

BOOK ONE

TWICE DEAD

C A I T L I N S E A L

Charlesbridge

TEEN

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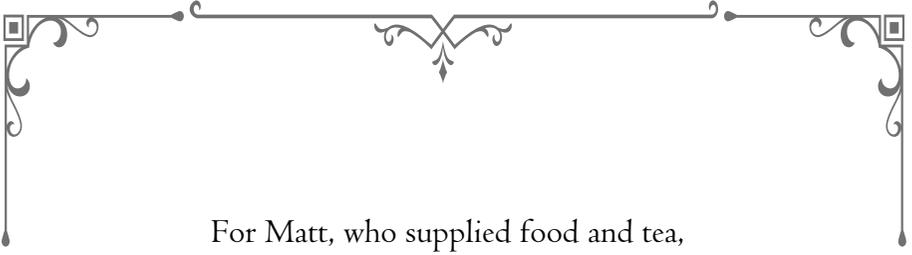
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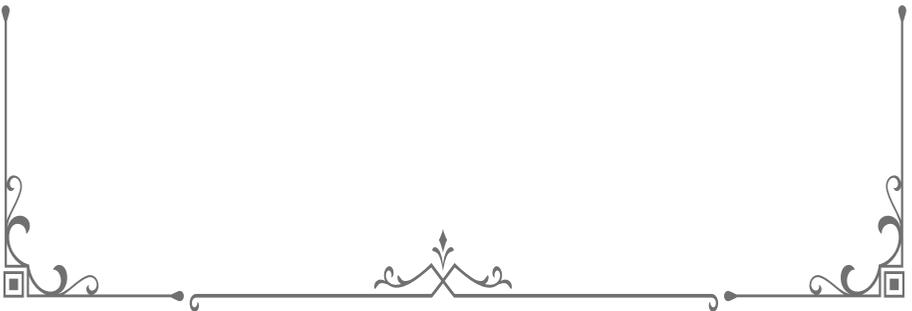
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For Matt, who supplied food and tea,
and believed in me even when I didn't.

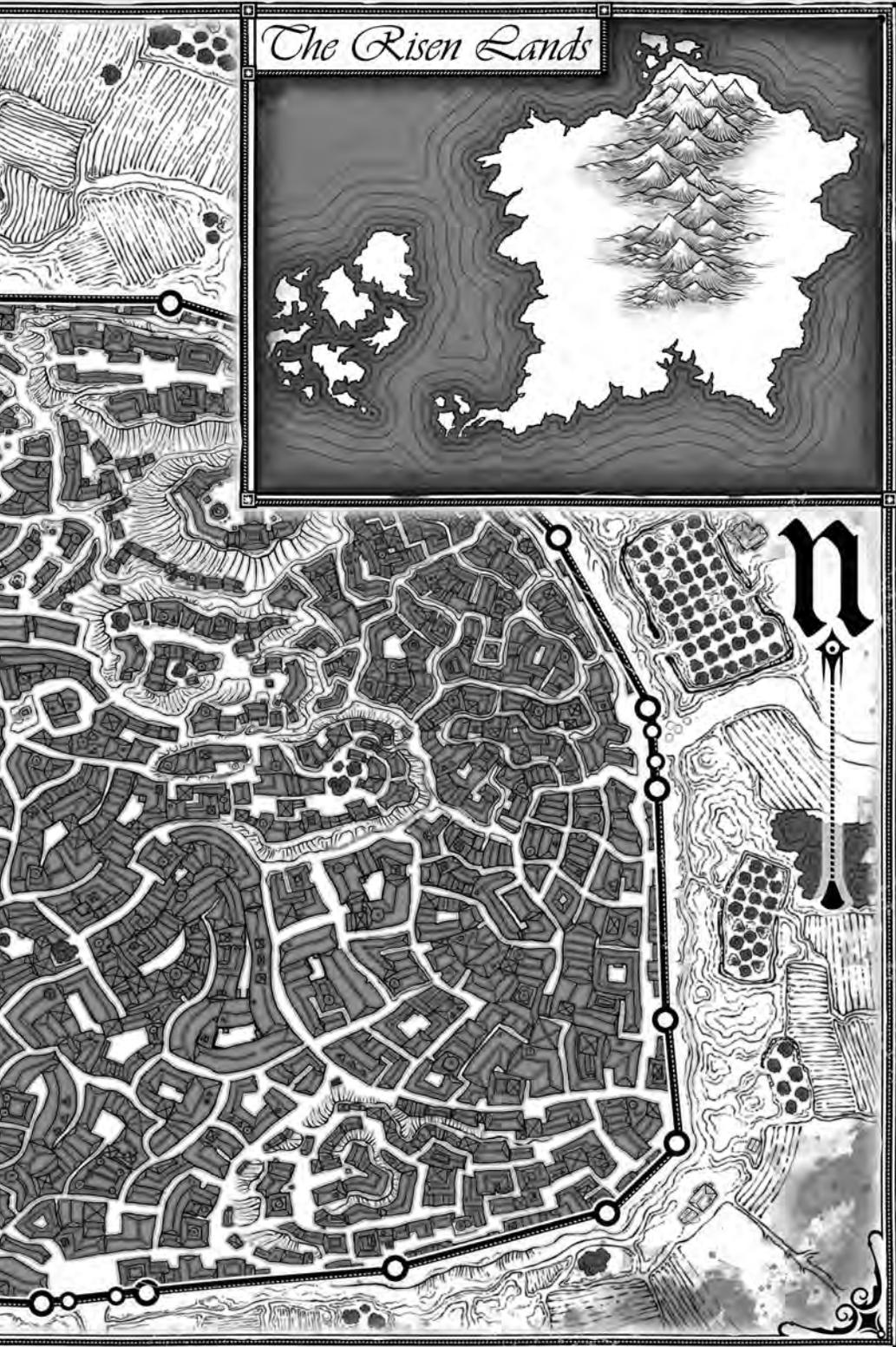


Belavine City



Map not final

The Risen Lands



CHAPTER 1

Naya stood on the deck of her father's ship, the *Gallant*, watching the crowded docks with a growing sense of unease. Any one of the brightly dressed strangers down there could be undead. She shaded her eyes against the afternoon sun as she turned to face her father. "I'm not certain I can—"

"You're ready." He stood beside her, arms crossed, scowling at the city beyond the port. He was a tall man with broad shoulders and dark eyes. His beard was trimmed neat and he wore his black jacket like battle armor.

A warm sea breeze blew across the deck, making the rigging creak above them. Naya touched the silver pendant hanging below her throat. "Yes, sir. I won't let you down."

The scowl left her father's face as he met her eyes. He squeezed her shoulder. "I know. Learn all you can here, and keep your wits about you. This city is full of liars."

"I will."

Her father looked like he wanted to say more. Instead he looked back at the city and his scowl returned. "Go. Creator guide you."

Naya clutched her oilskin document folder as she descended the gangplank to the docks. She stuck out her chin and tried to mimic the calm expression her father usually wore. *Find Master*

Belleno. Ensure that he sign the contract. Return to the ship. Simple. As for the undead, everyone said they looked and acted like ordinary people. If she ignored the walking corpses, they'd do her the same courtesy. Probably.

The smells of the market—flowers, strange spices, sweat—flooded Naya's nose as she shouldered her way into the crowd. The press of bodies trapped the afternoon heat, making her head spin as she searched for a street sign. Normally her father dealt with suppliers here by the docks. But Belleno was special. He owned some of the finest orange groves in all of Ceramor. The fruit would fetch a good price back home in Talmir. First, though, Naya needed to convince him to sign the contract, and the stubborn old eccentric refused to meet outside his house in the city's western hills.

Naya tightened her grip on the folder. Though she was already past her seventeenth birthday, this was the first time her father had let her go ashore alone to negotiate with a supplier. From her father's tone she guessed her task would be more complicated than just collecting a signature. Perhaps he worried Belleno would try to cheat them. Or maybe he expected her to negotiate for a better price. Whatever it was, it was obviously a test. If she passed, she could prove he hadn't made a mistake by taking on his bastard daughter as an apprentice.

A whistle shrieked. Naya stepped back just in time before a rune-powered tram barreled past. Her heart raced as she tucked a sweat-damp curl back into her braid. She would not fail.

