Nyx plenty back then.

"I have another magician I'd like you to see," Yahfia said. "She's far better than I, and works near the Orrizo. She may find something I've missed."

Nyx shrugged. "I got work."

"I thought you wanted to get out of red work."

Nyx shook out her dusty-red burnous and pulled it on. "If I'm not doing red work, I'm doing black work. We can't all

magicians.”

“Or bel dames?”

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Nyx grimaced.

“Is there something wrong with being respectably employed?” Yahfia asked.

Nyx walked over to the table at the end of the slab, took up and sheathed her sword. She lashed a dagger to her hip, holstered her scattergun, wound up and secured her whip, and stepped into and laced up her sandals, the ones with the razor blades hidden in the soles.

“Come on, you ever see me doing something respectable?” she said, and patted at the braids of her hair where she kept the poisoned needles.

“Might be an interesting career change. Rumor has it you’ve turned castration into an occupation.”

“You go cutting one guy’s cock off and you never hear the end of it,” Nyx said. “I killed Raine six years ago. Nobody in the border towns has spoken straight to me since.”

“Imagine that,” Yahfia said lightly. Nyx was reminded that Yahfia had had her own cock cut off not so long before. Helped add legitimacy to the paper forgery. Best to leave that one alone.

“Huh,” Nyx said.

Nyx walked to the door, said over her shoulder, “You need anything from Afifa Square? I got to return something to some folks there.”

“No. I’m going to Amtullah tonight for a few days,” she said. “Don’t get yourself into trouble, Nyxnissa. Few people have patience for your sort.”

“My coin’s still good,” Nyx said. “And I get people favors when they need them. You remember that.” She opened the door.

“I do remember,” Yahfia said. “It’s why I still permit you in my theater. I do wish you’d appreciate that, instead of trying to bully my staff.”

“I don’t bully.”

Yahfia waved a hand at her. “Go on. Get that magician’s name and pattern from my secretary!”

Nyx closed the door.

Eshe stood in the waiting room. It was an airy, maroon-colored office ringed in stained-glass windows. All those outward-facing windows always freaked Nyx out. Eshe was rocking back on his heels and surreptitiously eyeing one of Yahfia’s pretty little secretaries. The woman’s plump body was partially concealed by the lattice of the privacy screen at the front desk. His mouth was hard and his face looked drawn. When he saw Nyx enter, his expression didn’t improve.

“What did she say?” Eshe asked.

“Fit as a harem girl,” Nyx said.

“You’re a liar.”

“I used to be good at it.” Also a lie. She tousled his hair, though he was old for it. He ducked away from her, pursed his mouth, and looked out at the street. She didn’t think his pouty, petulant-looking mouth would get any more attractive with age.

“Let’s go,” she said. “Suha’s probably dropped Mercia off already and itching to get back to the keg.” She still used the same affectionate term for her storefront in Mushtallah that she’d used for her storefront in Punjai, though it’d been ten years since she stopped selling beer kegs out of the one in Punjai.

“She didn’t fix you up at all?” Eshe asked. He had big brown eyes, and when he looked at her, sometimes, she wondered what his mother had looked like. Nyx had caught Eshe trying to pick her pocket when he was eight years old. He’d run away from his sanctioned apprenticeship to a cat dealer when he was six and started dressing like a girl to avoid the patrols. Eshe was a breed baby, one of a brood of eight or ten popped out by some career breeder. There were thousands of women in Nasheen who made living breeding babies for the cause. Looking for her would have been pointless. Breeders didn’t want to raise children. They wanted the state to feed them to the front. Where his half-breed blood came from was a matter of some contention. Nobody raised Ras Tieg babies at the compounds, but he had found some sanctuary in the Ras Tieg slums, and could speak the language passably well now.

“She said there’s some other magician who could look me over.”

“What’s her name?”

Nyx shrugged. “Why don’t you talk to the secretary and set it up?” Fourteen was plenty old enough for a boy to get tangled with girls. Not that he didn’t have any experience with that—he’d been a street kid, after all—but she was looking to find her somebody proper and half-virtuous before some bel dame came to collect him for the front, and there weren’t a lot of those sorts of young women around in her line of work.

Eshe shot a look at the secretary. He fidgeted a bit before finally going over to speak with her. The secretary was all smiles. Boys outside the schools or the coast were rare, and though he was an obvious half-breed, most people fawned over him the way people fawned over babies—Nasheen’s most precious resource.

His voice was changing. She heard it while he spoke with the woman. He was dressing less often like a girl, too. No more headscarves or belled trousers. He wore vests and somber-colored burnouses now, the sort Nyx only saw on old men. She hated him when he wore those stupid burnouses. He was getting old enough now that order keepers on the street were going to start asking him for his papers, too. She should have registered him for the draft two years before, but he was still passing for a girl then, and no one had come knocking on her door to get her to comply with the paperwork. Not yet. But shifter boys were especially conspicuous, and it was only a matter of time. Even if she discouraged him from shifting in public, the bags of feathers they packed out into the all

every week and the vast amounts of protein he consumed were going to give him away eventually. The war wanted shifters as bad as it wanted magicians.

Eshe chatted with the secretary and then walked back over, his face flush. Nyx tucked another wad of sen under her tongue. The left Yahfia's place together.

"Karida says the magician serves the noses up in the hills. She lives in a gated plaza near the Orrizo."

"I'm tired of hemorrhaging money."

"Karida says the magician works cheap for anybody Yahfia recommends."

"You two already swapping first names?"

"She has a girlfriend," he said.

"This is Nasheen. Everybody has a girlfriend."

They met up with Suha in the street. She sat in the driver's seat of their bakkie, smoking clove cigarettes.

Suha was a decade younger than Nyx, and still dressed like a woman at the front: long-sleeved, hip-hugging tunic bisected by wide munitions utility belt; half-length trousers, dust-colored burnous, and standard-issue combat boots. She was a short, squat woman, more muscle than fat, with a protruding mouth, jutting chin, and mashed-up nose that had been broken more times than she could say. Eshe called her "the trout," which might have been funny if Nyx had ever seen a fish. Eshe said he had some sort of half-memory of fish farms on the coast. Nyx suspected he was just using the word to show off.

"Mercia get back all right?" Nyx asked as she opened the door.

Suha blew smoke through her nose and tugged at her sleeves. The venom scars on her arms weren't visible with the long sleeves—she made an effort to hide them, especially around Eshe—but it was a nervous habit that reminded Nyx of a Chenjan woman tugging at her headscarf to make sure her hair was covered.

"Could have gone better," Suha said. "You should have been there."

"I can't be everywhere at once," Nyx said.

Eshe opened the front and squeezed into the little jump seat behind them. Nyx slid next to Suha.

"The diplomat fired us," Suha said. She put out the cigarette and stuffed a wad of sen between teeth and cheek. Her teeth were stained bloody crimson with it.

"She deposit my fee?" Nyx asked.

"Yeah. Says she heard we had trouble downtown today."

"Fucking diplomats. She should thank me for keeping her daughter alive."

"I called the bounty note office like you asked," Suha said.

She started the bakkie, and turned them out onto south Raban. From here, Nyx could just see the curved amber spire of the Orrizo in the distance—a monument to anonymous dead men.

