

THE SLEEPING GODDESSES

Book One

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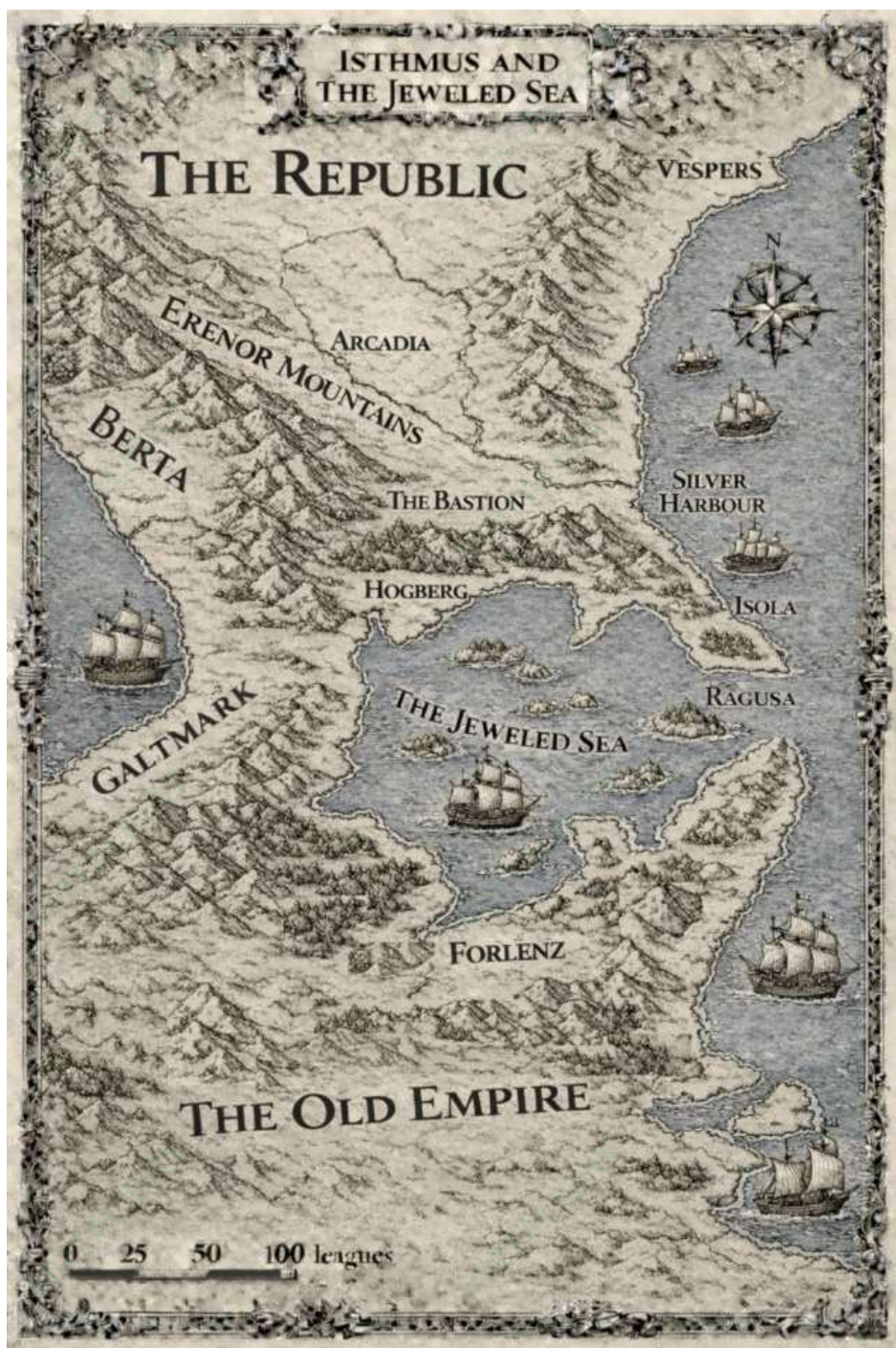
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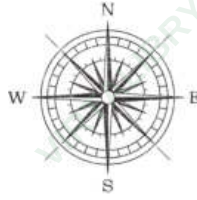
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Prologue: Glimmers on the Water



The blood on the marble was still warm.

It mingled with the scent of candle wax and sea salt, turning sickly-sweet in the morning air. Beatrice Feski stopped at the threshold of the Upper Hall, the silver pitcher in her hands suddenly unbearable, too heavy, too slick with sweat. She pressed her elbows tight against her ribs to keep from shaking.

Breathe. You're the cupbearer. You're furniture. You're nothing.

She stepped forward. Her shoe stuck to the floor.

The mosaic beneath her feet depicted Ragusa in triumph, a great ship beneath a rising sun. Now bodies lay across it. A guardsman had curled against the nearest column, hands pressed to his stomach. His helmet had rolled away, and she could see his face. Giovanni. The lieutenant who'd winked at her by the well just yesterday, teasing her about the color of her ribbons. His mouth was frozen open in a silent scream. His eyes had rolled back, showing only white.

The crest of Ragusa gleamed on his breastplate, the same crest that had hung on every banner in this hall. The banners were ash now.

Bile rose in her throat. She bit down until her teeth ached, forcing herself to swallow.

Do not look at the throne. Do not.

She looked.

Prince-Admiral Francis Scaliger sat where he had ruled the city. His face held no fear, no pain, only recognition. His eyes were open, glassy, fixed on nothing. He had seen who betrayed him. He had understood in that final second before the blade fell. And now he would know forever.

Somewhere beyond the walls, the clash of steel rang against stone. Through the shattered window at the far end of the hall, Beatrice caught fragments of the fighting: soldiers in Cornaro colors shouting commands from the Upper City barracks, the rhythmic thud of a battering ram against some final pocket of resistance. The household guard, most likely. Those who hadn't fled or surrendered. They'd taken the palace with drawn daggers and on tiptoes, but the

aftermath was always loud. At least that was what the very old servants whispered, the ones who remembered how the Scaligers seized power two generations ago. History, repeating its bloody lesson.

The Upper Hall stretched around her like a mockery of its former glory. Morning light spilled through the great rose window, painting the carnage in red and gold. Bronze censers still smoldered in their niches, filling the air with incense that could not quite mask the copper-sweet stench beneath. Tapestries depicting the Republic's naval triumphs hung between marble columns: the Battle of the Serpent Straits, the Sack of Tarsis, victories won by Ragusan admirals for generations beyond counting. Now their descendants lay sprawled beneath them.

At the great map table, a man traced a finger across the parchment.

Luciano Cornaro. Heir to the old admiralty, the dynasty that the late Admiral's father had crushed forty years ago. Forty years in exile. Forty years to nurture his hatred like poison in a stoppered vial.

The stopper was out now.

He turned at her approach. Handsome in a sharp, predatory way despite his gray hair. Clean-shaven, immaculate, his doublet the deep red of dried blood. Only his cuff betrayed him: dark flecks on the lace.

His eyes moved over her like a blade testing skin.

"A drink for the new Admiral." His voice was soft, almost gentle. Velvet wrapped around steel. "How thoughtful."

Beatrice made herself walk. Her legs were stone, every step a small victory.

Do not stumble. Do not spill.

"Golden Galtian, Your Excellency." She hardly recognized her own voice, thin and scratchy. "Azure Coast Vintage." She held out the goblet. Their fingers brushed. His hand was dry, hot, hard as wood, a killer's hand, still warm from the work.

"House Feski." He raised the goblet but did not drink, inhaling the bouquet, watching her over the rim. "Your family has always known which way the wind blows." He smiled, a thin line that never touched his eyes. "I've had time to study Ragusa from afar: every house, every marriage, every alliance. Your grandfather poured wine for mine. Now you pour for me. Tradition."

"The Feskis serve Ragusa, my lord."

"Ragusa?" He took a small sip. "Or whoever holds the knife to her throat?" Another sip, thoughtful. "Clever girl. Your mother was clever too, clever enough to run, three years back. But you stayed. Why?" He tilted his head. "Ambition? Or just good instincts?"

"I..." She scrambled for safe ground. "I believe in the city's future, my lord."

"Liar." He said it gently, almost fondly. "You can taste your own fear right now. Sour, isn't it? Like bad wine."

She could not help it. She flinched.

His smile widened a fraction. "The Admiral's sons," he said, setting down the goblet. "Three boys. Did you know them?"

Her heart kicked against her ribs. Her face stayed still. "I saw them at court, Your Excellency. Now and then."

Cornaro studied her a moment longer, then turned to the window.

A cannon shot split the morning, rattling the glass in its frame.

Movement from the shadows caught her eye: a woman's gasp, a hand flying to her chest. Emilia, Francis's widow, stood half-hidden by a column. Golden-haired and barely thirty, she wore blue silk threaded with silver, mourning colors that could not hide her beauty. Her face was pale, bruised with sleeplessness, and her lips trembled.

Cornaro watched the harbor for another heartbeat. Then he turned to Emilia, and everything about him changed. The hardness melted from his face. He crossed to her in two strides and took her hands in his. "Shh." His voice had gone soft now, no longer the velvet-wrapped blade. "It's done, *cara mia*. That was the signal gun. The fleet's coming in. You're safe."

Emilia nodded, eyes locked on his. She leaned her forehead against his shoulder, just for a moment.

Sunlight struck the stained glass, and something flashed green on Emilia's hand.

Beatrice went still.

There, beside the Scaliger wedding band, a new ring gleamed. Heavy. Gold. Set with a massive emerald. The seal of House Cornaro. The ring their brides wore. Green fire, screaming what words never could.

"Run along, child," Emilia murmured without looking at her. "And watch your step. The floors are... slippery today."

Beatrice bowed her head and walked out of the hall, her hands still shaking around the empty pitcher.

She made it to her chamber in the upper keep before she fell apart.

The door crashed shut behind her, and she pressed her spine against the oak, sliding down until the cold flagstones bit through her skirts. Her quarters were modest, a servant's privilege, not a noble's right. But in this moment, the narrow bed, the chipped washstand, and the single window overlooking the palace

gardens felt like the only safe place left in the world. Dried lavender hung from the rafters, a futile attempt to sweeten the air that always carried the sea's salt tang. Pale dawn fell across her writing desk, illuminating the half-finished letter to her mother she would never send.

She could not stop trembling. Her teeth chattered so hard she bit her tongue and tasted copper. The blood helped, somehow. It anchored her. She pressed her palm flat against the rough stone wall, letting the chill seep into her bones and ground her in something real.

Move.

She crawled across the floor to the corner where the flagstones had always sat slightly uneven. Her fingernails scraped against bare stone as she pried at the loose panel, tearing one nail to the quick and barely feeling it. The compartment beneath was small, just large enough for the obsidian box she had hidden there three years ago, when her mother fled, and she chose to stay. She had opened it only twice since then, on the anniversaries of her mother's departure. Small offerings. Whispered prayers. Nothing like what she was about to attempt.

Inside lay what she needed: the obsidian statuette, wrapped in faded silk, and beside it a bundle of dried herbs. Sage from the mountain slopes, rosemary from her mother's abandoned garden, and something darker she'd bought from a hedge-witch in the Lower City three summers past. She set the herbs in the brass dish she kept for this purpose, her movements automatic despite her shaking hands. The ritual was forbidden, pagan worship in a city that hunted heretics. Still, the Feski women had kept this secret for generations, passing it from mother to daughter like a birthright written in blood.

The statuette filled her palm. A woman carved from pure obsidian, a handspan tall, her face serene and ageless. Ishtar. The Sleeping One. Goddess of love and secret knowledge, of the evening star and the morning's first light. The ancients had worshipped her when there was no Ragusa yet, nor the Jeweled Sea itself. The carving was exquisite: flowing robes that seemed to ripple despite the stone, hands raised in eternal blessing, eyes that caught light where no light should reach. Familiar weight. Familiar cold. Today, though, the cold felt like grave dirt.

"Show me," she whispered. Her hands shook as she lit the herbs. "Sleeping One, let me see. What's coming? What has he brought?"

The smoke did not rise. It crawled across the table like something alive. Somewhere in the palace, a door slammed. A woman screamed, cut short. Beatrice flinched but did not stop.

"*Egeiro. Egeiro. Egeiro.*" The ancient words scraped from Beatrice's throat, raw and desperate.

The statuette *moved* in her grip.

Beatrice gasped. The obsidian blazed, not gradually but all at once, searing into her palm like a brand. She tried to let go. The stone clung to her skin. The statuette pulsed against her flesh, each beat driving deep into bone, and her skull filled with sound, not blood-rush but whispers, thousands of voices crushing into one.

...blood wakes... blood calls...

The room warped around her. Shadows stretched into claws. Candlelight turned the color of infected wounds.

“Let go.” She clawed at the statuette with her free hand, the stench of burning skin filling her nostrils. The obsidian fought her, searing, but she ripped it free with everything she had. It flew across the room. Hit the wall.

CRACK.

Like a bone breaking, a fracture split the black face of the goddess, cleaving it in two.

Silence.

She sat there, breathing hard, staring at her burned palms. Red and blistered, the skin peeled away in papery strips.

Her mother had performed this ritual a hundred times. Quiet communion, gentle visions, the goddess’s presence like a warm hand on her brow. She had taught Beatrice the words, the herbs, the proper way to hold the statuette. She had never spoken of fire and never mentioned voices that clawed at the inside of your skull. The old texts spoke of such signs, omens of significant change, of divine attention turned toward the mortal world.

The worst sign. The very worst.

She pushed herself upright on trembling legs, steadying herself against the wall until the room stopped spinning. Three steps carried her to the window, where iron shutters blocked out the morning. She threw them open with both hands, letting sunlight and salt air pour over her burned palms like a blessing she did not deserve.

Morning light poured over Ragusa.

For a heartbeat, the city looked as it always had, proud, prosperous, untouchable. White limestone walls cascaded down the hillside in terraces, bristling with cypress trees and clay-tiled rooftops the color of dried blood. Church bells rang from a dozen campaniles, their bronze voices overlapping in discordant harmony.

Below, the harbor churned with commerce. Vesperian galleys unloaded silks and spices at the eastern quays, while Ragusan merchantmen took on casks of wine and olive oil. Smaller craft threaded between the hulls like water-beetles. Traders shouted prices in fifty languages. Gulls screamed above the fish market.

The city breathed and haggled and laughed, oblivious to what was waking beneath.

Beyond the harbor, the Jeweled Sea stretched blue and endless.

Beatrice stared at the water, though she could not have said why. The vision had shown her nothing clear, only fragmented images, half-formed whispers, and beneath them all, a pull. Something profound and old, something that had slumbered in the depths longer than Ragusa had stood.

There, deep down, just for a heartbeat, she saw it. A glow, faint and greenish and cold, like moonlight filtered through leagues of black water. Like eyes opening after an age of sleep.

She blinked hard. Looked again.

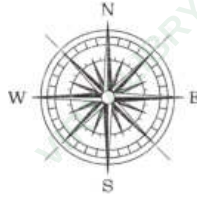
Gone. But the pull remained, an ache behind her breastbone, a hook set in her soul.

She stayed at the window a long time, watching the waves catch the light, feeling the world shift beneath her feet.

Something was stirring in the deep places of the world.

And Ragusa was only the beginning.

Chapter 1: The Escape



SEBASTIAN

Sebastian awoke to a scream—his own.

He lay frozen on the narrow cot, heart pounding, sweat soaking through his linen shirt. The dormitory pressed in around him, its vaulted stone ceiling blackened by centuries of torch smoke, tall windows admitting the first gray light of dawn. Twenty cots stood in precise Naval Academy rows.

Familiar. Safe except for the pain.

It came searing, unbearable.

He raised his fingers to his eyes.

Blisters.

Three fingers on his right hand, index, middle, and ring, were covered in angry red welts. The skin had split on the middle finger. Clear fluid ran toward his palm, catching the thin dawn light from the narrow window. A drop fell to the stone floor.

Sebastian stared at the burns. This was not possible.

Where did...

He touched his forehead with his left hand, soaked with sweat. His heart hammered, his breath came ragged, and a copper taste filled his mouth, like he'd been running for miles.

The dream.

Fragments surfaced, vivid and wrong: marble corridors slick with blood. The weight of metal in his hands. His father's body on the carpet, indigo uniform dark with blood, eyes frozen open. And hands not his hands, slender, feminine, gripping a silver pitcher.

A small room. A black statuette burning in his palms. Heat built to agony. A scream.

Sebastian touched one of the blisters on his index finger. Pain lanced up to his elbow. He bit down hard.

This can't be real. Visions happen, but feeling someone else's pain? Burns from someone else's dream?

But the burns were real. He listened in silence, too complete, too still.

* * *

The Naval Academy barracks were never silent. The building was ancient, its thick walls steeped in centuries of salt, damp wood, and hot metal. Massive arched windows threw shadows across the stone floors, and the heavy ceiling beams seemed to stand guard over forgotten ages. Even at night, there was always the rhythm of dozens of cadets breathing, the rustle of blankets, the creak of old beds, the occasional footsteps of the watch.

Now, nothing. Emptiness.

Sebastian swung his legs off the cot. Bare feet hit cold stone. He flinched. His head swam, his mouth dry as dust.

Just a nightmare. Just...

But the burns pulsed with each heartbeat, sharp and insistent.

Magic.

The word surfaced on its own. He shoved it away.

No. The Triune All-Mother sends visions, but not like this. Not with pain. Not with burns on your hands.

Morning light fell across empty cots where his fellow cadets usually slept: unmade beds, tangled blankets, but no one.

Sebastian grabbed his doublet, dark blue wool with silver buttons that gleamed dully in the dawn light. He tried to pull it on, but the buttons wouldn't cooperate. His burned fingers trembled, and he couldn't grip the slick metal. Every movement sent fire up his hand.

"Damn," he hissed through his teeth.

He clenched his jaw. One button. Another. The blisters scraped against the fabric, but he didn't stop. Finally, the doublet was fastened.

Sebastian stepped into the corridor.

It stretched before him, endless. Arched windows on the left threw pale stripes of morning light across the stone floor, while heavy doors on the right stood closed, revealing nothing. The emptiness pressed against his ears.

His boots rang against the flagstones, sharp, lonely sounds that seemed to mock him.

The Academy was the heart of Ragusa's naval power. Fifty cadets were required to live here during the week. The duty officers, the watch, and the instructors lived here too. The building was never empty.

Now it was dead.

He pushed open the first door. The dormitory yawned before him: twenty cots in two neat rows, blankets thrown back as if the sleepers had been dragged from their beds. A pair of boots lay toppled by the window, one upright, one on its side. A book lay open on a pillow, pages fluttering in the draft from the half-open window. But no cadets. No sound of breathing. Only silence.

He tried the next room, then the next. Each one was the same: personal effects abandoned, beds disheveled, inhabitants vanished as if spirited away by some dark magic.

The officers' quarters told a different story: beds untouched, personal effects still in place. They had been taken out. Fast. In the middle of the night.

