

PART ONE

BEL DAME



Nyx sold her womb somewhere between Punjai and Faleen, on the edge of the desert.

Drunk, but no longer bleeding, she pushed into a smoky cantina just after dark and ordered a pinch of morphine and a whiskey chaser. She bet all of her money on a boxer named Jaks, and lost it two rounds later when Jaks hit the floor like an antique harem girl.

Nyx lost every coin, a wad of opium, and the wine she'd gotten from the butchers as a bonus for her womb. But she did get Jaks into bed, and—loser or not—in the desert after dark, that was something.

“What are you after?” Jaks murmured in her good ear.

They lay tangled in the sheets like old lovers: a losing boxer with a poor right hook and a tendency to drop her left, and a wombless hunter bereft of money, weapons, food, and most of her clothing.

“I'm looking for my sister,” Nyx said. It was partly the truth. She was looking for something else too, something worth a lot more, and Jaks was going to help her get it.

The midnight call to prayer rolled out over the desert. It started somewhere out in Faleen and moved in a slow wave from mosque muezzin to village mullah to town crier, certain as a swarm of locusts, ubiquitous as the name of God.

“Don't tell anyone,” Nyx said, “what I'm about to tell you...”

Nyx woke sometime after dawn prayer with a hangover and what felt like a wad of cotton in her belly. Dropping the womb had bought her some time—a day, maybe more if the butchers were smart enough to sell it before her bloody sisters sniffed her out. She'd shaken them in Punjai when she dumped the womb, along with the rest of her coin.

Jaks was long gone, off to catch a ride to Faleen with the agricultural traffic. Nyx was headed that way too, but she hadn't said a word of that to Jaks. She wanted her next meeting with Jaks to be a pleasant surprise. Mysterious women

were attractive—stalkers and groupies were not. Nyx had tracked this woman too long to lose it all by being overly familiar.

Some days, Nyx was a bel dame—an honored, respected, and deadly government-funded assassin. Other days, she was just a butcher, a hunter—a woman with nothing to lose. And the butcher had a bounty to bring in.

The sun bled across the big angry sky. The call box at the cantina was busted, so Nyx walked. The way was unpaved, mostly sand and gravel. Her feet were bruised, bleeding, and bare, but she hadn't felt much of anything down there in a good long while. Back at the butchers', she had traded her good sandals for directions out of the fleshpots, too dopey to figure the way out on her own. Under the burnous, she wore little more than a dhoti and breast binding. She had an old baldric, too—her dead partner's. All the sheaths were empty, and had been for some time. She remembered some proverb about meeting God empty-handed, but her knees weren't calloused anymore—not from praying, anyway. She had already been to hell. One prayer more or less wouldn't make any difference.

She hitched a ride on the back of a cat-pulled cart that afternoon. The cats were as tall as her shoulder. Their long, coarse fur was matted and tangled, and they stank. The cats turned leaking, bloodshot eyes to her. One of them was blind.

The woman driving the cart was a cancerous old crone with a bubbling gash that clove the left half of her face in two. She offered Nyx a ride in exchange for a finger's length of blood to feed the enormous silk beetle she kept in a covered cage next to her left hip, pressed against her battered pistol.

Nyx had the hood of her burnous up to keep off the sun; traveling this time of day was dangerous. The crone's skin was rough and pitted with old scars from cancer digs. Fresh, virulent melanomas spotted her forearms and the back of her neck. Most of her nose was gone.

"You coming from the front, my woman?" the crone asked. Nyx shook her head, but the old woman was nearly blind and did not see.

"I fought at the front," the crone said. "It brought me much honor. You, too, could find honor."

Nyx had left her partner, and a lot more at the front—a long time ago.

"I'd rather find a call box," Nyx said.

"God does not answer the phone."

Nyx couldn't argue with that.

She jumped off the cart an hour later as they approached a bodega with a call box and a sign telling her she was fifty kilometers from Faleen. The old woman nattered on about the wisdom of making phone calls to God.

Nyx made a call.

Two hours later, at fourteen in the afternoon on a day that clocked in at

twenty-seven hours, her sister Kine pulled up in a bakkie belching red roaches from its back end.

Kine leaned over and pushed out the door. “You’re lucky the office picked up,” she said. “I had to get some samples at the war front for the breeding compounds. You headed to the coast? I need to get these back there.”

“You’ve got a leak in your exhaust,” Nyx said. “Unlock the hood.”

“It’s been leaking since the front,” Kine said. She popped the hood.

The bakkie’s front end hissed open. Waves of yeasty steam rolled off the innards. Nyx wiped the moisture from her face and peered into the guts of the bakkie. The bug cistern was covered in a thin film of organic tissue, healthy and functioning, best Nyx could tell by the color. The hoses were in worse shape—semi-organic, just like the cistern, but patched and replaced in at least a half-dozen places she could see without bringing in a speculum. In places, the healthy amber tissue had blistered and turned black.

She was no bug-blessed magician—not even a standard tissue mechanic—but she knew how to find a leak and patch it up with organic salve. Every woman worth her weight in blood knew how to do that.

“Where’s your tissue kit?” Nyx said.

Kine got out of the bakkie and walked over. She was shorter than Nyx by a head—average height, for a Nasheenan woman—but they shared the same wide hips. She wore an embroidered housecoat and a hijab over her dark hair. Nyx remembered seeing her with her hair unbound and her skirt hiked up, knee deep in mud back in Mushirah. In her memory, Kine was twelve and laughing at some joke about conservative women who worked for the government. Rigid crones, she’d call them, half dead or dying in a world God made for pleasure. A farmer’s daughter, just like Nyx. A blood sister in a country where blood and bugs and currency were synonymous.

“I don’t have a tissue kit,” Kine said. “I gave it to one of the boys at the front. They’re low on supplies.”

Nyx snorted. They were low on a lot more than tissue kits at the front these days.

“You’re the only organic technician I know who’d ever be short a tissue kit,” Nyx said.

Kine looked her over. “Are you as desperately poor as you look? I know a good magician who can scrape you for cancers.”

“I’ve been worse,” Nyx said, and shut the hood. “Your bug cistern is in good shape. It’ll breed you enough bugs to power this thing back to the coast, even with the leak.”

But the leak meant she’d get to Faleen just a little bit slower. If there was one thing Nyx felt short on these days, it was time.

Nyx slid into the bakkie. Kine got behind the steering wheel. For a moment

they sat in stuffy, uncomfortable silence. Then Kine turned down the window and stepped on the juice.

“What’s her name?” Kine asked, shifting pedals as they rolled back onto the road.

“Who?”

“I can smell her,” Kine said, tightening her hands on the steering wheel. Her hands had the brown, worn, sinewy look of old leather. Her lip curled in disdain.

“I’m working a note,” Nyx said. “What I do to bring it in isn’t your business.”

“A note for a deserter, or one of those dirty bounties you deal in? If you’re bringing in a deserter, where’s Tej?”

Tej, Nyx thought, and the shock of it, of hearing his name out loud, of thinking *Tej, my dead partner*, was a punch in the gut.

“I couldn’t get him back over the Chenjan border,” Nyx said. Another boy buried in the desert.

A clerk the color of honey had given Nyx a bel dame’s note for a boy named Arran nearly three months before, after he’d deserted his place at the front and sought refuge in Chenja. His officer had called in the bel dames because she believed he’d been exposed to a new Chenjan burst, a delayed viral vapor that hid out in the host for up to four months before triggering an airborne contagion. The contagion was capable of taking out half a city before the magicians could contain it. Nyx had gone into the bel dame office and been inoculated against the latest burst, so all she had to do was bleed on the boy to neutralize the contagion, then cut off his head and take him home. Even clean, the penalty for desertion was death. Boys either came home at forty or came home in a bag. No exceptions.

This was Nyx’s job.

Some days, it paid well.

So Nyx and Tej had tracked Arran. Arran had gone over the border into Chenja. That part was easy to figure out. Where in Chenja, though, that was harder. It took tracking down Jaksdijah so Hajjij first. Arran had been a house boy of Jaks’s mother, a coastal boy raised in the interior. Jaks was the last of his known, living kin. Nyx and Tej found Jaks boxing for bread at an underground fighting club thirty kilometers inside the Chenjan border. The mullahs didn’t like Chenjans fighting foreigners—which made Jaks’s fights illegal—but it paid well.

Tej and Nyx bided their time for a month, waiting for Arran to show up while their money ran out. Arran didn’t disappoint. Tej was on watch the night a hooded figure knocked on Jaks’s door. Just before dawn, Jaks and Arran were headed back to Nasheen.

Tej and Nyx followed.

But Tej hadn't made it back.

"He was the only one of your partners I liked," Kine said, and pursed her lips, probably to hold back words God wouldn't permit her to say. Then, "You should partner with men more often."

Nyx snorted.