"There's no record that anybody put out a note on you or Mercia."

Nyx chewed on that for a while. "So that bel dame *was* rogue. Interesting." And more than a little disconcerting. She was hoping she could just burn up the body in her freezer and be done with it.

"Only thing more dangerous than a bel dame is a rogue bel dame," Suha muttered. She hunched over the wheel and bunched her mouth into a sour moue.

"You got that head in our freezer?"

"Yeah."

"May need to pay a visit to Bloodmount, then."

Eshe hopped up and down in his seat. "Bel dames? We get to see bel dames?"

Nyx sighed.

The awning above Nyx's storefront was battered and torn, and the unguent that kept the bugs away had long since worn off the slick surface. Locusts and sand flies clung beneath the awning during the day and crawled across the top at night. In the window just to the left of the door, Eshe had painted and hung a sign:

Nyxnissa so Dasheem  
Personal Security  
Blood Bonds  
Bounty Reclamation &  
Bel Dame Consulting Services

Nyx hadn't wanted to put in the part about bel dame consulting services, but she'd had a couple of kids come in from the front and ask her whether or not there was money in being a bel dame. More often, she had dodgy-looking young boys push in and ask her how to avoid getting caught by bel dames. She charged those ones half a note and told them to leave the country. Once a bel dame had your name, only death would stop her—and bel dames were notoriously hard to kill.

Nyx knew that better than anyone.

Suha unloaded gear and dry goods from the bakkie while Eshe followed Nyx inside through the filtered smart door. Nyx had laid out the place out a lot like her old storefront in Punjai, only this one was about twice as big. The wide, circular reception area they called the keg had an ablution bowl near the door and one padded bench along the far wall. Eshe's little desk guarded the entry from reception into the backroom where they kept their com and gear shop—they called it the hub—on the other side of a cheap, low-

filter. Nyx's office was to the right of the shop. She didn't bother keeping a filter over her door. Filters were expensive. She didn't need one with a magician anymore who could do the maintenance for free, so she just kept the one filter over the entrance to the hub. The organic smart door had come with the lease. It was enough.

"What other contracts are on the boards?" she asked Eshe as she walked behind the slab of her desk. She and Suha had rescued the desk from behind a kill shelter on the south side of Amtullah during a low-spring rainstorm that flooded the streets long enough for them to float the desk out. The wood was synthetic, made from bug secretions instead of coastal timber, but the sort of people Nyx dealt with couldn't tell the difference. It made her look richer than she was.

Eshe pulled a battered, antique slide from the locked drawer of his desk and accessed a list of potential notes and clients that Suha had logged that morning. Nyx began taking off the most extraneous of her gear and set it out for cleaning. Her vision swam as Eshe spoke. She rubbed her eyes.

"So let's get this straight," Nyx said when he was done. "I can play babysitter to some First Family secretary, cut off a peon's debtor's head, or... What was that other one?"

"Woman who owns a gambling pit in Ashad quarter wants you to evict some tenants."

"You've got to be kidding me."

Eshe shrugged.

How the fuck else was she going to pay the bills? Nyx felt suddenly lightheaded, and put her hand on her desktop to steady herself.

"Sign me up for the babysitting job," she said to Eshe. "I'll sort out the details tonight, all right? Go get cleaned up. It's five o'clock night."

Eshe thumbed some notes into the misty slide and walked back into the keg. Nyx heard him crackle through the hub filter a little batter around in the backroom with Suha. They started arguing about what kind of oil was best for rubbing down a double-barrel semi-organic Z1020 after disassembly.

Nyx pulled off her sandals. She hung her head between her knees. She closed her eyes and waited for her head to stop spinning.

She didn't want to go up the hill to the Orrizo and talk to some moneyed magician who looked at her like a broken anvil. She also didn't want to spend any more nights with her head between her knees. She wasn't doing herself or Eshe any favors, and Suha had a mother and three sisters to feed. For the first time in a decade, Nyx had money in the bank, gun and money caches for emergencies, and a team she was more than eighty percent certain wasn't fucking around on her. So why was she so sick and miserable?

Nyx sat up slowly and palmed open the sen box on the bottom left corner of her desk. A little sen with a morphine chaser cured her just about everything.

When she was more coherent, Nyx accessed the day's accounts on her personal slide and paid a couple of bills. Mercia's mother had indeed deposited the promised fee. They'd all be able to eat for the next few weeks.

Winter days in Mushtallah were warm, but short. By the time she mostly squared her accounts it was already dark, and she had unshuttered both glow worm lamps; the one on her desk and the big cylinder near the door. She heard Eshe light the cheap lamps in the keg. Suha turned up the radio as a band of nighttime revelers passed through the alley on their way to a low-end brothel three streets over.

The local magicians were holding a boxing match later that night. Nyx figured she'd send out Eshe for food and then take her downtown after Suha packed up and went home to her mother. Payday nights were traditionally Nyx and Eshe's food and fighting nights.

She leaned back in her chair and stretched. The chime on the reception area door sounded, which meant somebody had stepped onto the porch. She figured Suha had punched up a food delivery.

Nyx walked into the keg and slid her hand over the face of the door. The door went transparent—from her side, anyway—and she saw a girl on the stoop wearing a too-big burnous. Even with her face hidden deep within the heavy hood, Nyx knew it was Mercia. The kid had affected an awkward slouch, probably in an attempt to appear less like Mercia, but Nyx had spent all day staring at her ass-end, tracking her through crowds—she'd know that kid's bony little ass anywhere.

Nyx opened the door and stepped into the threshold to block Mercia from getting inside.

"Don't you put a foot in here," Nyx said. "Your mother likely has tags."

Mercia tilted her head up a little, so Nyx could just see the stubborn end of her pale chin. "No one followed me."

"I'm not hiring," Nyx said. "Cutting off heads isn't nearly as glamorous as it sounds."

"It's nothing like that. I wanted to apologize, about my mother."

"We all had them. Not worth apologizing."

"She shouldn't have fired you. That was..." Mercia hunched up again, as if retreating. "I had a woman once who wasn't as good as you."

"Hard to believe."

"I'm being very serious."

"If your mother's hiring in my pay range, I'm not surprised she's gotten some shitty service."

"Can I please come in? I don't like standing around in this part of the city."

"We're out of honey wine, and Ras Tiegans don't drink buni."

"Put something in it, and I might."

"A runaway and a lush? Your mother's going to enjoy feeding me to her security staff."

Nyx heard someone crackle through the hub filter behind her.

Eshe said, "What's up front?"

Nyx stepped aside to let Mercia in. "We've got another bug for dinner."

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Eshe's eyes got big. "We're ordering in?"

"Go pick something up. Suha's got petty cash."

Nyx sat Mercia down on the padded bench in the receiving room. The kid pulled back her hood. Her eyes were reddened from crying, but not bruised. Nyx didn't see any bruises on her bare arms or wrists either. Nobody had roughed her up—at home or on the street. Not tonight, anyway. So what was she running from?

"Does this apology come with some dinner money? You Ras Tiegan girls don't eat much, but I won't hold it against you."