People stared at her as she continued down the main road, past shops in tall buildings with large front windows displaying gowns and gentlemen's shoes. Naya hunched her shoulders. She could imagine what those strangers must be thinking: *foreigner*. Her tan skin and brown hair could have let her pass for local, but her clothing made her stick out like a barnacle on a well-scrubbed hull. The people here, in the city of Belavine, wore

loose, bright-colored cottons. Men and women alike favored brass-buttoned vests that stopped just above the hips. Even the poorest embroidered their hems and cuffs with elaborate geometric designs that looked gaudy in comparison with the simpler fashions of her home.

A drop of sweat trickled down Naya's back and into the hem of her gray wool skirt. She fought the urge to unbutton the high collar of her blouse. Maybe it would have been smarter to concede a little to the local fashions. She'd likely have been more comfortable, and far less conspicuous. Safer. The people here had no love for Talmirans like her.

Naya pushed the uncomfortable thought away. Her father wouldn't send her into danger. And he hadn't offered an escort from among the crew. That meant he thought she could do this alone. Naya focused on the warm sun and the lively sounds of the market. So long as she got back to the *Gallant* before nightfall, she'd be fine.

Despite Naya's initial unease, a smile rose on her lips as she followed her father's directions deeper into the city. There was a thrill to exploring new places, even those tainted by necromancy.

The streets narrowed when she left the main thoroughfare. The big glass windows were replaced by smaller storefronts and pushcarts manned by eager vendors selling everything from bruised vegetables to lamp oil. The faded wooden street signs were barely legible here. Naya had to double back twice before she finally found the right one.

As she rounded the corner, she noticed a man standing a few paces behind her. He turned away before she could get a clear look at his face, but something about him tugged at her memory. He had shaggy black hair and wore the oft-mended clothing of a common laborer. Naya frowned. She could have sworn she'd glimpsed the same man lingering near the docks. *No. Not just at*

the docks. Hadn't he been standing outside the bookshop she'd passed a moment ago?

Goose bumps rose on her arms despite the heat. Was he following her? Naya stepped backward, keeping her eyes on the man.

"Watch—!" Something slammed into her. Next thing she knew, she was sitting on the cobblestones and staring up at a heavysset woman in a flowing green skirt and black vest. A shopping basket lay next to Naya, its contents scattered over the paving stones. The woman pursed her lips as she bent to collect her things.

"I'm sorry." Naya grabbed her folder and scrambled to her feet. Her palms stung. When she lifted them, she wasn't surprised to see beads of blood rising from the scrapes. *Wonderful.* She couldn't even deliver a simple contract without getting into trouble. What would Belleno think when she arrived with stained skirts and bloody hands?

"Are you all right?" the woman asked in the local tongue. She glanced at Naya's hands, and her brow wrinkled with concern.

"I'm . . ." Naya began in the same language. But the words died in her throat when she noticed the black runic tattoos encircling the woman's neck and wrists. She'd heard of marks like these. They bound the woman's soul to her formerly dead body. *She's one of the undead,* Naya thought.

Her skin crawled as she stumbled away from the walking corpse. "No. I'm fine." Before the corpse could do anything else, Naya hurried off. Her heart thudded against her ribs. *Fool.* It wasn't as though the corpse had done anything wrong. Naya could have avoided her if she hadn't been walking backward like a child scared of wraiths in the night. She paused, looking back the way she'd come, but the strange man was nowhere in sight.

She followed the road up into the city's rolling hills, turning

right at an inn with a massive smiling fish carved over its doorway. The way turned again, narrowing to a lane barely wide enough for two people to walk abreast. Tall, brightly painted houses rose up on either side, blocking out the sun. Naya glanced back over her shoulder at the empty lane. Her father had said Belleno's house wasn't far from The Happy Cod inn. This had to be the right way.

After a few minutes following the winding lane, her certainty wavered. The city below was laid out in a proper grid. But up here the streets looked like they'd been mapped by wandering cows. *Blind cows*. Naya glanced back down the hill. The shimmer of the bay was just visible above the rooftops. The street was empty, but she couldn't shake the feeling that someone was watching her.

Naya's fingers strayed to her pendant, running over the stylized bird embossed on the flat disk. Foolish. Her father would be disappointed if he saw her fear. Fear made you hesitate, and those who hesitated were overtaken by others bolder and smarter than them. Naya took a steadying breath, then continued on her way.

Her luck turned when she glanced down an alley to her right. It opened onto a wider street, and through the growing afternoon shadows she could just make out a narrow purple house. White pillars flanked the doorway, matching her father's description. Naya grinned as excitement washed away her unease.

Her shoes splashed through puddles spreading from a clogged gutter as she jogged into the alleyway. Finally. If she hurried, she could be back on the *Gallant* before dinner. With all her attention focused on the house, her mind barely registered the scrape of footsteps behind her. She felt a sting at the back of her neck. Naya reached up to slap whatever bug had bitten her, but her fingers brushed against something long and narrow protruding from her skin. *What in creation?* She stifled a gasp as

she pulled the thing out and held it up to the light. A dart. It was fletched with tiny red feathers, and something dark and oily was smeared across the needle-sharp tip. Her stomach clenched.

Naya tried to turn, but her neck caught fire with pain. The sensation spread like swarming ants up her scalp and down the curve of her spine. Her jaw snapped shut so tight she thought her teeth might shatter. She tried to run, but her feet got tangled and she stumbled to her knees instead. She tried to call out but only managed a weak moan. The folder slipped from her stiff fingers. When she exhaled, her mouth filled with the copper taste of blood.

Naya tried to take a breath. Nothing. Her chest burned. She tried again, failed again. Numbness crept through her limbs, more terrifying than the pain. *No, this can't be happening.* She was dimly aware of her body collapsing to the ground. Dirty water splashed against her cheek and into one paralyzed eye. As the edges of her vision darkened, she saw a pair of scuffed boots with bronze buckles.

Then everything melted away.

CHAPTER 2

“It worked. Incredible.”

Naya opened her eyes. The world blurred, then swam into focus. *What worked?* Her memories were fragmented and jumbled. There had been a song, persistent and alluring, but sung in a language she didn’t recognize. She’d been standing on a black expanse, struggling against an icy tide that sought to suck her away.

No, wait, that wasn’t right. She’d been on a street. She’d been doing something important. What was it? The details slipped away like fever dreams, so she narrowed her eyes and concentrated on the present. The ceiling was all wrong. It was too high, and too white to be the ceiling of her cabin on the *Gallant*.

Naya was lying down, so she raised her head. An older woman stood nearby, staring at her. The lines around the woman’s eyes and mouth suggested she was somewhere past her fiftieth year. Sweat glistened on her forehead and her skin was flushed with exertion. Round glasses covered eyes so dark they were almost black. Behind the woman, shelves sagged under neat rows of jars with labels too small to make out. A window set in the right wall overlooked a cluttered counter next to the shelves, but it had been covered with heavy drapes.

Weak light shone from oil lamps and reflected off a strange

metal table pushed against the wall opposite the window. A man of average height and build stood next to it. He wore a dark, well-tailored suit and held his hands clasped behind his back. A wide-brimmed hat shadowed his face.

The woman with the glasses watched Naya with an expression of grim triumph. *What in creation did you do to me?* Naya tried to ask, but all that came out was a moan. She tried to draw breath. Couldn't. Tried again. Still nothing. Fresh panic ignited her thoughts. Her memories returned, indistinct at first, but growing clearer with every passing moment. She was in Belavine, a wealthy port in the country of Ceramor. She'd been looking for something for her father. Naya's head spun as she tried to recall the details. Why did she feel so strange? Her back seemed to barely touch the floor, almost like she was drifting.

"There. She's almost completely solid. Where's my book?" The woman turned to search the cluttered counter, oblivious to Naya's panic. Anger sparked in Naya's chest. Who were these people? The drifting sensation lessened. She pressed her hands against the cool stone floor as her anger grew.

The woman dug out a worn leather journal from a pile of papers. She grabbed a pen and began writing, stealing glances at Naya between sentences.

