

LEIGH BARDUGO

SIX DANGEROUS OUTCASTS.  
ONE IMPOSSIBLE HEIST.

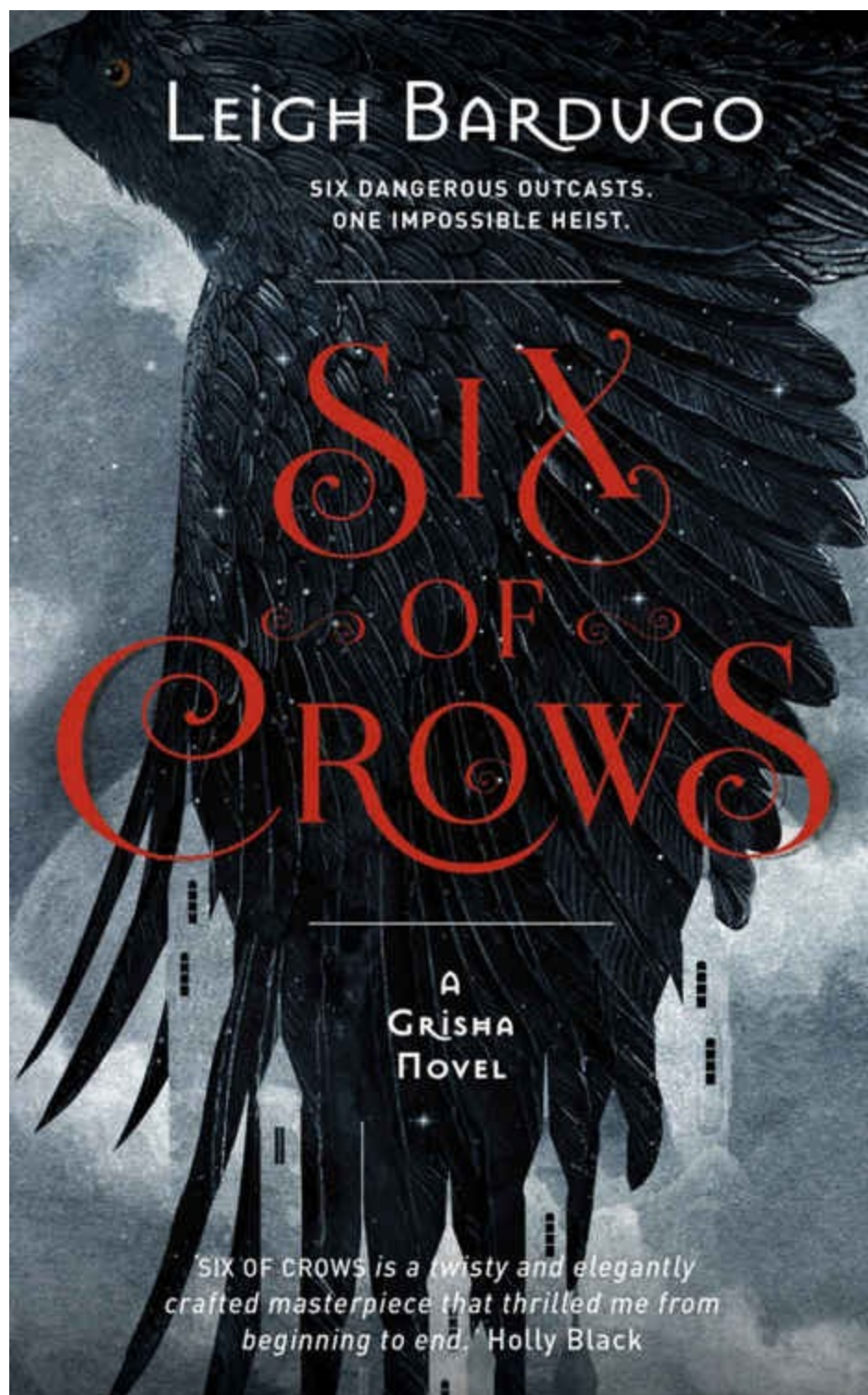
---

# SIX OF CROWS

---

A  
GRISHA  
NOVEL

*"SIX OF CROWS is a twisty and elegantly  
crafted masterpiece that thrilled me from  
beginning to end."* Holly Black



[Praise for \*Six of Crows\*](#)

‘This has all the right elements to keep readers enthralled: a cunning leader with a plan for every occasion, nigh-impossible odds, an entertaining combative team of skilled misfits, a twisty plot, and a nerve-wracking cliffhanger.’