He stepped onto the gallery, the morning air carrying the smell of salt and smoke from the harbor below. The guardhouse stood at the far end, its door gaping like a wound. Sebastian approached. Inside, the disorder told its story: a chair lay on its back, legs pointing at the ceiling like a dead animal's. A clay cup sat on the table, half-full of something that smelled of honeyed wine. Beside it, a chessboard with the black king cornered, but no one was left to finish the game. The guard had been pulled right off his post. Someone had the authority to give that order.

Sebastian stood alone on the wide gallery, a small figure in his dark blue doublet against the massive, empty building.

He looked toward the harbor. On the far side, where the palace stood, unfamiliar ships were moored. Cornaro standards flew from the masts.

Coup.

The gallery opened onto the main wing, and Sebastian's steps quickened. His brothers' dormitory was at the far end, the one place he hadn't checked yet, the one place he was afraid to check.

He pushed through the door.

Mark and Emile were still in their cots, breathing, thank the goddesses, but sleeping too deeply. Unnaturally deep.

"Wake up!" Sebastian shook Mark's shoulder. His voice was hoarse. "This isn't a drill! There are Cornaro standards in the harbor!"

Mark's eyes snapped open, dark and complex. Even half-awake, with his hair plastered to his forehead and sleep crusting his lashes, he looked dangerous. He had their father's build—broad shoulders, a solid frame, and their father's face, all sharp angles and a jaw that could cut glass. He sat up instantly. "What happened?"

"The Academy's empty. Everyone's gone."

Emile was awake too, rubbing his eyes. At seventeen, the youngest Scaliger was all wiry energy and restless motion, with chestnut hair that never quite stayed in place and dark eyes that caught everything and found most of it amusing. He saw Sebastian's face, and all traces of sleep vanished. "Coup?"

"Looks like it."

Mark stood and saw his brother's right hand. His eyes narrowed. "What happened to your hand?"

Sebastian pulled it back instinctively. "Burn."

"From what?" Mark stepped closer, his gaze demanding.

"I don't know." Sebastian turned away. "Not now. We need to move."

Within minutes, the brothers were ready. They threw on their uniform doublets, dark blue wool with gold braid at the shoulders, and the Naval Academy crest stitched onto the sleeve.

Sebastian took his rapier. The cold metal of the hilt and the curved shell of the guard pressed against his burned fingers. Pain hit like a wave. Sharp. Cutting. He clenched his teeth and didn't let go.

Deal with it. Not the time to complain.

Mark noticed his brother's grimace. "You sure you're all right?"

"Yes." Sebastian hid his right hand under his cloak. "Let's go."

Emile pulled a heavy leather purse from inside his shirt. The leather was stamped with the Scaliger crest, a ladder rising toward clouds. "Father gave it to me last week. Just in case, he'd said." His voice wavered. "Guess he saw this coming." He tried to smirk, his usual cynic's mask. But the smirk came out crooked, almost a grimace.

Emile is scared. He just hides it better than anyone.

Sebastian watched his younger brother's fingers tremble as he tightened the leather cord. Emile had always been the lightest of the three, quick with a joke, easy with a laugh, charming everyone around him, but the mask was cracking.

They pulled on dark cloaks with hoods and headed for the side door.

Sebastian's sharp ears caught movement behind it. He froze, raising his hand. *Stop.* "Someone's coming," he mouthed.

Mark drew his blade, backing toward the wall, while Emile pointed to the servants' spiral staircase. The brothers moved toward it without a sound.

They slipped out of the barracks, moving like shadows through narrow corridors. Cold stone swallowed their footsteps. Not a soul, only a lone black cat crossed the hallway, watching them with slanted yellow eyes.

On the streets of Ragusa, the city still slept, but danger hid in the silence.

The route to the harbor wound through a maze of alleys, the cobblestones slick with morning dew, making every step treacherous. High walls pressed in from both sides, close enough that Sebastian could have touched them with outstretched arms.

Every shadow might hide a blade. Every doorway a trap.

Sebastian led them the shortest way through the Lower City, where the streets twisted into a stone labyrinth. He knew these alleys well; as children, he and his brothers had played pirates here, fleeing their tutor.

But at the crossroads, Mark's arm shot out. *Stop.*

From around the corner came voices, men speaking in low, steady tones, commands given in several languages. The dialect was foreign, mainland mercenary talk, carrying the hard consonants of the northern cities.

The brothers froze in the shadow of an archway.

The measured tramp of boots followed not a fleeing mob, but a formation, a squad.

"First three, check the side passages. Second group, up to the roof, better vantage point," the captain said, calm and gravelly, the voice of a man used to giving orders and seeing corpses.

Clank of steel. Click of crossbow mechanisms, someone testing the tension of a bowstring, a short, businesslike sound.

"Orders are clear," the captain continued. "Three sons of the late Admiral. Alive or dead. Triple price for being alive. Dead pays too, just less."

A pause. The footsteps came closer.

"Academy's empty. They got out. But they haven't gotten far," a younger voice said, a junior officer. "Harbor's sealed. Every gate's under control. The rats are trapped, Captain. We'll find them."

"We will," the captain agreed. "But fast. The city's new master does not like to wait. Does not like mistakes."

Sebastian felt his heart slamming as he pressed against the cold wall. Mark stood beside him, motionless, one hand on his rapier hilt.

“How many?” Emile breathed.

Mark peered around the corner, then froze and pulled back. “Fifteen,” he whispered. “Maybe more. Heavy infantry, halberds, crossbows. Professionals.”

The voices behind the corner continued. “If you find them, do not talk. Noble pups will offer money. Do not listen. Tie them up if they’re alive. Put them down if they resist. Questions?”

“No questions, Captain.”

“Then move. Pairs. Sweep the quarter. See anyone from the Scaliger family, signal the horn. The rest will come running.”

The footsteps split apart. The squad fanned out, methodical and professional.

Mark grabbed his brother’s hands. “Back,” he mouthed silently. “Now.”

They turned and moved the other way, fast but silent. Soft boot soles barely whispered against the stone.

Behind them, the hunting party fanned out through the streets. Boots tramped on the stone, weapons clanked, and cold commands echoed off the walls.

The brothers stopped for a moment.

Late.

Sebastian had heard the word earlier, from the city guard, but there hadn’t been time to process it.

Mark didn’t move. His face had gone still, a cold stone mask. Only his fists clenched, knuckles white.

He’s freezing from the inside out.

Sebastian knew that look. Mark got it before exams, before duels, before any test; he turned to stone. Feelings later. Survival now.

“Late,” Emile mouthed, looking at his older brother.

Mark gave a short nod. Nothing more.

The brothers exchanged glances.

Mercenaries. Hunting them, but lost in unfamiliar streets.

Emile smirked, crooked but relieved. He gestured with his hand.

We go around.

They ducked into a narrow passage between buildings, so tight they had to turn sideways. The walls were slick with moisture, and the smell of mold hung thick in the air, but the passage brought them to a parallel street.

The mercenaries' voices fell behind.

"Cornaro hired outsiders," Emile whispered. "He doesn't trust the locals. His paranoia gives us a chance."

"Chance ends at the harbor," Mark said darkly. "They'll be waiting there for sure."

* * *

The harbor air was thick with salt and tension. It smelled of rotting fish, seawater, and rope oil. Against the hulking silhouettes of merchant vessels and war galleys, the *Medusa* stood out with her sleek lines, a fast brigantine with tall masts, sails furled like a bird's wings before takeoff.

The captain stood by the gangplank, a wiry man in his fifties, his face carved by sea winds and old scars. His eyes were greedy, suspicious. He watched the brothers approach, squinting.

"Admiral's boys?" he snorted. "The city's new master will pay well for your heads. Very well."

Emile tossed the heavy leather purse at his feet. It hit the planks with a dull clink. "We'll pay more. Double. Get us to the mainland; you get the other half when we arrive."

The captain bent slowly, picked up the purse, and weighed it in his hand. He loosened the cord. Gold ducats gleamed in the dawn light.

His weathered face went blank as a gambler's. His fingers stopped on the purse strings, and he studied the brothers with eyes that had priced a thousand cargoes and a few lives.

"Triple," he said calmly, not looking up from the gold. "For the risk."

"Triple," Mark nodded, voice steel. "But we leave now. Immediately."

The captain spat over the side and looked toward the harbor. Down at the far docks, Cornaro's warships were unloading soldiers.

"Raise anchor!" he bellowed, shoving the purse inside his coat. "Ready the sails! Move your asses, you sons of bitches, before they spot us!"

They were about to board when a shout came from the next pier. "There! The Scaliger sons! Take them!"

A squad of soldiers in dark uniforms trimmed with gold, the new Admiral's colors, ran toward them, weapons drawn. The first soldier stood a head taller than the rest, his face ruined by a puckered scar that ran from temple to jaw. He swung a naval cutlass, a brutal weapon heavy enough to split a man from shoulder to hip.

Sebastian spun, dropping into a fighting stance, sword in his right hand. The hilt dug into his burned fingers; every grip sent pain shooting through his hand. He gritted his teeth and held on.

The scarred soldier charged. His cutlass swept upward in a brutal arc, aimed to open Sebastian from hip to shoulder.

Sebastian's Academy training took over. He stepped left, pivoting on his rear foot, letting the blade whistle past his ribs. The wind of its passing kissed his doublet. Close. Too close.

The soldier recovered faster than Sebastian expected. He reversed the stroke, bringing the cutlass back in a vicious horizontal slash.

No time to dodge. Sebastian caught the blow on his blade, steel screaming against steel. The impact jarred his arm from wrist to shoulder, and fire exploded through his burned fingers. He tasted copper and realized he'd bitten his tongue.

The soldier grinned a gap-toothed, predatory thing. He shoved forward, trying to muscle Sebastian's guard aside.

Sebastian gave ground. One step. Another. His heel found the edge of a crate.

Trap.

But he'd been here before, in a hundred training bouts. He dropped his weight, let the soldier's momentum carry him forward, and brought his blade up in a short, economical thrust.

The point pierced the man beneath the breastbone.

The soldier's grin froze. His hands opened. The cutlass clattered to the planks.

The soldier's eyes went wide, surprised, and almost offended.

How dare you?

He grabbed the blade with both hands, slicing his own fingers on the edge. Blood ran down the steel. He dropped to his knees.

I'm killing him.

Sebastian pulled the blade free. Blood gushed, warm, alien, splashing onto his hand, onto his burned fingers.

Pain exploded. Unbearable.

He clenched his jaw so hard his vision blurred. A strangled groan escaped his throat, but he didn't drop the sword. His fingers burned as if branded again, yet his hand held firm.

I killed a man.

"Seb!" Mark grabbed his arm, practically dragging him up the gangplank. "Move!"

More soldiers were closing in. Too many.

Emile was already on deck, helping the sailors prepare to cast off.

The sails caught the wind and swelled, huge white canvas billowed against the sky, majestic and liberating. The wind filled the morning silence with the whistle of rigging and the creak of masts.

From the shore came shouts of fury, wordless rage at prey escaping. Several soldiers jumped into a rowboat, hoping to catch the departing ship. Oars churned desperately, but the *Medusa* was fast, and the waves and current beat against the pursuers' faces. They fell behind quickly, beaten by the sea.

Standing at the stern, the brothers watched the receding city—three silhouettes in dark cloaks against the dawn sky. Wind tore at their clothes, tangling their hair.

Ragusa, their home, their past grew smaller with every gust. To the east, the sky brightened, the first rays of dawn painting the horizon soft pink, deepening to amber gold.

Then a cannon shot tore through the air. The sound rolled across the water: not a celebration, but a grim announcement of a new era. Cornaro was claiming Ragusa.

"They're not chasing us," Emile observed, studying the port where the warships remained at anchor. "Consolidating power in the city must be more important."

"Or they're confident we have nowhere to go," Mark added grimly.

Domes and towers, so familiar, so much their home, now seemed part of a fading dream, lit by the first rays of a sun indifferent to human tragedy.

"So, Father," Mark said suddenly, his voice steel. "We all heard what they said, 'the late Admiral.' I'm afraid that leaves little room for interpretation."

The words hit Sebastian's chest and knocked the breath out of him.

Late.

He knew. He had seen it in the dream: the body on the carpet, blood soaking the indigo uniform. But knowing it and hearing it from his older brother were different things.

His knees buckled. He grabbed the rail, felt the world tilt.

Father is dead.

And Sebastian had seen it. Through that girl's eyes. Beatrice.

He had killed a man today. His first. A stranger's blood on his hand, on his burned fingers. It seared like a brand.

I became a killer the same day I lost my father.

Emile put a hand on his brother's shoulder, a silent confirmation of the worst. Sebastian turned toward the sea and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. Blood smeared across his cheek. "I'm fine."

A lie. But this wasn't the time to fall apart.

His right hand still gripped the bloody sword. Blood mixed with fluid from the burst blisters, his fingers on fire. But that was physical pain. It was nothing compared to what was tearing him apart inside.

"Does anyone know who the cupbearer at the palace is now?" he asked.

Mark turned, surprised. "No idea. I've barely been there this past year. Same as you. After Father married Emilia, we weren't exactly welcome."

"The Feski heiress," Emile always knew everything, talked to everyone, "Beatrice. Hard to forget her, brother."

He leaned against the mast, closing his eyes for a moment, as if remembering something pleasant amid all this nightmare.

"Dark hair braided so intricately your hands itch to undo that dark river. Moves like a panther, smooth, dangerous..."

"Emile—" Mark cut in. "Enough."

"Why?" The younger brother opened one eye. "Sebastian asked. I'm answering. Professionally."

"Professionally?" Mark raised an eyebrow.

"Absolutely." Emile straightened. "Every curve promises both grace and claws. Eyes gleaming like two obsidian shards, she looks at you as if seeing you without your doublet and without your lies, right down to your soul."

Sebastian felt himself flush. He'd seen this girl in a dream. Felt her from inside. And now he was listening to his brother describe her... like this.

"Emile, I'm serious..."

"So am I!" Emile spread his hands. "Seb, you asked about the cupbearer. I'm telling you about the cupbearer. Her figure..." a slight smirk "the line from neck to hips as if drawn by a master. Slender, but not fragile. More like a blade in a velvet sheath, a hilt you want to grasp, and danger in every..."

"EMILE." Mark stepped forward. His voice dropped an octave. "Stop."

"...movement," the younger brother finished, unperturbed. "What? She wears jade and silver, family heirlooms. They gleam against her skin so that your gaze just slides down her neck, her collarbones..."

Mark grabbed him by the collar of his doublet.

“Lower.” Emile didn’t resist, but the smirk didn’t leave his face. “I just meant the jewelry goes lower down the décolletage. Important for costume, isn’t it?”

“You’re about to get an important detail of my fist in your teeth,” Mark promised.

“Our father is dead. We’re running. They’re hunting us. And you...”

“And I’m trying not to lose my mind—” Emile cut him off. The smirk vanished.

His voice went hard. “Sorry, brother, but I’ve seen too much today. I can’t be a cold stone like you. I need to talk about something alive. Something beautiful. Otherwise, I’ll start screaming.”

Silence hung between them. Mark slowly unclenched his fingers. Let go.

“Sorry,” he said, voice hollow.

“It’s fine.” Emile adjusted his collar. The smirk returned, though not as genuine now. “I’m done. Promise. Although I haven’t told you how she talks yet, her voice is low, velvety, with a husky edge...”

“Emile.”

“Joking! Joking.” He raised his hands in a placating gesture. Then he grew serious, his tone normal: “Her mother ran off with some doge from a tiny island, leaving her daughter in charge of the family business at fourteen. The Cupbearers’ Guild wanted to push her out, you know what that position at the Ragusan palace is worth. But she dug in, bribed some, cut deals with others, and kept her post by some miracle.” He paused. “Word is she rules with an iron fist. Down at the port, they respect her and fear her.”

“Why do you ask, brother?” He looked at Sebastian.

Sebastian stared at his bloody, burned fingers. *Beatrice*. He’d probably seen her at the palace a few times, maybe walked right past her without a second glance. “Just a dream,” he muttered, not looking up. “Nothing important.”

He turned and walked to the bow. The *Medusa* ran under full sail, cutting through the waves. The city shrank behind them, a silhouette against the morning light. Sebastian stood at the very front, gripping the rigging. Wind hammered his face. Salt spray stung his burned skin. He didn’t turn away. Behind him, a city where only death and betrayal waited.

Ahead lay life. And revenge.

The ship passed the last of the piers.

At the very edge of an ancient stone jetty, where waves broke against moss-covered foundations, stood a statue. The Three-Faced One. Hecate. The All-Mother.

The marble had been worn by salt and time, but the form remained visible: three female figures fused back-to-back into a single column of darkened stone. Each

face looked in a different direction, one toward the city, one toward the harbor, one along the coast to where the open sea began. Stone hands held torches, extinguished centuries ago but still extended, as if lighting the way for those crossing between worlds.

Mistress of all. She who sees past, present, and future as one. She whose wrath could drown continents, erase civilizations, grind cities to dust beneath the weight of water.

Sleeping. But not dead.

The statue's faces had been scoured by the winds. Features nearly gone: only hints of eye sockets, shadows where eyes should be.

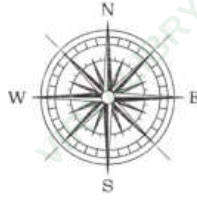
But as the *Medusa* passed, Sebastian could have *sworn* all three faces turned. Invisibly. Imperceptibly. Watching.

A chill ran down his spine, not from the wind. Something ancient had stirred for an instant, then gone still again.

She sees.

Three times. Three paths. Three fates.

Chapter 2: Ragusa in Darkness



BEATRICE

His blood. His blade. His kill. Beatrice woke gasping.

The dream clung to her, Sebastian Scaliger's first kill, felt from inside his skin. The blade slides between ribs. The resistance of flesh giving way. Hot blood on burned fingers.

She looked at her palms. The blisters were still fresh burns from the Ishtar statuette that had cracked in her hands the night before.

What is happening to me?

She had seen Sebastian at the palace before. Tall, fair-haired, quiet, always in his brothers' shadow. They had barely exchanged a dozen words in all those years.

Now she knew him. The dream had seen to that. An invisible thread seemed to be strung between them.

Does Ishtar want this?

Beatrice rose from the narrow bed, her bare feet touching cold stone. The room was small, a cupbearer's quarters, not a lady's chamber, with bare walls, a single shuttered window, and a washstand in the corner. She splashed water from the pitcher onto her face. The cold stung her skin and cleared her mind. She looked into the small mirror above the washstand: pale face, shadows under her eyes, dark hair in tangles.

Enough. Focus.

Today was the meeting with Clarence, which was important, and she was already late.

The Admiral's sons had escaped rumors crawling through the palace all day. Mark, Sebastian, and Emile Scaliger had stolen a brigantine from the harbor and fled to sea. Cornaro had sent four galleys after them. And Sebastian, the one through whose eyes she'd dreamed, had killed a soldier at the port.