Naya tried again to take a breath, and this time air flooded her lungs. She sat up. The blanket covering her slid away. When she glanced down, a noise somewhere between a yelp and a scream escaped her throat. As if waking up in a strange room surrounded by strange people wasn't bad enough, someone had taken her clothes. The rough wool blanket slipped through her fingers as she struggled to cover herself, but after a moment she managed to pull it to her chin. In the flickering candlelight her fingertips looked silvery blue, almost transparent. Naya blinked and the illusion vanished.

The woman looked up. "Please, try to remain calm."

“Who are you? What’s going on? Where am I?” Too late Naya realized she’d asked in Talmiran. Even using the familiar words, her voice sounded strange. She took another breath and repeated the question in Ceramoran.

The woman gave her a tight-lipped smile. “My name is Lucia Laroke, and this is my shop. I realize this is disorienting, but I promise that will pass.” She wrote a few more lines in her journal. “Now then, would you please raise your right hand above your head?”

Naya clutched the blanket tighter. She looked again at the strange room. White chalk runes encircled the bare patch of floor where she’d woken. An idea tugged at the back of her mind, one too terrifying to acknowledge. “Why?” she asked.

“It’s a standard test. I need to gauge your motor functions.” Mistress Laroke spoke like a physician. Her calm tone pushed back against Naya’s fear.

Reluctantly, Naya shifted her grip on the blanket and raised her right hand. Her memories were beginning to stitch themselves together. She recalled the alley and the stabbing pain in her neck. She’d been attacked. A mugging perhaps?

“Good. You can lower your arm.”

What kind of physician left her patient to lie on a stone floor? And where had Naya’s clothes gone? She scrambled to her feet, wrapping the blanket around her shoulders.

“Please, I had a folder with me. Where is it?” she asked.

“It has been taken care of,” the man by the metal table said. Naya almost jumped in surprise. The man had stood so quiet and so still that she’d nearly forgotten he was there.

“You don’t understand. I need to deliver it, and I need to get back to my father’s ship. I can settle whatever accounts we have after—”

“I’m afraid your ship has already begun the return voyage to Talmir,” the man said.

“That’s impossible. What day is it? My father wouldn’t leave without me.” The panic growing in the back of her mind threatened to envelop her. She ignored it. Foolish little girls might panic when they woke in a strange place, but Naya wasn’t a fool or a child. These people were obviously confused. They’d mistaken her for someone else. All she had to do was figure out where she was and what they had done with her document folder and her clothes. Then she could be on her way.

Madame Laroke took a step back and glanced nervously between Naya and the man. “There are a few more tests I need to run to make sure the runes have set properly. After that you’re welcome to—”

“I believe your tests can wait until she recovers her senses.” The man pulled off his hat, revealing an angular face with a long chin and thick black eyebrows. His hair was combed back and held in place with some sort of oil. His skin was smooth save for a few wrinkles around the corners of his eyes. Naya frowned. The man’s features seemed familiar. “Do you know who I am?” he asked. Like Madame Laroke, he spoke Ceramoran, though his words were clipped by a faint Talmiran accent. Naya glanced at his feet. He wore slick black boots laced up the front—definitely not the boots she remembered seeing in the alleyway.

Naya stared at him. She was certain they had never met, but there was something about him. “You’re Ambassador Valn,” she said after a moment. Dalith Valn was the ambassador assigned to represent her home nation of Talmir here in Ceramor. Her father had always insisted she keep up with politics, and she’d seen a sketch of Valn in one of the morning newspapers back home.

Valn’s job was to facilitate communications and trade between the courts of Talmir and Ceramor. He also worked with the ambassadors from Banen and Silmar, two neighboring countries that, along with Talmir and Ceramor, formed the Congress of Powers. Together they enforced peace in all the

lands between the Banen Isles and the Blackspine Mountains. Each time the *Gallant* docked in Belavine, her father had met with the ambassador to get his signature on the ship's manifest.

Valn nodded. "Yes, I wanted to come personally to make sure you had recovered."

"So you know what happened to me?"

"There was an incident while you were traveling alone in the city."

"I was attacked." How did Valn know so much? And why was he here? She could understand why the ambassador would be concerned about an attack on a Talmiran citizen, but it hardly made sense for him to visit personally.

"Yes. I cannot begin to express how sorry I am that we could not reach you in time for a better solution."

"But I . . ." She remembered the burning in her chest, then the icy blackness and the song. It had felt like she was dying. But no, that was impossible. She felt fine now and there wasn't a mark on her. Except . . . Valn continued to stare at her. The clawing, biting panic finally tore loose as she realized what he was implying. "No," she whispered, but the confirmation was there in his eyes, and the pity.

"No. That's impossible." She looked down at her hands. *We could not reach you in time.* There were no runes on her wrists, but that didn't mean much. The undead could take different forms depending on the necromancer's whims. *She's almost completely solid.* That's what Madame Laroke had said. Naya had heard stories about the other monsters necromancers could make, the things they'd let loose on the Talmiran Army during the war. "No," she said again.

"I'm sorry, child."

Naya shuddered, finally noticing the signs she'd let herself ignore. She didn't feel the need to breathe. Yes, she drew in air to speak, but when she wasn't talking her chest remained still.

When she pressed her fingers against her wrist, she felt no pulse. She should have had bruises on her knees and cuts on her hands from the fall. Her feet ought to have ached from the long walk up the hill. But she felt entirely fine—too fine, too normal to be real. A scream threatened to push its way up her throat.

“What did you do to me?” Her voice was ragged. She took one step back, then another. There was a door to her left, and another behind her. One of those had to be an exit.

“I resurrected you.” The necromancer, hurried to put herself between Naya and the side door.

“So I’m dead?”

“Not at all. You’re a wraith—one of the best I’ve ever constructed.”

Naya stared down at herself. The fingers holding the blanket were hers. Her right arm still bore the faded scar from when she’d fallen and cut herself as a little girl. But if what the necromancer said was true, then none of it was real. Wraiths were worse than other undead. The woman she’d collided with in the street earlier was an animated corpse. Such creatures were violations of nature, but at least they were corporeal. Wraiths didn’t even have true bodies. They were just ghosts, spirits that sucked energy from the living.

The rough wool blanket prickled her fingertips. She didn’t feel like a ghost, or a monster. She felt solid, and at least more or less like herself. She took another deep breath. This had to be a nightmare. Maybe she was still lying unconscious in the alleyway. Naya squeezed her eyes shut and willed herself to wake. Nothing changed.

“I realize you may consider the process distasteful,” the necromancer said. “But there are a few things you should know. I’ve condensed the runes and scribed them to a network of bones in your left hand. I’m hoping this configuration will allow for greater flexibility in the bond’s outer limits and—”

“Thank you, Madame Laroke, but I don’t think now is the time to discuss the details of your work,” Valn said, his words tinted with scorn.

The necromancer gave him a look Naya couldn’t interpret. “Of course,” she said.

Valn turned back to Naya. “I imagine you’ll have many questions.”

She did. Dozens of them banged against her tightly pressed lips. A part of her wanted to charge the too-calm ambassador, then wrap her hands around his shoulders and shake him until he told her it had all been a mistake. That she wasn’t really dead and he hadn’t really let this necromancer strip her bones and drag her soul back into the world. “Why would you condone something like this? If I really died, then why didn’t you leave me dead?”

She didn’t want to die. But surely it would have been better to face the Creator’s judgment now than to live on as some twisted abomination. Necromancy was forbidden in her homeland. She would never be allowed to go back, not like this. Her old life, sailing the oceans with her father, was gone. Her old dream of someday joining the merchant’s guild and traveling the world, bringing home bright treasures and stories of strange places, was dead. The thought filled Naya with a nausea-like tingling.

“I’m afraid your situation is complicated,” Valn said. “But I want to assure you that things are not as bad as they seem. I’ve made arrangements. And if you give your consent, I think you can have a most productive future here. Your ship’s captain regrets he could not deal with this matter personally, but his business in Talmir could not wait.”

The captain. Her father. He couldn’t have left her. “What arrangements?”

Valn glanced at the necromancer, and Naya saw distaste in

the way his lips pursed. “Leave us. I need to speak to the girl alone.”

The necromancer said, “I don’t think that’s best right now—”

“Go.” Valn’s voice was quiet, but there was a hard edge to his tone.

The necromancer scowled, then lowered her gaze. “Fine. Call me if she shows any signs of instability.” To Naya she added, “There are clothes on the counter if you wish to get dressed. The fit won’t be exact, but they should do for now.”