*Publishers Weekly, starred review*

‘Cracking page-turner with a multiethnic band of misfits with differing sexual orientations who satisfyingly, believably jell into a family.’

*Kirkus Reviews, starred review*

‘Bardugo outdoes herself with this book, creating the gorgeously built backdrop of Ketterdam and populating it with a sophisticated cast of rogues and criminals. *Six of Crows* is a twisty and elegantly crafted masterpiece that thrilled me from beginning to end.’

*Holly Black*

### **Praise for *The Grisha Trilogy***

‘A New York Times bestseller, it’s like *The Hunger Games* meets *Potter* meets *Twilight* meets *Lord Of The Rings* meets *Game Of Thrones*; basically epic magical fantasy but completely for grown-ups.’

*Stylist*

‘Unlike anything I’ve ever read.’

*Veronica Roth, author of the Divergent trilogy*

‘A heady blend of fantasy, romance and adventure.’

*Rick Riordan, author of the Percy Jackson series*

‘Mesmerising ... Bardugo’s set up is shiver-inducing, of the delicious variety. This is what fantasy is for.’

*New York Times*

‘Shadow and Bone was a dark, rich, utterly compelling book that did not let me go from the very first word to the very last. I loved it, loved it, loved it, loved it!’

*Guardian Teen*

‘This engaging YA adventure takes a different and distinctly Russian approach to epic fantasy ...

Giving us a convincingly chilly and well-thought-out world as well as a touchingly played romance, Leigh Bardugo’s fantasy is effortlessly readable.’

*SFX*

‘In this richly-imagined and beautifully-written novel, Leigh Bardugo has created a vivid fantasy world drawing on Russian traditions and folklore.

With unexpected twists and turns, and plenty of action and romance, this is a pacy and exciting adventure, but also a multi-layered story of self-discovery, with an intelligent and compelling heroine in Alina.’

*Booktrust*

‘Leigh is a writer of the best kind because she loves her characters and the world they live in and makes a reader jealous that they can’t visit it. There is magic in these pages.’

*Sister Spooky*

# SIX OF CROWS

LEIGH BARDUGO



Indigo

Contents

Praise for *Six of Crows*

Title Page

Dedication

Maps

The Grisha

Part 1: Shadow Business

1 Joost

2 Inej

3 Kaz

4 Inej

5 Kaz

6 Nina

Part 2: Servant and Lever

7 Matthias

8 Jesper

9 Kaz

10 Inej

11 Jesper

12 Inej

13 Kaz

[14 Nina](#)

[15 Matthias](#)

[Part 3: Heartsick](#)

[16 Inej](#)

[17 Jesper](#)

[18 Kaz](#)

[19 Matthias](#)

[20 Nina](#)

[Part 4: The Trick to Falling](#)

[21 Inej](#)

[22 Kaz](#)

[23 Jesper](#)

[24 Nina](#)

[25 Inej](#)

[26 Kaz](#)

[Part 5: The Ice Does Not Forgive](#)

[27 Jesper](#)

[28 Inej](#)

[29 Matthias](#)

[30 Jesper](#)



[31 Nina](#)

[32 Jesper](#)

[33 Inej](#)

[34 Nina](#)

[35 Matthias](#)

[36 Jesper](#)

[37 Nina](#)

[38 Kaz](#)

[Part 6: Proper Thieves](#)

[39 Inej](#)

[40 Nina](#)

[41 Matthias](#)

[42 Inej](#)

[43 Nina](#)

[44 Jesper](#)

[45 Kaz](#)

[46 Pekka](#)