Mercia shook her head. "I only wanted to say I'm sorry. She shouldn't have run you out like that. I saw what those women were doing. I don't think anybody else could have gotten out of that."

"Women are just women."

Mercia's forehead wrinkled. "Those women were bel dames."

That particular insight was surprising. How could a Ras Tiegan girl spot a bel dame? "You seen a bel dame before?"

"I've seen one of those ones before, at the Queen's palace. I told my mother I'd give a description to the authorities, but she didn't want to make a charge."

"You remember the bel dame's name?"

Mercia shook her head.

"But you know she's a bel dame?"

"Queen Zaynab introduced them as a group."

"Which one was it? One of the ones by the bakkie or the one with the bag?" Nyx asked.

"The one with the bag."

The one Nyx had killed.

"Was that the only one who looked familiar?" Nyx asked.

"That's the only one I remember," Mercia said.

Nyx leaned forward and put her elbows on her knees, clasped her hands. If bel dames wanted Mercia dead, it wasn't so much her business, but it was interesting. Ambassador sa Aldred had taken Nyx off watch, and the diplomat and her daughter would be heading back to Ras Tieg after the summit ended in a couple days. But a dead ambassador's kid might trigger a bigger incident than something rogue bel dames might like.

She looked over at Mercia. The skinny kid was watching her with sorrowful eyes, like she was worried about how Nyx was taking the news. It wasn't the sort of look Nyx expected from a girl being hunted.

"Your mother will hire you another bodyguard," Nyx said. "If she ups her fee, she can get one better than me. You'll be better off on your right."

The half-lie tasted fine. There were a couple of retired bel dames who could make good bodyguards, if the ambassador was willing to pay the fee. Knowing the ambassador's pay rate, though, she probably wouldn't parse out that much for a replacement, and Mercia would be left with some snot-nosed kid just out of university who wouldn't stand a chance against three or more bel dames working on a blood note. Just another soft, educated idiot.

Nyx sighed. Ever since Nyx took Eshe in she'd had a soft spot for kids with shitty mothers. I must be getting old, she thought.

"I know a few women I'd trust to watch after you," Nyx said. "I could make some calls, maybe convince them to work cheap."

Mercia wrinkled her brow. "Me? I'm not worried about *me*," she said.

"Why the hell not?" Nyx said.

"Because," Mercia said, very slowly, as if speaking to a soft, educated idiot, "those bel dames weren't after me. They were after *you*."

The Tirhani Minister of Public Affairs was in a foul mood. In the three years Rhys had worked with her, he had come to know her moods better than those of his own wife. The Minister bore her moods more clearly in the severe lines of her face, the deepening crease of worry between her heavy brows. When her mood moved from severe to foul she would tighten and release her fist on her desk the way she was doing now—tighten and release, tighten and release—as if she were strangling kittens one by one and dropping them into a pail at her feet.

Rhys sat across from her at the center of the broad map of her office, a slide pulled open in his hands. A pattern of gilded parafroids repeated along the border of the room, like the name of God in a prayer. The windows behind her were opaqued and filtered to keep out the sun. He could look just over the Minister's shoulder and see the whole of Tirhani's capital, Shirhazi, spread out across the flat plain below, crowded along the rim of the salty inland sea called Shahrddad. Tirhanis liked their buildings tall, and from that height, fourteen floors above the city, Rhys could share their enthusiasm. Being above this big city made him feel less small.

The Minister thumped her fist on her desk.

"These bloody black roaches think that covering up women's faces makes the lot of them more pious. Piety does not determine price. I won't part with the fruit of our labor for a brick man's fee. Do they think we are a country of stevedores?"

Rhys pulled his attention back to the Minister and the pleasantly cool room. The slick semi-transparent screen of his slide displayed his notes on the translation of Chenjan contracts relating to an exchange of goods and services with Tirhan. Like many of the documents Rhys had dealt with during his translation work with the Tirhani government, the actual goods and services were not specified, merely the terms of the amounts agreed upon, the delivery dates and times, the payment milestones, and generic legal jargon.

"Are you going to have your assistant consul politely decline their offer?" Rhys asked. "I'd like to have an idea of the tone you wish to present before I receive the document for review."

Though the goods were never named outright, Rhys suspected the Minister of Public Affairs was negotiating arms sales with Chenja, and had been for as long as he had worked for her. A third of the population of Shirhazi was employed in its weapons manufacturing plants. Most of Tirhan's economy was tied up in arms deals that fueled the centuries-old war between Chenja and Nasheen. It kept Tirhan's neighbors busy and made Tirhanis rich. It also required a significant ex-pat community of magicians to produce it. Shirhazi was a hodgepodge haven of refugee Chenjans and exiled magicians from Nasheen, Ras Tieg, even Mhoria. The Minister knew he knew her business, but they never discussed the movement of arms in such blunt terms. Some of this was merely the Tirhani custom of false modesty and false politeness. Rhys had spent much of his time as a child learning similar conversational rituals at the Chenjan court while on business with his father. He had picked up the Tirhani version easily. He found it much more comforting than brutal Nasheenan honesty.

The Minister's frown deepened. "You must decline their offer politely, but with a touch of disdain. This is the second time the new Minister has treated us as infidels during a negotiation. He must know his place before God. I will have my consul remove the offer completely, as a lesson. I will have him forward you our reply tonight, but do not trouble yourself about its delivery. I will have their minister stew himself to death while his people starve in the trenches.

"Would you like some tea?"

The segue was abrupt, and familiar. The Minister pulled a cup and saucer from her desk, a strainer, a tea bag. Business was concluded for the day.

Rhys rose. "Thank you, but I must humbly decline," he said.

"Oh, no, I insist you sit and have a drink," she said. She ladled a teaspoon of fire beetles into a water shaker and shook it up to heat the water. "I cannot allow you to part ways without a drink."

Tirhani false politeness.

"I respectfully decline. I am not thirsty. Thank you for this reception. I do look forward to hearing from your consul." Rhys bowed his head and waited. They had still not discussed the matter of payment.

"It is really too much," the Minister said, taking her cue. "You do too much for us."

"I am, as ever, pleased to offer my services to the benefit of this great country," Rhys said.

"And how much is it I may reward you for those services you've provided today?"

"It is nothing," Rhys said. "It is my pleasure."

He continued waiting.

"No, indeed, I insist. It is the least I can do."

"I am pleased to serve such a pleasant employer."

"I must redeem you. Come now."

"A day's work, twelve hours, correspondence with a Chenjan minister," Rhys said. "God willing, the price for such work is six notes." It was a price ten percent higher than he believed she would pay.

"That is too much," she said, and her expression soured further. "I could have had a boy from the Chenjan ghetto do the same, for far less."

"And you would have gotten work of an equal quality to the price you paid. You will not find a boy familiar with Chenjan politics."

and the workings of the minds of her war ministers begging for bugs at the corner.”

“Yet I have had Chenjan men provide me with just such a service at half the cost.”

“Half? Then they are beggars, and scoundrels, and it is no surprise that they are no longer in your employ. Instead, you have found my services more than adequate for several seasons.”

“It is adequate only when it is fair. I’ll pay you forty, no more.”