They blew back out onto the road. The shocks in the bakkie were going out too, Nyx realized, leaking vital fluid all over the desert. She hoped Kine knew a good tissue mechanic at the coast.

"Where am I taking you?" Kine asked. Sand rolled across the pavement.

"Faleen."

"A bit out of my way."

Nyx let that one go and looked out the window, watching flat white desert turn to dunes. Kine didn't like silence. Give her a long stretch of stillness and eventually she'd change the subject.

Kine was government now, one of the breeding techs who worked at the compounds on the coast. She had some kind of slick security clearance that went well with her hijab and lonely bed. Nyx saw her only when she was ferrying samples to and from the front—just another blood dealer, another organ stealer.

"A ship came into Faleen this week," Kine said as she rolled up the window. Nyx saw the wide sleeve of her burnous come down, flashing a length of paler skin from wrist to elbow—dusty sand instead of sun dark. "If you're looking for magicians to help you bring in this deserter, there are a whole mess of them gathering in Faleen. I hear even the lower sort are there, the sort who might—"

"Where from?"

"The magicians?"

"The ship."

"Oh, yes. The ship is from New Kinaan."

Colonists had been barred from Umayma for a thousand years. Nyx hadn't even seen a ship in a decade. Umayma sat at the edge of everything; most of the sky was dark at night. All she ever saw moving up there were dead satellites and broken star carriers from the beginning of the world.

"I've corresponded with them for some time," Kine said, "for my genetics work. They fight another of God's wars out there in the dark, can you believe it?"

"Does the radio work?" Nyx asked. Knowing aliens were out there killing each other for God, too, just depressed her. She leaned forward to fiddle with the tube jutting out of the dashboard.

"No," Kine said. She pinched her mouth. "How did you lose Tej?"

10 - GOD'S WAR

Nyx wasn't sure she could answer that question herself, let alone give Kine a good answer.

"You have any weapons?" Nyx asked.

Kine's face scrunched up like a date. "If you can't tell me that, then tell me who's tracking you."

"You giving me the fourth inquisition?"

"Nyxnissa," she said, in the same hard tone she used for quoting the Kitab.

Nyx dipped her head out the open window. The air was clearing up.

"Raine," she said.

Kine's hands tightened on the wheel. She shifted pedals. The bakkie rattled and belched and picked up speed. Dust and dead beetles roiled behind them.

"You're doing black work, aren't you?" Kine said. "One of your dirty bounties. I don't like dealing with bounty hunters. Raine is the worst of them, and you're no better, these days. I'll drop you at the gates of Faleen, but no farther."

Nyx nodded. The gate would be good. More might get Kine killed.

Raine would bring Nyx in if he had to cut up half of Nasheen to do it. Nyx had been a part of his team, once, and it had been a great way of picking up skills and paying off some magician-debts for having her body reconstituted. After a while, though, he'd started to treat her like just another dumb hunter, another body to be bloodied and buried. When she started selling out her womb on the black market, well, that had made the animosity mutual. He had good reason to track her down now. Reasons a lot less personal than cutting off his cock.

"Tej was a good boy," Kine said, "You kill good men for a lost cause just like Raine."

"Raine always got us back over the border."

"Raine isn't a bel dame. He's a bounty hunter."

"There's not much difference."

"God knows the difference."

"Yeah, well, we all do it our own way."

"Yes," Kine said, and her hands tightened on the wheel. "We're all trying to cure the war."

Spoken like a true organic technician, Nyx thought.

"But there is a difference," Kine said, turning to look at her again, hard and sober now. "Bel dames enforce God's laws. They keep our boys at the front and our women honest. Bounty hunters just bring in petty thieves and women doing black work."

Women like me, Nyx thought.

Her black market broker, Bashir so Saud, owned a cantina in Faleen. The cantina was first. Even on a botched delivery, Bashir owed her at least half what

it was worth. If Nyx had taken the job in Faleen instead of through Bashir's agents in Punjai, she'd have half her money now and wouldn't be so hard up. As it was, her pockets were empty. The last of her currency had been eaten with Tej.

They turned off the paved track and onto the Queen Zubair Highway that bisected Nasheen from the Chenjan border to the sea. The road signs were popular shooting targets for Chenjan operatives and Nasheenian youth. Most of the metal markers were pocked with bullet holes and smeared in burst residue. A careful eye could spot the shimmering casings of unexploded bursts lining the highway.

If dropping the womb kept Raine and Nyx's sisters busy long enough trying to track it down so they could tag and bag it, she could collect her note, call in some favors from the magicians, and maybe find a way to clear up this whole fucking mess.

Maybe.

A three-hundred-year-old water purifying plant marked the edge of the old Faleenian city limits. The city itself had lapped at the organic filter surrounding the plant for half a century before a group of Chenjan terrorists set off a sticky burst that ate up flesh and metal, scouring the eastern quarter of the city and leaving the plant on the edge of a wasteland. The government had rebuilt the road and the plant, but the detritus of the eastern quarter remained a twisted ruin. Chenjan asylum seekers, draft dodgers, and foreign women had turned the devastated quarter into a refugee camp. A colorful stir of humanity wove through the ruins now, hawking avocados and mayflies and baskets of yellow roaches. Nyx caught the spicy stink of spent fire beetles and burning glow worms.

As the dusty ridges of the refugee camps turned into the walled yards and high-rises of what passed for the Faleenian suburbs, the massive ship from New Kinaan came into view, rearing above the old gated city center of Faleen like some obscene winged minaret.

Faleen was a port city, the kind that took in the ragged handfuls of off-world ships that sputtered into its archaic docking bay every year looking for repairs, supplies, and usually—directions. Faleen wasn't the sort of place anybody off-world came to on purpose. Most of the ships that rocketed past Umayma were so alien in their level of technology that they couldn't have put into the old port if they wanted to. The port design hadn't changed much since the beginning of the world, and most everybody on Umayma wanted to keep it that way.

They drove past women and girls walking along the highway carrying baskets on their heads and huge nets over their shoulders. Bugs were popular trade with the magicians in Faleen. Professional creepers caught up to three kilos a

12 - GOD'S WAR

day—striped chafers, locusts, tumblebugs, spider wasps, dragonflies, pselaphid beetles, fungus weevils—and headed to the magicians' gym to trade them in for opium, new kidneys, good lungs, maybe a scraping or two to take off the cancers.

Kine pulled up outside the towering main gate of the dusty city, scattering young girls, sand, and scaly chickens from her path with a blast of her horn. Another cloud of beetles escaped from the leak in the back and bloomed around the bakkie. Nyx batted away the bugs and jumped out.

She took one long look at the main gate, then swung back to look at Kine. She half opened her mouth to ask.

"I'm not giving you any money," Kine said.

Nyx grimaced.

"Go with God!" Kine yelled after her.

Nyx raised a hand. She'd left God in Chenja.

Kine shifted pedals and turned back onto the highway, heading for the interior.

Nyx turned toward the two giant slabs of organic matting that were the main gates into Faleen. Rumor had it they'd seen better days as compression doors on some star carrier the First Families rode down on from the moons.

Nyx pulled up the hood of her burnous and bled into the traffic heading through the gate. She passed the broken tower of a minaret and walked through narrow alleys between mud-brick buildings whose precipitous lean threatened a swift death. She didn't much like the stink and crowd of cities, but you could lose yourself in a city a lot more easily than you could out in farming communities like Mushirah. She had run to the desert and the cities for the anonymity. And to die for God.

None of that had worked out very well.

Bashir's cantina was at the edge of the Chenjan quarter, and the ass end of it served as the public entrance to the magicians' gym and fighting ring. Bashir made a pretty penny on fight nights when all of Faleen's starving tailors, tax clerks, bug merchants, and renegade printers crowded in through the bar to watch the fight. The ones who couldn't get into the main fighting area contented themselves with drinking cheap rice wine and whiskey, listening to the steady *slap-slap* of gloved fists meeting flesh and the damp thumping of sweaty bodies hitting the mat.

Bashir also made a little money on the side as a black work broker.

Two tall women with shoulders as wide as the doorway stopped Nyx at the cantina stoop.

"You have an appointment?" one of them asked. "It's private business only until we open for tonight's fight."

"Do I look like I have an appointment?"

“Who the fuck are you?”

“Tell her I’m the bel dame.”

The women shifted on their feet. “I’ll get her,” the biggest one said.

There was a time when Nyx had enjoyed throwing that title around on a job. “Yeah, I’m a bel dame,” and “bel dames—like *me*.” These days the whole dance just made her tired. She’d cut off a lot of boys’ heads over the last three years. Draft dodgers, mostly, and deserters like this Arran kid who came back into Nasheen still contaminated with shit from the front.

Nyx pushed at her sore belly and rocked back on her heels. She wondered if Bashir sold morphine before noon.

The bouncer came back and said, “She’ll see you.”

Nyx ducked after her into the dark, smoky interior of the cantina. Dust clotted the air, and bug-laced sand covered most of the floor. It was good for soaking up blood and piss.