Floorboards creaked as the necromancer retreated upstairs. Valn crossed to the back of the room and turned away, giving Naya the chance to dress. The clothes on the counter were foreign things, but at least the shoes Naya found on the floor nearby were her own. The skirt the necromancer had left her was patterned with interlocking rectangles and lines. The neckline of the shirt dipped uncomfortably low, and the red vest wasn’t any help in covering what the shirt didn’t. All of it felt too loose, and far too thin. Still, it was better than the blanket. “You can turn around,” she said.

Valn turned, then strode to the staircase the necromancer had taken. He checked it, paused as though to listen for any conspicuous sounds above, then nodded. He met Naya’s eyes. “How much do you know about your father’s true work in this city?”

CHAPTER 3

Naya shivered. She wasn't cold, but something in Valn's voice made her want to snatch up the blanket and wrap herself in its comforting warmth. "My father is a merchant." Valn had switched back to Talmiran and Naya did the same.

"True, but Hal Garth came to Belavine for more than trade and profit, as I think you may have suspected."

"I . . ." She had wondered why they'd spent so much time in the Ceramoran capital. There were other ports they might have sailed to that offered the chance for similar profits, and her father had no love for Ceramor or its necromancers. "I asked, but he wouldn't say."

Valn nodded. "I'm not surprised. Why don't we sit?" He motioned to a pair of stools pushed up against the counter. Naya perched on one, trying not to look at the array of knives and chisels spread out nearby. Valn sat across from her. "You asked me before why I didn't let you die and go to your place by the Creator's side. Simply put, we could not afford to lose you. We have too few trustworthy assets in this city as it is."

"I don't understand."

"You've studied the Treaty of Lith Lor?"

Naya frowned. What did that have to do with anything? "Of course. The treaty ended the War of Betrayal, and it created the

Congress of Powers to ensure that no Ceramoran ruler could ever raise another undead army.”

“Correct. When we signed the treaty thirty-two years ago, our King Lohen sought to eradicate necromancy entirely. But a few clever liars convinced the rulers of Banen and Silmar that it would be better to show mercy and set restrictions rather than outlawing the necromantic arts outright. They argued that the elimination of Ceramor’s army, combined with the reparation payments, and the execution of the Mad King and his generals were punishment enough. So Ceramor’s necromancers were allowed to continue their work under the watch of the other Powers. Ceramor was allowed the protection of our defensive alliances and a place in the Congress of Powers.

“Ever since she took her father’s place on the throne, Queen Lial has fought to uphold Lohen’s ideals and protect her people from the threat of another undead army. But as memories of the war fade, our allies grow less willing to help us monitor the Ceramoran necromancers and enforce the restrictions. If the restrictions weaken, I fear it will only be a matter of time before the necromancers break the treaty to raise another army and march on Talmir. Your father and I are part of a group working in secret to find proof Queen Lial can use to convince others of this danger.”

Naya clutched the edge of her stool. “You’re saying my father is a spy?” She’d always known he had secrets. But she’d never imagined anything like this. It sounded absurd. And yet the more she thought about it, the more she realized it made sense. It would explain their frequent visits to Belavine, and the trips he made alone into the city. He’d made sure she learned to keep ledgers, barter, and gauge the markets. But he’d also taught her ciphers, politics, and languages. “What does all this have to do with me?”

Valn’s expression softened. “Your father intended to bring

you into our work. The day you were attacked, you were supposed to meet with me.”

“You’re the merchant Belleno?”

Valn smiled. “In a manner of speaking. That house is a place where we can conduct our business without drawing suspicion.” His smile fell. “Unfortunately, we cannot guard against all threats. We’ve had trouble with some of the locals, but until now they haven’t been so bold as to kill in broad daylight. From what my agents uncovered, we know you were followed from the docks by someone who decided your father was asking the wrong sorts of questions. They went after you as a warning.” He brushed his fingers over the counter, like he was trying to get rid of some invisible stain on the smooth black stone. “I’m sorry we couldn’t protect you, but rest assured my people have dealt with the one responsible.”

There was a finality in what he said that made her shiver. “If you and my father are trying to stop the necromancers, then why would you hire one to bring me back?”

“I understand your doubt. It was not an easy decision. But as I said before, our resources are stretched thin. If you can help us in our mission, then I think the Creator will forgive us this transgression.”

Naya twisted the fabric of her skirt between her fingers. Her father had always hated such nervous habits. But she couldn’t seem to stop. She felt like a lifeboat caught in a tempest, her ship already smashed by the waves. Horror spread through her as she thought about the way her fingers had seemed silvery blue and nearly transparent when she’d first woken. It was all so wrong. And yet Valn’s words shone in her mind like the half-glimpsed beam of a lighthouse, a promise that shore and safety still existed somewhere within her reach. “Help how?” she asked.

“Your father meant for you to train under me, so we’ve already made arrangements to explain your absence from the ship.

This attack changes things, but I've found a cover that should allow you to remain in the city without drawing unnecessary attention." He pulled a folded document from his coat pocket and handed it to her. "The embassy records will show that Naya Garth left the city at her father's behest to tour several orange groves and meet with various Ceramoran businessmen whose goods the *Gallant* might carry back to Talmir. Meanwhile, a Talmiran servant girl was crushed by a horse cart near the docks. The official report will say that Lucia Laroke witnessed this tragic incident and decided to revive the girl. The girl's old master, wanting nothing more to do with her, has agreed to sell her contract to Madame Laroke, who is in need of an assistant. As the ambassador between our countries, I will ensure this potentially delicate transaction is completed smoothly."

Naya stared at the document. It was a ten-year servitude contract for a girl named Blue, making the girl a slave in all but name to whoever held her papers. "Blue?" Naya asked, not liking the sound of the name. "Won't a Talmiran wraith draw too much attention?"

"Not so much as you might think. Over the years a few of our countrymen have, in the face of sickness or dire injury, abandoned their faith and traveled to Ceramor seeking a chance at resurrection. You will be seen as a novelty at first, but the risks are less than if we tried to pass you off as a native of somewhere else."

Naya's grip tightened, making the paper crinkle. Was Valn really asking her to become some necromancer's servant? A bitter voice in the back of her mind whispered that it fit. *After all, I'm just a dead girl whose father couldn't be bothered to stay in town after his daughter was murdered.* No, that wasn't fair. Her father had a mission. If he trusted Valn to act in his stead, then he wouldn't have wasted time loitering in the city.

Valn leaned forward. "I can tell that you dislike the idea, but

think for a moment. Who do you imagine will be more conspicuous, the merchant's daughter who ought to be dead, or one more servant? Which one of those two will be able to blend in among her enemies and gather secrets to help shape her country's future?"

Hope flared in Naya's chest. "You'll still train me as a spy?"

"Yes. We stand at a delicate point. In four months the Powers will convene for the Tenth Congress. Certain factions in Ceramor are gathering strength. Once they convince our allies to lift the restrictions, I believe they will seek to rebuild Ceramor into the terror it once was. We need the very best on our side if we're going to prevent that fate. Your father has told me you are decisive, hardworking, and loyal to your country. Will you join us?"

Naya tried not to hunch under the weight of the ambassador's praise. Would her father really say all that? Hal Garth was a great man. He'd dragged himself up from work as a dock boy to become one of the queen's most favored merchants. Naya worked hard to follow his example, but he'd never praised her efforts so openly. *Then again, maybe that's not why they want you, not really.* If even half the stories she'd heard about wraiths were true, then their strange forms would make them perfect for the work Valn described. And no one would expect a wraith to be working for Talmir.

Naya closed her eyes. After two years traveling aboard the *Gallant*, it was hard to see herself as anything but a merchant. But when she imagined gathering information to protect Talmir, she felt a tickle of the same excitement that had gripped her every time she'd stood on the docks and looked out at the open sea. Maybe if she proved herself here, her countrymen would make an exception to the rules that forbid creatures like her in Talmir. She took a deep breath. "I'll do it."

"Excellent." Valn stood. "Tell Madame Laroke to take you to the embassy tomorrow morning to file the necessary paperwork.

Celia will explain the rest to you then.” Before Naya could ask who Celia was, Valn had already donned his hat and retreated to the door.