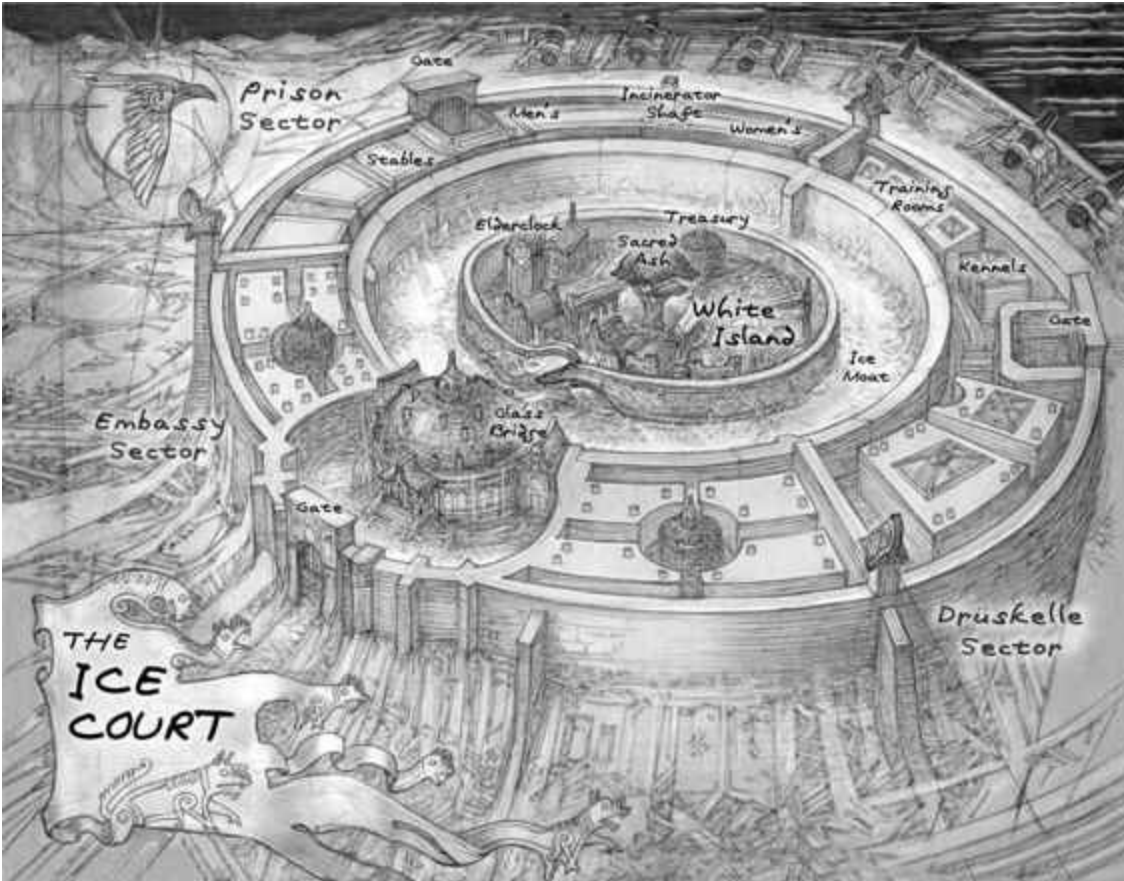
[Acknowledgements](#)

[Copyright](#)

*To Kayte – secret weapon, unexpected friend*







## [THE GRISHA](#)

**SOLDIERS OF THE SECOND ARMY**

**MASTERS OF THE SMALL SCIENCE**

**CORPORALKI**

(The Order of the Living and the Dead)

**He arte nde rs**

**Healers**



**ETHEREALKI**

(The Order of Summoners)

**Squallers**

**Inferni**

**Tide makers**

**MATERIALKI**

(The Order of Fabrikators)

**Durasts**

**Alchemi**

[PART 1](#)

[SHADOW BUSINESS](#)

Joost had two problems: the moon and his moustache.

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

If only Anya's eyes were blue like the sea or green like an emerald. Instead, her eyes were brown –

lovely, dreamy ... melted chocolate brown? Rabbit fur brown?

“Just tell her she's got skin like moonlight,” his friend Pieter had said.

“Girls love that.”

A perfect solution, but the Ketterdam weather was not cooperating. There'd been no breeze off the harbour that day, and a grey milk fog had wreathed the city's canals and crooked alleys in damp. Even here among the mansions of the Geldstraat, the air hung thick with the smell of fish and bilge water, and smoke from the refineries on the city's outer islands had smeared the night sky in a briny haze.

The full moon looked less like a jewel than a yellowy blister in need of lancing.

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

Joost glanced at his reflection in one of the glass panels set into the double doors that led from the house to the side garden. His mother was right. Even in his new uniform, he still looked like a baby.