Bashir sat at a corner table smoking sweet opium. Nyx could taste it. The smell made her nauseous. Bashir had two bottles of sand-colored whiskey at the table, and someone had left behind a still-smoking cigar that smelled more like marijuana than sen. Bashir had two teenage boys beside her, both just shy of draft age, maybe fifteen. They were sallow and soft-looking and kept their hair long, braided, and belled. Somebody had kept them out of training. Letting adolescent boys go that soft was illegal in most districts, even if they were prostitutes. They wouldn’t last a day at the front—the Chenjans would mash through them like overripe squash.

“Nyxnissa,” Bashir said. She exhaled a plume of rich smoke. “Thought I’d seen the last of you.”

“Most people think that,” Nyx said, sliding next to one of the boys. He flinched. She outweighed him by at least twenty-five kilos. “Until I show up again.”

“How was your trip?” Bashir asked. She wore red trousers and a stained short coat but kept her head uncovered. Her skin was a shade paler than those who worked in the desert, but the tough, leathery look of her face said her wealth was recently acquired. Like the boys, she was getting fat and soft at the edges, but unlike the boys, she’d fought it out on the sand with the best of them in her youth. There was muscle under the affluence.

“Not as smooth as I hoped,” Nyx said. She pulled off her hood.

Bashir looked her over with a lazy sort of interest. “A bug told me you don’t have what we bargained for.”

“I need a drink,” Nyx said, “and half of what you owe me.” She hailed the woman at the bar, but Bashir waved her woman back.

“The bug says you dropped the purse at the butcher’s.”

“I did,” Nyx said. “It was a high-risk job. You knew that when your agent gave

it to me.” She’d been carrying genetic material worth a nice chunk of money in that womb. Bashir wasn’t going to let it go easy, no, but bel dames made good black market runners which made them valuable to people like Bashir—until they got caught. Word got around when you did business with gene pirates.

Being unarmed made it easier to resist the urge to shoot Bashir in the head and demand the contents of the cantina’s till from the barmaid. She was too close to the magicians’ gym to get away with that.

“It was a substantial purse,” Bashir said.

Nyx leaned back against the seat. The boy next to her had a hold of his glass, but wasn’t drinking. Like many Nasheenan women, Bashir was known to like boys, but these ones were a little young and soft for a desert matron.

“Where’d you pick up these two?” Nyx asked.

“Lovely, eh?” Bashir said. Her dark eyes glinted in the low light. The place was too cheap for bulbs. They were still using worms in glass. “They were a gift. From a friend.”

Bashir didn’t have friends. Nyx cut a look at the door. The bouncers had closed it. The woman at the bar was still wiping the same length of counter she’d been mopping when Nyx dropped in. I shouldn’t have come, Nyx thought. She should have gone straight to the magicians and asked for sanctuary. It had been only a matter of time before turning Nyx in was worth more than a black market purse. But, fuck, she’d needed the money from this job.

Nyx knew the answer but asked anyway.

“Who gave them to you?”

Bashir showed her teeth.

“You’ll get shit from the magicians for crossing a bel dame,” Nyx said. They could take her money, her shoes, her sword, her *bloody fucking partner*, but they couldn’t take her title. “How much did you get for selling me out? I’m worth a lot more than a couple of fuckable boys.”

“Your reputation’s been tumbling for a good long while, Nyxnissa. The bounty hunters have your name in a hat now, and if you’re lucky, it’ll be Raine who brings you in and not some young honey pot trying to prove something by cutting off your head. What would your sisters say?”

“Leave the bel dame family out of it.”

“There’s been some stirring in the bel dame council. Rumor has it they want to clean up this little mess with you internally, the way Alharazad cleaned up the council. They’ll cut you up and put you in a bag.”

“Then you and your pirates are losing a good ferrier.”

“You don’t deliver enough to make yourself worth the risk. And now you dropped your womb, so I don’t have anything invested. Putting out a note on you got me a good purse for reporting a pirate. Delivering you to the bounty office and claiming my own bounty makes us even.”

So Bashir had turned her in for bread.

“How much am I going for?” Nyx asked. Her hands itched for a blade that she no longer carried. She was good with a sword. The guns? Not so much.

“About fifty,” Bashir said.

Well, that was something.

The boy beside Nyx took his hand away from his drink.

The woman behind the bar moved toward the kitchen.

All right, then.

Nyx kicked up onto the tabletop before the boy could steady the pistol in his other hand. The gun went off with a pop and burst of yellow smoke.

She threw a low roundhouse kick to the other boy's face and leapt off the table before Bashir could get her scattergun free.

Reflex sent her running for the back door, kicking up sand behind her. She shouldered into the kitchen, knocked past a startled Mhorian cook, and ran headlong out the open back door and into the alley.

A strong arm shot out and slammed into her throat. The blow took her off her feet.

Nyx hit the sand and rolled.

Still choking, Nyx tried to get up, but Raine already had hold of her.

He twisted her arm behind her and forced her face back into the sand. She spit and turned her head, gulping air. She saw two pairs of dirty sandaled feet in front of her. She tried to look up at who owned them.

Little ropy-muscled Anneke hadn't broken a sweat. She stood chewing a wad of sen, one arm supporting the weight of the rifle she kept lodged just under her shoulder. She was as dark as a Chenjan, and about the size of a twelve-year-old. The other feet belonged to the skinny half-breed Taite, who wasn't a whole hell of a lot older than thirteen or fourteen.

“You must be desperate,” Nyx said, spitting more sand, “to use Taite and Anneke as muscle.”

“That's all the greeting I get?” Raine asked. He pulled her up, kept a grip on her arm, and tugged off her burnous.

“Where did you lose your gear, girl? I taught you better than that.” He shook the burnous out, probably thinking she'd hidden something in it.

Raine was a large man, a head taller than Nyx, just as dark and twice as massive. His face was broad and flat and stamped with two black, expressionless eyes, like deep water from a community well. The hilt of a good blade cut through a slit in the back of his brown burnous. He was pushing Bashir's age—one of the few who'd survived the front.

She grunted.

He took off her baldric and passed it to Anneke for inspection.

“Nothing here,” Anneke said, and tossed the baldric at Nyx's feet.

"You're clean," Raine said, half a question. "You know how much you're going for?"

"More than fifty," Nyx said.

He took Nyx by her braids and brought her close to his bearded face. The beard was new, a Chenjan affectation that would get him noticed on the street and pegged as a political radical. "Do you know what the queen does to bel dames who turn black?" he asked. "When they start selling zygotes to gene pirates? Those pirates will breed monsters in jars and sell them to Chenjans. But you don't care about that, do you? You need pocket money."

Raine had recruited her from the magicians' gym after she was reconstituted. They'd spent long nights and longer days talking about the war and his hatred for those whose work he saw as perpetuating it. Gene pirates—selling genetic material to both sides—were no better to him than Tirhani arms dealers.

Raine released her.

"I didn't train you to be a bel dame," he said. "I taught you to be a bounty hunter, to fight real threats to Nasheen like young bel dames who sell out their organs to gene pirates."

"I got issued a bel dame note for a contaminated boy. I know he's in Faleen. I needed the cash from the womb to bring him in."

"You should have given the note to a real bel dame."

Nyx looked him in the eye. "I don't give up notes."

"Taite," Raine said, holding Nyx with one strong arm while reaching toward the boy. Taite had the half-starved look of a kid who had grown up outside the breeding compounds. He reached into his gear bag.

They were going to truss her up and sell her.

Nyx stood in the back alley of Bashir's cantina. At the end of the alley she could clearly see the back entrance to the magicians' gym. Anneke was leaning against the wall now, rifle still in hand. Getting shot would hurt.

Getting trussed up and hauled into the Chenjan district, though... that would be the end of the job. And probably a lot more.

Nyx tensed. Taite pulled out the sticky bands from his gear bag and threw them to Raine.

Nyx twisted and swiveled in Raine's grip while he tried to catch the bands. She palmed him in the solar plexus. He grunted. His grip loosened. She pulled free and bolted.

Anneke jumped to attention. Nyx pushed past her.

The rifle popped.

Nyx felt a sharp, stabbing thump on her right hip, as if someone had set a sledge hammer on fire and hit her with it.

She staggered down the alley and clutched her hip. A burst of mud-brick exploded behind her. She heard two more rounds go off.

The red door of the magicians' gym appeared at her right. She stumbled and pounded on the door.

"Sanctuary!" she yelled. "Bel dame! My life for a thousand! Sanctuary!"

She heard Anneke yell, "Fuck!"

The pack of them ran toward her. Raine's face was dark. Nyx screamed, "My life for a thousand!" and pounded on the door again. There was nothing easier to shoot than a stationary target.

Anneke was a hand breadth away. She reached for Nyx's hair.

The magicians' door opened. A waft of cold air billowed into the alley, bringing with it the stink of sweat and leather. Nyx fell inside, into darkness. She tucked her feet underneath her, pulling them across the threshold.