“I do appreciate proper recompense for the valuable work I provide for Tirhan. If you wish my family and I to soil ourselves in the Chenjan ghetto, please pay me what you would a dockworker, and excuse the state of my soiled bisht,” he said, taking a handful of the gauzy outer robe he wore and holding it out to her. It was not, indeed, soiled, but it was a bit dusty. “I cannot ask for less than fifty-five.”

“I, too, have mouths to feed, and a public to serve. Do you wish to bankrupt my country? Fifty notes will fill the bellies of half the children in the Chenjan ghetto.”

“For fifty-two notes, I can feed my children and perhaps excuse the Minister’s insults as to my ethnicity.”

The Minister leaned back in her chair and regarded him. “You’re very Chenjan,” she said.

“It’s why you hired me,” he said.

The Minister pressed her hand to the upper left corner of her desk. Rhys felt the air fill with the soft chatter of wood mites. The mites in the desk vomited up the Minister’s pay tickets. She wrote out a receipt for fifty-two and handed it to him.

Rhys accepted the receipt and bowed his head.

“Peace be with you,” the Minister said, “and may God bless your house and family.” She raised her teacup.

“And yours,” Rhys said, “God is great.”

He walked out of the Minister’s cool office and into the grand hall of the Public Affairs Ministry. The building’s gilt-domed mosque was on the top floor, two floors above him. He had gone to prayer before his meeting with the Minister, and now he took the stairs back to street level. It was a long descent, but he preferred it to the lifts, which were encased in an opaqued glass shaft that made him nervous. He knew too much about how easily a magician could alter the instructions given to the burr bugs that drove the lift up and down the height of the building. The convenience wasn’t worth the risk.

As Rhys took the stairs, he passed several other magicians doing the same. Though Rhys had the ability to perceive another magician through look, manner, and gaze alone, magicians on official business in Tirhan were required to wear a yellow, ankle-length khameez with wide sleeves and greenish bisht over the top of it. The bisht was thin and gauzy, hemmed in yellow along the collar, and both garments were cool and light enough to make walking around in the heat bearable. Cool and modest as the garments were, however, they did mark him apart; removed him from the rest of the community. There were days, passing through the streets of Tirhan as people moved out of his path, that he wondered if this was how members of the First Families of Nasheen felt when they descended from the hilltops to mingle with the common folk. Tirhan was notoriously short on magicians and shape shifters, and the genetics and breeding programs had been working on a solution to their dearth of talented individuals for decades. It also meant that immigration policies were extremely favorable toward magicians and shape shifters, regardless of nationality. That had been a blessing six years before when he crossed the border.

Rhys walked across the cool marble inlay of the foyer and out the wide archway that opened onto the street. He passed through a low-res organic filter that kept out the heat and stepped onto the palm-lined pedestrian way. Bakkies weren’t permitted within the center, so Rhys had to walk to the edge of the center to catch a taxi. Above him, trains crawled along a suspended rail, spitting roach beetle and roach casings from the back end. The trains were good for getting around inside the city and out to the factories, but Rhys lived in the suburbs. His wages were comfortable enough that he could afford a taxi.

As he walked, clerks, officials, and street cleaners and sweepers stepped out of his way. He passed the big tiered marble fountain and grassy knolls of the park at the city center. In the middle of the fountain stood a stone sculpture of a robed, veiled magician, her hand reaching toward the sky. Water cascaded from her palm and sloshed over the tiers below. Each slab was adorned with gold and silver gilt stone beetles and dragonflies, thorn bugs and owl flies. Stone dogs, foxes, ravens, and parrots crowded around the lip of the fountain. They had been coated with a skein of flesh beetles, so they appeared to shift and move.

Rhys had never liked the fountain. In Chenja, human representations presented as public art were banned. In Nasheen, they were merely discouraged. Idols left on display encouraged the worship of idols. Rhys often worried to see men and women approach the fountain and toss stones into the water as tokens in return for wishes granted, as if offering up prayers to... magicians. He supposed that was one more alien Tirhani gesture he would never get used to. Tirhan had grown up short on magicians. That idea was foreign enough.

Rhys lined up for a taxi at the edge of the center. The porter directing traffic insisted he come to the front of the line. Rhys no longer protested such treatment. The first few times he insisted on waiting in line—at the taxi ranks, at a restaurant, while out with his wife at a local art gallery—the porter, the clerks, and all of those waiting in line had grown anxious and expressed their concern—after a while, outrage—at his refusal of their courtesy, particularly after they heard his Chenjan accent. Tirhanis would not have foreigners calling them impolite.

He stepped into the front passenger seat of the taxi, and four other men squeezed into the seat in the back. The driver refused the fifth who wanted to sit between him and Rhys.

“I am escorting a magician!” the driver yelled, and shut the door.

The driver was Rhys’s age, probably in his early thirties, and he appeared to have been trying, unsuccessfully, to grow a beard for some time. It had grown in in patches. He kept it short, which eased the contrast between beard and hairless cheek.

The men in the back wore white khameezes, aghals, and sandals, and from the look of their manicured nails and neat beards, the

were probably lower-level assistants or officials working in the financial district. They could have, perhaps, been lawyers or businessmen, but they seemed too young to have reached such heights, and interns would not have had the cash for a taxi fare.

The driver slowed the taxi as the traffic ahead of them came to a halt. Rhys looked out the window. He saw a toppled rickshaw thirty meters up the road. He closed his eyes and searched for a local swarm of wasps to sniff out the disturbance, but could see none nearby. He gave up and opened his eyes.

"Pardon, Yah," the skinny man in the middle said, and leaned forward. Yah, or Yahni, was the polite prefix to a magician's name across Umayma, an old term dating back to the days when bel dames policed the world.

But Rhys had never been certified as a magician. The title was not earned, just assumed when he wore the robes.

Rhys did not correct him.

"You are married, yes?" the man asked.

"I am," Rhys said. He wore a silver ring on each of his ring fingers, the left to symbolize his engagement, the right to confirm his marriage.

"And how is it you drew this woman's interest? Was it that you were a magician?"

Rhys's wife was Chenjan, but she had been raised in Tirhan. He had had to learn his courting behaviors whole cloth. Not that he had much experience in courting before he came to Tirhan.

"It did help that I was a magician," he said.

The men nodded seriously.

They got off at the next street. Rhys and the taxi driver rode the rest of the way in silence. Just outside the hybrid oak park at the edge of Rhys's district, the driver came to a halt.

Rhys stepped out. "What shall I give you?" he asked.

"Praise be, it's an honor to ferry a magician."

"From the city center to the grove is generally a note and a half. Is this agreeable?"

"A note and a half? Do you wish to see me starve?"

"I am a fair man, not a fool."

They haggled. Rhys paid the driver a note sixty-five. He took the shortcut through the grove. It smelled of lemons and loam and the tangy sap of the hybrids. Bugs swarmed the treetops, none of them virulent. Clouds of wasps patrolled the streets, tailored to track and record the movements of nonresidents. At the end of the grove, he stepped out onto his street.