First kill. Blood on his hands.

It doesn't matter. I have work to do.

She dressed quickly in a modest ash-blue dress, carefully choosing understated jewelry, the image of a prosperous citizen taking an evening stroll after services at the temple of the Three-Faced One, nothing to draw attention to.

At her belt hung a thin silver chain with small vials, five flasks, each no bigger than a little finger. Antidotes. Part of her trade. A cupbearer had to be ready for anything: poison in the wine, poison in the food, poison on the rim of a goblet. One wrong sip and the Admiral dies, and the cupbearer's entire line dies with him.

Her grandfather had served Cornaro's grandfather. Her grandmother had served his successor. And her mother...

Beatrice pressed her lips together. Four years since Bari. Four years since the letter that said, *I've found happiness, darling. I hope you understand.*

She had not understood. She still did not.

But that was for later. Right now, she needed to leave the palace unseen.

She slipped out through the small eastern gate, the one leading to the service yard where provision wagons were unloaded. The guards at the entrance, two mercenaries in worn leather armor, did not even glance at her. They saw her every day. The cupbearer had the right to come and go as she pleased.

Beatrice hired a boat to cross to the other side of the harbor, to the Lower City port.

* * *

The Sunday evening was warm, filled with the familiar noise of portside entertainments. The smell of salt, spices, and fried fish mingled with the scents of cheap wine and tobacco drifting from taverns and coffeehouses. A summer breeze from the sea brought a light freshness, cutting slightly through the stuffiness of the narrow streets.

But something had changed. Beatrice felt it the moment she stepped onto the pier.

The city had gone quiet. Not silent. Life still bustled, as always. Merchants hawked their prices. Sailors sang in the taverns. Prostitutes called to customers from half-lit doorways.

But people spoke more softly, moved faster, and did not linger in the squares.

And they watched the gallows.

Tall wooden beams lined the harbor street, blackened by time and salt. Three or four bodies hung from each.

Beatrice walked slowly along the cobblestones, counting. Twelve gallows. Forty-two bodies.

Scaliger guardsmen in tarnished uniforms. Palace servants in plain clothes. Fleet officers who had been too slow to pledge allegiance. Their faces had bloated in the summer heat, skin darkened to bruised plums. On each chest, a placard: "TRAITOR."

Beatrice walked slowly, memorizing the faces. The smell of death hung thick, sweet, cloying. A fly landed on one man's open eye. She kept walking.

Some she knew. Good people. Honest.

Dead.

Forty-two. Only the beginning.

She turned into a narrow alley, leaving the main street behind. It was darker here, quieter. The walls of the houses pressed so close she could touch both sides with her outstretched arms. In wet weather, passages like this became gloomy tunnels.

Now they were salvation, a path into shadow, beyond the long fingers of the new regime.

The narrow passages led her to a familiar four-story building draped in old ivy, its dark green leaves glossy. Stones darkened by time remembered more than one generation of owners, noble and otherwise. Once it had been a wealthy merchant's house, then an expensive brothel, and later a mainland ambassador's residence. Now the ground floor held an unremarkable coffeehouse, and the upper floors were modest lodgings rented at inflated prices to foreign traders.

And the basement.

Beatrice entered the coffeehouse. The smell of freshly ground beans, aged wood, and tobacco smoke enveloped her, familiar and pleasant. Half a dozen patrons sat at small tables: several merchants discussing deals over steaming cups, a pair of ship's officers leafing through worn charts, and a solitary poet gazing melancholically out the window at the gathering dusk.

The waiter, a thin man with faded eyes and a face that seemed designed to be forgotten, saw her and nodded silently. He stepped aside, letting Beatrice pass through an inconspicuous door behind the bar, cleverly concealed by heavy coffee sacks.

Behind the door was a narrow corridor with a steep staircase leading down. The steps, worn smooth by countless feet, descended into dimness. A single oil lamp flickered in a wall niche, casting trembling shadows on the damp stone walls.

Beatrice descended. Her footsteps echoed strangely, swallowed by the stone, as if the basement itself devoured sound.

The basement opened before her: a low-ceilinged room supported by massive wooden beams, blackened with age. Cool air wrapped around her like a cloak. Even on a warm evening, it was always cold here, as if the stone walls had absorbed the winter wind from the sea and refused to let it go. The scent of old wine barrels and damp earth hung thick in the air.

The dim light of the oil lamp illuminated the center of the room, leaving the corners in comfortable shadow. At a heavy oak table covered with worn green baize sat Clarence.

He looked like someone's kindly grandfather, an elderly man with curly gray hair that might once have been dark, and piercing gray eyes nearly hidden beneath wrinkled lids. His face was the sort that inspired trust and simultaneously failed to stick in memory: average features, average build, the kind of man you'd pass on the street without a second glance. He wore a simple brown doublet, well-made but unremarkable, and his hands resting on the table were soft, uncalled, the hands of a scholar or a priest.

A collector of helpful information. A man who knew where bodies were buried because he'd helped bury some of them.

Clarence didn't rise at her arrival. He sat motionless, hands resting on the table. Before him lay a silver platter inlaid with turquoise, bearing fruit: pale yellow lemons from the gardens of the Azure Islands, dark purple plums from the Haiver Highlands, and succulent cherries from the valleys of Vanhira.

Beside the platter lay a dagger, slender, elegant, with an ivory handle. The blade gleamed in the lamplight, freshly sharpened and deadly.

Beatrice stopped at the threshold. She looked at the dagger, then at Clarence.

He smiled warmly, fatherly. "My dear," he said softly. "I'm so glad to see you. Come, help yourself." His voice carried gentle notes of elderly kindness.

But his fingers rested a finger's breadth from the dagger's hilt, and his eyes did not smile at all.

She didn't move. "Uncle Clarence," she said carefully. "You wanted to see me."

There was no kinship between them; the address "uncle" was part of the role they'd played for years: a kindly old relative and his grateful young niece.

But today, something was wrong.

Clarence slowly picked up the dagger, turning it in his hands as he studied the blade. "Sit," he said quietly. It was not a suggestion.

Beatrice approached the table and sat across from him, hands on her knees, back straight, face calm.

Clarence set the dagger back on the table, drawing it slightly closer. "Tell me, child," he said, not looking at her, "what you see and hear at the palace."

Beatrice took a breath. "Cornaro is consolidating power. Fast and brutal. Forty-two people were hanged today. All loyal to the Scaligers."

"Forty-two," Clarence repeated thoughtfully. "And how many families knew about the coup in advance?"

Beatrice went still. "What do you mean?"

Clarence raised his eyes to hers, gray and cold as a winter sea. "Don't pretend. You're a clever girl. Too clever." He leaned forward. "A coup of this scale isn't pulled off alone. Cornaro brought four hundred mercenaries. They didn't materialize from thin air. They were hired, transported to the island, housed in safe locations, fed, and armed." He let that settle. "Someone had to see it. Someone had to stay silent."

Beatrice nodded slowly. "The Great Families," she murmured. "The trading houses. The patrician clans. They were tired of Francis. At least forty, by my count. Probably more. They kept silent."

"Forty," Clarence repeated, and something like satisfaction crept into his voice. "Forty families knew. And kept silent." He leaned back in his chair, stroking the silver sea dragon that supported the fruit platter. The dragon, with its crest of tiny emeralds and ruby eyes, seemed alive in the flickering lamplight.

"And Cornaro promised them everything," he continued. "Lower tariffs. Monopolies. Forgiven debts. Classic." He took a cherry from the platter and crushed it between his fingers. Red juice ran down his skin like blood. "How did they pull it off?"

Beatrice paused. "The plan was clever," she said slowly. "They didn't want to kill, only capture them alive. Send Francis and his sons to the mainland. It would have destroyed their reputation and avoided a blood feud. Just as the Scaligers had done in their time, and many others on the islands."

Clarence wiped his fingers. "Sensible. But something went wrong."

"Everything went wrong." Beatrice leaned forward. "The brothers were drugged with sleeping draughts. Every single cadet left the barracks on their parents' orders. Betrayed their comrades. So much for sacred naval brotherhood. If the plan had worked, Cornaro's soldiers would have taken the sons in their sleep. Clean."

"Vile. But practical."

"But the boys woke early. Escaped." Beatrice pressed her lips together. "And Francis..."

"Who killed Francis?" Clarence watched her intently.

"His wife lured him to the upper hall," Beatrice said, her voice colder. "Their favorite spot. Used her feminine charms. The conspirators were waiting. And then... Francis resisted, and emotions got the better of calculation."

Clarence whistled softly. "Emilia Tagliapietra. Black widow."

"They were together right after the coup," Beatrice said, meeting his eyes. "With Cornaro. It looked like they'd been close for months. Perhaps longer."

"Black widows don't live long in troubled times," Clarence said thoughtfully.

"Remember that, child. Betrayal is like poison. It corrupts everyone. She betrayed her husband. What's to stop her from betraying her lover?"

"Nothing."

"Exactly." He leaned back. "And letting the sons escape was idiocy. Now they'll return."

"With revenge."

"With an army." Clarence smiled coldly. "And if our employers wish it, we can help them."

Beatrice froze. The employers had been mentioned but never discussed. He had crossed a line for the first time.

He fell silent, studying her face. "You predicted the coup." His voice dropped.

"Three months ago. I didn't believe you. Thought you were wrong." His eyes narrowed. "But you were right."

Beatrice said nothing. She waited.

"Why didn't you stop it?" Clarence's voice sharpened. "You knew. You could have warned Francis. Could have raised the alarm. But you stayed silent." He leaned forward, locking his gaze on hers. "Why?"

The question hung in the air, heavy and dangerous.

Beatrice held his gaze. "Because I'm not suicidal," she said calmly. "Forty families, Uncle. Forty. If I'd tried to interfere, they would have killed me before I opened my mouth. And the coup would have happened anyway." She didn't blink. "I chose to survive."

Clarence watched her for a long moment, one second, two, three.

Then he smiled.

"The right answer," he said softly, pushing a purse toward her. Heavy, leather, clinking with silver. "This is more than we agreed. I'm pleased with you and your work."

Beatrice took the purse and tucked it into a hidden pocket in her dress. The weight was reassuring.

Clarence poured himself wine from a faceted crystal decanter, ruby liquid smelling of sunshine and dried rose petals. "Your mother." He studied the glass. "How is she?"

Beatrice went still. "Still in Bari," she answered carefully. "We haven't spoken since."

"Not at all?"

"I don't answer her letters." Beatrice clenched her hands on her knees. "Not that she writes much. Why do you ask?"

Clarence sipped his wine. "Cornaro asked about you today."

Beatrice slowly raised her eyes. "Asked whom?"

"The old treasurer. Giovanni." Clarence took another sip. "My people heard. Cornaro is checking everyone who stayed at the palace. Looking for connections to the Scaligers."

"And what did he learn?"

"That your mother abandoned you. Left for Bari, remarried. Left a fourteen-year-old girl alone." Clarence looked at her carefully. "Giovanni said you managed. Became an excellent palace cupbearer. Earned trust."

Beatrice nodded slowly. "So Cornaro won't find anything suspicious."

"Not yet." Clarence leaned forward. "But be careful. He's paranoid. Sees enemies everywhere. Stay close, but not too close. Be useful, but not indispensable. Understand?"

"I understand."

He leaned back and drew a folded sheet of parchment from inside his doublet, placing it on the table between them. "I'm being recalled to the mainland," he said, lowering his voice. "Urgently. Our employer has... difficulties. I need to take the place of a colleague who made a mistake." His gaze hardened. "I leave at dawn tomorrow."

Beatrice felt her heart skip. "And me?"

"You, my dear," Clarence smiled, "become my successor. You take over the Ragusa station. All my agents, all my contacts, all my sources. Yours." He held out the parchment. "Study it. Memorize it. Burn it."

Beatrice took the parchment. Her hands trembled just slightly, but they trembled.

The station. The whole network. This was more than she could have dreamed. And more dangerous than she could have imagined.

"In two days," Clarence continued, "you'll travel to Hogberg. Meet with our employer in person. He wants to see you. Evaluate you." His voice hardened.

"Make an impression, child. Your life depends on it."

"I understand."

"And one more thing." Clarence leaned forward, lowering his voice to a whisper. "I have a sleeper agent in the palace. Invaluable. High up. Close to Cornaro. As close as it gets."

Beatrice held her breath. "Who?"

"You'll learn later." Clarence smiled enigmatically. "For now, I'll only say this: it's a woman. She can give you everything: Cornaro's plans, his weaknesses, his secrets. But she must be handled with extreme care. One wrong word, and she'll break."

He drew out another sheet, smaller and thinner.

"Instructions here. How to make contact. What to say. How to pressure her if she wavers." His gaze went cold. "We have leverage on her. Serious leverage. If necessary, remind her of it."

Beatrice took the sheet and tucked it away with the first. "I'll manage."

"I know." Clarence stood and walked to her, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"You're the smartest of my agents, Beatrice. The most cold-blooded." He smiled.

"Just don't forget: in this game, there are no friends. Only allies and enemies. And the line between them is thinner than a blade." He nodded at the dagger, still lying on the table.

Beatrice looked at the blade, then at Clarence. "Be careful on the mainland, Uncle."

"And you here." He released her shoulder. "Dangerous times. The Scaligers fled, but they'll return. And when they do, war begins. Real war." A pause. "Choose your side wisely, child. Not the one that seems right. The one that wins."

Beatrice bowed her head and walked toward the door.

"One more thing," Clarence called as she reached the threshold.

Beatrice turned.

"Those letters you mentioned last time," he said slowly, "with the black phoenix on red wax."

"Yes?"

"Have you seen more?"

"No. But rumors are spreading. Council members are receiving them from the mainland."

Clarence frowned. For the first time all evening, his face lost its mask of calm. "If you see one, report to me immediately," he said sharply. "This is critical."

“All right.”

As she left, Clarence’s laugh followed her.

Beatrice climbed the stairs and exited through the coffeehouse onto the street. Night had fallen over the city, warm, humid, smelling of sea and oil-lamp smoke. And something else. The copper tang of blood.

Your mother. How is she?

Clarence’s question echoed in her mind. He’d asked it casually, a throwaway line among more essential matters. But the words had found the old wound and pressed.

Left a fourteen-year-old girl alone.

The memory surfaced unbidden the day her mother had left.

She was fourteen, standing in the doorway of a room that smelled of lavender and betrayal. Her mother’s trunks were already loaded onto the cart outside.

“You could come with me.” Her mother’s voice was soft, pleading. “Bari is lovely in spring.”

“And Father’s debts? The creditors? The Guild contracts?”

Her mother looked away. “Those are... complications.”

“Those are my inheritance.” Beatrice heard her own voice, cold and steady, and wondered when she’d learned to sound like that. “Someone has to stay. Someone has to fix what you’re running from.”

“Darling, you’re fourteen.”

“Old enough to know what you’re doing.”

Her mother’s eyes glistened. “I’ll write. Every week.”

She didn’t. Three letters in four years, each shorter than the last.

The door closed. The cart rolled away. Beatrice made herself a promise:

Never again would she let herself need someone who could leave.

Never again would she be the one left behind.

Beatrice blinked. The memory dissolved. She stood in a dark street in the Lower City, and her eyes were dry.

Focus.

The streets of the Lower City came alive with nightfall. Taverns threw open their doors, releasing warmth, laughter, and drunken songs. Lanterns swayed in the wind, casting trembling shadows across the cobblestones.

Beatrice walked quickly but didn't run. Running would draw attention, and attention was the last thing she needed.

She turned into an alley leading to the pier where she could hire a boat back to the Upper City.

And stopped cold.

Ahead, a patrol.

Six men in worn leather armor, swords at their hips and crossbows on their backs. Mercenaries, the same ones Cornaro had brought: tall, broad-shouldered, faces burned by the sun of distant lands.

They stood at the alley's exit, checking passersby. One stopped people while another searched them; the rest stood aside, ready to intervene.

Damn.

Beatrice could not go back to a dead end behind her. She could not turn aside either; the alley was narrow, with no other exit. The only way was forward.

She took a breath. The parchment in her pocket pressed against her hip, her only shield. She straightened her back and walked.

The mercenary at the exit saw her and raised his hand. "Stop."

Beatrice stopped. Face calm, hands hanging loose at her sides. "Good evening, sir."

The mercenary approached—tall, towering over her, a scar across his entire cheek, the smell of sweat, leather, and iron clinging to him. "Papers," he said hoarsely.

Beatrice pulled a folded parchment from her pocket, a permit to move through the city, signed personally by Cornaro, the Admiralty seal pressed in red wax with the ship's imprint.

The mercenary took the parchment and unfolded it. He stared for a long time. Too long. Probably reading slowly. Or maybe he could not read at all.

Finally, he looked up. "Cupbearer?" He squinted. "What are you doing in the Lower City?"

"Personal business, sir," Beatrice answered calmly. "Purchasing wine for the palace. Meeting with suppliers."

"At this hour?"

"The best suppliers work at night." She smiled slightly. "Smugglers, you know. But their wine is the best in the city."

The mercenary smirked. "Smugglers." He handed back the parchment. "Go on. But be careful. It's dangerous here at night."

"Thank you." Beatrice walked past him, careful not to quicken her pace. Her heart pounded, but her face remained calm. Behind her, the mercenaries' quiet laughter drifted on the night air.

She emerged from the alley and turned toward the pier. Only here, in the darkness, did she allow herself to exhale.

Too close.

Cornaro had increased the patrols, checking everyone, looking for Scaliger agents, spies, traitors. Sooner or later, he would get to her.

Need to be more careful. Much more careful.

But first business.

* * *

Beatrice returned to the palace late at night. The eastern gate was open, and the guards let her through without question. She climbed to her quarters, a small room in the south wing with a window overlooking the harbor. The room was exactly as she'd left it: bed made with military precision, almost nothing personal on the dresser, little that said someone lived here.

Little did they say *someone would miss her if she didn't come back.*

She bolted the door. Lit a candle. Drew out the sheets Clarence had given her and began to read.

She memorized every word slowly, carefully. Then she burned the sheets in the candle flame, ground the ashes to powder, and threw them out the window.

The wind scattered the gray flakes over the harbor.

Beatrice approached her bed, ready to sleep.

And saw it.

The Ishtar statuette lay on the floor. Shattered.

Not just cracked, as it had been that night when it had burned in Beatrice's hands and split into pieces. The black obsidian had scattered into dozens of fragments, as if someone had hurled the statuette against the stone in fury. The goddess's head lay apart. Arms, scattered. Torso, ground to dust.

Beatrice froze.

Someone was here.

The door had been locked. The window was closed. Yet someone had entered. Come into the room. Took the statuette and smashed it.

Not by accident. Not by carelessness. With hatred.

Beatrice slowly sank to her knees, touching the shards, cold, sharp, dead. Not a trace remained of the power that had pulsed in the statuette that night.