"Fuck!" Anneke said again.

Nyx lay at a pair of bare feet cloaked by yellow trousers. She heard a low buzzing sound, and a soapy organic filter popped up over the doorway. Through the filmy gauze of the filter, Nyx saw Raine standing behind his crew, her burnous still in his hand.

She looked up the length of billowing yellow trousers and into the sapphire-eyed face of Yah Reza.

"You're bleeding all over my floor, baby doll," Yah Reza said, and shut the door.

2

Rhys had never fought at the front. He'd been through it, yes. But he had never picked up a blade or a burst or dismembered a body. He had gone to great lengths to avoid doing so.

He had once walked across a rubbish-strewn street with his father, anxious to keep up with the long-legged man, and some piece of glass or serrated tin had lodged in his shoe. He had kicked free of it and limped on despite the pain. When he arrived home after morning prayer, he had pulled off his shoe and found it full of blood. It had taken his mother and sisters nearly a quarter of an hour to stir him from a dead faint, and by then they had cleaned and bandaged the wound. He did not look at it again until the skin had healed clean. He threw out the shoes.

When Rhys crossed the great churning waste of the desert, he'd been running not toward his father but away, across the disputed border between Chenja and Nasheen. The sky had lit up every night with deadly green and violet bursts. The world had smelled of yeast and mustard and geranium. He had stayed as far from the contagion clouds as possible, but when he stumbled through Chenja and into the nearest Nasheenan border town, he was hacking up his lungs in bloody clumps, and his skin burned and bubbled like tar.

What woman took him in then, he did not know, but he knew it was a woman. Everyone alive in Nasheen was a woman. They sent all their men out to die at the front. They had no family heads, no clans. They were godless women who murdered men and bred like flies. The Nasheenas took him for a deserter, but because they called in their magicians before they called in their order keepers, they had saved him from a cold, bloody death in an interrogation room somewhere in the Nasheenan interior.

The magicians had arrived with sleeves full of spotted fungus beetles and cicadas in their hair, and when Rhys next opened his eyes, he was in a bed at the center of a circular room deep in the magicians' quarters. A lightning bug lamp beside him brightened and dimmed, brightened and dimmed, until he

thought his vision must have been lost somewhere in the desert along with his name. He moved his hands over the lamp, and the bugs ceased their intermittent dance and glowed steadily.

“Is it better or worse, in the light?” one of the magicians had asked, emerging from the darkness of the doorway. From the raised bed, he could see that the doorway opened into more blackness.

The woman magician spoke to Rhys in accented Chenjan, and she had brought him a strange still-wriggling stew of grubs and gravy. She was a tall, bony woman with eyes the color of sapphire flies; not their real color, she assured him.

“We know a thing or two about illusion in Nasheen,” she had told him. He remembered how strange it was to see her eyes at all. He had heard that Nasheenian women did not wear veils, but he still found her vanity surprising, decadent. Chenjan women could submit to God and wield a rifle with equal ease, but Nasheenian women had allowed their propensity for violence to pollute their beliefs. Wielding a rifle, they believed, made them men in the eyes of God, and men did not have to practice modesty or submission to anyone but God. Nasheenian women had forgotten their place in the order of things.

The woman’s mouth had worked constantly at the wad of sen she kept in it. Her teeth were stained a bloody crimson. She turned to the lightning bug lamp and laughed.

“You’ve figured it all out, haven’t you, baby doll?” she had said, gesturing at the bugs. “We may find some use for you yet.”

It was then that he realized he had asked the bugs to light the room, something only a magician could do. They knew what he was, then.

Her name, she said, was Yah Reza. She said she would help him work on his Nasheenian and that hiding his ability with bugs from another magician would have been like trying to pretend he wasn’t Chenjan. She could see the difference. Now, she had said, he was hers, unless he wanted some other life—wanted to get sold off to gene pirates or the breeding compounds, or become a venom dealer or some mercenary’s translator.

“There are worse fates,” she had said, and something on the stuccoed wall behind her had shifted, and Rhys realized it was an enormous butterfly, big as his hand. “But I can make you a magician.”

A magician.

A *Nasheenian* magician.

“One that can practice in Nasheen?” he had asked, because he could not go back to Chenja. Something in his chest ached at the thought of it.

He remembered rubbing at the backs of his hands where his father had beaten him with a metal rod when he had refused him. But the magicians had healed those wounds as well, and the skin and bones were mended now,

erasing the physical history of that night, those words. But not the memory. His or God's.

"I can even get you a proper sponsor, once you're trained. Better, I won't ask what brought you across the border in the dead of night or how you did it. You get on with the magicians, you get immunity from the draft and the inquisition. What do you think of that?"

Rhys did not fear the Nasheenan draft—Nasheeniens didn't draft foreign men—or the inquisition; he was too smart for them. But Yah Reza offered him magic. In Chenja, to reveal his skill would have meant immediate training for the front, no matter that he was his father's only son. As a standard, his father's lack of sons had given Rhys a place at home. Men still headed families in Chenja. They still owned companies, acted as mullahs, ran the government. But as a magician, he would have been forced to the front.

"I'll stay," he had told her.

He spent some months among the magicians, learning the intricacies of bug manipulation and organic tech. His Nasheenan improved. He learned to look away from the women in the hall as he passed. They stared at him openly, like harlots. It was up to him to allow them to maintain some shred of honor. When he asked to leave the cavernous labyrinth of the magicians' quarters and boxing gym to go sightseeing in Faleen, Yah Reza told him he was not yet ready. She encouraged patience. But her words did nothing to distill the growing sense that he was a prisoner there, kept at the discretion of Nasheen's magicians until he proved worthless or useful. He did not know what they would do with him when they decided which he best embodied.

Yah Reza caught him by the elbow one afternoon as he hurried back to his rooms after another embarrassing encounter with a magician teaching him transmission science. He was not used to a world where women put their hands on him without reservation and regarded him as if he were a young but dangerous insect. Chenja was full of women, of course, but no Chenjan woman had ever grabbed him in the street, not even the lowliest of prostitutes. And no Chenjan woman had ever done the things to him that the women in the border towns had done before their magicians showed up. They would not have dreamed of it. They would have been killed for it.

He was still trembling when Yah Reza grabbed him.

"Come with me, baby doll," she said. She wore a billowing saffron robe and smelled of death and saffron. A furry spider the size of Rhys's thumb crawled along her sleeve, and a whirl of tiny blue moths circled her head.

He tried to quiet his trembling.

Yah Reza beckoned him. Rhys followed her through the long, twisting halls of the magicians' quarters—cool, windowless corridors that suddenly opened into niches and vaulted chambers filled with locusts and cocooned creatures,

lit sporadically by glow worms and fire beetles and the ever-present lightning bugs flaring and dying in the dark.

The preponderance of bugs in the magicians' quarters made his blood sing, as if he was attuned to a bit of everything, able to touch and manipulate pieces of the world. He felt more alive here than he had anywhere else in his life, among those who spent their days coming up with new and interesting ways to kill his people.

I'll take what I need from them and return, he thought. I'll make it right.

The boxers' locker rooms were three steps to the right of the transmission rooms, a corridor away from the internal betting booth, and three long bends of the hall from Yah Tayyib's operating theater, where magicians and bel dames came to receive treatment for cancer and contagion. The corridors within a magicians' gym were never the same length, never quite in the same location. Beneath each gym, the world was bent and twisted. The distance-bending corridors were relics from the times before Umayma was habitable, back when magicians lived belowground while they remade the world. This made it possible to step into a gym at the coast and emerge a few minutes later at a gym in Mushtallah or Faleen and Aludra. Practical for long distances, but dizzying over short ones.

As they approached the locker room for outriders, Husayn—the magicians' favorite boxing nag—passed them in the hall, heading one twist of the hallway down to her own locker room. Husayn was a stocky woman with a face like a shovel. A novice magician scurried after her, carrying her gear.

"Hey, chimba!" Husayn called at Rhys. Too loud. The women in this country were all too loud.

Rhys did not look at her.

"Those magicians haven't been able to wash that gravy stink off you, you know it?" Husayn persisted.

"I am still perplexed as to why it is that Chenja retained the veil and Nasheen discarded it," Rhys said. "Perhaps Nasheen's women sought to frighten away God with their ugliness."

"Well now, if all your boys are as pretty as you, your *boys* best start covering up too," Husayn said. "Ah, the shit I'd like to do to you." She laughed.

What a fool, Rhys thought. Chenjan mullahs taught that men's bodies were clean, asexual. Closer to God. Women, real women, were not stirred to sin at the sight of men. If these godless Nasheenian women were stirred at the sight of anything, it was blood.

Yah Reza shooed her away. "Come, now, this isn't a whorehouse."

Husayn cackled and moved on.