Rhys had wanted to live somewhere in the hills, but Shirhazi, at best, rolled. It did not have proper hills, not until it came to the base of the mountains, to the north. And by then the city had turned to scrubland and clover fields. So he settled for living in a three-story house made of mud-brick and bug secretions sandwiched at the far end of a long row of similar houses. There was a rear garden, and a wide, open balcony on the second floor. There were no windows on the first floor, of course, but windows on the upper floors opened out onto the rear garden, and during the hottest part of the day, they could push them all open and catch a breeze off the inland sea.

They. Rhys had expected to remain alone in Tirhan, his narrow days interspersed with occasional visits to Khos and Inaya, his fellow exiles, to ease some of the loneliness. But it hadn't turned out that way. Nothing about his life in Tirhan had turned out the way he expected.

Rhys walked across the street, through the front gate, and onto his tiled front patio. He heard laughter from behind the house. He passed through the cobbled alley to the treed yard surrounded in an eight-foot-high privacy wall. His family's refuge.

His daughters played in the yard, attaching strings to giant ladybugs and hanging them from the wisteria bushes that bordered the backyard. Ladybugs were supposed to be lucky, and were a popular symbol of the Tirhani Martyr. It was said that after she was burned, her body was consumed by ladybugs. It was nearing the time of the Martyr's festival, when the whole of Shirhazi would fast for nine days and feast for nine nights down at the beachfront. It would be the first year he and Elahyiah felt the girls were old enough to join in the nighttime festivities. There would be fireworks and magicians. Elahyiah had friends running the food kiosks and performing in the theater groups. The girls had been talking about it for weeks.

He stood at the edge of the yard and watched them. The girls were two and four now, not old enough, in his opinion, to be left out in the yard with bugs in the sun, but he did not see Elahyiah or the housekeeper. The girls had shed their coats and played uncovered in the dirt.

"Laleh, Souri," he said. The girls lifted their heads. Souri, the younger, squealed and ran across the dirt in her bare feet. Souri had once eaten a spider and nearly died from it. Laleh was far more cautious, willing to follow but never lead.

Laleh hung back with the bugs under the scant shade of one of the thorny acacias.

"Where's your mother?" Rhys asked Souri.

Souri clung to his robe.

Rhys scooped her up and asked Laleh, "How long have you been out? Come inside. You're going to get cancer."

"Da," Souri said, and threw her little arms around his neck.

"Come," Rhys said to Laleh again, and held out his hand.

Laleh took a few tentative steps forward, head lowered. He often wondered where Laleh got her docility from. Certainly not from her mother.

They passed through the filter spanning the arched entryway of the porch and stepped across the cool tiles and into the house. A dozen succulents with broad green leaves crowded the porch, situated around a low, bubbling fountain lined in blue and green tiles. The main floor was one big room, loosely divided by hand-carved screens that Elahyiah's father had brought over from Chenja. The

screens were her dowry; her family had little else to offer besides Elahyiah herself.

Elahyiah sat bent over her desk near the ceramic stove they sometimes lit during the cool winter evenings, consulting her Tirhani dictionary. She spent several nights a week improving her Tirhani with a group of women downtown. The women were all Chenja refugees, or the children of refugees. She had emigrated to Tirhan when she was nine, and he thought she spoke the language well but she was constantly worried about it. “When we met I believed you would think I was some uneducated Nasheenian, it was poor,” she once confided.

He had thought nothing of the kind. Elahyiah was nothing like a Nasheenian woman, though he had not felt the need to tell her why he knew that for a certainty.

Elahyiah turned when he entered. He saw that she had the long stare of deep immersion. It took her a moment to focus, to come back from wherever she had been in her head, and then she was looking at him, at the children—and she smiled.

“You left them outside uncovered,” he said.

She blinked, and the smile faded. “It’s only been a few minutes.” She turned to look at the water clock next to the call box.

“Where’s the housekeeper?”

“I sent her home. It was such a beautiful day.”

That was Elahyiah—compassionate when she remembered to be, but not always practical. God, he loved her for the compassion but...

Rhys left the girls with her and walked into the kitchen. Dirty dishes littered the counter; half-eaten mangoes and a loaf of uncovered rye bread, plates smeared in peanut butter and toast and grasshopper heads.

“Elahyiah, you can’t send her home before she’s even finished the tea dishes.”

When she did not reply, Rhys turned to look back into the study, and saw Elahyiah giggling over some bug with Souri.

“Elahyiah?” he said. “The tea dishes.”

“Hm?” She raised her head, distracted. “That’s just tea.”

Rhys felt slow irritation building in his chest, disrupting his hard-fought calm. He closed his eyes. These are not important things, he reminded himself. It was a blessing that his days no longer consisted of cutting off heads and blowing up buildings. A blessing.

“Let’s get the children slathered down and put to bed,” Rhys said. “I’m not paying to have their skins replaced before they’re twenty.”

He went upstairs to the tidy bedroom and changed his clothes. The housekeeper had the unenviable job of trying to keep up with his distractible wife. She did her best to keep the children fed and the common rooms clean, but it often fell to him to keep the bedroom neat. He had become terribly fastidious about it. When he came back down, Elahyiah had managed to move the children halfway to the bathing room. They stood in the hallway talking idly about how fast bees could fly.

Together, he and Elahyiah got Souri and Laleh bathed and slathered in burn ointment and put to bed. It was a long, drawn-out process. Laleh, ever the dour, sensitive one, cried and protested. Elahyiah kept up a constant stream of chatter, spoke of Heideggerian philosophy and Tirhani verb structure, and Souri spun stories of dervishes and sand demons who lived in the garden and became imprisoned in the belly of a sand cat.

By the time they put the girls into their room, the suns had died and the blue dusk had long since fallen.

As Rhys stood at the door of the girls’ bedroom, he realized all of them had gone without dinner.

Elahyiah remained inside the bedroom, telling the girls stories about Chenja and the war in her soft voice.

“I need to speak to you when you’re done,” he said.

“I’ll be down in a bit, love,” Elahyiah said.

A night without dinner would not kill them. If Elahyiah didn’t remember to feed them in the morning, the housekeeper would.

Rhys walked back down to the disastrous kitchen. There were no clean knives. He rolled up his sleeves and threw out the rotting food—nothing left uncovered for long kept well—and opened the bug bin. He stacked the dishes in the bin and opened the access panel for the refuse beetles. They would lick the dishes clean in a quarter hour.

Rhys left the rest for the housekeeper and made himself a quick meal of stale rye bread, curried protein cakes, and a lone man he found at the back of the ice box behind a very curdled jar of cats’ milk. He opened the jar and threw it and its contents into the bug bin. The beetles hissed.

As he ate, standing next to the counter, he wrote some notes for Elahyiah on the live countertop. *Make sure the children eat breakfast. Don’t send the housekeeper home early. Don’t leave the girls outside uncovered.* He nearly wrote, *And remember to eat something, yourself,* but that was too much, like reminding her to wash her hair. Which she also often forgot. I’m not raising three children, he amended. How did such a brilliant woman lose so many details? Why did he have to play father to all three of them?

He finally went upstairs to find her.

The window was open. A cool breeze stirred gauzy curtains. Elahyiah stood at the door that led out onto their private balcony. Her hair was unbound; black curls tumbled down her shoulders. She wore only a loose shift.

She turned when he entered, smiled.

“I missed you,” she said.