“Wait!” she called. But the only answer was the click of the latch closing. Naya stared at the writ of servitude and felt the dark menace of the foreign city pressing down on her.

CHAPTER 4

When the thump of shoes on the stairs announced the necromancer's return, Naya was still sitting on the stool with her knees drawn up and her eyes locked on the document. "So it's done, then?" the necromancer asked.

Naya nodded. "He says you're to take me to the embassy tomorrow." She scanned the writ one more time before setting it on the counter. She could hear the soft patter of rain outside. When had it started to rain?

"The embassy. Of course." The necromancer pushed her glasses up her nose. "I suppose there's no going back now," she added, almost too softly for Naya to hear.

Naya said nothing. The necromancer took a few steps toward her, then hesitated, smoothing an invisible wrinkle in her plain blue dress. Wisps of gray hair had escaped her bun. They hung lank around her face, making her look more like an exhausted schoolteacher than an evil practitioner of the dark arts. "There are a few more tests I should run. But I don't think any harm will come from waiting until morning."

Imagining what sort of tests the necromancer might subject her to made Naya's skin crawl. She looked away, but there was nowhere safe to cast her eyes that didn't remind her of what this

place was—and of what she'd become. "Very well, Mistress Laroke," she said softly. Her throat closed around the words, but if she had to get used to pretending to be this woman's servant, better to start now.

"Please, just Lucia is fine." Lucia wrinkled her nose. "I don't know what's usual for an indentured servant, but I've never enjoyed formal titles. It will only draw more attention if people hear you calling me that."

Naya nodded. "Very well, Miss Lucia." Back in Talmir, no servant, indentured or otherwise, would ever call her employer by their first name. Were things different in Ceramor, or was Lucia just eccentric?

Lucia pressed her lips together like she'd just tasted something bitter. "Close enough I suppose. I need a few hours to recover from the singing. Until then I suggest you stay inside." She rubbed the bridge of her nose, and her mouth stretched in a half-suppressed yawn. "You're welcome to look through any of the books while you wait, but please don't touch anything else. Wake me if you experience any sudden changes. Oh, and your personal effects are in that pouch on the counter."

Naya's eyes widened at the mention of the pouch. Her fingers darted to her throat in search of her mother's pendant and found nothing. How could she not have noticed its absence? Naya snatched the bag off the counter. She turned it over and sifted through the more ordinary objects—coins, pens, ink, and a small knife—before she spotted the gleam of the pendant.

"Would you like help?" Lucia asked.

"No!" Naya fumbled the clasp in her haste to open it. Finally her fingers found the latch and she closed the chain around her neck. Her shoulders relaxed as the familiar weight of the pendant settled just below her collarbone. She glanced up to see Lucia watching her. Lucia looked like she was going to ask something, but instead she rubbed her eyes.

“Well, it seems we’re in this together now. As I said, wake me if you experience any sudden changes.”

Naya kept her eyes fixed on Lucia as the necromancer shuffled toward a door in the side of the workroom. She waited in tense silence until she could no longer hear the creak of the stairs. When all was still, she wrapped her fingers tight around the pendant. She closed her eyes and let the sound of the rain wash over her, trying to make sense of the strange nightmare she had fallen into.

As the steady drum of rain filled her ears, her thoughts wandered back to the first voyage she’d made with her father. It had been the summer just after her fifteenth birthday and her father had finally agreed to pull her from the academy and begin her apprenticeship. They’d sailed into a storm two days out, one strong enough to make the *Gallant* rock as it plunged into the troughs of the waves. Each flash of lightning had exposed new shapes in the churning clouds. Naya had ignored her father’s warnings and sneaked from the cabin. She’d strapped her safety line to the mast and stood grinning into the sheets of rain. The pitch of the deck had made her heart leap, and the thunder had sung in her bones. She knew she should have been afraid. But after years of bowing her head and learning to navigate between the nobles’ heirs, who knew she didn’t belong, and the tutors, who only tolerated her because they feared her father, she couldn’t be scared of a little storm. Naya opened her eyes and felt her smile fade as the empty workroom replaced the memory of the storm.

She walked toward the window. It was dark out—a few hours from dawn, if the clock on the wall told true. The window’s rain-washed glass only showed her wavering reflection. The face that looked back was hers: hazel eyes, thin lips, expression tight with fear. The hair framing that face was the same curly brown mess it’d always been. She wrinkled her nose and saw the reflected monster do the same.

Naya shuddered and turned away. It wasn't right. Monsters should look like monsters.

She looked back at the workroom, with its shelves stuffed full of jars of who-knew-what and black-bound books. She paced the length of the room, her steps making no sound against the stone. Even just walking, she could feel the grace in her strange new limbs. Her skin buzzed with power that begged to be unleashed. It made her want to scream. It made her want to run laughing through the rain. All her life she'd heard stories about the twisted creatures the necromancers of Ceramor spawned from the remains of their countrymen. The stories varied, but one fact remained the same: the undead weren't human anymore, no matter how well they faked it.

Naya still felt human. She didn't feel consumed by monstrous urges, but would she even be able to tell if she was?

She bit her lip, then turned to face the door. The smart thing to do would be to wait here until morning. But as convincing as Valn's story had seemed, a part of her still couldn't believe it. She imagined her father waiting for her on the deck of the *Gallant*, staring out through the rain and wondering where she'd gone. Naya glanced again at the monster reflected in the window. If she stayed here with nothing to distract her save the unanswered questions darting through her mind like swallows, she'd go mad.

No. Lucia had trapped her soul in this form, but she wouldn't stay trapped in this room, waiting on the necromancer's pleasure. She would go to the docks and see for herself if the *Gallant* had truly sailed. With one final glance at the stairs, she hurried for the door.

The rain hit her, soaking her clothes and running off her skin. Naya breathed deep, savoring the smell of wet wood and stone. Between the pouring drops and the steady blue-white light of the rune lamps lining the street, the city looked almost like it

had been plunged underwater. She hesitated on the doorstep, fear creeping up her throat as she stared out at the darkened streets of the strange city.

Then she laughed, the sound perilously close to a sob. She was already dead, already resurrected as a monster. What more could this place do to her? She shot a defiant glare back at the necromancer's shop, then hurried out into the night. Little streams gurgled in the gutters and Naya followed them. Finding the docks would be simpler than her search for Belleno's house. She needed only follow the water downhill, until she reached the coast.

The rain and dark dimmed Belavine's brilliant colors, and the houses loomed over her. Naya could barely see a dozen steps ahead. As she left the hills, the road got wider and flatter. The buildings here were bigger, but still mostly constructed from wood and coated in peeling paint. Many had iron grates shaped like vines or flowers covering the lower windows. Music and tipsy laughter rang out from an open door, and here or there she saw a slumped and swaying figure hurrying through the rain. She felt their eyes following her as she passed them. She shivered, quickening her pace.

Relief flooded through her when she finally heard the rumble of the tide grinding against the pebbled shore. She came to a wide road hemmed in on one side by what looked like warehouses, and on the other by the sea. Up ahead the bay curved gently. The lights of the docks and the ship lanterns floated above the water just a little ways ahead. In the dark she couldn't guess if any one of them was the *Gallant*. She broke into a run. For an instant her hopes soared. Maybe Valn had been wrong. Maybe the *Gallant* hadn't left yet.

As soon as she reached the glow of the dock lamps, though, she knew it wasn't so. A few small fishing boats huddled behind the seawall surrounding the docks. Farther out, four vessels sat

at anchor. One was a big trading ship with three masts, a wide hull, and a high stern. But even from here the fat shape looked nothing like her father's narrow *Gallant*.

A sob escaped her lips. No. She ran toward the nearest dock.

"Hey, what the—?" someone shouted behind her in Ceramoran.

Naya spun, struggling to keep her footing on the wet ground. The speaker, a man almost entirely covered by an oilskin cloak, hurried toward her. He held a lantern in one hand. Bright light seeped from the runes carved in the metal plates behind the glass. When he got close, Naya saw a sailor's craggy face with a drooping black mustache peeking out from under the cloak's hood. "What do you think you're doing out here, girl?"

"There was a ship here from Talmir, the *Gallant*. Do you know when it sailed?"