Rhys ducked into the other locker room. Inside, the light was dim, and a lean woman sat hunched on one of the benches, staring into her hands.

When he stepped in, she looked up. She was long in the face, like a dog, and she had narrow, little eyes and a set to her mouth that reminded Rhys of one of his sisters, the look she got when she wanted something so badly she made herself sick. He hoped this woman didn't vomit. He knew who would have to clean it up.

Yah Reza moved past him and greeted the outrider.

The outrider stood. She looked uneasy, like a cornered animal—a dog-shifter in form, or maybe some scraggly adolescent sand cat. He might have guessed her for a shifter if he had seen only an image or picture of her, but in person he was able to see clearly that she was not. The air did not prickle and bend around her as it did a shifter. She was just some kid, some standard—just another part of the world.

Yah Reza talked low to the girl and rubbed her shoulders. She spit sen on the floor. Rhys knew who would have to clean that up too.

"This is Rhys. Come here, boy," Yah Reza said, and Rhys walked close enough to see that he was a head and shoulders taller than the outrider.

"You bring your wraps?" Yah Reza asked the girl.

The outrider stabbed her fingers toward two long, dirty pieces of tattered muslin on the bench next to her.

Yah Reza spit more sen. "Rhys," she said.

Rhys went to the locker at the back of the room, where they kept the extra gear. He unraveled a couple of hand wraps. He grabbed some tape and took a seat on the bench and finished unraveling the wraps.

"He know how to box?" the outrider asked, and even Rhys, with his non-native Nasheenan, noticed her mushy inland accent. Where had they picked her up? Working some border town? The magicians were notorious for pushing girls into the ring before they were ready. It made the fights bloodier.

"I don't believe in violence," Rhys said.

"A shame too," Yah Reza said. "He's a damn fine shot with a pistol. But don't worry none about his technique. He's a magician, girl. He knows hands. You get on, and I'll meet you in a quarter-hour. We got some fancy visitors want to meet you and Husayn before the fight."

Yah Reza petted the outrider's cheek.

The outrider sat back on the bench and eyed Rhys like he was a beetle turned over on its back, not sure if it was harmless or just playing at docility until she got close.

Rhys asked for her right hand.

She hesitated, and he thought that was odd from a woman who was about to go toe to toe with a seasoned fighter in a magicians' gym. He realized then how young she was, maybe seventeen. It was hard to tell with Nasheenan women. They grew up fast, bore the marks of their short, brutal childhoods on their

bodies and faces. Most of them were broken old crones at thirty.

He taped the wrap in place and began to loop it around her wrist and between her fingers. She had her palm flat and her fingers wide.

When he had first come to Nasheen, he'd thought he would hate all of its women for their ugliness, their vanity, but as he put the wraps on this little dog-faced girl, he found himself admiring her hands. She had strong, beautiful fingers, calloused knuckles and palms, and he saw her scars, and the dirt under her bitten nails. There was something splendid and tragic about her all at once.

He tied off her right hand and moved to the left. When he took her left hand in his, something about the way she held it, the way it felt beneath his fingers, made him hesitate. He pulled at her fingers.

She winced.

"You've done an injury to this hand?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said.

"An old injury," he amended as he pressed his thumb against the back of her hand, rubbed her knuckles, pushed in slow circles up to her wrist. She had hairline fractures in the small bones of her left hand. Some had healed, but badly. It was a brittle hand.

"You shouldn't be fighting with this," he said.

She pulled her hand from him, and her mouth got harder. Her shoulders stiffened. "I can wrap myself. They told me magicians used tricks."

"I didn't say I wouldn't finish." He took her hand in his again. His ability to diagnose illness and injury had been the first sign that he'd inherited his father's skill as a magician. A more talented magician might have been able to heal her hands, if the injuries weren't so old, but Rhys's skill was limited, his knowledge incomplete. The longer he stayed among the Nasheean magicians, the more he worried things would stay that way.

"Does your family approve of you boxing?" he asked to fill the cool silence. Three locusts climbed up his pant leg. He moved his hand over them, and they dropped to the floor.

"Don't have much family," she said. "Where you learn to wrap hands? They teach you that in magic school?"

"My uncle took me to fights in Chenja," he said, "when I was too young to know better. I wrapped his hands."

"You got soft hands. You aren't a fighter. You never fought?"

"I don't believe in violence."

"You ain't answered the question."

He finished taping her bad hand. He squeezed her fist in his palm. "There, that good?"

She made fists with both hands. "I been taped worse."

"I'm sure," Rhys said. He hesitated. If she had had a proper husband, or a brother, or a son, that man would have told her not to fight. He would have taken care of her. "You shouldn't fight with that hand," he repeated.

"I been doing it a long time. It's fight or die where I'm from. Sometimes you have to run away just to live. I suppose you know something about that."

Rhys did not answer.

"I don't mind you're black," she said, magnanimously.

"It doesn't matter what we mind," Rhys said. "God sorts all that out."

"Our God says your god is false."

"They're the same God." He had not always believed that, even when he pressed his head to the ground six times a day in prayer and intoned the same litany in a dead language, the language of Umayma, brought down from the moons with the Firsts at the beginning of the world: *In the name of God, the infinitely Compassionate and Merciful...*

For years he had believed what the Imams told them, that Nasheenians were godless infidels who worshipped women and idols brought in from dead worlds, worlds blighted by God for their own idolatry. But when the muezzin called the prayers here, those who were faithful went to the same mosque he did with the other magicians, prayed in nearly the same way, and spoke in the same language—God's language—though his birth tongue was Chenjan, and theirs, Nasheenian.

They were all Umaymans, the people from the moons who had waited up there a thousand years while magicians made Umayma half-habitable—all but the Mhorians, Ras Tiegans, the Heidians, and the two-hundred-odd Drucians, who had come later. Survivors of other dead worlds, worlds out of the darkest parts of the sky.

In the mosque, forehead pressed against the floor, Rhys never understood the war. It was only when he raised his head and saw the women praying among him, bareheaded, often bare-legged, shamelessly displaying full heads of hair and ample flesh, that he questioned what these women truly believed they were submitting to. Certainly not the will of God. On the streets he saw widowed women reduced to begging, girls like this one earning money with blood, and bloated women coming in from the coast after giving birth to their unnatural broods of children. This was the life that Chenja fought against. This godlessness.

Whenever the bakkie got sick or the milk soured, his mothers would blame "those godless Nasheenians, daughters of demons."

"Rhys?"

He looked up from the outrider's hands to see Yah Reza in the doorway. A dozen fungus beetles skittered past her into the room. The outrider flinched.

"Yah Tayyib needs you in surgery," Yah Reza said.

Rhys squeezed the girl's fist a final time. "Luck to you," he said.

"We have some visitors come to see you boxers," Yah Reza said. "You up for it?" She was slipping further into whatever vernacular the girl spoke.

"What sort of visitors?" the girl asked.

Rhys stood, and put away the tape. He walked toward the door.

"The foreign kind. They don't bite, though, so far as I can tell."

"Yeah, that's fine, then."

Yah Reza clapped her hands. "Come."

Rhys turned past the magician and walked into the dim outer corridor. He saw a cluster of figures outside Husayn's locker room and paused to get a look at them.

Two black women wearing oddly cut hijabs spoke in low tones. Though the hijabs were black, their long robes were white, and dusty along the hem. They wore no jewelry, and instead of sandals they wore black boots without a heel.

Despite their complexions, he knew they were not Chenjan, or even Tirhani. They were too small, too thin, fine-boned, and the way they held themselves—the way they spoke with heads bent—was not Chenjan or Tirhani but something else.

One of them looked out at him and ceased speaking. From across the long hall, he saw a broad face with high cheekbones, large eyes, and dark brows. It was a startlingly open face, as if she was not used to keeping secrets. Her skin was bright and clear and smoother than any he'd seen save for the face of a child. She was old, he knew, by her posture and her height, but the clarity of her skin made him want to call her a girl. It was not the face of a woman who had grown up in the desert or even a world with two suns. Unless she was the daughter of a rich merchant who had kept her locked in a tower in some salty country, hidden from the suns by dark curtains and filters for a quarter century, she was not from anywhere on Umayma.

"You're very young to be a man," she said, and laughed at him. Her accent was strange—a deep, throaty whir swallowed all of her vowels, and when she laughed, she laughed from deep in her chest. It was a boisterous sound, too loud to come from a woman with such a narrow chest.

"You're not from Nasheen," he said.

"Nor are you."

She was not from anywhere in the world. But that was impossible. The Mhorians had been the last allowed refuge on Umayma, nearly a thousand years before. They had brought with them dangerous idols and belief in a foreign prophet, but they claimed to be people of the Book, and custom required that they be given sanctuary. It was a custom soon discarded, though, and the ships that followed the Mhorians were shot out of the sky. Their remains had rained

down over the world like stars.

Were these women people of the Book?

"You're an alien," he said, tentative, a question.