He moved toward her in the dark. “Elahyiah, the children—”

She brushed a hand across his mouth, delicate as a moth’s touch. “Hush now, they’re in bed. I missed you.”

She kissed him.

They didn’t make it to the bed. She straddled him in the dark, almost frantic, passionate, as if they would be caught and stoned like two unwed lovers.

The whole world, for a moment, was just this: Elahyiah, his wife. The spill of her hair. The warmth, the urgent desire. He did not know where her sudden passion came from on these nights, when he was nearly exhausted and the house was in disarray. But his passion never ceased to move him.

Later, he got up to use the privy, and paused again as he entered the archway leading into their shared room. He watched her through the stir of the white curtain that separated their room from the hall. Elahyiah was already asleep. She looked small and delicate as she had the fine features of a lizard; delicate as a dragonfly. Their girls had been born small—too small for him not to worry. Both were growing up as fine-boned as their mother. She was peaceful and perfect in sleep, disarmed, completely vulnerable.

He loved her. He felt that in his bones, but some days, even when he lay next to her, when he looked at her as he did now, he could not help but feel, somewhere just under the surface of his love, of their sometimes strained contentment, that something that should have sustained him was missing. He supposed all marriages must be like this; great chunks of contentment, frustrated days of living, shot through with moments of absolute terror and doubt and disappointment. The world was large. It was no fault of his or hers, he supposed, to sometimes wonder if a mistake had been made.

And then as the wind fell and the curtain stilled he felt his restlessness still as well, and his wife was no longer a frail stranger across the hall who could not remember to eat her own dinner or keep an appointment, but the mother of his children, his gift from God, the passionate love of his life, because the love of one's life was never that which you wished for or hoped for or forgot or lost or mistook; it was the partner you spent your long days with, the woman God made for the partnering of all of your days.

The love of your life was never the woman you left behind.

He moved to step into the room, to lie next to her, but as he did he heard a faint sound from below, felt the stirring of some bug on a wire—old, familiar.

Rhys turned away from the bedroom and descended to the kitchen at the bottom of the house. From here, the sound of the call bell was louder, though the stirring in his blood remained the same.

The box was soldered to the wall next to the desk. He picked up the receiver.

“Peace be with you,” he said.

“And with you,” the woman on the other end said. He knew the voice. The connection was good; nothing hissed or chattered over the line. It meant the bugs that originated the call were expensive. Government.

It was the Tirhani Minister.

“I need you to take a train tonight to Beh Ayin,” she said.

“This is... unexpected.” He was thinking it would cost her two hundred notes.

“It's of great importance.”

If she was being blunt, he would follow suit. “It will cost you,” he said. He thought of the housekeeper, wondered how much it would cost to hire a second.

“I expected nothing less,” the Minister said, but her tone was the same. No amusement, all business.

“Who am I meeting with?” he asked.

“I will have one of my people meet you in Beh Ayin. She'll give you more information. She lost our original translator. How do you know your Nasheenian?”

When was the last time he had spoken Nasheenian? Six years? Inaya and Khos preferred to speak to him in Tirhani. When three of them lapsed into Nasheenian, it was generally brief, to explain a term, or triggered by some memory.

“You'll need to translate a negotiation,” the Minister said, “and you need to be on your best behavior.”

“Goods and services?”

“Very discreet goods and services. You understand?”

“If I did not, you would not employ me.”

“There's a train to Beh Ayin in two hours. There's a ticket with your name at the call desk.”

“Minister?”

“Yes?”

“What happened to the other translator?”

“Two hours,” the Minister said, and hung up.

The bel dame reclamation office in Mushtallah was at the base of the city's fifth hill, unofficially referred to by bel dames and civilians alike as Bloodmount. Particularly pious Nasheenians paid exorbitant prices to take a brief, musty tour of the interior of the derelict that made up the center of the hill. All the hills of Mushtallah were artificial. Their rotting cores were made up of old refugee ships, derelicts from the mass exodus from the moons back at the beginning of the world. Nyx had never been down there—she didn't much care what came before her—but she heard most of it was sealed off. What was left was just a sterile tangle of old metal, bug secretions, and bone dust.

There had been talk a few years before of the bel dames selling their residences on Bloodmount. Some had gone so far as to set up an alternate site in Amtullah for training new bel dames, but whatever grief they had with the Queen or with themselves had been sorted out, best anybody could tell, and Bloodmount was back at full capacity again.

Nyx had brought the whole team to drop off the head. She was interested in keeping them all together right now, at least until she had some answers. They had packed up the rogue bel dame's head in the trunk, and Nyx had finished off a fifth of vodka for breakfast, since she'd sworn off whiskey. It took the edge off her nerves. The last thing she wanted when she walked into a boiling hive of bel dames was to go in jumpy.

As they proceeded around Palace Hill, Bloodmount came into view. At the height of the hill, a single tower gleamed a burnished copper color. That was the only visible part of the ship above ground—a twisted metal spire where every bel dame took her oath to uphold the old laws of blood debt.

"You sure you want to do this today?" Suha muttered, and spit sen out the open window.

Nyx stared at the spire. The bel dame training schools, residences, and reclamation office ringed the base of the hill. From here she couldn't see the organic filter that protected the hill, but she'd been through it enough to know that it was the most powerful one in Nasheen. Hard to do, with Palace Hill and its high security organics just up the street. And the inner filters were more precise, and more deadly. She didn't figure she'd get much past the first filter on this little jaunt.

"I'm sure," Nyx said. "Best case, we find out what the fuck's going on with this rogue bel dame. Worst case, they kill me and you're out of a job."

"I like my job," Suha said.

Eshe stayed quiet.

Suha drove to the big, burst-scarred main gate at the base of the hill. This neighborhood was mostly boxing gyms and cheap eateries. There were a few shabby text and radio program stores and some bodegas. Nyx stepped out of the bakkie and looked up at the tenement windows above the shops. Teenage girls—bel dame hopefuls and university students—sat around on the tiny balconies. High-pitched laughter trickled over the street. She caught a whiff of marijuana, opium, and the distinctive milky stink of too many teenage women. A couple of leggy girls stood on the stoop of a bodega across from the bakkie. They smoked clove and marijuana cigarettes and wore calf-length burnouses. They looked Nyx over with heavy-lidded eyes.

"Can I come?" Eshe asked, leaning out the window. A couple of passing girls turned at his voice and stared outright. One of them stumbled. Her companion shrieked with laughter.

Nyx pushed his head back into the bakkie. "Stay with Suha. This isn't a good place for boys."

"Nyx—"

"You heard me. I'll lose com with you once I'm inside the filter," Nyx said. "I'm not back in two hours, you file a report with the order keepers." Not that it would do much good. Bel dames were outside government control. They policed themselves. How they dealt with Nyx and the rogue bel dame's head was no business of the Queen's, so far as they were concerned. Still, she liked the idea of somebody filing some obscure paperwork on her behalf.

Nyx motioned for Suha to pop the trunk, dug the burnous-wrapped bel dame's head out of the back and slung it over his shoulder. The burnous had eaten most of the blood, but it was still stained with amber-brown splotches.

She leaned into the driver's side window and nodded to the side street. "There's a good Ras Tiegan place two streets over called the Montrouge. Get the kid a soda and some curried dog."