The man's bushy eyebrows came together. "Aye, sure, just yesterday. They left in quite a hurry." He frowned. "Why're you asking 'bout the *Gallant*?" His eyes trailed up her sodden skirts to the too-thin vest and blouse plastered against her breasts.

Naya took a step back. "Yesterday? You're sure?"

"Course. Now listen here, I think you'd better be coming with me. Little thing like you shouldn't be out here on your own." He reached for Naya's wrist. Her mind flashed back to the alley, and she leapt away.

"Wait," the man called, but Naya was already sprinting back along the coast. When the light of the docks was far behind her, she glanced over her shoulder. Nothing. The man hadn't followed. In the distance she could still just make out the dark shapes of the ships at anchor. The sight of them wrenched at her chest.

A full day had passed since the *Gallant* had left for Talmir. So it was true, then. Her father had sailed without her. Abandoned her.

Naya wasn't sure how long she stood staring at the ships.

Cold rain soaked her clothes, but she didn't feel chilled. Numbness crept through her and this time she welcomed it. Her shoes squelched as she turned toward the necromancer-infested shore. Valn must have spoken true. Even if she'd failed to return to the ship on time, her father wouldn't have left without trying to learn her fate. His leaving was a message, and this business with Valn was her real test. Naya focused all her energy on that thought as she trudged back up the hill.

CHAPTER 5

By the time Naya found her way back to the necromancer's shop, the rain had worn itself down to a drizzle and dawn's glow shone through the clouds above the eastern mountains. Her steps had grown sluggish during the last half hour of walking. She wasn't winded. Her legs didn't burn, nor did her pulse pound. But a steady ache radiated from her left hand. The necromancer had said something about that hand, some nonsense about bones and bindings. Still, why should running make her hand hurt?

She'd examined her conversation with Valn a dozen times on the walk back up the hill, but it still didn't feel real. She was in Ceramor. Her father had abandoned her. She was dead. Naya reached for her necklace. As her fingers traced the design, a memory surfaced, worn around the edges like the pages of an old book, but still strong enough to make her chest ache.

It had been just a few weeks after her seventh birthday. Her mother lay in a narrow bed, covered up to her chest in rough wool blankets even though the air in the room was hot and stuffy. Naya sat on a stool by the bed, watching the incremental rise and fall of the blankets as her mother struggled for breath. "I don't understand," Naya whispered as she rubbed one finger along the withered flesh of her mother's thumb.

Her mother smiled. “Everything’s going to be fine, little bird. Your father will—”

“He’s not my father.”

Little wrinkles appeared in her mother’s brow. “He is. I know he hasn’t been here, but he knows about you now and—” Her words were cut off by a fit of coughing. Naya scrambled for the water pitcher. When she returned with a wooden cup, fresh red dots speckled her mother’s lips. Naya held her mother’s head as she took the water in tiny sips. When she’d finished, she continued talking as though nothing had happened. “You’re going to love the new house, little bird. You’ll have your own room and the very best tutors and all the rhubarb jam you can eat.”

“But why aren’t you coming with me?”

Her mother lifted one hand to run her fingers over Naya’s curls. “You heard the doctor. I can’t be moving right now. But I’ll see you again. I promise.”

She’d died two days later, while Naya slept on silk sheets in a new house even bigger than the tavern where her mother had worked. The Dawning keepers had promised that if Naya was good, she’d see her mother again on the other side of death. The keepers spent their lives studying and preaching the Creator’s word. They ought to have known as much as any mortal could about the afterlife. But Naya had seen death. There’d been only blackness and cold tides and the irresistible pull of the necromancer’s song.

Naya closed her eyes and willed the memory away. The pendant dug into her hand as she imagined folding her fears into a tiny square, then placing that square inside a box. The box she locked and shoved deep under the big canopied bed in her room back in Lith Lor. Her father was the one who’d taught her the trick. He’d said once that bad memories could make you strong. They could burn inside and keep you warm when it seemed like

the rest of the world had gone cold. But not all bad memories could be so used. Some were more like broken glass buried in your heel, bringing pain with every step. Those you had to lock away until time could grind them down and make them safe to touch.

Her father couldn't have known the dangers when he sent her into the city alone. He'd given her a task, and the only thing to do was finish it. She could not let the truth of what she had become be a spike of glass in her heel. She would lock it away and she would do what needed to be done.

Naya let herself back into Lucia's shop as quietly as she could. She passed through the shop's small front room, empty save for a desk and a few uncomfortable-looking chairs pushed against the walls. The workroom beyond was dark and quiet. Naya stood in the doorway, listening to the slow drip of rain-water from her soaked clothes. If she were to masquerade as the necromancer's servant, she would probably have to live here. That was not a comforting thought.

Suddenly desperate for light, Naya ran to the room's single window and jerked the curtain open. The heavy fabric caught the edge of a jar and knocked it over. Before Naya could catch it, the jar rolled off the edge of the counter and smashed against the floor. Naya winced at the sudden noise. The pale morning light showed glass shards and dried herbs scattered all across the floor. She'd just begun searching for a broom to sweep up the mess when she heard the creak of footsteps on the stairs.

Lucia came into the room, wearing a sleeping robe and a worried expression. Her eyes widened as she seemed to take in Naya's dripping clothes and the broken jar. "Why are your clothes wet?" the necromancer asked after several agonizing seconds of silence.

"I went to the docks," Naya muttered.

"The docks." Lucia repeated the word as though she were sounding it out, as though she'd never heard anything so absurd.

She took a deep breath. “What in the Creator’s name were you thinking going out there? And what were you doing at. . . no, wait, never mind. I don’t want to know.”

Naya frowned. How much did Lucia know about her identity? Last night she’d seemed afraid of Valn. She’d followed his orders, but it was hard to believe a necromancer would willingly serve a Talmiran spy.

Lucia turned from Naya’s scrutiny. “I’ll find you something dry to wear,” Lucia said before disappearing up the stairs.

She returned a few minutes later, wearing a fresh dress and carrying another bundle of clothes for Naya. Naya dressed while Lucia cleaned up the broken glass, and a few minutes later they departed for the embassy. Lucia locked the door behind them with a heavy iron key. As she did, Naya saw a faint blue glow shimmer between the door and the frame. It reminded her of the blueish tint she’d seen around her fingers earlier. She shuddered. Could it be that even the door was tainted by the necromancer’s touch?

“This way,” Lucia said as she turned west, down the hill, and toward the lower city. She’d spoken little since Naya’s return. That was a relief, since Naya had no idea what to say to Lucia. Would the necromancer expect gratitude for what she’d done? Obedience? She would have to speak to Valn. There had to be another way for her to help that didn’t involve masquerading as the servant of someone who made her livelihood damning souls. Naya tried to keep her expression even as Lucia led her out onto a wide street with tram tracks running through the middle. They joined a small crowd waiting at the corner.

Naya’s eyes wandered over the people standing nearby as they waited for the tram. The man next to her was another walking corpse, his wrists and neck banded with runic tattoos. Naya stared at the flowing black lines and wondered what her father had thought when he learned his daughter had become a wraith. Had it been shame that drove him from the city?

She locked the horrible possibility away. If she let herself dwell on what might be, or on what she'd become, she'd go mad. Searching for a distraction, she noticed something strange about the undead man's tattoos. Blue light leaked out around their edges, like the light she'd seen on the door. She opened her mouth to say something, but her words were cut off by the rattle and screech of an approaching tram. The sounds of the wheels braking against the track set the humid air vibrating. As the tram approached, Naya was nearly overcome by the bizarre impression that something was pulling on her—draining the energy from her limbs. Her vision blurred and her hand throbbed.

She started to slump, but Lucia grabbed her and pulled her up the steps into the seating area. Naya jerked her arm away as Lucia dropped two tin bits into the conductor's collection box. Her legs wobbled, but at least the draining sensation wasn't as strong inside the tram.

She couldn't help but gawk as they settled onto the wooden bench. They had rune-powered trains back in Talmir—huge steel constructions that rumbled through the countryside hauling coal, produce, and people toward the cities. The lines still didn't extend more than fifty miles from the capital, but the royal engineers had promised that soon any citizen would be able to ride from the northern coast to the Ceramoran border. Naya remembered watching the first of the big trains pulling into the new station in Lith Lor as a child. Compared with those, the boxy single-car trams of Belavine looked almost delicate.