She laughed again, and the laughter filled the corridor. "Your first?"

He nodded.

"Not the last, I hope," she said.

And then Yah Reza and the outrider entered the hall and blocked his view, and Rhys turned away and walked quickly past a bend in the corridor, where he could no longer hear the alien woman's voice.

The memory of her laugh tugged at something inside him, something he thought he'd left back in Chenja. He wanted to pull back her hijab and run his fingers through the black waves of her unbound hair. He squeezed his eyes shut, shook his head. He had been too long in Nasheen.

When he arrived at Yah Tayyib's operating theater, he saw blood spattering the stones, hungry bugs lapping up their fill. Another hard-up bel dame had come to collect *zakat*. Another godless woman was destined to die.

3

Nyx struggled out of a groggy half dream of drowning and fell off the giant stone slab in Yah Tayyib's operating theater. The floor was cold.

Yah Tayyib helped her up. One curved wall of the theater was lined with squat glass jars of organs. Glow worms ringed the shelves and hugged the glass. Nyx noted the long table at Yah Tayyib's left and the length of silk that covered his instruments, but her gaze did not settle there long. She was interested in the medicine wardrobe at the back. The one with the morphine.

She was naked. Blood trickled down one leg.

"How do you feel?" Yah Tayyib asked. He wore a billowing blue robe. Carrion beetles clung to the hem. He was a tall thin man, well over sixty and gray in the beard. His face was a sunken ruin, the nose a mashed pulp of flesh. But his hands, his all-important magician's hands, were smooth and straight-fingered.

Nyx wondered how she was supposed to respond to that. Her head felt stuffed with honey.

"You were missing a kidney," Yah Tayyib said. "I replaced that as well."

"I traded it for a ticket out of Chenja. The other one wasn't mine either."

"I didn't think it was," he said.

"Why not?"

"I put it in there six months ago."

"Ah," Nyx said.

"I'm quite sorry about the womb," Yah Tayyib said. "It was your original, you know, and uniquely shaped. Bicornuate. I would have bought it myself, though for much less than you likely sold it." He always talked about body parts like bug specimens—dry and purely academic.

"I don't care much how it's shaped or whose it is," she said. "I care about what it can do for me. What time is it? I've got Raine on my tail."

She looked around for her clothes. They were stacked neatly next to the

operating slab. She started to get dressed, slowly. It was like trying to work somebody else's body. She was still a big woman, but she was down to her dhoti and binding, and both were tattered and loose, hanging off her like a shroud.

"You have a price on your head," Yah Tayyib said, and turned to wash his hands at the sink. Flesh beetles clung to the end of the tap, bundling up drops of water in their sticky legs.

"Yeah," she said. "More than fifty, apparently."

"You should turn yourself in to your bel dame sisters. The bounty hunters won't be so generous. They say it's black money this time. Gene pirates." He wiped his hands dry on his robes and regarded her. "What were you carrying?"

"Zygotes," Nyx said. "Ferrier work. I was supposed to hand it off on this end, but I had to drop it and sell it to some butchers to keep my sisters busy. I figure they lost at least half a day trying to figure out where I dropped it. No womb, no proof, no way to fully collect their note on me."

The fist in her belly tightened, contracted. She felt dizzy, and leaned back against the stone altar.

"You've indebted yourself to us again," Yah Tayyib said. "This is not the place to settle a blood note. Yours or theirs. Keep your bloody boys and your bloody sisters out of my ring."

"Still got something against bel dames?"

"You've never been a boy at the front."

"I can't imagine you being frightened of anything, Yah Tayyib."

"We all manage our grief differently," Yah Tayyib said. "Three dead wives and a dozen dead children make me more human, not less. You have chosen your path. I have chosen mine. This is the last time I do this for you, Nyxnissa."

"You say that every time. Is it too late to bet on the boxers?"

"What in this world do you own to bet?"

Nyx prodded at the red scarring tissue on her right hip. "I've got good credit," she said. She always paid her debts to the magicians... eventually.

"I doubt that," he said. "You've nothing more than rags and flesh."

She shook her head. Her vision swam. "I'll get paid when I've cleared the blood debt. I can buy whatever I need after that."

Yah Tayyib sighed. He walked over to the big wardrobe next to the medicine cabinet.

"Am I done bleeding?" Nyx said.

Yah Tayyib pulled out a deep mahogany burnous. "You'll expel the usual bugs in a few hours. They're aiding in the last of the repairs. Here, this is the most inconspicuous I have."

Nyx donned the burnous. It was surprisingly soft.

“Organic?” she asked.

“Yes. It will breathe for you, if you need it to.”

“Great,” she said, as if that would make any difference tonight. “Walk me out?”

Yah Tayyib escorted her back through the labyrinthine halls of the magicians’ quarters, all windowless. He took her to the internal magician’s betting booth, where a young woman Nyx knew from her days at the gym stood at the window collecting baskets of bugs.

“I still have credit here, Maj?” Nyx asked.

“You always have credit,” Maj said.

Yah Tayyib huffed his displeasure as Nyx set down a bet on Jaks so Hajjij for fifty.

“You’re a madwoman,” he said as Nyx picked up her receipt and then pushed back through the crowd of magicians.

“Maybe so,” she said. But this would get her Jaks, and Jaks would get her the boy, and the boy would put money in her pockets—and save some Nasheenan village from contamination.

That was the idea, anyway.

Yah Tayyib brought her back to the gym, which had been transformed into a fighting arena. The lights outside the ring were dim. The last of the speed bags had been put away. A man who looked remarkably like a Chenjan dancer moved under the ring-lights and it took Nyx half a minute to realize the dancer really *was* Chenjan—and male. Some instinctual part of her thought he’d look a lot better blown up, but there was something she liked about him, something about the way he moved, the delicacy of his hands.

She and Yah Tayyib negotiated the crowd to a bench at the back, along the edges of the darkness. Nyx kept her eye on the dancer.

“Who’s he?” Nyx asked.

“The boy?”

He was probably eighteen or nineteen, old enough for the front. Not so much a boy, in Nasheen.

“Yeah,” she said.

“A pet project of Yah Reza’s,” Yah Tayyib said. “A political refugee from Chenja. He calls himself Rhys.”

“What kind of a name is that?”

“A *nom de guerre*,” he said, using the Ras Tiegian expression. “Yah Reza tells me he used to dance for the Chenjan mullahs as a child. When his father asked him to carry out the punishment of his own sister because he himself was unable, Rhys refused, and was exiled. That’s the story he tells, in any case.”

“Does he do anything besides dance?”

“He’s not a prostitute, if that’s what you’re asking,” Yah Tayyib said.

"Then what's he do?" she asked.

Yah Tayyib folded his hands in his lap. "He's good with bugs."

"A bel dame could use someone good with bugs."

"He's worth three of you."

"You saying I'm a bad girl?"

Yah Tayyib's expression was stony. "I'm saying you're less than virtuous."

Well. She'd been called worse.

The dancer slowed and stilled. The match was about to start, and his time was up.

Nyx scanned the crowd for Raine and his crew, in case they'd gotten in through the cantina entrance. Her gaze found a handful of very different figures instead. Three tall women with the black hoods of their burnouses pulled up, the hilt of their blades visible at their hips, moved through the throng of spectators, sniffing at glasses of liquor and brushing bugs from their sleeves.

Her sisters.

Not the kind she was related to by blood.

Nyx hunkered on the bench. Her insides shifted. She winced.

"How much longer until it starts?" Nyx asked.

"A moment. The visitors wished to speak with the boxers."

"The visitors?"

"There's a ship in from New Kinaan. Had you not heard?"

"What do they care about boxing?"

"Not only the boxing," Yah Tayyib said. "The magicians. Ah, there she is."

At the far end of the room Yah Reza stood in a door that opened into blackness. Husayn strode in from the darkness, followed by a wave of purple dragonflies that coasted out over the heads of the spectators and swarmed the ring lights. Nyx had known Yah Tayyib's blind-eyed boxer for years. They'd trained together back when Nyx came in from the front. Husayn was a decade older than Nyx, big in the hips and thighs, with the beefy legs of a woman who spent most of her days running—from what or to where, only Husayn knew. She had a mashed-in pulp of a nose and a misty right eye that wasn't commonly talked about. Husayn kept a long list of dead men and women in her locker—the ones she'd served with at the front.

The spectators were finding their seats. Nyx watched her sisters take up a position along the far wall. They did not sit. They would look for a lone woman congratulating the winner at the end of the bout—Nyx knew enough about the game not to bet on losers.

Unless she wanted to.

Jaks appeared from the more traditional entrance, the one from Bashir's cantina. She was a tough, skinny little fighter with a face like death—long and hard and forgettable. She was so sun sore she looked Chenjan. She had her chin

tucked and her shoulders rolled, and she walked with her hands up. She had no patron, no cut woman, no manager. She walked alone and looked just the way she should: like a scared kid pulling her first fight in a magicians' gym.