Eshe grimaced.

"You watch yourself in there," Suha said.

"You watch yourself out *here*," Nyx said. She walked up to the front gate.

There was a young woman posted, just a kid, maybe twenty. Couldn't have served a day at the front. She had clear skin and shiny eyes, just like the cocky bel dame Nyx was bringing in. Definitely not a day at the front.

"Here to report a rogue bel dame," Nyx said.

"I gotta take your identification," the woman said. Nyx held out her hand.

The woman wiped Nyx's finger across her portable slide. Nyx felt a wisp of pressure as some tailored bug skein sucked up a blood sample.

Nyx watched the woman's reaction as the file came up. The girl didn't blink.

"You've got level one clearance. You can go as far as the reclamation office without being cleaned." She punched open the gate.

Nyx slipped inside. The gate clanged behind her. Old, old metal—the sort of stuff that came off derelicts. She walked across the

courtyard, past the bakkie barns. A couple of tissue mechanics raised their heads as she passed. Otherwise, nothing stirred on the other side of the gate.

The bounty reclamation office was a single-story building of amber stone. Most of the original arches had been whittled away by small arms fire, and what remained had been badly reconstructed with concrete and crumbling brick. Only half of the bel dame oath was visible. The complete line, the heart of the bel dame oath, was “My life for a thousand.” All that was clearly readable above the office now was “My life.” Nyx thought that somehow appropriate, knowing what she did about bel dames.

She hesitated at the stoop. It’d been a while since she crossed this threshold.

“Well, shit,” she said aloud, and moved the weight of the head to her other shoulder.

She walked into the musty interior of the office. It took a minute for her eyes to adjust. A kid clerk stood behind the counter, chin in hand, staring at some misty drama leaking out from the radio on the counter. She jerked her head up when she saw Nyx and turned off the radio. The images began to dissipate in the dry air.

Nyx thumped the burnous-wrapped head onto the counter.

The girl put on a haughty face to cover her surprise. It was fun to watch. Nyx figured she wasn’t a day over sixteen.

“You have a note?” the girl asked, casually extending her hand.

“It’s not a note,” Nyx said.

The girl’s posture changed, then, subtly—enough for Nyx to judge that she’d had some bel dame training already.

“I’m here to deliver a rogue bel dame,” Nyx said.

The girl’s eyes widened. She shifted away from the counter. “You killed a... bel dame?”

“More or less. You’ve got another thirty hours or so before the head goes bad. They put the bug in your head yet? We’re hard to kill for a reason.”

“The... bug?”

“Call whoever’s in charge of black marks, all right? I’m filing a report.”

Another woman walked in from the back. She was a gray-haired matron with a face like death and vinegar. One hand rested on the pistol at her hip. The barrel glowed green. It was some new organic model. Suha would know it.

“You left me a long time with your runt,” Nyx said.

The matron crinkled her face into the semblance of a smile. “A surprise or two is good for her. Teaches her to pay attention.”

The girl moved to shove her hands into her pockets. Hesitated. Left them free. One of the first rules of self-defense was to always keep your hands free—so you could grab a weapon, or use your hands as one.

“Go sort the dead notes in the back, Hind,” the matron said to the kid.

Hind sidestepped behind the matron and ducked into the back.

The matron spread her palms on the table, cocked her head at Nyx. “I can see you’ve been in the business awhile. Most don’t reach our age.”

I’m only thirty-eight, Nyx wanted to say, but this old woman—this crone—was likely no more than forty.

“You handle black marks against bel dames?” Nyx asked.

“No. That’s a council job. I already called her. She’ll be coming down to chat.”

“Council? The bel dame council?”

“Been a council job the last four or five years now, since the new gals got elected.”

“Didn’t know there was an election.”

“They happen hard and fast around here. Usually ’cause somebody got cut up. Just elected two new ones. Shook things up. Been some... interesting times, last few years.” She palmed the burnous. “So, what you bring us?”

Nyx heard at least two people take up positions outside the front door, blocking her escape. It felt good to have somebody make a fuss over her again, at least.

Then the door at Nyx’s left opened—the door leading back into the bounty reclamation offices.

A familiar figure entered. Her hair was completely white now, tied back from a pinched, hallowed face. The years hadn’t been kind. A long scar marked her from nose to ear on the left side of her face. Whoever had given it to her had taken half the ear as well. She wore loose black trousers and a tight, sleeveless tunic the color of sage. Her hands were fine boned, like her face, but heavily veined and wrinkled. You could always mark a woman’s age by her hands, even among the First Families.

The matron at the counter nodded at her. “This is Fatima Kosan,” she said. “Fatima handles all the black marks.”

“I know who she is,” Nyx said.

“They told me when you breached the gate,” Fatima said coolly. “I requested a personal notification if you ever blooded the gate.”

“How many people you kill to get that council seat?” Nyx asked.

“Enough,” Fatima said lightly.

“I’m here to deliver a head. That’s all. This honey pot tried to kill the daughter of the Ras Tiegan diplomat, Erian sa Aldre. Maybe me too.”

Fatima approached the counter. She walked with a barely perceptible limp. Nyx figured the right knee had been replaced, maybe a year or two before.

Fatima pushed open the top of the burnous, a bold thing to do, considering Nyx and the head hadn’t been through a filter. Nyx could have brought in any kind of Mushtallah-based contagion and killed the lot of them. But Fatima, best Nyx remembered, was stupid. She just knew Nyx well.

“Make sure she’s one of ours,” Fatima told the matron, “and get her to the Plague Sisters.”

Nyx pulled the red note from her dhoti. “Found this on her.”

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Fatima took the red note and examined it. “We’ll have it tested. Where’s the body?”

“Last I saw it, Mashad and East Efran, in the alley behind a Heidian deli. Don’t know the name, but the food smelled right.”

The matron took the head carefully, as if it were a child.

Fatima rested a hand on the counter, faced Nyx. Her eyes were soft and brown, but the hollows were deeply lined now.

“You looked better back when you were teaching me the laws of blood debt,” Nyx said.

“Long time ago,” Fatima agreed.

“Before you sent me to prison and tortured me?”

“Before you started doing black work, yes.”

“You got the girls outside for a reason?” Nyx said, nodding to the front where she’d heard the bel dames take up position.

“Nyxnissa, if I wanted you killed, I’d have done it long ago. Your name has come up many times at the council... but the dead vote never passed.”

“Which way did you vote?”

Fatima showed her teeth. “We’re no longer children, Nyxnissa. Let’s not fight.”

The matron returned from the back. “Blood test says the girl’s ours,” she said. She handed a coded note to Fatima. “Called Ara Basmirah. One of Shadha’s girls.”

“Shadha?” Nyx said.

Fatima stared at the coded note. Nyx saw her mouth harden. Then she raised her gaze, and the slip in her expression smoothed.

“The council has encountered some conflicts of interest among its members.”

“So she’s rogue after all?” Nyx said. There was no more “conflicting interest” in Nasheen than bel dames policing a rogue bel dame.

“That term is a little extreme,” Fatima said. “We have full control over the matter.”

“Isn’t that what Alharazad said before she killed half the council twenty years ago?”