Ishtar was dead. Or sleeping. Or something worse.

Beatrice picked up one shard, small, no larger than a fingernail. On it, part of the goddess's face. One eye was closed, as if in eternal sleep.

She clenched the shard in her fist. Someone knows. *Someone knew* she had used forbidden rituals. Someone had seen the statuette. Someone wanted to frighten her. Or warn her. Or kill her.

Beatrice stood, gathered the shards, wrapped them in a rag, and hid them in a secret chest. Then she lay on the bed, still dressed, a dagger under her pillow, and did not sleep until dawn.

When she finally drifted off, she dreamed.

Fog. Thick, white, alive. She felt the ship beneath her feet, the roll of the deck, the creak of timber, the salt spray on her lips. His ship. His escape.

And somewhere in the fog, a voice.

Beatrice.

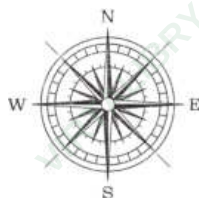
She turned. The fog parted for an instant, and she saw him. Fair hair plastered to his forehead. Blue eyes wide with shock.

Who are you? His voice, or hers? Why can I feel you?

The fog closed between them.

She woke with his name on her lips.

Chapter 3: Journey to the Mainland



SEBASTIAN

“Sails on the horizon!” The cry from the crow’s nest shattered the morning calm. “Four ships! Red pennants!”

Mark spun like he’d been stung. Sebastian snatched the spyglass from the watch sailor, pressed it to his eye, and winced as the movement pulled at his burned palms. The blisters from that night in Ragusa hadn’t healed; if anything, they’d worsened, weeping and raw beneath the rough bandages.

Four dots on the horizon, still distant but visible.

“Cornaro,” he breathed, lowering the glass. “Damn it.”

Around him, the *Medusa* erupted into controlled chaos. She was a sleek two-masted brigantine, built in the Hogberg shipyards for speed and shallow-water work, with thirty souls aboard not counting the three brothers who’d bought passage with gold and desperation. The crew had been wary of them at first, these sons of a murdered admiral, but two days at sea had forged a tentative camaraderie. Now that trust would be tested.

Emile was already beside the captain on the quarterdeck. The captain, a wiry man in his fifties with a face carved by decades of salt and sun, squinted at the horizon, gauging distance with the practiced eye of a man who’d outrun customs boats and pirates alike. “War galleys,” he muttered. “Heavy ones. Thirty oars per side each. Full complement of soldiers, a hundred heads per ship.”

“Four hundred soldiers against thirty sailors,” Emile observed, his voice calm but his dark eyes calculating. “The odds are not in our favor.”

“We’ve got no chance,” the captain grunted. “If they catch us.”

Sebastian looked at the pennant on the mast. It barely stirred. Then at the galleys. Then back at the pennant. “With this wind, we won’t outrun them,” he said.

“We’re practically dead in the water, and they’ve got oars. Three hundred rowers, rotated every two hours.”

“Right you are, young sir,” the captain spat over the rail. “Wind’ll pick up by noon. Maybe. They’ll be here in two hours. Three if we’re lucky. Without wind, we’re a log on the water.”

Mark approached, hand resting on his rapier hilt, elegant Vesperan work, a gift from their father. "What are our options, Captain?" His voice was quiet, controlled, betraying nothing of the tension coiled in his chest.

The captain studied the horizon for a long moment. Then he turned to the brothers. "One. The Misty Isles." He nodded north, where green peaks showed through the haze. "Shallow water over old ruins. Galleys won't go there: draft's too deep, they'll rip their hulls on the stones."

"We might make it through. *Medusa's* got a sharp bow for speed and a shallow draft for coastal work. She was built for waters like these."

"What about the current?" Sebastian asked.

"Weak, but running north toward the islands. And a breeze offshore should strengthen by noon." The captain bared his teeth in something that wasn't quite a smile. "Should. Or we're done."

"One in three ships that enter those islands doesn't come out," Emile murmured. "Reefs. Currents. Rocks that appear from nowhere. I've read the accounts."

"Read right," the captain nodded, his greedy eyes turning thoughtful for a moment. "Cursed place. Sailors say the drowned reach up and pull ships down. But the choice is simple: risk it there or surrender here."

Mark looked at his brothers. Sebastian gripped his rapier hilt until his knuckles turned white, the pressure sending fresh pain through his burned hands. Emile's sharp mind was already calculating odds; Sebastian could see it in the way his younger brother's eyes moved, weighing lives against probabilities.

"We go to the islands," Emile said softly.

The captain nodded, short and soldier-like, and spun toward the crew. "Turn north! Catch every gust! All hands aloft! Shift sails on my command!"

Medusa heeled over, changing course. The sails hung limp, barely filled by the weak breeze. The ship crawled forward, agonizingly slowly. The current pulled them north, but it wasn't enough.

"Pray to the Three-Faced, gentlemen," the captain said. "Right now, she matters more than my skill."

The galleys picked up speed.

A drum roll carried across the water, dull, measured, terrible. The rhythm of oars beat like a giant's heartbeat. Sixty oars on each galley rose and fell in perfect unison, a war machine that knew no fatigue, no mercy.

The hunt had begun.

* * *

An hour passed. Sebastian stood at the stern, eyes locked on their pursuers.

The galleys grew larger with each passing hour, from dots to pennants to the silhouettes of soldiers crowding their decks. Sebastian's stomach tightened. The drum was closer now, louder.

"Half a league!" the watch called. "They're gaining!"

Sebastian looked at the sails still slack, cursed calm. *Medusa* crawled on weak currents and pathetic gusts of breeze, helpless as a beached shark.

Beside him, a young sailor, about twenty, with weathered hands shaped by the sea, went pale, leaned against the rail, vomited over the side, wiped his mouth with a shaking hand, and whispered a prayer to the Three-Faced.

"Shut up and work!" the bosun roared. Burly, with a face that looked like it had lost arguments with dock pilings and won fights with everyone else. "Or they'll hang us all in Ragusa, understand?! Check the rigging! Stand ready to turn on command!"

Sailors rushed across the deck, but it did little good. Without wind, a sailing ship was a toy in fate's hands.

Then Sebastian felt it first: a breath against his cheek, light as a whisper. The wind was rising. The pennant on the mast jerked, straightened.

"Wind!" the captain bellowed, hope ringing in his voice. "Wind from the west! Turn her into it! Move, you devils!"

Sailors leaped to the rigging. Sails unfurled, stretched, and filled with wind. *Medusa* surged forward like a horse finally given its head.

"Glory to the Three-Faced," someone exhaled.

But the galleys were still close, too close.

"Islands ahead!" the captain shouted. "Half a league to shallow water! Hold course!"

Sebastian saw an officer in a red cloak on the lead galley, screaming and waving his arms. The rowers doubled their efforts, the drum thundering faster, oars blurring in the water, a final, desperate push.

But the wind favored *Medusa*. The brigantine flew now, cutting through the waves faster than even three hundred rowers could pull.

The islands drew near. What had seemed a solid archipelago from a distance now resolved into separate hills rising from the sea, green peaks ringed by white spray and rolling fog.

"The Misty Isles," the captain said, and superstitious fear colored his voice.

Emile frowned. He'd read about them in the Academy library, an archipelago above sunken ruins, far off the trade routes. Sailors avoided it like plague waters. Now, seeing the fog wrapped around those peaks like a burial shroud, feeling the strange chill that seemed to radiate from the place even at this distance, he understood why.

"All leads in the water!" the captain barked. "Take soundings! One mistake and we rip the hull!"

"Twelve fathoms!" the leadsman called. "Shoaling fast!"

The captain cursed, spinning the wheel. But Sebastian had already seen it, the water ahead changing color, pale green shading to white where the reef lurked just beneath the surface.

"Hard to port!" Sebastian shouted before he could stop himself. "There's a passage, see the current line? The darker water!"

The captain's head snapped toward him. For a heartbeat, Sebastian expected to be told to shut his mouth and let sailors do their work.

Instead, the captain looked where he pointed. The current was different there, a ribbon of deeper blue threading between the pale shallows.

"You're sure?"

"My father made me memorize every reef approach in the Jeweled Sea." The words came out steadier than he felt. "This formation matches the Serpent's Teeth off Cape Maros. There'll be a drop-off on the far side, twenty fathoms at least."

The captain held his gaze for one second. Two.

Then, "Hard to port! Follow the dark water!"

Medusa heeled over, timbers groaning. Sebastian gripped the rail, watching the reef slide past, close enough to touch, pale shapes beneath the surface like drowned fingers.

The leadsman's voice came almost surprised. "Twenty-two fathoms! Clear water!"

Mark appeared at his shoulder. "How did you know?"

Sebastian's hands were shaking. He had not known, not for sure. He'd gambled thirty lives on a pattern from a book three years ago.

"Father's lessons," he said. "Finally useful for something."

But inside, something had shifted. For the first time since Ragusa, he'd *done* something, made a choice that mattered.

Sailors rushed to obey. Lead weights flew overboard, ropes pulled taut.

“Twenty fathoms!”

“Fifteen!”

“Ten!”

The water under the keel grew shallower every minute.

Medusa entered the strait between the first islands, and Sebastian allowed himself one last look back. The four galleys hung at the edge of the shallows like hounds straining at a leash, their red pennants snapping in frustration, soldiers crowding the rails to watch their prey escape. The lead ship slowed, then stopped. Sebastian watched a sailor at the bow cast a sounding lead.

Too shallow. Far too shallow for their deep-drafted hulls.

The second galley came alongside the first. Third. Fourth. All four formed a semicircle at the boundary of safe water, like wolves circling a den they could not enter.

“They will not follow,” the captain breathed in relief. “A war galley draws two fathoms minimum. Here, it’s barely one in places. They’d tear their hulls on the stones.”

“Will they wait for us to come out?” Mark asked.

“They will.” The captain spat over the rail. “A day, maybe two. Hoping we drown or wreck ourselves on the rocks.” He bared his teeth. “But we will not drown.”

Then the ship entered the fog, and the world changed.

Visibility dropped to nothing. The fog wrapped *Medusa* in a damp shroud, cold and choking, tasting of salt and something older. Something that spoke of centuries drowned in silence. It muffled and distorted every sound. The splash of water against the hull seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. Light dimmed to a pale, deathly glow.

The world went quiet. Sebastian could hear his own heartbeat, and beneath it the soft lap of water against the hull, the creak of rigging overhead, someone breathing too fast nearby. The fog swallowed everything else.

“Eight fathoms!”

“Seven!”

Sebastian approached the rail and looked into the water, then froze.

There, beneath the turquoise depths, shapes emerged. Not rocks. Not underwater reefs. Buildings.

“What is that?” he breathed.

Mark and Emile came closer. All three brothers stared down in silence.

Beneath *Medusa's* keel, at a depth of four to six fathoms, an entire city spread out before them: streets paved in white stone, squares lined with columns, palaces with collapsed roofs through which fish now swam. Sunken. Dead. Vast beyond comprehension.

"Heavens," Emile whispered, his voice cracking. "Giardini Celesti. The Celestial Gardens."

Sebastian knew the name from history lessons: the sacred city of the Twelve Goddesses, heart of the ancient faith, center of the world before the Cataclysm. Every child learned of it. Every priestess invoked its memory. But dusty lectures and faded illustrations had conveyed nothing of this, the sheer scale of what had been lost, the reality of a civilization lying silent beneath their keel. His throat tightened.

"All of it," Mark said quietly, staring down, wearing an expression Sebastian had never seen on his brother's face. Something like grief. "An entire civilization, drowned."

The captain crossed himself, muttering a prayer under his breath.

Then Sebastian saw the statue.

It stood at the corner of a submerged square, taller than the buildings around it, a woman in armor, one hand raised as if commanding armies to halt. Even through the water and the seaweed wreathing her shoulders, her face was visible. Beautiful and terrible, twisted with grief and rage, the face of someone who had lost everything and chosen to take the world with her.

"Empress Helena," Mark said, his voice soft.

Emile looked closer. "How do you know?"

"The crown." Mark pointed. "Three tiers. Only empresses wore those. And that pose, commanding the waters to rise." His voice was flat, controlled, but Sebastian heard something underneath. "She drowned her own empire because she could not bear the loss of her family."

The statue's other hand pointed downward, into the depths. As if even in stone, after three centuries, she was still commanding the sea to swallow what remained.

Sebastian remembered the lesson now, the battle at Arcadia. Helena's army was crushed. Her husband and sons were slain before her eyes. The empress, mad with grief, called upon Hecate. And Hecate answered.

The central plains, the empire's heart, had collapsed into the sea. A massive waterfall formed at the ocean's edge, and for six months the waters poured through, filling the basin where millions had lived. Cities went under day by day. People fled to the hills, and the mountain became islands, and then the islands flooded too.

"And we're what's left," Sebastian said softly. "Living on the edges of a drowned world."

Medusa sailed on, weaving between the "islands", the hilltops that had once been neighborhoods, districts, the homes of countless thousands. The water was surprisingly clear here, sunlight filtering through the depths and illuminating details that made his stomach clench. Columns wrapped in seaweed. Arches where schools of silver fish glided through what had once been doorways. Statues with their arms raised toward a surface they would never reach.

To the right, the ruins of what had clearly been a temple rose from the depths: a rotunda of white marble, its dome partially collapsed, twelve columns still standing guard around its perimeter. On the pediment, half-hidden by seaweed and time, carvings depicted female figures dancing among flowers and birds.

"A temple from before Hecate's time," Sebastian said.

"Not just any temple," Emile countered, peering at the carvings with scholarly intensity. "Look at the symbols on those columns. Twelve different sigils, one for each goddess." He pointed to a column where a crescent moon was carved, then another bearing a lotus flower, a third showing wings spread in flight. "This is a place of power. One of the great sanctuaries where the faithful came to commune with all twelve at once."

To the left, in a gap between curtains of seaweed, something even stranger emerged from the depths. A garden: a sunken garden, its stone terraces descending into darkness like steps into the underworld. On the terraces, remnants of fountains and pools remained, their basins now home to darting fish and waving anemones. And everywhere statues.

Female figures in flowing robes, hands raised toward the surface, faces turned upward as if still hoping for rescue. Stone goddesses with sightless eyes, their arms lifted in supplication to a sky they would never see again, seaweed wound around their wrists like chains. A fish slipped through the parted lips of one statue, casual as a whisper.

"The sacred gardens," Emile breathed, something like reverence in his voice. "Each goddess had her own. Twelve gardens surrounding the city, each one a sanctuary."

Mark nodded, not taking his eyes from the ruins. "They say the goddesses would appear to their faithful here. Walk among them in mortal form." His voice was distant. "Before Hecate. Before everything changed."

"They say the goddesses slept in those gardens," the captain whispered, crossing himself again. "When the waters came, they drowned in their sleep. And they still lie there, below. Sleeping. Waiting for someone to wake them."

Shadows glided between the columns. Seaweed swayed like drowned women's hair. Somewhere in the depths, something large and dark flashed between buildings and vanished before Sebastian could get a clear look.

"Monsters live here," a sailor beside Sebastian croaked. "Guardians of the ancients. Those the Cataclysm didn't kill but... changed."

"Shut it," the bosun growled. "You're scaring the boys."

But even the bosun shot wary glances at the water.

"Five fathoms!" the lookout at the bow called. "Bottom's rising!"

"Hold course!" the captain roared, personally manning the helm. He didn't trust anyone else in these waters. His experienced eye read the surface like a book; where the water rippled differently, a reef lurked. "Just a bit more!"

Medusa glided over what had once been a central square, its mosaic floor still visible through the clear water: patterns of stars and moons and suns, the symbols of a faith drowned three centuries ago. At the center stood a round pedestal that must have held an altar, surrounded by twelve columns, each carved with a different sigil.

Sebastian recognized some of them: lotus flower, crescent moon, wings of a bird in flight.

"Three fathoms!" the sailor's voice trembled. "Captain!"

"I see it!"

Ahead, directly in their path, something dark jutted from the water. Not a rock. A fragment of a tower or perhaps a temple spire. The stone was almost black, unlike the white marble of the surrounding ruins, and its edges looked sharp as razors.

"Helm to starboard!" the captain bellowed. "Hard to starboard, now!"

The wheel spun, and *Medusa* turned slowly, too slowly.

Sebastian watched the spire approach. Two paces. One pace.

"Brace yourselves!" Mark shouted, grabbing a line.

CRRRUNCH.

The impact threw Sebastian against the rail, and he bit back a cry as his burned hands slammed into the wood. The ship shuddered, a grinding roar running through the deck as ancient stone tore through oak planks. Sailors staggered, grabbing rigging, masts, anything solid. Emile fell hard, his shoulder striking a coiled rope.

The sound was monstrous: the scream of wood being ripped apart, of a ship being gutted.

“Hull breach!” The cry came from below, raw with panic. “Breach in the starboard side! We’re taking water!”

The captain swore viciously, creatively, with the kind of feeling that would make a port whore blush.

Water rushed into the hold. Sebastian heard it before he saw it: a roar like a beast unleashed, the sea pouring through the breach in a torrent of foam and fury. Cold hit him first, then the smell of brine and something older, the mustiness of drowned places, of ruins that had lain three centuries beneath the waves.

And then he heard the scream, high and raw, the sound of a man who knew he was dying. It cut off abruptly, swallowed by the roar of water, but Sebastian would remember that sound for the rest of his life.

“Man down!” someone shouted from below. “Tomas is pinned! He’s pinned!”

Sebastian rushed down the ladder, boots splashing into ankle-deep water that was rising fast. The hold was chaos, water churning gray and green, foam swirling with splinters and debris, the stench of brine and blood filling the air. And there, against the inner hull, pinned by the jagged plank that had punched through:

Tomas. The young sailor who’d vomited over the rail hours ago, too scared to hide it. Now his eyes were wide with a different kind of fear, his hands scrabbling uselessly at the plank that had impaled him through the chest. Blood swirled in the rising water, pink at first, then darker.

“Get him off!” the bosun roared.

They tried. Pulled. But the wood held fast, and every attempt made Tomas scream a wet, bubbling sound that Sebastian knew he would hear in nightmares.

The water rose to his chest.

“Leave me,” the sailor gasped. Blood bubbled on his lips. “Just... leave me. Seal it.”

“Shut your mouth!” The bosun grabbed his shoulder.

But they all knew. The plank could not be moved without killing him faster. And the water was rising.

Mark appeared beside Sebastian, assessing the situation in a single glance. His face showed nothing: no horror, no hesitation, just a calculation.

“Seal around it,” he said, his voice low. “Now.”

The bosun’s face went hard as stone. He nodded once.

They worked around Tomas, driving oakum into the gaps beside the spire, their hands moving with desperate efficiency. The sailor did not scream anymore. He just watched them with glazing eyes as the water reached his chin. His mouth. His nose.

Sebastian looked away. When he looked back, Tomas was gone beneath the dark water. They kept working.