Any impressions of delicacy vanished as the car lurched forward, picking up speed to swing round a bend in the track. Naya grabbed the edge of her seat so tight she could feel the wood digging into her fingertips. Lucia seemed unperturbed as they careened downhill. "We can take this to Market Street. From there it's only a short way to the embassy," she said.

Naya didn't reply. She was busy trying not to think about

the way the city sped past, revealing glimpses of glittering blue ocean between the houses. Nobody else looked like they were swallowing a scream every time the tram whipped around a corner. Then again, the people of this country practically worshiped necromancers. Would they even care if they died in a crash?

The tram didn't slow until they reached the base of the hill and turned onto one of the wide streets Naya had crossed on her way to deliver the contract for her father. Salt air flooded through the half-open window and seemed to infuse her entire body. The day was already getting hot and she could smell the unappealing aromas of sweaty bodies, rotting fish, and refuse as she and Lucia stepped off the tram and joined the crowd on the street.

They'd gotten off at an intersection where the lines of shops ended and the rows of stately houses began. The buildings here were grander than the ones she'd seen in other parts of the city. Lucia paused in front of a white, three-story building with imposing mahogany doors. It stood out from its lime-green and purple neighbors like a dove among peacocks.

Two soldiers guarded the doorway, dressed in the blue uniforms of the Talmiran Army. The soldiers didn't move, but eyed Naya and Lucia warily as they approached. Naya tried not to stare at the rune pistols and longswords hanging from their belts. The weapons looked far more menacing than the clubs the Belavine city guard were allowed to carry.

On the door between the soldiers was a brass plaque reading EMBASSY OF TALMIR. A flag rode above the peak of the roof, the queen's crest set in blue and gold on a black field. A sudden wave of homesickness made Naya's eyes sting. This would probably be the closest she'd ever come to seeing her country again.

A black-clad servant answered the door before Lucia's hand could leave the bell rope. He was tall and gaunt, with unusually

pale gray eyes. Gray flecks peppered his thinning hair. He bowed, then led them into a hallway with plush carpet and white walls.

The servant paused at a door near the end of the hallway. “Ambassador Valn will see you now.”

Lucia eyed the polished wood as though it might bite. Naya moved to join the necromancer, but the servant grabbed her arm.

“You may wait in the kitchen.”

Naya stared at the man. Surely she’d misheard. “I need to speak to the ambassador.” Valn had sounded certain that resurrecting her had been the best, if not the only, option. But his faith had only spawned more questions in her mind.

“The ambassador has no need to speak to you.”

Naya looked at Lucia, who pointedly avoided her gaze. “But why would he . . .”

“The kitchen is over there.” The servant nodded at a smaller door at the very end of the hall. It was clear from his tone that he didn’t intend to let her into the other room. He didn’t even let go of her arm until Lucia had disappeared inside, closing the door behind her.

Naya looked once more at the door, struggling to squash the doubts bubbling up inside her. Valn’s story made sense. It was the only thing that could explain her father abandoning her in a city corrupted by dark magic. *Keep your wits about you. This city is full of liars.* Naya forced herself to walk through the kitchen door, wondering which liars her father had meant to warn her about.

CHAPTER 6

The kitchen was quiet, the only occupant a thin-armed boy rolling dough on the back counter. He glanced up as Naya entered. “You looking for Celia?”

Celia. Valn had mentioned that name last night. “I think so.”

“She’s upstairs.” He pointed to a door to the left. Naya opened it and found a narrow servant’s stairway. She glanced back, but the boy had already returned his attention to the dough, and the man who’d directed her here was nowhere in sight. The stair let her out onto a second-floor hallway. Here the floors were simple wood, and the white surface of the walls was unbroken by paintings or other decorations.

“Hello?” Naya stepped tentatively into the hall.

A door opened to her left. “Who’s there?”

“I’m . . .” Should she introduce herself with her real name, or the fake one Valn had given her?

A middle-aged woman stepped into the hallway. She was an inch or two taller than Naya and clad in a servant’s outfit of black skirt, white blouse, and black vest. The few streaks of gray in her hair didn’t match the graceful way she walked or the hard gleam in her eyes. Naya had to fight the urge to squirm when those eyes met hers.

“Ah, come in.” The woman motioned Naya into a tiny bedroom with a battered desk and narrow bed.

“Are you Celia?” Naya asked.

“Yes. And you must be the dead girl.”

Naya clasped her hands in front of her to keep her fingers from wandering toward her necklace. “Yes.”

“He told you about our work?”

Naya met Celia’s eyes. Obviously the woman was much more than a servant. “Ambassador Valn said I would be gathering information. But I have some questions about—”

Celia silenced her with a wave of her hand. “We’ll deal with that later. First let me look at you.” Celia crossed her arms over her chest. “You don’t stand much like a servant.”

Naya frowned. “I’m not a servant.”

The blow came so fast Naya barely saw it coming. Her head snapped sideways, and tingling waves of force spread from her cheek to the rest of her body. It didn’t hurt exactly, but it was far from pleasant. Celia flexed her fingers, looking like she was considering slapping Naya again.

“Wrong. You are whoever the job requires. From this second on you will start believing that with every scrap of your soul. Today you are Blue. You are a servant. You have always been a servant. And now you are very, very eager to prove yourself useful to your new master.”

Naya’s skin burned with anger. “What’s wrong with you?”

Celia shook her head. “Ambassador Valn says I am to make an agent of you. He thinks you are smart and useful. He thinks that your condition will make you a valuable asset. But before I can make you useful, I must know you won’t get yourself killed again by giving away your identity to every stranger you meet.”

Naya rubbed her cheek. “And that gives you the right to hit me?”

“Yes. You must be able to hold your cover even when others

push you, even if they make you furious or afraid. If anyone suspects your true identity, you won't just be risking your own safety. You will be endangering all our operations in this city. Our people. Do you understand? I do not care who you are or who your father is. If I cannot trust you, I cannot use you."

Naya glared at Celia. She wanted to stomp out the door, or slap the older woman right back, but damn it if either one wouldn't prove Celia right.

"No? Then return downstairs. I will tell Ambassador Valn that training you would be a waste of time," Celia said.

Naya could feel her body tensing, readying itself for another blow, or for her to lash out herself. Instead she closed her eyes, dragging out an old memory from among the locked boxes in her mind. Her mother stood silhouetted in the doorway of their tiny room, pleading softly. A man in a sweat-stained coat scowled at her from the hallway. He owned the tavern below where her mother scrubbed tables and served drinks. He liked to come upstairs in the evenings to remind them how lucky they were to have his generosity, that there were plenty of others in Lith Lor with no steady work who'd gladly take her place. Naya remembered watching from the far corner, waiting for her mother to snap at the man, to tell him it was no generosity for him to take more than half her wages for a tiny room that was hot in the summer and drafty in the winter. But her mother had taken the abuse without comment, even going so far as to thank the man before he left.

Sometimes, little bird, you have to bend to keep from breaking. Slowly, Naya felt her shoulders adopting her mother's hunch. When she opened her eyes, her gaze stayed fixed on the floor. "I'm sorry to have given you the wrong impression. If you give me a chance, I'll show you I can be useful."

Silence. She had to fight to keep her head down. Finally Celia huffed. "Well, it's not the best I've seen, but it's not the worst

either. You're willing to admit mistakes and you're willing to learn. You may look up."

Naya snapped her head up and found Celia surveying her again, tapping one finger against her thigh. "So you were just testing me?" Naya wasn't sure if that made her angrier or relieved.

"Of course. Ambassador Valn may be running this operation, but he's trusted me to manage the details. No matter how much potential he thinks you have, I won't work with a fool who can't learn."

"I'm not a fool."

"We'll see. How many languages do you speak?"

"I speak the court tongue, and some Banian. My Ceramoran is fluent. My father said my accent is barely noticeable." Naya straightened and met Celia's eyes. Now that she had gotten through Celia's little test, there was something oddly comforting about the older woman's hard words and glares. She wasn't interested in what Naya was, only what she could do.

"Useful, but too clever for a galley girl. Blue spoke Ceramoran. Her master used her to translate sometimes, didn't like sully himself with foreign tongues. But her command of the language was limited. No accent will make you stand out worse than not being able to speak at all. Can you fake one?"