Gently, he brushed his finger along his upper lip. If only his moustache

would come in. It definitely felt thicker than yesterday.

He'd been a guard in the *stadwatch* less than six weeks, and it wasn't nearly as exciting as he'd hoped. He thought he'd be running down thieves in the

Barrel or patrolling the harbours, getting first look at cargo coming in on the docks. But ever since the assassination of that ambassador at the town hall, the Merchant Council had been grumbling about security, so where was he?

Stuck walking in circles at some lucky mercher's house. Not just any

mercher, though. Councilman Hoede was about as high placed in Ketterdam government as a man could be. The kind of man who could make a career.

Joost adjusted the set of his coat and rifle, then patted the weighted baton at his hip. Maybe Hoede would take a liking to him. *Sharp eyed and quick*

*with the cudgel*, Hoede would say. *That fellow deserves a promotion.*

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

"*Captain* Joost Van Poel."

"Stop gawking at yourself."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He was surprised to see the glass-panelled doors to the Grisha workshop open. More than the hand-painted blue tiles in the kitchen or the mantels laden with potted tulips, this workshop was a testimony to Hoede’s wealth.

Grisha indentures didn't come cheap, and Hoede had three of them.

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

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

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

Retvenko was a Squaller, older than the other Grisha indentures, his hair shot through with silver.

There were rumours he'd fought for the losing side in Ravka's civil war and had fled to Kerch after the fighting.

"I'd be happy to present your complaints to Councilman Hoede," Joost lied.

The house was always overheated, as if Hoede were under obligation to burn coal, but Joost wasn't going to be the one to mention it. "Until then—"

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

Joost glanced uneasily at the bowls of red grapes and heaps of burgundy velvet on the worktable.

Yuri had been working on bleeding colour from the fruit into curtains for



Mistress Hoede, but he'd fallen badly ill a few days ago, and Joost hadn't seen him since. Dust had begun to gather on the velvet, and the grapes were going bad.

"I haven't heard anything."

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

What was wrong with his uniform? And why did Retvenko even have to be here? He was Hoede's

personal Squaller and often travelled with the merchant's most precious cargos, guaranteeing favourable winds to bring the ships safely and quickly to harbour. Why couldn't he be away at sea now?

"I think Yuri may be quarantined."

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

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

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

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

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

*For good?*

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

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

“If Councilman Hoede—”

Retvenko raised an arm and a gust of air slammed Joost backwards. Joost scrambled to keep his

footing, grabbing for the doorframe.

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

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

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

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

“Go and make your rounds, little watchdog,” Retvenko called.

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

How long had he been standing there? “Don’t you have something better to

do than follow me around?” Joost asked.

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

“I was asking him to shut the door.”

Rutger shook his head. “You don’t ask. You tell. They’re servants. Not honoured guests.”

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

What had Retvenko meant about Yuri and Anya being taken anyway? Had he been covering for Anya? Grisha indentures were kept to the house for good reason. To walk the streets without protection was to risk getting plucked up by a slaver and never seen again. *Maybe she’s meeting someone*, Joost speculated miserably.

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

A few weeks before, Joost had been told that Hoede's boathouse would be undergoing improvements and to strike it from his rounds. But when he and Rutger entered, he saw no paint or scaffolding. The *gondels* and oars had been pushed up against the walls. The other house guards were there in their sea-green livery, and Joost recognised two *stadwatch* guards in purple.

But most of the interior was taken up by a huge box – a kind of freestanding cell that looked as if it was made from reinforced steel, its seams thick with rivets, a huge window embedded in one of its walls. The glass had a wavy bent, and through it, Joost could see a girl seated at a table, clutching her red silks tight around her. Behind her, a *stadwatch* guard stood at attention.

*Anya*, Joost realised with a start. Her brown eyes were wide and frightened, her skin pale. The little boy sitting across from her looked doubly terrified.

His hair was sleep-tousled and his legs dangled from the chair, kicking nervously at the air.

“Why all the guards?” asked Joost. There had to be more than ten of them crowded into the boathouse. Councilman Hoede was there, too, along with another merchant Joost didn't know, both of them dressed in merchant black.

Joost stood up straighter when he saw they were talking to the captain of the *stadwatch*. He hoped he'd got all the garden mud off his uniform.