“Pumps!” the captain roared from above. “Pump the water! Move, damn you all, or we all drown!”

Sailors rushed to the pumps. Mark and Emile appeared beside Sebastian, sleeves already rolled up.

The hold was chaos. Water sloshed ankle-deep and rising, dark with debris and blood. The breach gaped in the hull: a span-long tear with jagged edges still jutting inward like broken teeth. Sailors worked the pumps frantically, arms pumping in desperate rhythm.

“Work!” the bosun bellowed. “Pump, you bastards, or the Three-Faced takes us all!”

Sebastian grabbed a pump handle. Pumped. Down. Up. Down. Up. His arms burned, his palms screaming with every motion; the blisters had torn open, raw flesh grinding against rough wood. Sweat stung his eyes. He didn’t stop.

The sailor beside him wheezed, face red from strain. “Well damn, young lord,” he managed between gasps. “Didn’t expect a nobleman to work like this.”

“Shut up and pump,” Sebastian ground out through his teeth.

They pumped for an hour, hands bloody from ropes and rough handles. One sailor collapsed from exhaustion. They dragged him topside, and another took his place without a word. Mark worked beside the bosun, silent, methodical, his face a frozen mask that revealed nothing. Emile coordinated shifts with quiet efficiency: who went on pumps, who rested, who hauled buckets.

Pump or drown. Pump or drown.

Finally, the water flow slowed. The captain descended to the hold, examined the breach with experienced eyes, and swore with renewed feeling. “Breach is bad. That cursed stone tore through the planks like they were paper.” He spat into the bilge water. “Got to fix it here. Now. Or we sink.”

“How long?” Mark asked, wiping sweat from his forehead.

“Four hours. Maybe more.” The captain glanced toward the fog that hung thick around them. “If those galleys don’t find us first.”

They found a sheltered cove, a gap between two of the island-hills, hidden from direct view by walls of rock and fog. The crew tilted the ship on its side, exposing the breach.

The carpenters began their work. They cut a patch from oak planks, shaping it to fit the ragged tear. Tarred oakum was driven into every gap, then three layers of tarred cloth were nailed over the outside and reinforced with iron strips. The

master carpenter, a stocky man whose hands bore the scars of decades with saw and chisel, cursed steadily as he worked. "Cursed city... cursed ruins... three hundred years underwater and still sharp enough to gut a ship..."

The work took four hours of grueling labor. The brothers helped: hauling planks, holding patches in place, and spreading hot tar with brushes. Sebastian's hands were raw agony by the end, coated in tar that stuck to his torn blisters. His clothes were soaked through with sweat and seawater, reeking of rot.

By evening, they'd sealed the breach and tarred, caulked, reinforced. It would hold. Probably. Maybe.

"We'll make it to the mainland," the captain grunted, inspecting the work with a critical eye. "If our luck holds."

Luck. Sebastian almost laughed.

Their luck had drowned with Tomas.

* * *

The brothers stayed ashore that night, by a fire built from driftwood that burned with strange blue-green flames. Mark sat with his back against a rock, cleaning his sword in methodical strokes, the same ritual their father had taught them, the sort of thing a man did when his hands needed occupation, and his mind needed quiet. Emile had fallen asleep almost immediately, curled on his side with his cloak drawn up to his chin, looking younger than his seventeen years. The sailors slept on the ship, too exhausted to do anything but collapse where they stood.

Sebastian stared into the flames, watching the colors shift and dance. His hands throbbed. His whole body ached. But his mind wouldn't quiet.

He rose and walked to the water's edge.

Mark looked up from across the fire. "Going somewhere?"

"For a walk." Sebastian nodded toward the grove of trees that crowned the island-hill. "I need to think."

He left before his brothers could object.

The grove was bathed in moonlight silver and strange. The trees stood in perfect rows, too orderly for a natural forest. This had been an avenue once, Sebastian realized: an ancient road, now overgrown but still holding its shape after three centuries.

He walked without direction, letting his feet carry him forward. Something was calling. He couldn't have said what, but he felt it as a pull, gentle but insistent, drawing him deeper into the grove.

The avenue ended at a temple.

It rose from the hilltop like a dream made stone: a rotunda of white marble, ringed by twelve columns that gleamed in the moonlight. Through the opening in its dome, a shaft of silver light fell upon whatever lay within. Sebastian climbed the worn steps and entered.

In twelve niches around the circular wall stood statues, dark silhouettes, their features indistinct in the half-light.

Goddesses. The Ancient Twelve.

But his attention was fixed on what lay at the center.

An altar. And on the altar, a body.

Not stone, but flesh. A girl, young, her hands folded on her chest, her face twisted in a grimace of pain. A long bronze knife jutted from between her ribs, and her white dress was soaked with old blood, dark and dried, but blood nonetheless.

Sebastian stepped forward. Moonlight fell across her face.

His heart stopped.

Beatrice Feski.

The world tilted.

No. Can't be. She's in Ragusa. Alive. I'd feel it if she were...

He stepped closer, his burned hands forgotten, his exhaustion forgotten, everything forgotten except that face. Long dark hair fanned across the stone. Pale skin, almost luminous. Closed eyes with dark lashes.

But no. Not Beatrice. Similarly, terribly, impossibly similar but different. Younger. Thinner. The shape of the jaw was wrong, and the arch of the brows was wrong. Yet the resemblance was uncanny, as if he were looking at her sister, or her reflection in a dark mirror.

The girl's eyes opened.

They were sightless, filmed with death, but they looked at him. Saw him.

Sebastian reached out without thinking. His fingers brushed her hand.

The skin was ice. Not cold. *Ice*. Like death itself. Like snow. Like something that had lain three hundred years in darkness, waiting.

Reality shattered. Pain exploded in his skull, white-hot, blinding, like lightning striking behind his eyes. Sebastian staggered, tried to pull his hand back.

He couldn't. His fingers were frozen to hers.

White light exploded behind his eyes.

And the temple changed.

Torches blazed on the walls where moonlight had been. The altar ran red with fresh blood, steam rising from it in the cold air. A woman in white robes stood over the girl, bronze knife raised high, her face hidden by a ceremonial mask. The girl's eyes were alive now, wide with the kind of terror that came from knowing exactly what was about to happen and being unable to stop it.

"No," Sebastian tried to shout.

The knife fell. Blood sprayed across the white marble. The girl's scream cut off with a wet, choking sound.

The woman turned. Her face—

Sebastian's breath stopped. Half of it was beautiful, serene, the face of a saint in a church fresco. The other half was rotting, crawling with maggots, the flesh sloughing away to reveal yellowed bone beneath.

She smiled at him with both mouths. "Blood wakes us," she whispered. "Blood calls us."

The temple floor cracked. Water burst through, not the clear turquoise of the sea above, but something black and cold, reeking of decay and death. It rose impossibly fast, swallowing his ankles, his knees, his waist. Sebastian struggled, tried to run, but the dead girl's hand gripped his like iron, frozen fingers locked around his wrist.

The water reached his throat, then his mouth, then his nose.

He couldn't breathe. The cold filled his lungs like liquid iron, burning where it should have frozen. His chest spasmed, desperate for air that wasn't there. Above him, impossibly far above, he could see light filtering through the surface, and around him, the drowned city stretched in all directions: streets full of shadows, stone goddesses reaching toward a sky they would never touch again.

The girl's eyes opened underwater. Dead eyes, filmed and sightless, but they saw him. They *knew* him. Her lips did not move, but he heard her voice as clearly as if she'd spoken directly into his mind:

She's waiting for you. In the darkness. She knows your name.

Sebastian screamed, water flooding his lungs, burning, choking.

He was on his knees on the temple floor, gasping and retching, utterly alone.

The altar was empty. Nobody. No blood. Just bare, stone cold, and ancient in the moonlight. His hand was empty too, no frozen fingers gripping his, no dead girl's touch.

Had any of it been real?

His head throbbed as if someone had driven a spike through his skull. His hand, the one that had touched her, burned with a cold deeper than skin, deeper than bone, a cold that felt like it would never leave.

BEATRICE

In Ragusa, in a small room in the palace's south wing

Beatrice Feski woke screaming.

Cold. Unbearable cold like she'd plunged into a winter sea, like ice was forming in her veins. Her right hand burned with it. She looked down, expecting to see frost, hoping to see death.

Nothing. No ice. No water. Just her own hand, trembling in the darkness.

But she felt it. Felt *his* hand touching something dead. Something ancient. Something that should never have been disturbed.

And in that moment, just a flash, bright and terrible, she saw through his eyes:

A temple. Moonlight. A girl's corpse on an altar.

A girl who looked like her.

The vision shattered like glass. Beatrice was in her room, in her bed, alone. The night was quiet. The palace slept.

But the cold in her hand remained.

And deep in her chest, certainty settled cold and absolute as stone: he was in danger. Sebastian.

SEBASTIAN

Sebastian woke sharply, as if struck.

He lay on the sand near the dying fire. He did not remember leaving the temple. Did not remember the walk back. Nothing between the vision and this moment, just a gap, a void where memory should have been.

Mark and Emile slept nearby, wrapped in their cloaks.

Sebastian sat up. His hands trembled. Cold sweat coated his back, his chest, his forehead. On his lips, a taste of salt? Blood? Something older?

His hands still burned with cold. Both hands now. The old burns from Ragusa overlaid with something new, something that ached in a way fire never could.

"Sebastian?" Mark was awake instantly, rising on one elbow, alert even half-asleep. "Where did you go? We waited for you."

"I..." Sebastian did not know what to say. How could he explain? "I walked. Needed to think."

"Are you all right?" Emile was watching him now, dark eyes studying his face with uncomfortable intensity. "You look pale. Like you've seen a ghost."

Worse than a ghost.

“I’m fine.”

The truth would make them think him mad. Perhaps he was.

Mark studied him for a long moment, that calculating look which always made Sebastian feel like a map being read. Then he nodded and lay back down. “Get some sleep. Long day tomorrow.”

Sebastian lay down. Closed his eyes. Through his lashes, he watched the fire’s dying dance. In the flicker of flames, he saw faces he couldn’t escape: the drowned statues reaching upward through dark water, the stone goddesses frozen in their ruined gardens, and, worst of all, Beatrice lying on that altar with a knife in her chest, her eyes open, looking at him, always looking at him.

He pressed his hand against his chest. The cold inside would not leave. But there was something else now, too, a connection, thin as spider-silk but unbreakable.

She was there. In Ragusa. Alive.

And she was in danger.

He did not know how he knew, but the knowledge sat in his chest like a stone cold and certain.

Sebastian fell asleep near dawn, deep in sleep, for once without dreams. But the cold remained.

* * *

They managed to leave the archipelago without encountering their pursuers. The next day, as the captain had promised, *Medusa* approached Hogberg.

The mainland port rose from the coast like a promise or a threat. Ships of all types and sizes filled the harbor, their masts forming a forest against the evening sky. Fishing boats bobbed beside merchant galleons; coastal traders shared berths with vessels flying colors Sebastian did not recognize. The wealth of a dozen nations flowed through these waters.

Above the harbor, fortress walls of hewn gray stone climbed the hillside, their square towers built in the old Imperial style, functional, unlovely, designed for defense rather than beauty. Higher still, the pointed roofs of merchant palazzos caught the last light of sunset, their windows glinting like coins. New money rising above old stone.

The captain steered carefully between the crowded wharves, his experienced eyes scanning every vessel they passed. Sebastian saw him checking for red pennants, for the black lion of Cornaro, for any sign that their hunters had arrived before them.

"We'll moor at the far pier," the captain said quietly to Mark. "Away from the main port. Away from eyes."

Mark nodded. He stripped off his expensive doublet and threw on a rough sailor's cloak. "Sebastian, Emile, hide the fine clothes. We need to look like sailors, not gentlemen."

Emile tucked his doublet of Vesper velvet; the silver embroidery would catch light like a signal fire under a plain jacket two sizes too large. Sebastian pulled up his hood, concealing the fine linen of his collar.

They were fugitives now. Hunted men, worth gold, dead or alive.

Medusa moored at one of the far piers, where the crowds thinned, and the harbormaster's men rarely bothered to patrol the kind of place where ships came and went without too many questions asked.

"We've arrived, gentlemen," the captain said, and something almost like respect had crept into his voice. "Hogberg, as you requested. Against considerable odds, I might add."

Mark handed him the remaining payment, a heavy purse that clinked with gold. The captain accepted it with a slight bow, not bothering to count the coins. Trust earned through shared danger.

"You kept your word, Captain," Mark said, and for once his voice carried genuine warmth. "We won't forget this."

"I merely did my part of the bargain." The captain glanced around the harbor, old habits keeping him cautious even at anchor. "But I'd offer advice, if you'll permit. Be careful in Hogberg. The city's full of spies and informers; every second tavern keeper sells information to someone. And news of the coup in Ragusa will have reached these shores by now. Many will be looking for the sons of Scaliger." His voice dropped lower. "Some to help. More to betray. Cornaro has friends all along this coast."

"We'll remember," Mark said. "Thank you for the warning."

The captain nodded in farewell. "May the Three-Faced keep you. And if you ever need a ship and crew that don't ask questions..." A ghost of a smile. "Ask for the *Medusa* in Hogberg port. We'll find you."

The brothers went ashore carrying only small travel bags with necessities and weapons; everything else they had owned was left behind in Ragusa, abandoned in the chaos of that bloody dawn.

When they stepped onto Hogberg's cobblestones, the last rays of sun painted the sky in shades of amber and rose. Above the horizon, the first stars kindled heralds of a night that could bring danger or hope.

The port city wrapped around them like a living thing. After the sea's quiet, the noise was almost overwhelming. Merchants shouted their wares while drunk sailors sang off-key. Hammers rang from smithies and shipyards, and coins clinked in money-changers' stalls. The smells were different too: spices and smoke, roasted meat and rancid oil, good beer and foul sewage, the honest stink of a city that lived and worked and did not apologize for itself.

A woman in a stained apron hauled a bucket of fish guts from a shop doorway, cursing at a cat that fled with a stolen scrap. Two young girls in patched dresses sold wilting flowers from a basket, calling out to passing sailors with practiced smiles. Near a tavern entrance, a barmaid with hennaed hair leaned in the doorway, watching the street with the bored, calculating eyes of someone who'd seen everything and expected nothing.

Life was everywhere loud and crude and vibrantly, defiantly alive.

Mark led his brothers away from the wharf, navigating the labyrinth of narrow streets with the confidence of someone who'd studied maps. He avoided the main roads and squares with too many eyes, too many opportunities for Cornaro's agents to spot them and kept to the shadows, the back alleys, the places where three young men in rough cloaks would not merit a second glance.

Sebastian walked with his hand on his rapier hilt. His palms still ached from the burns from Ragusa, overlaid with fresh wounds from the pumps, tar crusted beneath his nails, calluses torn open and bleeding under the bandages. Every step sent small jolts of pain through his hands.

When they stopped at a fountain to rest, Mark consulted his mental map while Emile kept watch. Sebastian looked down at his hands in the torchlight.

His hands were filthy, tar-stained, and beneath the tar he could still see the soldier's blood from Ragusa's port, dark between his fingers even three days later. It couldn't be there. But he saw it.

He plunged his hands into the fountain's cold water and scrubbed furiously, desperately, as if he could scour away the memory along with the stains. The blood wouldn't come off; it was *there*, he could *see it*.

Mark grabbed his wrist. Hard. "Enough." His voice was quiet, controlled. "It's not there, Sebastian."

Sebastian looked at his brother. Then at his hands. Water ran off them clean, just water. No blood. Just tar, healing wounds, and clean skin beneath.

Illusion. The kind that lived in a man's mind, not in the world. He'd heard of such things: soldiers who saw enemies in every shadow, who heard battle drums in their sleep, who couldn't wash away stains that existed only in memory.

He nodded and wiped his hands on his cloak. "Where are we going?" he asked, his voice steady despite the tremor he felt inside.

"The Silver Horseshoe Inn," Mark answered. "Father stayed there sometimes, when he had business in Hogberg. The owner's an old sailor who served under him, Dominguez, I think. We can spend the night safely and prepare to meet Uncle Alber."

Emile's smile was crooked, but relief showed beneath the irony. "Next time we flee for our lives, let's do it on foot. Sea travel is decidedly overrated."

Mark almost laughed, a rare sound these days. "Agreed."

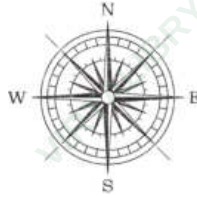
They continued through the narrow streets, each step carrying them further from the lives they'd known: from the palace where they'd grown up, from the city where their father had died, from everything that had once been certain and safe.

Sebastian walked last, eyes moving across the shadows, hand never leaving his sword.

He didn't see the hooded figure standing in the darkness of an archway, watching, tracking. The figure waited until the brothers disappeared around a corner, then turned and vanished in the opposite direction toward another part of the city, where, in a luxurious palazzo, a man with cold eyes and golden rings awaited news.

News about three fugitives. The sons of Admiral Scaliger.

Chapter 4: Blood and Arena



BEATRICE

“We’re late,” one of the bodyguards hissed. “Slave traders don’t like to wait.”

Beatrice only smirked. In the dark, it was more snarl than smile.

The night over Ragusa was dark and starless. The sky had turned its face from what transpired below. The narrow streets leading to the old lighthouse were deserted. Oil lanterns trembled in the wind as if afraid to illuminate what was happening, their reflections dancing in puddles left by the recent rain. The sea breathed heavily and dully.

Beatrice moved quickly and silently, like a shadow gliding across the stone slabs of the waterfront. Four men followed her. One limped from an old wound earned in a street brawl three years ago; another kept touching his dagger hilt, a nervous habit, but he was reliable. All four watched not her but outward, into the darkness, scanning alleys and archways. Professionals, everyone.

She had felt eyes on her twice this week already, once near the market, once outside her own door. Someone was taking an interest. *Good. Let them watch. Let them wonder.*

Two walked ahead, two brought up the rear. The hoods of dark cloaks hid their faces, and only their eyes glinted in the darkness like coals in ash. They were her servants, but far from ordinary. Each of them knew how to kill and had done so more than once.

Here, Beatrice didn’t have to pretend. By day, she played the polite, modest courtier who smiled and curtsied. By night, she became what she truly was: the one who gave orders.

Beatrice clenched her fist and released it, feeling the familiar tremor run through her fingers, that tingling thrill which came with risk, her pulse quickening in anticipation. Risk intoxicated her like the finest wine, and the thought of possible danger only sharpened the sensation. Money and blood, too, but risk came first.

The old lighthouse rose like a stone finger pointing at the sky. Once, it had saved ships from destruction; its fire was a blessing for sailors in storms. Now, it watched what happened at its base. Men were sold into slavery.

At the dock, a cargo ship rocked at anchor, its paint peeling, its sails weathered, bearing neither flag nor name on its hull. Only muffled thuds and hushed voices betrayed the presence of people aboard.