"I think so," Naya switched to Ceramoran, forcing herself to clip her *r*'s and *s*'s, and adding a harsher note to the vowels to emphasize her slight Talmiran accent. It felt strange after spending so long trying to learn the silky native accent. She sounded foolish, but maybe that was the point. "I don't mean to pry, but you're talking about Blue like she was a real person."

"So far as you're concerned, she is a real person. She is you and you are her. That is all you need to know."

Naya opened her mouth again, but when she saw Celia's scowl deepen she forced it closed and nodded. *I am Blue. I am a monster with a stolen name.*

“Your accent is passable, but you sound like you’re trying too hard. I’d recommend avoiding any long conversations until you can improve.”

“So I’m going to be staying in Belavine for a while?”

“Yes. King Allence and his court won’t be returning to his winter palace until after the Tenth Congress. Our work requires us to remain close to his government.”

Naya ran her palms over the front of her skirt. “I understand. But what about the man who attacked me? Ambassador Valn said he’d been dealt with, but he also said there’ve been other attacks on Talmirans. What if he wasn’t working alone? If someone sees me and realizes I’m still in the city, . . .”

Some expression flickered over Celia’s face but was gone before Naya could read it. “I wouldn’t worry about that. Ambassador Valn has already seen to the issue. The odds of anyone recognizing you are very slim, especially if you keep your eyes down and act the proper servant.” She seemed to consider this for a moment. “Still, it will be best for you to learn to change your face.”

“Change my face?”

“Your body is energy, yours to control. You look the way you want to look. The sooner you learn to manipulate that, the better. Has that necromancer taught you to use your sight yet?”

“I can see, if that’s what you mean.” Naya’s mind was still spinning as she struggled to keep up with the strange conversation.

“No, not ordinary sight. Wraiths can supposedly see the flow of aether. Even more important for our cause, you can see where aether has been redirected to power a rune binding. You must learn this skill. And meanwhile you must also practice being a good servant. Do whatever the necromancer tells you, no matter what you think of the task.”

“How do you know so much about wraiths?”

“Only a fool shuts her eyes to something because she is afraid. Regardless of what the keepers say of necromancy, it is powerful and that power must be understood.” Celia glanced at a pile of papers on the small desk. “In ten days you will wait for me at the corner of Rillon and Wavcrest Streets at the fifth morning bell, provided you do not destroy your cover before then. I will evaluate your progress and we will see if you are worth the risk of training. Do you understand?”

Less than two weeks to learn two things she hadn’t even known existed a moment before? Naya took a deep breath, then nodded.

“Good. Ask whatever questions you have now.”

Naya clasped her hands to keep herself from fidgeting. She had so many questions, but one forced its way ahead of all the rest. “Ambassador Valn says my father sent me to join your work before I was . . . killed. Does he know what happened to me? Did he leave me any kind of message?”

Celia paused before answering. “I’m not privy to the details of Ambassador Valn’s communications, but I would assume he notified Lord Garth before he sailed. As for messages . . .” She extracted a small key from her vest pocket and unlocked one of the desk drawers. “Your father left this for you.” Celia pulled a folded sheet from the drawer. Naya’s father’s seal was stamped on the front, and below it he’d written her name in neat script.

Celia held the paper out. “Written and delivered before your death, so it will not answer your question, but perhaps it may offer some comfort in his absence.”

Naya took the paper in shaking hands. “Thank you.”

Celia nodded. “I’ve business to tend to now. You may stay to read that, but don’t tarry long. I suspect Ambassador Valn will soon be done speaking with the necromancer.” She paused by the door. “Though it should be obvious, don’t tell her about your true mission.”

“How much does she know?” Naya asked.

“She knows the story others will be told. You are a servant girl she resurrected, and Ambassador Valn has transferred your contract to her.”

The letter crinkled under Naya’s grip. Lucia knew more than that already. Or even if she didn’t, Naya doubted it’d be easy to hide the nature of their work while living with the woman. “Does that mean I have to actually serve her? There must be someone else we can work with who isn’t—”

“Isn’t a necromancer?” Celia asked.

“Someone who isn’t likely to turn against us the first chance she gets,” Naya clarified.

Celia snorted. “I trust Lucia Laroke to follow her best interests, and the ambassador has ensured that those interests align with ours. She may not like it, but she’ll play her part and hold her tongue.”

Naya wanted to ask what sort of interest could be strong enough to make someone like Lucia work for Talmir. But Celia’s tone suggested the matter was closed.

“Anything else?” Celia asked.

“No. I’ll learn what you asked.”

“Good.”

As soon as Celia left the room, Naya tore open her father’s letter. Inside were scrawled several lines of jumbled nonsense, a cipher he’d taught her when he first brought her on as his apprentice. She skimmed once over the words, letting her eyes pick out the pattern, then began to read.

Daughter,

If you are reading this, then it means you have reached Valn and our plan has entered its next stage. I have sent you to him to learn of our true work and to help enact the Creator’s will. I apologize for not telling you of our plans, but I could not risk others learning the truth.

The necromancers grow more dangerous by the day. We must stop their plots before they can finish what the Mad King began. Valn will explain what must be done. We will not meet again for some weeks. In that time you must trust and obey him as you would me. Know that what we do protects the people of Talmir from dangers they refuse to see.

Naya read it again, then twice more to ensure she hadn't missed anything. *Trust and obey.* So Valn had told the truth. Her father really had meant for her to stay in Belavine and help protect the treaty.

She closed her eyes. If her father had a task for her, then she would do it. But everything about this felt wrong. Her father had never hinted that this trip was anything more than a contract negotiation. If their mission was so important, then surely he could have found a way to tell her something. And if he'd been working with Valn all this time, he must have known about the dangers growing in the city. Why hadn't he warned her? If he had, then she would have been more careful. Maybe she would still be alive if only . . . Naya locked the thought away before it could go further. Her father must not have known the extent of the danger. Valn had said none of the other attacks had happened while the sun was up.

She folded the letter, running over each crease with her fingers. If the necromancers were planning another attack, then they had to be stopped. It was an honor to be trusted with such a task. She repeated the thought as she made her way out of the embassy, trying to drown out her traitorous doubts.

She found Lucia waiting outside. As Naya walked toward the street, her foot caught on a loose stone and she almost stumbled into the necromancer. The aching she'd managed to ignore during her meetings with Celia returned full force. Her head spun, and not just from the dizzying horror of the past two days.

Lucia frowned as she caught Naya's elbow. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." In truth her limbs felt heavy and her vision was starting to blur around the edges.

Lucia clicked her tongue and extracted something from her bag. It was a delicate metal rod with tiny runes carved into the shaft and handle. Before Naya could make her sluggish body respond, Lucia grabbed her hand and touched the rod to it. The skin around the rod turned transparent, revealing what Naya assumed must be the bond Lucia had spoken of. Four bones floated in the space where her hand should have been—one in the bottom half of her thumb and three in her palm. Dozens of tiny runes had been carved into each bone. Their lines wove a complex pattern that blurred and twisted as she tried to trace their shapes. Naya shuddered. She pulled her hand away and was relieved when it returned to normal as soon as she broke contact with the strange rod. "What are you doing?"

Lucia examined the rod's now-glowing runes, then muttered something to herself as she stuffed it back into her bag. "That device is a reader, which allows me to measure the energy flowing through your bond. You're running dangerously low on aether."

"Aether?"

"Yes, the energy fueling your bond. You'll need to draw more in. It shouldn't be a problem here. Any one of them can give you more than what you need." She waved at the crowd.

"What are you talking about?" Aether was a type of energy, normally impossible to sense but collecting everywhere there was life. Celia had claimed wraiths could see aether, but what did Lucia mean by drawing it in? Naya's mind conjured the stories she'd heard as a child about wraiths sucking out people's souls to feed. Horror rose like vomit in her throat. "I won't. I can't."

Lucia only looked annoyed. “You have to. Every wraith has to. Honestly, I’m surprised you haven’t done it instinctively yet.”

The prospect of accidentally consuming the energy of those around her was even more horrifying. Naya took a step back.

Lucia scowled, then pulled a small silver watch from her pocket and glanced at it. “This is ridiculous. Come with me.”