“What is this?”

Rutger shrugged. “Who cares? It's a break in the routine.” Joost looked back through the glass.

*Anya* was staring out at him, her gaze unfocused. The day he'd arrived at

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

When Joost thanked her, Anya had smiled and Joost was lost. He knew his cause was hopeless.

Even if she'd had any interest in him, he could never afford to buy her indenture from Hoede, and she would never marry unless Hoede decreed it.

But it hadn't stopped him from dropping by to say hello or to bring her little gifts. She'd liked the map of Kerch best, a whimsical drawing of their island nation, surrounded by mermaids swimming in the True Sea and ships blown along by winds depicted as fat-cheeked men. It was a cheap souvenir, the kind tourists bought along East Stave, but it had seemed to please her.

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

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

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

“Open your eyes and pay attention for once.”

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

“He looks fine to me.”

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

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

She gave a small, tight smile. “Of course, Onkle.”

Hoede whispered a few words to the guard behind Anya, then stepped out.

The door shut with a loud clang, and Hoede slid a heavy lock into place.

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

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

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

“And you’ve lowered the dose?”

“Yes, but we’re agreed that if we have the same results as the Fabrikator,

the Council will compensate me? I can't be asked to bear that expense."

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

*The same results as the Fabrikator.* Retvenko claimed Yuri had vanished.

Was that what he'd meant?

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

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

Joost swallowed hard.

"First test," said the captain.

The guard bent forwards and told the boy to roll up his sleeve. The boy obeyed and stuck out his arm, popping the thumb of his other hand into his mouth. *Too old for that*, thought Joost. But the boy must be very scared.

Joost had slept with a sock bear until he was nearly fourteen, a fact his older brothers had mocked mercilessly.

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

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

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

"Quiet, please," said Hoede.

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

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



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

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

“Will it hurt?” the boy gulped.

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

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

Anya removed a handkerchief from her sleeve and wiped away the excess blood. Then her fingers

brushed carefully over the boy’s wound. Joost watched in astonishment as the skin slowly seemed to re-form and knit together.

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

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

The boy looked almost disappointed.

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

Joost frowned. He’d never heard that word.

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

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

The boy shook his head. "I don't like that part."

"Do it."

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

"Swallow the contents of the packet," Hoede instructed Anya.

"What is it?" she asked, voice trembling.

"That isn't your concern."

"*What is it?*" she repeated.

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

Her jaw set, but she nodded.

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

"What is that stuff?" whispered Joost.

"Don't know," said Rutger.

"What do you know?" he muttered.

"Enough to keep my trap shut."

Joost scowled.

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

“Go on,” said Hoede.

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

“Is it just *jurda*?” she asked hopefully. Joost found himself hoping, too.

*Jurda* was nothing to fear, a stimulant everyone in the *stadwatch* chewed to stay awake on late watches.

“What does it taste like?” Hoede asked.

“Like *jurda* but sweeter, it—”

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

The guard tightened his grip on her shoulder.

“How do you feel?”

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

Joost felt suddenly cold.

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

“Heal the boy,” Hoede commanded.

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

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

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

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

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

"Mmm," hummed Anya.

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

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

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

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

"What did she say?" asked the merchant.

"Sergeant!" the captain barked out.

"Shoot the glass," Anya repeated. The sergeant's face went slack. He

cocked his head to one side as if listening to a distant melody, then unslung his rifle and aimed at the observation window.

"Get down!" someone yelled.

Joost threw himself to the ground, covering his head as the rapid hammer of

gunfire filled his ears and bits of glass rained down on his hands and back. His thoughts were a panicked clamour. His mind tried to deny it, but he knew what he'd just seen. Anya had commanded the sergeant to shoot the glass.

She'd *made* him do it. But that couldn't be. Grisha Corporalki specialised in the human body. They could stop your heart, slow your breathing, snap your bones. They couldn't get inside your head.

For a moment there was silence. Then Joost was on his feet with everyone else, reaching for his rifle. Hoede and the captain shouted at the same time.

“Subdue her!”

“Shoot her!”

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

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

Joost's panic vanished. He knew he'd been frightened, but his fear was a distant thing. He was filled with expectation. He wasn't sure what was coming, or when, only that it would arrive and that it was essential he be ready to meet it. It might be bad or good. He didn't really care. His heart



was free of worry and desire. He longed for nothing, wanted for nothing, his mind silent, his breath steady. He only needed to *wait*.