“Thank you for bringing in the head,” Fatima said, avoiding her look. “We’ll get her reanimated and interrogate her. I assume you checked to make sure the diplomat’s name wasn’t on a red note?”

“Obviously.”

“And—”

“And I checked for mine,” Nyx said.

Fatima nodded, showed her teeth again. Was that supposed to be a smile? Nyx wondered if the facial scar had severed something essential in Fatima’s face. Best she remembered, Fatima knew how to smile, when it suited her. “If nothing else, we’ll discipline her for causing a public disturbance. You should come up to file a report.”

“Why the fuck would I file a report?”

“Records. The council loves them. Indulge me.” Fatima hesitated a moment, then, “What happened in Chenja was misunderstanding.” Her words came out quickly, like pulling a scab on some old wound. “The Queen saw fit to clarify your purpose for being in Chenja after the fact, but you must have understood my position at the time. It’s another reason you aren’t dead. In the future, it would be... prudent if you informed us of your private notes. It ensures that our interests are aligned.”

So, Nyx thought, it had bothered Fatima that she tortured her back in Chenja. That was something.

“The Queen told you Rasheeda was working both sides back then?” Nyx asked.

“No note was put out on Rasheeda. She was reported dead six years ago. I assumed you’d killed her.”

“I did, but I never burned the head,” Nyx said. “I guess somebody could have had her reanimated within the thirty-hour window. Tended to happen, with rogue bel dames.”

“You, of all people, should know better,” Fatima said. “As it is here, there have been some changes.”

“Like you getting elected?”

They were only an arm’s length apart now. They could have reached out and strangled each other. Nyx thought about that for a while. “How many council members are rogue, now?” Nyx asked.

Fatima showed her teeth again in her half smile/half grimace. “Bel dames don’t go rogue.”

“Like Rasheeda didn’t go rogue? Or this Ara girl? You remember who I am?”

“I remember. Which is why you should come upstairs and file that report.”

Nyx could have filed a report in the office. Fatima didn’t invite folks up into Bloodmount proper for paperwork. All told, Nyx was curiously curious about why Fatima wanted to pull her away privately. She could kill her easily and legally enough here.

Nyx shrugged. “Your time.”

Fatima’s mouth twitched.

Nyx followed Fatima back into the courtyard. The two bel dames posted outside the door took up the rear. She was struck by how young they looked. Neither was a day over twenty, but they carried themselves with the assurance of bel dames—the confident expressions, squared shoulders. She noted that the pistols at their hips were the new kind—those organic hybrids with green glowing barrels.

Fatima led her up toward the primary filter at the base of the hill. Nyx passed through it with a soft pop and hiss. She smelled something strange on the other side, and realized the filter had eaten at the hair on her arms. She touched her scalp, and found that her braids were dry and frayed.

“Turned up your filter?” Nyx asked. Her skin prickled.

Fatima half turned, continued walking. “No. Perhaps it simply doesn’t like you.”

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Nyx frowned. She didn’t want to test any more filters.

Fatima turned off the paved road, toward the big stone residence where the bel dame and council offices resided.

“You come out for every call from the front desk?” Nyx said.

“I had your code flagged, as I said.” Fatima pressed her hand to the faceplate on the front door. It opened, and they stepped in the cool foyer. The bel dames continued to keep pace with them. Nyx heard the soft *shush-shush* of water being piped through the walls, cooling the building.

Fatima motioned to the stairs. “My office is this way.”

Nyx hesitated on the stairs. Offices for petty officials and bug pushers were downstairs. The bel dame council offices were upstairs.

“When were you actually elected?” Nyx asked.

“I joined the bel dame council last year,” Fatima said. She started up the stairs.

Nyx followed Fatima into a wide circular foyer. She saw runners on either side of the door, and lifted her head to see the ass-end of a metal portcullis hidden in the deep recesses of the ceiling. The floor was blood-red brick. The bel dame council offices ringed the foyer. All of the doors were made of metal-studded bug secretions. She noted personal filters on each door, and faceplates. At the center of the room stood a ragged bel dame with a face like a smashed melon. She already had both hands on the hilts of her pistols when Nyx and Fatima entered.

Fatima keyed Nyx into her office. Inside, there was very little furniture. A low table, some rugs, cushions to sit on, a big standing cabinet. The way the table was angled, nobody would have to sit with their back to the door. Still, Nyx took her time finding a good place to sit.

She eased herself to the floor and pushed one of the cushions behind her. The windows were filtered slits, set just above her head height. Every building on the hill was built like a fortress.

“It’s quiet up here,” Nyx said.

Fatima sat across from her at the table. “We’re in the process of moving our operations,” Fatima said.

Nyx didn’t like sitting on the floor. It was one of the things she missed the least about being a bel dame. “Moving operations? Another bluff, like last time? Don’t shit me, Fatima, bel dames have operated out of Mushtallah for over a thousand years.”

Fatima shrugged. Nyx noted that she hadn’t pulled out a slide or some organic paper for a blooded statement. She wished for a cigarette, some sen, a glass of whiskey—something to do with her hands. Sitting across from Fatima this way felt like being back at bel dame school. So she did what they did in school—laid her hands flat on the table. Fatima did the same.

“We still have partial residences in Amtullah, which we had begun to establish during the last move.”

“You’re clearing the whole quarter?”

“Select training facilities will remain, as well as the reclamation office. We’ll continue taking our oaths in the tower, and Bloodmount is still sovereign. A consulate will remain.”

“A consulate? You’re not a foreign country.”

“After a fashion. It seemed only polite to keep an emissary in Mushtallah, near the Queen’s seat.”

Nyx mulled over that for a while. She watched Fatima’s dour face.

“You didn’t bring me up here for a statement,” Nyx said.

“No,” Fatima said.

Nyx’s fingers twitched. She considered stabbing Fatima with one of the poisoned needles stashed in her braids.

“I didn’t expect the rogues to come after you,” Fatima said. “But because they did, it does open some possibilities.”

“Can we talk about it over a drink?” Nyx asked.

“No,” Fatima said. “I know why the rogues want you dead. I thought about it myself, before things got... messy. You must understand the politics of bel dames using rogues to do their black work?”

“Yeah, I remember you and Rasheeda sending me to prison.”

“You weren’t rogue. Merely acting against our ethics. We don’t sell out our country on the black market. It’s dishonorable.”

“Ferrying zygotes is hardly—”

“This isn’t the time to discuss it,” Fatima said sharply. “Old days. Old arguments. I speak of today.”

Nyx thought about stabbing her with a needle again.

“Bringing in rogues is much trickier than merely disciplining a morally corrupt bel dame,” Fatima said.

“Cause then you’ve got to admit you’re dealing with a bel dame civil war?”

“Let’s not go that far.”

“What do you want, Fatima?”

Fatima’s mouth twitched. Another attempt at a smile? “The question is, what do *you* want, Nyx?”

Nyx shook her head. “I can’t do what you’re asking.”

“Who better?”

“Somebody who likes life a little less.”

Nyx began to rise.

“Wait.” Fatima held up her hand. “You haven’t asked what I can offer you.”

“What, money? Me and my team are doing all right. If you asked me up here for this you already know that.”

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