“Let’s go,” Beatrice whispered, and her companions nodded.

They crossed the dock, melting into the shadows of warehouses and cargo crates. One of the men knocked a particular pattern on the wooden door of a storage building beside the ship. A moment later, the door cracked open. In the gap, dim lantern light flared, briefly illuminating a thin face with unclean skin and a serpent’s grin, then plunging everything back into darkness.

“You’re on time,” the slaver hissed, glancing around. “Or nearly so.”

Beatrice stepped forward. Her eyes flashed in the half-light. “Nearly?”

The slaver hurriedly bowed. “Forgive me, my lady. Of course, on time. This way.”

They entered. Lantern light slid along the walls, revealing, in the darkness, the silhouettes of men busily unloading heavy cages and wooden crates. It smelled of mold, salt, and sweat. Slavers whose greed and cruelty had long become legend on all shores of the Jeweled Sea.

“Where are they?” Beatrice asked coldly.

“In the hold, my lady,” the guide smirked. “Today we have special merchandise. Fresh, strong. Straight from islands you may not have even heard of.”

Beatrice nodded and followed him.

They descended a creaking ladder deep into the ship. The air grew heavier, saturated with the smell of rotting straw, tar, and human despair. Beatrice breathed through a thin silk handkerchief pressed to her face. The stench was nearly enough to make her vomit, yet she showed no sign of it.

The lantern beam slid across faces. Eyes flashed dozens of pairs, full of fear, rage, and hopelessness. Light fell on chains, gleaming rusty red. Darkness swallowed everything again, leaving only those eyes burning in the gloom.

Men and women of various ages and builds crouched in pairs, shackled by short chains so they could not stand at full height or raise rebellion. Their bodies were scored with scars and fresh wounds.

Beatrice moved among them with practiced efficiency, checking teeth, squeezing biceps, testing reflexes, like a horse trader examining livestock.

One of the enslaved people, a young woman, began to weep silently.

Beatrice did not look at her.

She surveyed the enslaved people, calculating their value.

The arena. That's where the real power in Ragusa lay, not in titles or positions, but in blood and gold. Every influential family owned fighters, placed bets, and organized tournaments. Late Admiral Francis had threatened to ban the games, calling them barbaric.

One of many reasons you're dead now, older man.

For Beatrice, the fights meant something else: access. Aristocrats forgot caution when they screamed with excitement. Merchants made desperate deals after losing fortunes. The arena equalized everyone.

My key to every door.

"Show me the best," she commanded.

The slaver snapped his fingers, and several men pulled four from the crowd: a tall Northerner with white hair and ice-blue eyes; a muscular, dark-skinned giant with a face that looked carved from stone; a wiry, middle-aged man with a scar crossing his face; and a young man with feline grace, in whose eyes hatred burned.

Beatrice walked around each of them, studying them carefully, like a master assessing an apprentice's work. Then she began examining the others. She asked questions about origins, skills, and how they'd behaved during the journey.

One of the enslaved people caught her attention.

He was filthy and emaciated, his ribs visible through paper-thin skin, his wrists raw and bleeding where the manacles had chafed. But his back was straight, and when he lifted his head, his eyes dark, fierce, unbroken, met Beatrice's gaze without flinching.

One second. Two.

There was no plea in his look. Only the cold promise that if he ever got his hands free, she would be the first to die.

And then he spat in her face.

The spit. The flash of steel.

Her hired man, without hesitating an instant, drove his dagger into the man's throat fast, without windup, professionally. The blade went into the hilt. The enslaved person grabbed it with both hands, cutting his palms to the bone. Blood ran down the hired man's arm, black in the lantern light.

The man wheezed, mouth gasping for air, as if hoping to catch the life slipping from his body. He fell to his knees. Convulsed, died slowly, thirty seconds that stretched like eternity. Wheezing, jerking. Then went still.

"The defiant don't live long," the hired man said coldly, wiping his dagger on the dead man's shirt.

The other slaves froze. Some closed their eyes; some looked at Beatrice with dull hatred. One boy, very young, no more than sixteen, wept soundlessly, shoulders shaking.

Beatrice smiled, as if she'd seen something mildly amusing. Inside her, the cold inner voice spoke: *One less piece of merchandise.*

Danger always sharpened her senses, made her feel alive. Risk and power. Power and risk.

She watched the blood spread across the wooden floor of the hold, flowing into cracks between the planks, disappearing into darkness. By morning, it would be dry. In a week, no one would remember a man had died here.

The selection continued. In the end, Beatrice pointed to four who, in her opinion, could bring her victory and pleasure. Her companions took the slaves into custody and led them outside, where wagons waited.

The slave-ship's deck was nearly empty now. Beatrice turned to leave.

And stopped.

A child sat huddled against a coil of rope near the gangplank. A girl, maybe eight or nine, in a torn shift. Not gladiator stock too small, too young. Probably a deckhand's daughter, or a stowaway discovered too late.

The girl's eyes met Beatrice's. No fear in them. Just emptiness. The look of someone who had already learned that hoping hurt worse than not hoping at all.

Beatrice knew that look.

Keep walking, she's not your problem.

The cold voice whispered.

She kept walking. Three steps. Four.

Then she stopped. Cursed under her breath.

"You." She turned to her guard. "The child. Find out who she belongs to. If she's cargo, buy her. If she's crew, offer enough to make them sell. And find her something to eat."

The guard blinked. "My lady?"

"Did I stutter?"

She did not wait for his response, just continued toward the carriages.

Weakness, the cold voice said. *I know. But tonight I can save one.*

It would not balance the scales. *Nothing would.*

* * *

By the time the last wagon rattled away toward her warehouse, the eastern sky had begun to pale.

Sunlight struck Beatrice's eyes. She shielded her face with her palm, surveying the city sprawled on the rocky promontory above the sea.

Ragusa was waking: fishermen dragging nets to their boats, merchants opening shops, the first cries of gulls audible. The morning breeze carried the smells of salt, fish, and blooming oleander. Beatrice inhaled deeply, savoring this moment between darkness and light, between lawful and forbidden. The cobblestones were still cool beneath her feet, not yet baked by the summer sun. A cart rattled past, laden with amphorae of olive oil, and somewhere a dog barked at the gulls.

Ragusa presented a remarkable sight at dawn. Its walls caught the first rays of the sun, creating the impression that the entire city radiated its own light. The terracotta-tiled roofs of the houses provided a vivid contrast with the whiteness of the walls. Narrow streets running down to the port were paved with polished stones, and elegant arches and loggias lent the city a refinement rare on this rocky coast.

The city straddled two rocky promontories like a rider astride a horse. On one side of the horseshoe-shaped harbor rose the aristocratic Upper City, dominated by the Admiral's Palace. On the opposite side bustled the Lower City, where the port, warehouses, trading-company offices, the exchange, and residential quarters were located. The Upper City gazed down on the Lower with the arrogance of ancient blood; the Lower glared back with the confidence of fresh coin.

The two parts of the city were connected by an avenue along the waterfront, though the journey was long enough that boats plied the harbor day and night, ferrying passengers from one side to the other in twenty minutes.

In the Upper City, where ancient noble families dwelt, narrow streets wound between stone palaces, each guarding its secrets behind high walls and wrought-iron gates. In quiet courtyards hidden from outsiders' eyes, decisions were made that shaped the city's fate. Here, wealth spoke softly, and power needed no shout.

The Lower City was entirely different. Life boiled and roared: merchants haggled at the exchange, sailors drank in taverns, stevedores hauled cargo from ships. Money smelled of sweat and salt, and fortunes rose and fell with each tide. Beatrice felt at home here, among those who knew the price of every deal and weren't ashamed of their ambitions.

She headed toward the Upper City, where the Stone Arena awaited. Today was a special day: the first training fights of new gladiators from the city's teams. New stars of Ragusa's arenas were born on days like this.

The Stone Arena was one of Ragusa's two main arenas, carved into the rock on the seaward side of the Upper City. From the highest rows of seats, spectators could see the Jeweled Sea stretching to the horizon, while below, on the sandy floor, men fought for their lives and the crowd's favor.

* * *

Beatrice arrived an hour before the start. The arena was already filling: nobles, wealthy merchants, ship captains, all those who could afford a seat in the boxes. The lower rows were packed with simpler folk: sailors, craftsmen, even servants who had saved coins for this spectacle.

Beatrice took her seat in one of the middle boxes, neither too high to seem arrogant nor too low to mingle with commoners. Beside her sat Giulia Morosini, a young widow whose husband had drowned six months ago, leaving her a shipping fortune. She wore her grief like jewelry, displaying it when convenient and tucking it away when not. Her dark hair was piled high, her neckline low, and her eyes never stopped moving. On Beatrice's other side, old Stefano Balbi wheezed into his handkerchief a banker whose nose had been broken so many times it zigged where it should have zagged, and whose risky ventures had made him rich enough that no one mentioned it.

"Signorina Beatrice," Giulia greeted her, smiling in a way that did not reach her eyes. "I hear you've acquired new fighters. I hope they'll provide us with a worthy spectacle."

"I always strive to please my friends," Beatrice replied with equal false warmth. "And perhaps even surprise them."

Stefano chuckled. "Surprise is expensive, my lady. But if it's worth it, I'm ready to place a bet."

"Then prepare your purse," Beatrice said. "Today you'll see something special."

The master of ceremonies, a portly man in a crimson robe, stepped into the center of the arena and raised his hands, calling for silence. "Noble ladies and gentlemen!" His voice carried across the arena. "Today we celebrate the first day of the new season! Blood will flow, sand will drink it, and the Three-Faced will decide who is worthy of life and who of death!"

A roar of approval rolled through the spectators. Beatrice surveyed the crowd. Among them, she saw many familiar faces: the head of the merchant guild, the admiral's counselor, ship captains, wealthy widows, and young heirs. All had gathered to enjoy the spectacle of blood and death, but for Beatrice, this was a moment to gather information, see who spoke with whom, and who trusted whom. Her agents, scattered among the crowd, watched attentively and noted everything necessary.

One of them, a sharp-eyed youth, had positioned himself near the admiral's counselor's box. Beatrice gave him a subtle gesture, and he nodded slightly, confirming everything was under control. Another agent of hers, a middle-aged woman with a forgettable face, approached a group of merchants and began a conversation about mutual acquaintances. Beatrice knew the woman was skilled at fishing out information while pretending merely to chat about this and that. Later, they would report to her in detail everything they'd heard, and from these scattered pieces she would assemble a complete picture of what was happening in the city under Cornaro's rule.

But now her attention was riveted to the arena. Both fighters belonged to her, and she saw commercial potential in each. The master of ceremonies raised his hand again, calling for silence, and addressed the crowd.

"Noble ladies and gentlemen!" he announced. "Today, we present to you new fighters, recently arrived from distant lands. They do not yet know our customs, but they thirst to prove themselves before you. The first match!"

The crowd burst into applause as two men were led into the arena. The afternoon sun beat down on the sand, and the air was thick with the smell of sweat, cheap wine, and the copper tang of old blood that no amount of raking could fully erase. Both fighters were bare-chested, wearing loose canvas trousers and sandals.

The northerner was tall and muscular, his white hair falling to his shoulders, a striking contrast against his tanned skin. A scar ran across his chest, from shoulder to ribs, old but deep. The dark-skinned fighter from the south was slightly shorter, his body carved from ebony. Every muscle sharply defined, every movement brimming with strength and grace.

The master of ceremonies gave a signal, and two servants brought wooden swords into the arena: rudises wrapped in leather, heavy as the real things. They handed them to the fighters, who tested their weight and balance. Wood thudded dully against wood when the northerner struck the hilt against his palm. These could not kill, but they could break bones reliably. Beatrice did not want to risk expensive enslaved people in the very first fight. In this round, both fighters belonged to her.

A horn blast cut the air, and the gladiators began circling each other, seeking weak points.

From the height of the box, the fighters seemed small, but Beatrice saw every strike. The northerner attacked first, a quick thrust aimed at the head. The dark-skinned fighter easily dodged. The sword whistled past his ear by a hair.

The crowd gasped in unison.

The fight picked up pace, fluid economy against raw strength. The northerner's rudis struck the dark-skinned fighter in the ribs. He doubled over, spitting blood onto the sand.

The crowd roared.

Something shifted in the northerner's posture, the sudden stillness before a storm.

With a growl more animal than human, he surged forward, ignoring his opponent's strikes. He seized the dark-skinned man by the throat and hurled him forcefully onto the sand. The rudises were tossed aside, and the fighters now battled bare-handed, rolling across the ground in a deadly embrace.

The crowd went wild. Beatrice noticed Giulia leaning forward, eyes gleaming, chest rising and falling rapidly. Apparently, her interest in the dark-skinned fighter was even stronger than it had seemed.

Beside the widow sat a young officer, one of the personal guards of the late admiral's widow, Emilia, one of many aristocrats whom the recent political changes had left untouched. He leaned toward his neighbor and whispered something, pointing at the arena. Beatrice strained to hear, but the crowd's noise drowned out his words. One of her agents was closer and could catch the conversation.

On the arena sand, the match's outcome was becoming increasingly apparent. Though the dark-skinned man possessed many martial skills, the northerner's fury and strength proved insurmountable. The blond giant pinned his opponent to the ground, knee pressed into his chest, hands squeezing his throat.

Her hand tightened on the armrest. She reached for her notebook, ready to cross out the banker's losing bet.

In the arena, the northerner's knee pressed into the dark-skinned man's chest, hands clutching his throat. The fighter's face was turning blue. One more second and it would be over.

The master of ceremonies already had his hand raised, ready to stop the fight.

And then the dark-skinned fighter, seemingly defeated, twisted like an eel, slipping from the grip. His leg described an arc and struck the northerner's head with such force that he collapsed onto the sand, unconscious.

The spectators gasped, then burst into applause. The dark-skinned man stood over his fallen opponent, breathing heavily but holding his head high, like a true champion.

Someone from the crowd shouted, "Sand Tiger!"

The nickname stuck. The crowd picked it up: "Tiger! Tiger! Tiger!"

"Victory!" the master of ceremonies announced, raising the dark-skinned fighter's hand.

Stefano turned purple with anger, his bet had lost. Giulia, however, smiled triumphantly, rubbing her hands in anticipation of her winnings.

From the neighboring box came Mario Vittori's howl. Old Aldo laughed, extending his hand for the money.

"It seems to me," Giulia said to Beatrice, leaning closer, "I'd like to look at this fighter... more closely. After the contests."

Beatrice smiled. "Of course. Everything can be arranged. Just keep in mind he bites."

Giulia smirked. "All the better."

And that gives me one more lever of influence over you.

Maintaining a pleasant expression on her face.

The evening continued. Fights alternated with performances by exotic dancers and acrobats. Food was served in exquisite dishes prepared by Ragusa's best chefs. Wine flowed freely, inflaming passions and loosening tongues. Beatrice moved from one group of guests to another, smiling, joking, listening, primarily listening.

By the end of the evening, her head was full of new information, her agents had gathered valuable intelligence, and her purse had grown noticeably heavier from the bets she had won. But most importantly, she had strengthened her network of influence, making several new, useful acquaintances.

Returning home, accompanied by her people, Beatrice allowed herself a slight smile of satisfaction. The day had been successful. The new gladiators had lived up to her expectations, the fights had gone well, and the intelligence gathered by her agents would prove a valuable asset in her games of power.

Night thickened. Torches along the walls of houses went out one by one. Ragusa was settling into sleep. Beatrice walked down the darkened street with the four shadows at her back. Behind her, the lights of the arena lingered. Ahead, darkness.

Then she noticed a shadow in the archway opposite. It flickered in the glow of the last lantern and vanished too quickly, too deliberately.

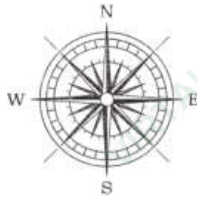
Her bodyguards noticed nothing. They watched ahead, to the sides, but not there.

Beatrice knew. She was being followed. The same presence she had sensed near the market, outside her door. She smiled a sharp, predatory curve of a smile in the darkness.

Another player on the board.

Her pulse quickened not with fear, but with anticipation. The game had just grown more interesting.

Chapter 5: Shore of New Hope



SEBASTIAN

Sebastian woke to burning in his fingers.

Sleep still clung to consciousness. Fragments of someone else's life. Here again. Beatrice. He'd seen flashes: an arena carved into rock, blood on sand, her cold gaze watching the slaughter. And pain. Her pain, bleeding into his.

He opened his eyes to the room at the Silver Horseshoe Inn. Gray dawn light seeped through cracks in the shutters. Sebastian raised his right hand. Three thin lines on his fingers, covered with scabs, ached.

Her. Her again.

Whatever caused this obsession, it was time to get her out of his head. Good thing his brothers couldn't see any of this.

He rose, splashed cold water from the pitcher onto his face, and dressed in the plain wool doublet they'd bought at the port, nothing that marked him as a Scaliger, nothing that invited questions. His hands still trembled. Remnants of the dream clung to consciousness like cobwebs, following him down the creaking stairs to the common room.

The Silver Horseshoe was waking with the city. Morning light slanted through dusty windows, catching motes that drifted like snow. The common room smelled of woodsmoke, stale beer, and bacon sizzling somewhere in the kitchen. A few sailors hunched over bowls of porridge at the far table, not looking up. The fire had burned down to embers, casting orange shadows on the soot-stained walls.

Mark sat at a table near the hearth, a cup of warm ale steaming before him. Even here, even in borrowed clothes, he looked like what he was: a soldier, a commander, someone used to giving orders. His dark hair was pulled back from a face of hard angles and watchful eyes. He'd positioned himself with his back to the wall and a clear view of both doors, habit, not paranoia.

Emile stood by the bar, speaking with the owner. Where Mark was stone, Emile was quicksilver, gesturing as he talked, his face animated, charm deployed like a weapon. His chestnut hair was tousled from sleep, and his clothes hung carelessly, but his dark eyes missed nothing. He turned when Sebastian descended, and the smile he offered was a mask over something more complex.

The innkeeper, Giovanni Bartolo, noticed Sebastian and nodded. He was a stocky man in his fifties, with the weathered face of a former sailor and scars on his forearms that spoke of blade work, not rope burns. "Good morning, young master," he said. "I hope you rested well after your journey."

"Thank you, Master Bartolo." Sebastian sat beside Mark.

Bartolo's voice dropped. "I recognized your brother the moment he walked in. Served under your father at Shark's Reef, he saved my life when the Corsairs boarded us. I was second mate on the *Sea Falcon*. Mark here was just a boy then, but he came aboard with the Admiral once, and I never forget a face." He glanced toward the door. "I heard what happened in Ragusa. Dark times have come."

Sebastian studied the innkeeper. Genuine sorrow lingered in his words.

"We count on your discretion, Master Bartolo," Mark said. "We need to contact our uncle, Alber Stone, but must do so carefully. Cornaro's reach is long, and even here, we cannot feel safe."