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

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

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

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

Anya shifted the boy’s weight in her arms. “Don’t look,” she murmured against his hair. “Now,”

she said to Hoede. “Pick up the knife.”

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

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

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

She saw Kaz and the others gathered near the great stone arch that marked the eastern entrance to the Exchange. Three words had been carved into the rock above them: *Enjent, Voorhent, Almhent*.

Industry, Integrity, Prosperity.

She kept close to the shuttered shop fronts that lined the square, avoiding



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

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

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

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

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

Kaz shook his head, dark hair glinting in the lamplight. He was a collection of hard lines and tailored edges – sharp jaw, lean build, wool coat snug

across his shoulders. "Yes and no," he said in his rocksalt rasp. "It's always good to have a country in debt to you. Makes for friendlier negotiations."

"Maybe the Shu are done being friendly," said Jesper. "They didn't have to

send all that treasure at once. You think they stuck that trade ambassador?”

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

When they’d broken down the door, they’d found the ambassador facedown on the white tiles, a knife in his back, the taps still running.

Kaz had sent Inej to investigate the premises after hours. The washroom had no other entrance, no windows or vents, and even Inej hadn’t mastered the art of squeezing herself through the plumbing.

Yet the Zemeni ambassador was dead. Kaz hated a puzzle he couldn’t solve, and he and Inej had concocted a hundred theories to account for the murder – none of which satisfied. But they had more pressing problems tonight.

She saw him signal to Jesper and Big Bolliger to divest themselves of weapons. Street law dictated that for a parley of this kind each lieutenant be

seconded by two of his foot soldiers and that they all be unarmed. *Parley*.

The word felt like a deception – strangely prim, an antique. No matter what street law decreed, this night smelled like violence.

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

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

“Take good care of my babies,” Jesper said as he handed them over to

Dirix. “If I see a single scratch or nick on those, I’ll spell *forgive me* on your chest in bullet holes.”

“You wouldn’t waste the ammo.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Exchange was one of the few remaining parts of the city that hadn’t been divvied up and claimed in the ceaseless skirmishes between

Ketterdam’s rival gangs. It was supposed to be neutral territory. But it didn’t *feel* neutral to Inej. It felt like the hush of the woods before the snare yanks tight and the rabbit starts to scream. It felt like a trap.

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

“Of course he is,” said Kaz. His voice had the rough, abraded texture of stone against stone. Inej always wondered if he’d sounded that way as a little boy. If he’d ever been a little boy.

“Then why come here tonight?”

“Because this is the way Per Haskell wants it.”

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

“He’s going to get us all killed,” she said.

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

“It’s not something to joke about,” she replied. The look Kaz cast her was amused. She knew how she sounded – stern, fussy, like an old crone

making dire pronouncements from her porch. She didn’t like it, but she also knew she was right. Besides, old women must know something, or they wouldn’t live to gather wrinkles and yell from their front steps.

“Jesper isn’t making a joke, Inej,” said Kaz. “He’s figuring the odds.”

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

“Care to place a wager?” Jesper asked.

“I’m not going to bet on my own death.”

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

He was right. Inej’s debt to Per Haskell meant she gambled her life every

time she took on a new job or assignment, every time she left her room at the Slat. Tonight was no different.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

entrance.

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

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

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

She drew two climbing spikes from the pockets of her quilted vest and wedged first one then the other between the bricks of the wall as she hoisted herself higher, her questing feet finding the smallest holds and ridges in the



stone. As a child learning the highwire, she'd gone barefoot. But the streets of Ketterdam were too cold and wet for that. After a few bad spills, she'd

paid a Grisha Fabrikator working in secret out of a gin shop on the

Wijnstraat to make her a pair of leather slippers with nubby rubber soles.

They were perfectly fitted to her feet and gripped any surface with surety.

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

Kaz had done his best to teach her, but she didn't quite have his way with

breaking and entering, and it took her a few tries to finesse the lock. Finally she heard a satisfying *click*, and the window swung open on a deserted office, its walls covered in maps marked with trade routes, and chalkboards

listing share prices and the names of ships. She ducked inside, refastened

the latch, and picked her way past the empty desks with their neat stacks of orders and tallies.