Another of the magicians, Yah Batool, stepped up into the ring and announced the fighters.

Jaks and Husayn touched fists. The stir of dragonflies circled the lights, casting wide, weird shadows over the faces of the crowd.

When the buzzer sounded among the caged insects kept just below the gym's water clock, Jaks leapt forward and opened with a neat right double-jab-cross-hook combination. She was young, and overeager. She could probably outlast Husayn if she wanted to, but when the bugs signaled the end of the round, Jaks was already breathing hard, and her face was bloody. Husayn had clipped her open. Yah Batool sealed the cut and sent her back out.

Rounds were three minutes long, and in a magicians' ring, the boxers fought it out until somebody was knocked down for the duration of a nine-second count or tapped out in their corner. Nyx had seen outriders go down three seconds into the first round. She'd also stayed up all night watching two magicians pummel each other until one of them had an eye dangling from its socket and the other was spraying blood every time she exhaled.

Jaks's bleeding made Husayn arrogant. Jaks knocked Husayn down in the third round. The knockdown sent Yah Tayyib and the rest of the crowd to their feet. The air filled with a collective roar of dismay.

Nyx took the opportunity to slip past Yah Tayyib's elbow and make her way toward the back of the room.

Yah Batool started the count.

Nyx circled around to the front of the cantina, keeping to the darkness at the rear of the ring and avoiding her sisters. Behind her, Nyx heard the crowd give a yell at the count of seven, and she turned to see Husayn back on her feet.

Husayn wouldn't lose this fight. It was why Nyx *hadn't* bet on her. Jaks would visit the betting booth to collect her money for the night, and like every new boxer at a magicians' gym fight, Jaks would want to know who had bet on her. Jaks would check the books and see Nyx's name. There was no faster way to get a losing boxer to take you home than to bet on her when nobody else did. And if Nyx had done her job the night before, Jaks would be giddily looking for Nyx in the bar later.

The bodies inside the cantina were packed so tight that Nyx had to shoulder her way through to a free patch of counter space. She edged a smaller woman out of a seat and ordered a whiskey from a slim half-breed barmaid.

Nyx perused the bar. She saw Anneke standing outside the door to the street. Raine and his team were likely worried the magicians had filtered the place against them. Bashir should have been looking for Nyx too, but Bashir

spent fight nights watching the fight, and business dictated that she attend the postfight parties with the local tax and gaming merchants. She wouldn't be running the bar.

Nyx looked for a good way to blend in with the chattering locals and decided to flirt with the sour-faced woman at her left, who turned out to be a gunrunner from Qahhar.

Nyx heard the fight end in round five. A wave of celebratory dragonflies cascaded from the arena and into the cantina through the open door. They brought with them a wave of scent—lime and cinnamon—that drowned out the musky stink of sweat-slathered women and warm beer. Dragonflies meant the magician-sponsored fighter had won.

The bar got louder. The winning betters bought rounds of drinks, and the gunrunner started weeping into her beer, grieving for her wayward girlfriend. She bid Nyx good night.

Nyx watched Anneke leave the doorway. Anneke would take up a position on higher ground, where she could get a better view as the cantina began to clear out en masse.

Jaks came through the door half an hour later, both eyes going purple, lip swollen. Blood oozed through a heavy wad of salve smeared above her brow. She walked like she had the last time she lost a fight—like a woman who believed she'd never see another break.

When Jaks got close, Nyx tugged her hood back so Jaks could see her face.

“Buy you a drink?” Nyx asked.

Jaks grinned. It wasn't an improvement on her face. “I suppose I owe you money,” she said. “I saw that you bet on me.”

Nyx shrugged. “Seemed like a fine idea at the time. What kept you so long?”

“Those off-world women chewed my ear clean off with all their talk,” Jaks said.

“What, the ones from New Kinaan?” Yah Tayyib hadn't been shitting, then. What kind of alien came all the way out to this blasted rock to talk to boxers?

Jaks sat next to her. “Yeah. What about you, what the hell you doing in Faleen?” Jaks asked.

“Looking for you,” Nyx said. She had never been a good liar, so whenever the truth worked, she used it. “What are you drinking?”

“Whatever you are,” Jaks said. She was still beaming, and Nyx had a twinge of something like guilt. She let the feeling slide away, like oil on the surface of a cistern.

The barmaid brought their drinks. Nyx moved closer to Jaks, so their knees touched. “You have family in Faleen?” Nyx asked.

Jaks chattered about her kin. They lived just outside Faleen, she said. She'd been trying to build up to a magician's fight since she was fourteen. She had two sisters and a handful of house brothers. Her mother was on the dole, the *waqf*, and not well off.

"Boxing keeps me in bread," Jaks said, polishing off her third whiskey. Like Nyx, she drank it straight. "And it's good for picking up girls," Jaks added.

"I don't have a place," Nyx said. "You empty tonight?"

"Mostly," Jaks said. She was grinning like a fool now, like a kid. She was probably sixteen. She'd never been to the front, never been a *bel dame*. You could see the difference in the grin, in the eyes.

Jaks leapt from her seat and bounced around. She paid the tab and said, "Let's get out of here."

Nyx hunched and shifted her weight to alter her usual walk as they crossed the bar. Jaks moved out the door, and Nyx looped an arm around her narrow waist and turned to press her lips to Jaks's neck, letting her hood shield her profile. She saw a stir of figures hanging around outside but couldn't catch their faces in the dim night. Her sisters would be figuring out soon that she had bet house credit on the wrong boxer and wouldn't be showing her face at the betting booth to collect.

Jaks was only a little drunk; the liquor made her happy.

"Listen," Jaks said as they stumbled down the alley, groping at each other. "We need to be quiet. I've got company."

"I'm a spider," Nyx said.

Jaks took her down a dead-end alley near the Chenjan district. Something hissed at them from a refuse heap. Nyx reflexively pushed Jaks behind her. Three enormous ravager bugs, tall as Nyx's knee, scurried out from the refuse pile. One of them stopped to hiss at them again. It opened its jaws wide. Nyx kicked it neatly in the side of the head, crushing an eye stalk. The bug screeched and skittered off.

Jaks laughed. "I should have warned you. They don't spray around here. Lots of mutants."

They climbed a rickety ladder to the second floor. Nyx felt like she'd been running forever, since the dawn of the world. Time stretched.

A boy's sandal hung from the top rung of the ladder. In that moment, Nyx saw the pile of Tej's things again, the detritus the Chenjan border filter had left of him. A sword, a baldric, his sandals.

Nyx caught her breath as she peered into the little mud-brick room. A couple of worms in glass lit the place. There were two raised sleeping platforms on either side of the room. A boy looked down at her from the one at her right. He looked nothing like Jaks. He was large and soft where she was small and hard. His hair was curly black and too long for a boy his age.

"My house brother," Jaks said. "Arran. Sorry, he doesn't do tea."

He didn't look like he'd spent a day at the front, but he was the right age. Nyx had expected to feel something when she saw this one. Rage, maybe; bloodlust. But he was just another boy. Another body. Another *bel dame's* bounty.

Along the far wall was the kitchen space: a mud-brick oven, all-purpose pot, two knives, and a sack of what must have been rice or maybe millet, knowing a boxer's take.

Arran rolled back into the loft.

"Come up," Jaks said.

Nyx came.

She kissed and licked Jaks in a detached sort of way. It was like watching two people she didn't know having sex.

Nyx lay awake after, until Jaks slept. She was aware, vaguely, of being hungry. She moved like a dream, smelling of Jaks, and slunk down the ladder and into the darkness near the oven. She reached for the biggest of the kitchen knives and put it between her teeth.

She climbed up the ladder to Arran's loft.

He came awake before she reached him. She heard the straw stir. She took the knife from her mouth, cut her palm, and as she met the top of the ladder, said, "Arran."

Following Jaks to find this boy had cost Nyx a kidney, her womb, and a year's worth of *zakat* from Yah Tayyib.

It had cost Tej his life.

Nyx shoved her bloody hand against the boy's mouth and brought up the other hand with the knife.

When infected boys came home, they jeopardized the lives of women like Jaks and Kine and little Maj. It's what she told herself every time. It's what she told herself now as she shoved her knife fast and deep into Arran's naked armpit three times.

Arran flailed in the straw. Nyx listened for Jaks. Sex and liquor and a hard fight would send even the worst of sleepers into a dead quiet, but anybody who lived like Jaks might be able to shake off worse.

Arran tried to catch her wrist with his other hand. Nyx rolled the rest of the way up onto the platform and pinned him still. She waited until the strength bled out of him, then began to saw at the neck with her stolen knife. For a stretch of time while she cut off Arran's head, she wasn't a *bel dame* at all—just another body hacker, another organ stealer, another black trader of red goods. The only difference was, when she brought this boy in, her sisters would forgive her. Her sisters would redeem her.

She had collected the blood debt this boy owed Nasheen.