Bartolo nodded, his face turning serious. "Rely on me, gentlemen. I keep my word firmer than my blade, and I still wield a blade well enough." He glanced around and added quietly, "As for your uncle, Master Stone sent a man last night while you slept. Said he expects you at his house at noon. Said it was urgent."

The brothers exchanged glances.

"Are you certain it was Stone's man, not a trap from Cornaro?" Emile asked, ever inclined to suspicion.

Bartolo shrugged. "In Hogberg, even walls have eyes and ears, young master. And Master Stone has a network of informants across all the ports of the Isthmus. Your arrival could not have gone unnoticed."

"A network of informants?" Sebastian raised an eyebrow. "Our uncle has become an important person, I see."

"He always was, young master," Bartolo replied, respect in his voice. "In Hogberg's trade circles, the name Stone carries as much weight as Scaliger's."

"Well then, let's not keep him waiting," Mark finished his ale.

* * *

After a hearty breakfast, the brothers emerged onto Hogberg's streets to reach Alber Stone's house. The day was clear and hot. Summer on the mainland was harsher than on the island, and the air hung thick with humidity, clinging to the skin.

Sebastian winced, feeling yesterday's bruises beneath his shirt. His ribs ached where he'd slammed against the ship's railing during the escape. Emile limped slightly, his ankle still swollen from the scramble onto the dock. They were tired, hungry despite breakfast, and every step reminded them how far they'd fallen.

Hogberg opened before them in all its contradictory magnificence. A city grown on trade and wars, it combined luxury and poverty, elegance and crudeness. Narrow streets, paved with uneven cobblestones, wound between houses like canals between islands. The buildings' façades were decorated with stained glass and stucco, but just around the corner, one could stumble upon a reeking gutter full of refuse. All of it created the image of a city living by its own laws, where the beautiful and the ugly coexisted, ignoring each other.

"Nothing like Ragusa," Sebastian remarked, grimacing at the smell of a drainage ditch.

"Island cities are easier to keep clean," Emile said. "Here, the city just grew, no plan, no order."

"And yet there's a beauty to it," Mark noted, pointing to a magnificent cathedral rising above the neighboring buildings. Its spires, sheathed in gold, sparkled in the morning sun, and stone gargoyles gazed down at the city from on high, like ancient guardians. "That cathedral is three hundred years old. It was built almost immediately after the city's founding, when half the world collapsed."

At the Square of Three Fountains, named for an elegant marble structure depicting sea nymphs, the brothers stopped to buy roasted chestnuts from an older man tending a smoking brazier. The square teemed with life: merchants loudly praised goods laid out on stalls; artisans demonstrated their skill under the open sky; street performers entertained passersby with simple tricks and songs.

Emile studied the marble nymphs with the focused attention he usually reserved for maps and ledgers. His gaze traced the flowing lines of their robes, the way the sculptor had captured movement in stone, and the subtle asymmetry that made each figure distinct. "The proportions are classical," he murmured, half to himself. "See how the weight shifts? That's no accident; that's someone who studied the old masters. Before the Cataclysm, they say, there were whole academies devoted to such work."

"All you think about is art," Sebastian chuckled, chewing a hot chestnut.

"Someone has to notice the world around us, brother." Emile's eyes hadn't left the sculpture. "You see threats. Mark sees tactical positions. I see... everything else."

"You'll get your training," Mark said, putting a hand on Sebastian's shoulder. "If Uncle hasn't converted the fencing hall in his house. But you fought well on the quay, I've been meaning to tell you that all these days."

"I miss home," Sebastian said quietly, watching the unfamiliar, alien life around him. There was undisguised longing in his voice for Ragusa, for the familiar way of life forever left behind.

He remembered white sails at dawn, the smell of the sea mixed with citrus from the garden. All of it remained in the past.

"Home isn't a place, but people," Mark answered. His voice cracked just for a moment, barely audible. He covered it by squeezing his brother's shoulder. "And we're still together. That's what matters."

Emile watched the crowd intently, his gaze picking out details others didn't notice: a man in a hooded cloak watching them too closely; two guards in city-watch uniforms exchanging glances at the sight of the brothers; a fish merchant who broke off mid-cry and slipped into a side alley.

"We've been noticed," he murmured. "Better hurry."

Their path led across the Silver Bridge, an elegant structure dividing the city into two. Statues of sea creatures and gods whose names were long forgotten but whose cults had flourished before the Cataclysm adorned the bridge. It had been built before the city itself existed. At its center, the brothers stopped, gazing at the river, its murky current carrying all to the sea.

"Look." Emile pointed to a barge passing by, loaded with weapons. "Someone's preparing for war."

"Or defense," Mark noted. "In troubled times, even merchants arm themselves."

"Well, look who's here."

The brothers turned. Three young men in fine clothing, their faces spoiled by wine and idleness, approached. One with red hair and a gold ring on his finger stepped forward, contempt in his eyes. "Sons of the deposed admiral." His lip curled. "Enjoying our city?"

Mark's hand moved to his rapier hilt, but Emile grabbed his wrist. "Not worth it." His voice was low. "We're strangers here."

The red-haired man's companions snickered. One spat into the river.

"Your Uncle Stone," the red-haired one continued, "tell him the Antlian merchants are still waiting. That is, if anyone still cares what a Stone thinks, now that you've lost your precious island."

Mark stepped forward. His gaze was cold as ice.

"Remember my face," he whispered. "When we return, I'll find you."

The red-haired man's smirk faltered.

"Empty threats from beggars."

“A promise.”

The brothers walked past, and behind them, silence hung. The laughter died.

“Get used to it,” Emile said grimly. “There will be many such meetings.”

The aristocratic hillside district of Altamira starkly differed from the port below. Here, the houses rose taller, the streets spread wider, and the air blew cleaner. Wealthy merchants and hereditary aristocrats had built their palazzos on the slope overlooking the bay, where every window commanded views of incoming ships and islands on the horizon. Each building seemed to compete with its neighbor in luxury: marble columns, stained-glass windows, carved balconies entwined with ivy and grapevine.

Alber Stone’s house stood in the most prestigious quarter, beside the residences of old merchant families. A four-story palace of light stone with lace balconies, it was decorated with sculptures of sea deities and the coats of arms of families into which the Stones had married. Two guards in expensive armor stood before the gates, clearly professionals, not hired rabble.

One of them recognized the brothers and silently opened the gates.

The courtyard was a small world unto itself. Paved with polished stone slabs, shaded by ancient trees, and decorated with fountains whose waters murmured peacefully. In the corner stood a statue of a woman with a child in her arms, carved from white marble. It could have been twenty years old or a thousand. After centuries of barbarism, sculptors had learned to carve no worse than in antiquity. Servants moved silently between columns and archways, performing their duties.

“This is more like it,” Emile muttered, looking around. “At least here, we’re not beggars.”

They were led through corridors decorated with frescoes and tapestries to a spacious study. Light poured through tall windows overlooking the garden. At a massive oak desk sat Alber Stone.

He was fifty years old but looked younger, lean, fit, with gray streaking his dark hair. His eyes were sharp and calculating, his movements precise. He wore expensive yet straightforward clothing: dark velvet with silver embroidery. Several rings glinted on his fingers, each a seal of a merchant house.

Alber rose and came around the desk. His gaze slid over each nephew, assessing, weighing, judging. “Sit,” he said, pointing to chairs. His voice was dry, businesslike. Then, as if remembering something, he embraced each of the brothers in turn.

The brothers sat. Alber returned behind the desk, poured wine into goblets, and handed them to his nephews. He did not drink himself, merely holding the goblet and watching.

"I know everything," he said without preamble. "Francis is dead. Emilia betrayed him. Cornaro seized power. You fled. My condolences and congratulations on escaping."

He set the goblet on the table. "I'll be direct. Your position is shit. The family won't abandon you, but don't expect special love either. You're alive. Good. But no one's rushing to restore you to power."

Silence stretched between them. Mark clenched his jaw. Emile looked down. Sebastian's face burned with fury.

"Why?" Mark's voice was flat.

"Because your father squandered everything your grandfather built," Alber said bluntly. He rose and walked to the window, gazing at the garden below.

"Do you know what Ragusa was before Cosimo Scaliger? A whorehouse, the most famous brothel on the Jeweled Sea, surrounded by taverns and a half-pirate harbor. A nothing city in a world of chaos. The Cornaros ruled it, then ruled it like a gambling den, skimming coins and dodging knives."

He turned back to face them. "Your grandfather changed everything. He overthrew the Cornaros, yes, but that was the easy part. What came after was the work of a genius. He built a fleet that commanded respect. He conquered half the Jeweled Sea, not for glory, but for control. And then this is what made him great: he understood that ships and soldiers mean nothing without gold."

Alber's voice hardened with something like admiration. "Cosimo founded the Exchange. He made Ragusa the choke point for every trade route between the Ocean and the cities of the Isthmus. Every merchant, every cargo, every coin, it all flowed through Ragusan hands. He turned a brothel into the financial heart of the region."

He returned to the desk, picking up his wine at last. "The great houses feared him, yes. But they also loved him, because he made them rich beyond imagination. When Cosimo spoke, men listened because he'd built something worth protecting."

The silence stretched. Sebastian felt the words like blows.

"And our father?" Mark asked, his voice tight.

"Francis inherited paradise and treated it like his birthright." Alber's tone went cold. "He made enemies of allies. He threatened to ban the arena games, the games that bind the great houses together, that seal alliances and settle disputes, and that let the common folk bleed off their rage in the stands instead of the streets. Every city needs a release valve. Vespers has its Carnival; Ragusa has its arenas. He trusted the wrong people and ignored the right ones. He forgot that power must be earned every day, not inherited once and forgotten."

He drank deeply. "When the blow came, no one raised a hand to defend him. The great houses didn't betray Francis; they simply stepped aside and let Cornaro walk through the door your father had left open."

He stood silhouetted against the light. "The coup ran deep. Far deeper than you know. Most island families participated. But they didn't want to dirty their hands, so they delivered you to Luciano indirectly, drugged in your sleep. Cowardly. Clever. Ragusan to the core."

Mark clenched his fists until his knuckles whitened.

"Repressions in Ragusa continue," Stone said. "Cornaro hunts everyone who might have helped you. Every day, new arrests."

"Uncle, we must gather swords and return!" Sebastian's jaw tightened. "Cornaro attacked suddenly. The people will rise for us—they loved Father!"

"No one will rise, brother—" Mark cut in. "We overestimated their love for us."

"Correct." Stone walked around the desk. "We mistook wishes for reality. The alliances your grandfather created? Gone. The loyalty we assumed? Never existed."

"But Father "

"Your father was unpopular." Stone's voice hardened. "And the Young Pretender we dismissed as harmless? He fucked us over."

Silence.

"The family won't abandon you," Stone continued. "But we have our own problems. Our bank branch in Galtmark was massacred last week. All documents destroyed. Your second cousin and all loyal people were killed. The family's commercial potential south of the Isthmus has been undermined for years, if not forever."

"Who?" Mark asked.

"Unknown. Which is the problem?" Stone turned to the window. "In the past, the Scaligers had a city behind them protected by the sea. Now, thanks to your father, we have nothing."

Through the glass, manicured greenery, ancient trees whose crowns cast cozy shade, and an elegant fountain where water streamed from a stone lion's maw. Sebastian watched Emile's gaze drift to the fountain and knew his brother was remembering the same thing. Summers here as children, splashing in that water with their cousin Liana. Then the world had seemed vast and full of wonders, not dangers and betrayals.

"I don't want to condemn Francis; he's dead. So understand this: the family doesn't consider you their own. Won't cast you out, but don't expect special love."

Not until you earn it.” He clenched his fist, gold rings flashing each a seal of a merchant house, each a promise of support. But not for the nephews. Not now.

“We don’t need the love of traders!” Sebastian spat the words like poison. “You lack honor! You’re nobodies, while we ruled and will rule!”

Mark stepped toward Sebastian, his eyes cold as the ice of the Jeweled Sea. “You will apologize to Uncle immediately.”

“Never! Your father was butchered like a pig, and you crawl before this... merchant!”

Mark struck without a word, sharply, with full force. His palm met Sebastian’s cheek with a crack that echoed off the study walls. The head jerked to the side, and hair flew up.

The only sound was Sebastian’s ragged breathing.

Sebastian slowly turned his head back. He stared at Mark. His eyes were full of tears, but not from pain, from rage and humiliation.

Mark stared back, unflinching. His hand remained raised. “Next time I won’t stop at a slap,” he said quietly.

Sebastian lunged at him, but Emile managed to grab him from behind.

“Enough!” Stone’s voice rang out, and Sebastian froze, breathing heavily, face red, tears in his eyes. He tasted blood; he’d bitten his cheek from the inside. His ear rang from the blow.

Sebastian stood motionless. His cheek burned. But the burn inside was stronger: humiliation, rage, helplessness. Mark had struck him. His older brother. For the first time in his life.

Stone returned to the desk and pulled from a drawer a heavy purse full of gold coins. “I forgive you, for the first and last time, for your mother’s sake. Cross me again, you’ll swim back to your island, where they’ll gut you like a boar. Or chain you to the galleys to avoid the mess.” He tossed the purse to Emile.

“Hogberg is a moderately peaceful city. Go, honor your father’s memory. Don’t brawl, and don’t draw attention. Return here for the night. Tomorrow, we’ll decide what to do.”

“Thank you, Uncle,” Mark said and left the room. Sebastian, head bowed, followed. Last was Emile, who, before leaving, spread his hands apologetically.

MARK

The afternoon sun hit Mark's face as they stepped onto the street. Emile and Sebastian walked ahead, silent. Sebastian's shoulders were rigid, his fists clenched at his sides.

Mark watched his younger brother's back and felt the anger rise hot and bitter.

Fool. Idiot. We need Alber. We need the family. And you spat in their faces for what? Pride?

His palm still tingled from the slap. He'd never struck Sebastian before, never had reason to.

But as he watched Sebastian walk in that stiff, proud gait, refusing to show pain even now, something else stirred beneath the anger.

He's just like Father.

The thought hit Mark like a fist to the chest.

Francis had been the same way. Always saying what he thought, regardless of consequences. Telling the powerful men of Ragusa exactly what he thought of them, to their faces. They smiled back. Nodded. Waited.

Until they did not.

Mark remembered the last time he'd seen Father three weeks before the coup, at a formal dinner. They'd argued about something trivial. He could not even remember what. What he remembered was leaving angry, not looking back.

He'd never said goodbye.

Something cracked inside Mark's chest. A door he'd kept locked since that morning on the *Medusa*, when he'd had to be strong for his brothers. When someone had to hold things together.

His eyes burned. He blinked hard and kept walking.

Not here. Not now.

But grief did not care about timing. It rose up his throat like bile: Father's voice, Father's laugh, Father's stubborn honor, the same honor Sebastian had inherited along with his dark eyes. The same honor that had gotten Francis killed.

Mark pressed his fist against his thigh until his knuckles went white and forced his breathing steady.

The rage at Sebastian drained away, leaving something colder in its place. Not forgiveness. Not yet. But understanding. And beneath it, the raw wound of loss.

He's young. He'll learn. Or he'll die the way Father did.

Mark quickened his pace to catch up with his brothers. There was work to do. A father to honor. A future to build from the ashes of everything they'd lost.

He would grieve properly later. In private. Where no one could see him break.

For now, he had to be the eldest son, the heir.

It would have to be enough.

ALBER

Stone remained in the study. He sat at the desk and wrote on a sheet of paper for a long time, then summoned a servant. "Send by pigeon to Ragusa."

The servant nodded and left. Stone remained alone. Fire in the fireplace crackled, casting dancing shadows on the walls. The pen scratched paper, the only sound in the silence.

For years, he'd built a network in Ragusa, secret from Francis, meant to protect the family agents, informants, people in the palace, in the fleet, in the great houses. Clarence had been the best: experienced, cautious, invisible.

And the network had failed.

The coup happened too quickly. Too cleanly. Clarence had managed to warn only that something was brewing, but not the scale. Not about forty families. Not that Emilia would betray her husband.

Too late. Everything was too late.

Clarence had left for Galtmark at dawn, as planned. Good. Alber needed to put out that fire first; the massacre at the bank demanded answers. But now, instead of the most experienced resident in Ragusa, a young woman remained: Beatrice Feski, nineteen years old, a cupbearer at court. Clarence had considered her the smartest of his agents and had transferred the entire residency to her before departing.

In a day, she should arrive in Hogberg. Meet with him personally. He would assess her. Decide if she could be entrusted with what remained.

Alber could only hope Clarence hadn't made a mistake. But he wasn't sure of anything.

Finally, Alber set down the pen. He studied the sheet, then folded the letter, dripped red wax, and pressed the signet ring. The wax melted, smoked in the candlelight. Stone's face was weary; he looked every year of his age.

A tapping sounded from the window.

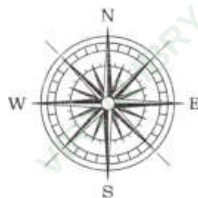
Alber turned. On the windowsill sat an enormous, black raven with eyes that gleamed too intelligently for a bird. It wasn't looking at him. It was looking at the desk at the sealed letter.

Stone rose and approached the window. The raven didn't fly away. "What do you want?" he whispered.

The bird cawed once, sharply, and soared into the sky.

Alber watched it go, and something tightened in his chest. Dread. Cold and certain. "Forgive me," he whispered into the emptiness. "Forgive us all."

Chapter 6: Serpent in Paradise



BEATRICE

What Beatrice intended tonight could shatter a life. Perhaps two.

She stood at her window, watching night settle over Ragusa.

The city slept. Only occasionally did lights flicker in windows: someone unable to sleep, someone reading by candlelight, someone, perhaps like her, preparing for a secret meeting.

In her hand, she held a small piece of parchment, the very one a servant had discreetly passed her at the arena half an hour before the fights ended, three words, written in familiar handwriting: One hour. Temple of Selene.

Clarence had activated the sleeper agent. The serpent was ready to emerge from its den.

Beatrice crushed the parchment in her fist, then tossed it into the candle flame. The paper flared, blackened, turned to ash.

She quickly changed from her luxurious gown into the clothes of a common townswoman: a dark gray dress of rough wool, a black hooded cloak, and leather boots without heels. The coarse fabric scratched against her skin, a reminder that tonight she was not a lady, but a blade. She hid her hair beneath a kerchief. Now she looked like a servant or a craftsman's wife returning home after a late visit to a sick relative.

The hour had come.

The July night wrapped the city in sticky heat, that particular swelter that comes from the sea after sunset and makes people toss in their beds, throwing off sheets. Moonlight transformed the white stone walls into ghostly silver, and the dark harbor water reflected the stars, as if a second sky had spread beneath the keels of ships.

Leaving through the back door, Beatrice was not alone.

The shadow in the archway, noticed on her way home, still troubled her. Someone was watching, perhaps watching even now. But she showed no concern and pressed harder into the wall's darkness before stepping onto the street.