She crossed to a slender set of doors and stepped onto a balcony that

overlooked the central courtyard of the Exchange. Each of the shipping

offices had one. From here, callers announced new voyages and arrivals of

inventory, or hung the black flag that indicated that a ship had been lost at sea with all its cargo. The floor of the Exchange would erupt into a flurry of trades, runners would spread the word throughout the city, and the price of

goods, futures, and shares in outgoing voyages would rise or fall. But

tonight all was silence.

A wind came in off the harbour, bringing the smell of the sea, ruffling the

stray hairs that had escaped the braided coil at the nape of Inej's neck.

Down in the square, she saw the sway of lamplight and heard the thump of Kaz's cane on the stones as he and his seconds made their way across the square. On the opposite side, she glimpsed another set of lanterns heading towards them. The Black Tips had arrived.

Inej raised her hood. She pulled herself onto the railing and leaped soundlessly to the neighbouring balcony, then the next, tracking Kaz and the others around the square, staying as close as she could. His dark coat rippled in the salt breeze, his limp more pronounced tonight, as it always was when the weather turned cold. She could hear Jesper keeping up a lively stream of conversation, and Big Bolliger's low, rumbling chuckle. As she drew nearer to the other side of the square, Inej saw that Geels had chosen to bring Elzinger and Oomen – exactly as she had predicted. Inej knew the strengths and weaknesses of every member of the Black Tips, not to mention Harley's Pointers, the Liddies, the Razorgulls, the Dime Lions, and every other gang working the streets of Ketterdam. It was her job to know that Geels trusted Elzinger because they'd come up through the ranks of the Black Tips together, and because Elzinger was built like a stack of boulders – nearly seven feet tall, dense with muscle, his wide, mashed-in face jammed low on a neck thick as a pylon.

She was suddenly glad Big Bolliger was with Kaz. That Kaz had chosen

Jesper to be one of his seconds was no surprise. Twitchy as Jesper was, with or without his revolvers, he was at his best in a fight, and she knew he'd do anything for Kaz. She'd been less sure when Kaz had insisted on Big

Bolliger as well. Big Bol was a bouncer at the Crow Club, perfectly suited to tossing out drunks and wasters, but too heavy on his feet to be much use when it came to a real tussle. Still, at least he was tall enough to look Elzinger in the eye.

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

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

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

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

Kaz and Geels discussed the weather, the suspicion that the Kooperom was serving watered-down

drinks now that the rent had been raised – dancing around the real reason they'd come here tonight. In theory, they would chat, make their apologies, agree to respect the boundaries of Fifth Harbour, then all head out to find a drink together – at least that's what Per Haskell had insisted.

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

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

"I'm a business man," he'd told her. "No more, no less."

“You’re a thief, Kaz.”

“Isn’t that what I just said?”

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

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

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

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

Technically, that was true. But Fifth Harbour had been useless and all but abandoned by the city when Kaz had taken it over. He’d had it dredged, and then built out the docks and the quay, and he’d had to mortgage the Crow Club to do it. Per Haskell had railed at him and called him a fool for the

expense, but eventually he'd relented. According to Kaz, the old man's exact words had been, "Take all that rope and hang yourself." But the endeavour had paid for itself in less than a year. Now Fifth Harbour offered berths to mercher ships, as well as boats from all over the world carrying tourists and soldiers eager to see the sights and sample the pleasures of Ketterdam. The Dregs got first try at all of them, steering them – and their wallets – into brothels, taverns, and gambling dens owned by the gang.

Fifth Harbour had made the old man very rich, and cemented the Dregs as real players in the Barrel in a way that not even the success of the Crow Club had. But with profit came unwanted attention. Geels and the Black Tips had been making trouble for the Dregs all year, encroaching on Fifth Harbour, picking off pigeons that weren't rightfully theirs.

"Fifth Harbour is ours," Kaz repeated. "It isn't up for negotiation. You're cutting into our traffic from the docks, and you intercepted a shipment of *jurda* that should have docked two nights ago."

"Don't know what you're talking about."

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

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

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

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

you eat your fill.”

“And what if you’re not around, Brekker? Everyone knows you’re the spine of Haskell’s operation

– snap it and the Dregs collapse.”

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

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

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

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

“Myself and nothing else.”