Nyx tugged off her burnous with sticky fingers and bundled up the head.

She was an hour's walk from the local collector's. Her feet were numb, and her legs ached.

This was all she knew how to do.

She got lost somewhere outside Jaks's place and turned around in circles, listening to the scuffle of feet and bugs. She remembered what Jaks had said about the mutants. Dark shapes hissed and skittered through the alley, some of them big as dogs—only without the cozy fur. She stumbled over a head-size ravager gnawing on a human hand. It caught hold of the end of her bloodied bag and tried to jerk it out of her hands. She bludgeoned the enormous bug to death with Arran's head.

Light and noise from the apartments hanging above her seeped into the street. Her bundle grew heavier as she walked. She kept losing her grip, and the head thudded onto the dusty street, picking up more sand. The organic burnous would eat most of the blood, but not for much longer. Even bugs got full.

She'd just turned off onto a lane she recognized when she caught the sound of footsteps behind her. She didn't turn, only picked up her pace. Her insides were hurting again. She needed a second wind, but she'd already spent her fourth getting into Faleen.

The footsteps behind her broke into a run.

Nyx ran too.

The way was mostly dark, cut through with rectangles and lattices of light. She ducked in and out of darkness. Bugs hissed and scattered around her.

She was twenty-four years old, a bottom-feeder among the bel dames, and she was about to be far less than that.

"Nyx! Nyx!"

She kept running. *Just keep going.*

Two shadows leaked out of the alley ahead of her. She knew their shapes before they leapt—a fox and a raven. Shifters tracked better in animal form. The third would come from behind. She put one arm over her head to deflect some of the blow.

Her sisters cloaked her from all sides.

I'm a fool, Nyx thought as she hit the dirt, suffocated by the weight of her sisters' bodies. It took three of them to pry the burnous from her clenched fingers.

Nyx howled. She twisted, found an opening through fur and feathers and long, black burnouses.

They shot her. Twice.

Nyx heard her sisters' voices in hazy snatches, little clips of song and breathy whispers. Rasheeda, the raven, had once been an opera singer. A soprano. Nyx had never much cared for opera. It was all about virgin suicides and widowed

martyrs. She got enough of that in real life.

The air was sultry and smelled of death and lemon. Nyx saw tall women wearing the white caps of Plague Sisters moving through the hall. She could hear the click and scuttle of insectile legs. The Plague Sisters were a guild of magicians specializing in the decontamination of bel dames and the refurbishment of discharged soldiers. Nyx had been among them before, back when her carcass was hauled in from the front, charred and twisted. But she'd been too ruined even for the Plague Sisters, and they'd sent her to Yah Reza and Yah Tayyib, two of the country's most skilled magicians. Nyx's first memories of reconstituted life were of Faleen. The sound of cicadas. Yah Reza's eyes, the color of sapphire flies.

Fatima minced into the room with a white raven on her shoulder. . . Rasheeda the raven. Fatima spent a moment fussing with the gas lamp near the bed. Fatima was picky about things, and had gone so far as to pose her bodies for pick up. She also dabbled her fingers in bel dame politics. She had the patience for it, and the bloodline. Bel dames ran through every generation of her family.

Gas lamps meant they were in Mushtallah or Amtullah, one of the major cities in the heart of Nasheen. If that was true, it meant Nyx had been out a long time—and she was in a lot of trouble. Behind Fatima was a long, thin window that looked down onto a street the color of foam. Extravagant figures cloaked in peach and crimson milled past the smoky glass like burned jewel bugs. Nyx no longer wondered if she was still half asleep. Her dreams were never so colorful.

"She's coming around again," Fatima said to the raven.

The raven shivered once, hopped from Fatima's shoulder, and began to morph into her sister Rasheeda. A few minutes later, Rasheeda was mostly human again, naked, covered in mucus, tossing her head of dark hair and snickering. Feathers rolled out across the floor.

Rasheeda came alongside the bed and wiped the worst of the mucus from her face and neck with one of Nyx's bedsheets. She had a peculiar way of cocking her head that put Nyx in mind of the raven.

"You look terrible," Rasheeda said.

"You helped," Nyx said.

Nyx tried to sit up. Rasheeda snickered again. Unlike Fatima's illustrious line, Rasheeda's was nothing special—she'd been just another grubby kid from the coast whose mother was into career breeding. Nyx heard that Rasheeda had gone mad at the front, ripping out entrails and eating Chenjan hearts. There was only one suitable occupation for a madwoman from the front after she was discharged.

Nyx gazed down the length of her own body. She swam in the black nightdress of the Plague Sisters. She pushed up the sleeves and saw her own tawny wrists

and arms, like sticks. She dared not look at her belly or legs. The bullets her sisters shot her with had been tipped with bugs. They'd whittled her down to almost nothing.

"Get me something to eat," Nyx croaked, and Rasheeda laughed.

One of the Plague Sisters strode into the room, white skirt trailing behind her. A cloud of spiders clung to her hem, darkening the fabric.

The Plague Sister fussed with Nyx's bedding and probed at her arm with the puckered snout of a semi-organic needle, which blinked at Nyx with half-dumb eyes. Nyx flinched. The sister gave her a disapproving frown and pulled away from her arm, taking the blood sample with her.

"I'll mark her for final analysis," the sister said, "but the venom should be out of her system." She walked back out, her entourage of insects pooling behind her.

"Are you all they sent?" Nyx asked.

Rasheeda snickered again, still sticky and naked.

"They couldn't spare any more of us to go running after a rogue sister," Fatima said. She was tall, skinnier and darker than Rasheeda, almost Chenjan in color, and stronger in the face and shoulders. She bore a perpetual frown on her long countenance.

"Dahab's here," Rasheeda said absently. "Luce went for sodas."

Dahab and Luce. If they'd sent Dahab, it was a wonder Nyx was still alive. Four mad, skilled bel dames had tracked her across the desert. Why the fuck was she still breathing?

"What am I doing in the interior?"

"A suit's been filed," Fatima said.

"Catshit. You don't have anything on me."

"I know a number of butchers outside Punjai," Fatima said. "One of them even bought a womb that matches your tissue samples. She sold it back to us."

"That doesn't prove—"

"We have Yah Tayyib," Rasheeda said.

"Yah Tayyib's taken an oath. He wouldn't testify. About black work or anything else."

"Wouldn't he?" Fatima said. "He knows the place of a bel dame. He knows we're just as happy to haul in rogue magicians as black sisters. We used to hunt magicians when they went rogue too. Black bel dames ruin our reputation."

Nyx lay back on the bed. Yah Tayyib, who had mended her when she was barely human, who recalled her body and mind from the front when she thought she had lost both there. The man who taught her to box.

"He wouldn't make a charge," she said.

"There was another complaint," Fatima said. "Not as potent as Yah Tayyib's,

but a formal complaint nonetheless.”

“Raine,” Nyx said.

Fatima raised her brows. “You expected it?”

“I’ve been expecting him to file a formal complaint ever since I cut off his cock.”

“It was deserved,” Rasheeda said.

“Deserved or not, he’s filed a formal complaint about a bel dame doing black work,” Fatima said.

“Lucky you left him his balls,” Rasheeda said, “or you’d get a fine for reproductive terrorism.” She wagged her index finger and snickered.

“So what happens now?” Nyx asked. “You give me some kind of probation?”

“No,” Fatima said. “We terminate your contract and send you to prison.”

“What?” Nyx said. Prison was for draft dodgers and terrorists. Prison was for *men*.

“The sentence came from the queen.”

“I’m bored,” Rasheeda said. “Where’s my soda?” She went naked into the hall, calling for Luce.

Nyx stared into her skinny, veined hands again. It was like she’d woken up with someone else’s body.

“How long do I serve?” she asked.

“A year, maybe less. We could have had you sent to the front.”

“How did you find me?”

“We had Rasheeda posted at Jaks’s residence.”

Of course. She’d seen only three of them at the fight. “So you knew about Jaks?”

“We looked up your note,” Fatima said, then wrinkled her nose. “You look and smell like death. I’ll get you something to eat.” She walked into the busy hall.

Prison, Nyx thought, with all the criminals Raine and people like her had put there.

Nyx tried to pull her legs off the bed. They were numb. How long had she been here? The window overlooking the street was barred, and the walls were solid stone. How the hell could she get bars out of stone?

But Fatima was coming back into the room with a Plague Sister bearing a tray of something that smelled a lot like food, and Rasheeda had her arms full of bottles of soda. If there was a way out of this one, Nyx couldn’t think of it. Didn’t even know if she wanted it. Her body was done.

“Here,” Rasheeda said, throwing her a bottle. Nyx’s reflexes were off. She ducked instead of catching it. “You won’t get any of those in the box.”

“When she’s done eating,” Fatima told the Plague Sister, “I have a team coming to get her.”

Nyx didn't finish eating, but they still came for her.
And prison was pretty shitty.