Geels burst out laughing and elbowed Oomen. “Listen to this cocky little piece of crap. Brekker, you don’t own these streets. Kids like you are fleas.

A new crop of you turns up every few years to annoy your betters until a big dog decides to scratch. And let me tell you, I’m about tired of the itch.”

He crossed his arms, pleasure rolling off him in smug waves. “What if I told you there are two guards with city-issue rifles pointed at you and your boys right now?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Took some doing,” Geels admitted. “We’re a small operation right now,



and city guards don't come cheap. But it'll be worth it for the prize."

"That being me?"

"That being you."

"I'm flattered."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Stop *talking*, Geels. Tell them to shoot."

"Kaz—" said Jesper nervously.

"Go on. Find your balls and give the order."

What game was Kaz playing? Had he expected this? Had he just assumed

Inej would find her way

to the guards in time?

She glanced down again. Geels radiated anticipation. He took a deep breath, puffing out his chest.

Inej's steps faltered, and she had to fight not to go sliding straight off the edge of the roof. *He's going to do it. I'm going to watch Kaz die.*

"Fire!" Geels shouted.

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

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

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

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

That was when Inej saw Kaz still hadn't moved. "You don't look well, Geels."

"I'm just fine," he said. But he wasn't. He looked pale and shaky. His eyes

were darting right and left as if searching the shadowed walkway of the roof.

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

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

“Good,” Kaz said ignoring him.

“Kaz, he needs a medik!”

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

Even from above, Inej saw Geels flinch.

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

Geels said nothing.

“Willem Holst,” Kaz said loudly, his voice floating up to the roof, “likes to gamble almost as much as Jesper does, so your money held a lot of appeal.

But Holst has much bigger problems – let’s call them urges. I won’t go into detail. A secret’s not like coin. It doesn’t keep its value in the spending.

You’ll just have to trust me when I say this one would turn even your stomach. Isn’t that right, Holst?”

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

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

“Just shoot him, Holst!” Geels bellowed, desperation showing at his voice.

“Shoot him in the head!”

Kaz snorted in disgust. “Do you really think that secret would die with me?”

Go on, Holst,” he called. “Put a bullet in my skull. There will be messengers sprinting to your wife and your watch captain’s door before I hit the ground.”

No shot came.

“How?” Geels said bitterly. “How did you even know who would be on duty tonight? I had to pay

through the gills to get that roster. You couldn’t have outbid me.”

“Let’s say my currency carries more sway.”

“Money is money.”

“I trade in information, Geels, the things men do when they think no one is

looking. Shame holds more value than coin ever can.”

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

“Are you worrying about the second guard? Good old Bert Van Daal?” Kaz asked. “Maybe he’s up

there right now, wondering what he should do. Shoot me? Shoot Holst? Or maybe I got to him, too, and he’s getting ready to blow a hole in your chest, Geels.” He leaned in as if he and Geels were sharing a great secret. “Why not give Van Daal the order and find out?”

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

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

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

“Please,” he moaned. “I—”

“I like it when men beg,” she said. “But this isn’t the time for it.”

Below, she could see Geels’ chest rising and falling with panicked breaths.

“Van Daal!” he shouted again. There was rage on his face when he turned back to Kaz. “Always one step ahead, aren’t you?”

“Geels, when it comes to you, I’d say I have a running start.”

But Geels just smiled – a tiny smile, tight and satisfied. *A victor’s smile*, Inej realised with fresh fear.

“The race isn’t over yet.” Geels reached into his jacket and pulled out a heavy black pistol.

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

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

Inej couldn’t believe what she was seeing. The guard in her arms released a tiny squeak. In her anger and surprise, she’d accidentally tightened her grip.

“Relax,” she said, easing her hold. But, all Saints, she wanted to put a knife through something. Big Bolliger had been the one to pat down Geels.

There was no way he could have missed the pistol. He’d betrayed them.

Was that why Kaz had insisted on bringing Big Bolliger here tonight – so he’d have public confirmation that Bolliger had gone over to the Black

Tips? It was certainly why he’d let Holst put a bullet in Bolliger’s gut. But so what? Now everyone knew Big Bol was a traitor. Kaz still had a gun pointed at his chest.

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

“Going out the same way I came in.” Kaz ignored the pistol, turning his