Behind her, keeping their distance, moved the same four: her constant companions on such nocturnal expeditions. Two ahead, two behind. Silent shadows in dark cloaks.

Beatrice turned into an alley so tight the walls seemed to lean together overhead, shutting out the moon. It smelled of urine, rotting refuse, and cats. There was only darkness here, and the scurrying of rats.

Then a vast square, flooded with light. Five figures crossed it quickly, dissolving into the fountain's shadow.

She crossed a bridge where black water swallowed the moon's reflection whole.

And finally, the abandoned temple quarter.

Here once stood twelve temples, one for each of the old goddesses. After the Cataclysm, Hecate had triumphed, and the old cults were declared heresy. Now Ivy swallowed what remained, and for three centuries, only thieves, beggars, and those with secrets had come here.

The Temple of Selene, goddess of the moon, secrets, and hidden knowledge, stood deep in the quarter. A round dome with a gaping breach, through which the night sky was visible. Massive arches, once decorated with mosaics of silvery stones, now crumbling, with black voids where the goddess's faces had been. Walls covered in cracks, through which tree roots grew.

Beatrice stopped at the entrance. Looked around. Her bodyguards dissolved into the shelter of nearby ruins, close but invisible.

She slipped inside through a gap in the ivy-covered wall.

The smell hit immediately.

Cold seeped through her boots from the cracked marble. The temple remembered winter even in July.

The air inside was thick with rot and something else, a sweetish tang beneath the mold, the kind of smell fear leaves behind.

In the center of the chapel, moonlight penetrating the breach in the dome formed a silver circle on the cracked marble floor. Once an altar had stood here. Now only a fragment of the pedestal remained, crusted with lichen.

At the heart of that circle stood a woman in a dark cloak.

Emilia Scaliger, widow of Admiral Francis, born Tagliapietra, lowered her hood when she heard footsteps.

The light revealed her face without mercy.

Emilia had aged a decade in a matter of months. The woman who'd once commanded a room now seemed to shrink from the light. Shadows pooled

beneath her eyes, and her golden hair hung in a careless knot; the expensive dress draped from shoulders grown too thin.

The last months had sucked the life from her, drop by drop.

"Beatrice Feski." Emilia's voice trembled. "I waited a long time for this meeting. Though I did not guess it would be you."

Beatrice entered the circle of light in silence.

Emilia stepped back. Then straightened. Anger flashed in her eyes. "Do you understand what risk you forced me to take?" Her voice rose to a high note. "Cornaro's people do not let me out of their sight! I am constantly under surveillance. Every step. Every word."

"And yet you're here."

"I had to lie that I was going to spend the night at the country house!" Emilia clenched her fists. "If someone checks... if someone noticed—"

"No one noticed," Beatrice said calmly, bored. "My people tracked you. You're clean."

"Your people!" Emilia stepped forward. "Easy for you to say. You're not threatened with—"

"I am threatened with the same thing." Her voice cut like a blade drawn across silk. "The gallows does not distinguish between those who ordered and those who executed."

Emilia fell silent, her breathing ragged, hands trembling.

"The time has come," Beatrice said simply. "The fledglings have flown."

The anger in Emilia's eyes died, replaced by fear. "I knew." She hugged herself. "But I hoped..."

"Hoped?" Beatrice smiled. "For what? That Cornaro would love you?"

"No." The word came out like a slap. "That it would all... end."

"It will end," Beatrice agreed, taking a step closer. "Sooner or later. The question is only how."

Emilia backed against a column. Pressed her back to the cold stone.

"I do not want more blood on my hands."

Beatrice stopped a pace from her. Tilted her head, as if studying a rare butterfly.

"A bit late, don't you think?"

"Francis was—"

"Francis was a poor ruler and a good target—" Beatrice cut her off. "Do not try to rewrite history, Emilia. You agreed to kill him. That's a fact."

"I did not kill! I just—"

"You were silent." Beatrice's voice softened. More dangerous. "Which, in my opinion, is even worse. At least a killer takes responsibility. But you just turned away. And climbed into the victor's bed."

Emilia squeezed her eyes shut. A tear rolled down her cheek.

"You're cruel."

"I am honest."

A long pause stretched between them. In the temple, only Emilia's breathing could be heard, rapid, interrupted. Somewhere in the gloom, water dripped steadily. A rat skittered across the stone.

"What do you want?" Emilia whispered.

"The same as always." Beatrice began to circle her, like a serpent around prey.

"Your cooperation."

"I've already paid."

"Oh, darling." Beatrice stopped behind her. Emilia spun around sharply. "You've only just begun to pay."

"I have nothing more!"

"You do." Beatrice drew a scroll from her cloak and unrolled it slowly. "See these numbers? These names?"

Emilia paled.

"Old leverage, the very thing that forced you to marry Francis. But these lines are new." Beatrice ran her finger down the parchment. "Your father supplies the corsairs of the Crimson Isles now. Not smuggling. Treason."

"He did not know—"

"He knew. Signatures. Seals. Witnesses." Beatrice rolled up the scroll. "One signal from me, and the guard knocks on House Tagliapietra's door at dawn."

Emilia grabbed the column. Her legs buckled. "What do you want?"

"Three things." Beatrice raised one finger. "First: information about the garrison. Number of soldiers. Guards. Weapons."

"I cannot—"

"Second." Another finger. "Sabotage the artillery on the eastern wall. Find it yourself or through someone. Does not matter."

"Beatrice—"

"Third." A third finger. "The small gate in the northern wall. When we say so, you open it."

Emilia stared at her with wide eyes. "That's... that's treason. If they catch me—" "They'll quarter you. Yes, I know." Beatrice shrugged. "But fear of death did not stop you from betraying your husband, remember?"

The words struck like a blade. Precise. Merciless.

Emilia swayed. "That was different..."

"No." Her voice held the finality of a closing coffin lid. "It was the same. You betrayed a man to save yourself. And now you'll do it again."

"And if I refuse?"

Beatrice smiled. Not with her eyes, only her lips.

"They'll hang your father in the Main Square. They'll throw your brother into debtor's prison. He'll last a year there, maybe two. Your mother and sister will be thrown into the street, without money and without protection." She paused. "You know what awaits beautiful women without means in Vespers."

Emilia slid down the column and sat on the floor. "Please..."

"Please, what?" Beatrice crouched beside her. Then she grabbed her wrist. Emilia froze, eyes wide. Beatrice's grip was iron. "Please, spare me? Please, choose someone else?"

Emilia sobbed quietly, hopelessly. Beatrice released her wrist. A red mark remained on the pale skin.

"I am tired, Beatrice. So tired..."

"I know." Beatrice's voice softened, almost human. "I am tired too. But we cannot stop. Neither of us."

"Why?"

"Because otherwise we'll both be dead. You and me. That's the whole answer."

A long pause hung in the air. Emilia wiped away tears, smearing them across her face. Her hands shook. She could not make them stop.

"If I do this..." Her voice went hoarse, broken. "What will happen to me?"

"New name. New life. Money. Freedom."

"You're lying."

"Perhaps." Beatrice stood, extending her hand. "But do you have a choice?"

Emilia looked at the extended hand for a long time. Then she took it and rose.

"No. There's no choice."

"Go," Beatrice said. "By a separate route. Do not look back."

Emilia stepped toward the exit. Stopped. "Beatrice..."

“Yes?”

“Have you ever felt...” Her voice broke. “...that you too want to just... stop?”

For a moment, just a moment, Beatrice felt the weight of every compromise, every betrayal, every choice that had brought her here.

The girl she'd once been would have wept for Emilia, would have seen a trapped woman, not a tool to be used.

That girl was dead. Had been dead for a year or two.

Beatrice buried the thought deep, where it belonged.

She didn't answer.

Emilia shook her head, as if answering herself, and quickly exited through the breach in the wall.

Beatrice remained in the circle of moonlight, listening to the retreating footsteps. Then silence. The smell of decay wrapped around her. In the darkness above, the broken dome framed stars.

She allowed herself to exhale. Relax her shoulders. Close her eyes for a moment.

The noose tightened. Now only to pull.

She glanced at the broken mosaics on the walls: fragments of the goddess's face, silver stones fallen from their settings, leaving dark voids.

Even goddesses of secrets couldn't keep theirs. But I will keep mine until the very end.

Beatrice slipped from the temple through the same gap in the wall. Her bodyguards materialized from the shadows. She nodded, and they set off on the return route.

The night air did nothing to clear her head.

Beatrice walked through empty streets, shadows at her back, and tried not to think about Emilia's face, the way she'd crumpled against that column, the sound of her sobbing: not theatrical tears, but the ugly, broken kind.

She betrayed her husband. She deserves everything coming.

The cold voice reminded.

True. All true.

So why did Beatrice's hands feel dirty?

“Have you ever felt... that you too want to just... stop?”

Emilia's question echoed. And for one treacherous moment, Beatrice let herself consider it.

What if she walked away? Took a ship to some distant port, changed her name?

She had enough money hidden. Enough skills to survive.

She could stop being Beatrice Feski, spymaster's blade.

The fantasy lasted three heartbeats.

Then she buried it.

You don't get to stop. You made your choices. Now live with them. Or die with them.

She walked on, the weight on her chest heavier than before.

The path back passed in silence. Beatrice checked every corner with peripheral vision.

And once, perhaps once, it seemed to her that the silhouette on the rooftop to the right had shifted. Too smoothly. Too carefully.

She did not stop. Did not turn around. Simply memorized the place.

A block later, she glanced back, as if casually, adjusting her kerchief. The rooftop was empty.

Did I imagine it? Or not?

Instincts, honed by years of working in shadows, were silent. They did not scream in danger. Only... whispered. Maybe a cat. Perhaps a night bird. Or maybe a watcher.

Beatrice walked on, maintaining a calm expression. But her right hand, under the cloak, found the hilt of a thin dagger and did not release it until she reached home.

When she finally found herself in the safety of her own walls, she allowed herself to exhale.

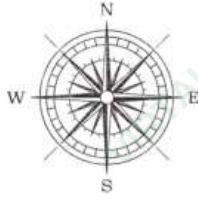
She approached the window. Looked out at the street, only silver light on the stones.

If I was wrong, then tomorrow there'd be a couple more bodies on the gallows.

She wondered, briefly, if Emilia would sleep tonight. Then she stopped wondering. Sleep was for those who could afford regret.

She drew the curtain and stepped away from the window.

Chapter 7: Poison and Steel



SEBASTIAN

“You’re worse than Father,” Mark said coldly.

His voice cut like a snapping rope. The vein at his temple pulsed with restrained anger. He stared at Sebastian without blinking, dark-haired, lean, with the watchful eyes of a falcon that had spotted weakness.

“You’re an idiot who insulted a blood relative and friend on the mainland. At least Father knew how to lose with dignity. You couldn’t even manage that.”

The Seashell tavern hummed with quiet conversation around them. Unlike the dockside establishments they’d passed, this place was cleaner and more refined: tablecloths of bleached linen, silver candlesticks, well-trained servers in spotless aprons. On the walls hung copper plaques detailing the privileges granted by the current duke’s grandfather. The owner had the right not to admit the guard or answer questions about lodgers, an ancient prerogative that smugglers and fugitives had exploited for three generations.

Through the window, Hogberg spread below them. The high ducal castle dominated the skyline, watching the city with the indifference of a stone giant. Twenty stone piers lined the harbor, hundreds of masts swaying on the waves, lantern lights reflecting in dark water like a starry sky drowned in the deep.

Sebastian sat in sullen silence, feeling the wine cloud his mind faster than it should. He was stronger than his brothers, taller than Mark by half a head, broader in the shoulders, but in their small hierarchy, he’d always acknowledged Mark as chief judge.

“I didn’t mean to...” he began, but stumbled, finding no words.

His massive shoulders slumped. The brothers’ faces blurred before him, and the tavern’s sounds grew muffled, as if he were sinking underwater.

“He spoke as if everything were already decided. As if we should just... accept... that Cornaro sits in Father’s chair, sleeps in his bed, gives orders to his men...”

Emile returned from the bar with another bottle, setting it down with a heavy thud. The youngest brother had their mother’s sharp features and a talent for looking unconcerned when he was anything but.

"They're talking about us," he remarked quietly. His fingers drummed on the table, keeping some internal rhythm. "And nothing good. Mostly about how the Scaligers slept through a conspiracy under their noses and paid for the old goat's lust."

A crooked smirk appeared on his face, closer to a grimace than a smile.

"Also, they're saying Grandfather's words came true: that they'd tolerate us for two generations, then throw us out. I heard one of the dockworkers saying," he hesitated, "that Father got what he deserved for preferring young tits to state matters. And that Cornaro had his eye on our stepmother, and she did not resist much."

Sebastian's face turned crimson. He raised his glass and drained it in a few gulps, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Emilia was always a whore," he rasped. "But our father did not deserve that death. Not in his own palace, not with a knife between his ribs like some thief or drunk from the docks."

"And not with a son who insults their only ally," Emile noted, sipping from his glass.

Sebastian slammed his fist on the table. The glasses jumped.

"Enough! Hear me? Stop lecturing me!"

Patrons at neighboring tables turned. In the corner, where shadows gathered thickest, a figure in a gray cloak sat motionless. Watching. Sebastian noticed, but the wine made everything blur together.

Mark did not answer immediately. He watched in silence. Then, slowly, very slowly, he said:

"Listen to me." Each word sounded like a hammer blow. "You think I like this? Think I do not want to slit Cornaro's throat, and every bastard who helped him? But I want to win. Not just die feeling satisfied. Understand the difference, brother?"

Sebastian raised his eyes, something like understanding flashing in them.

"I understand, Mark. But Uncle... he's a merchant. He thinks about profits and losses, not honor."

"Which is exactly why he's alive and rich," Mark shot back. "While we sit here, afraid to show our faces. And speaking of honor, I don't recall honor allowing you to insult a man who opened his doors to us and offered protection."

"What do you know?" Sebastian's voice cracked. "Mark, the heir. Emile, the favorite. And me? The spare! Who'll only be noticed if the first one dies!"

Silence. Mark and Emile exchanged glances, shocked by their brother's sudden confession. Sebastian sat, breathing heavily, his chest heaving like a blacksmith's bellows.

"You're not a spare, Seb," Mark finally said, his voice losing its hardness. "You're my brother. And if we start tearing at each other now, Cornaro wins without lifting a finger."

"Brothers..." Sebastian mumbled, the wine hitting him hard now. His eyes moistened, and his lips trembled.

"Is it really all over for us? Is this the end? Will we never return?"

Such childlike confusion sounded in his voice that Mark instinctively reached out and squeezed his shoulder.

"Well, we're actually alive," Emile objected with his usual irony. "And if not for you, we'd be in chains right now. That's the good outcome."

"As it is, we're free, have conditional support from relatives, and even have money," Mark added. He placed his hand on Sebastian's, squeezing hard, as if he could transfer some of his own strength.

"Listen, little brother. Do not think we do not care. The island is ours, and sooner or later, we'll take it back. It's just that falling apart now is like dropping anchor in a storm. Do not make the situation worse than it is."

He paused, then continued more harshly:

"We're not just outcasts without kin or clan. Our family is rich. Our grandfather took the island not with a sword, but with a mind sharp as a razor, diplomacy, alliances, and the right words at the right time. Our ancestors sent expeditions across the ocean when others were afraid to leave shore. They patronized the greatest painters, sculptors, and philosophers. The Scaligers built not only fortresses, but libraries. Whatever Father did, the fact that they overthrew us insults everyone. If they do not help us quickly, harshly, and visibly to all, the family will start getting stepped on all over the Isthmus. You have a right to vengeance, and they'll provide it."

Sebastian looked at him gratefully, but his head swam. The wine had gone to his head faster than ever before.

"He's had enough," Emile sighed, watching Sebastian sway. "Come on, let's get him some air before he passes out face-first in his chicken."

* * *

The night air was cool and fresh after the tavern's warmth. They found a fountain in a small square nearby, a bronze mermaid pouring water from a shell. Sebastian splashed his face, gasping at the cold.

"Better?" Emile asked, leaning against the fountain's edge.

"I don't know what happened." Sebastian shook water from his hair. "I've never gotten that drunk on two glasses."

"Three," Emile corrected. "You drained the first before we even ordered food. Classic Seb." He grinned, that sharp smile that made him look like a fox. "You always did drink like you were trying to drown something."

"Shut up."

"I'm serious. Remember the harvest festival three years ago? You challenged that Barberini captain to a drinking contest and ended up in the harbor. Mark had to fish you out."

"He didn't have to. I can swim."

"You were unconscious."

Sebastian groaned. "Must you bring that up every time?"

"Yes. It's my duty as the younger, smarter brother." Emile's grin softened.

"Besides, it's good to see you acting human instead of brooding like a martyred saint."

Sebastian looked at his reflection in the fountain's dark water. His face stared back, unwarped, not corpse-like, just tired, just him.

"I don't brood."

"You absolutely brood. You've been doing it since we left Ragusa. Silent stares, heavy sighs, meaningful glances at the horizon. If we weren't so busy, I'd think you were in love." Emile mimicked a tragic pose. "Oh, the weight of my noble suffering!"

"I'm going to throw you in this fountain."

"You can try. But then who would save your reputation at dinner parties?"

Despite everything, Sebastian laughed. A real laugh, rough and unexpected. It hurt his chest in a way that felt strangely good.

"Come on," he said. "Let's head back before Mark sends a search party."

* * *

When they returned to The Seashell, a girl in a hooded cloak sat at their table with Mark.

She materialized as if from nowhere, soundless as a ghost.

“Will their graces permit me to join them?” Amusement laced her voice. “Or have the Scaligers forgotten old friends?”

The hood fell back. Light hair, blue eyes, sharp as spring ice, a jawline that brooked no argument. She was tall for a woman, and when she leaned back, she spread her hands on the table like an officer in a war council.

Sebastian froze.

“Don’t recognize me?” She laughed. “The barbarian princess from the tree? I broke my leg because of you, remember? You swore you’d save me or drown together.” Her smile sharpened. “Keep your word, cousins. Now’s the time to drown.”

The brothers exchanged glances, and the first to understand was Sebastian.

“Liana?!” he exclaimed, his face brightening.

He jumped up and hugged his cousin, Emile, following.

Liana laughed, finding herself in Sebastian’s bear hug, then in Emile’s more restrained but no less warm embrace.

Sebastian’s heart swelled as the girl from the tree. The cousin who’d never judged, never expected them to be perfect. He saw Mark’s shoulders drop, the tension leaving him for the first time since Ragusa. Emile’s smile looked genuine, the first real one in days.

“I recognized you right away,” Emile admitted once they’d all sat back down.

“Though I was twelve, unlike them. And did your leg heal properly?”

His gaze slid to her legs, hidden beneath the folds of an indigo dress embroidered with silver thread, attire worthy of a wealthy merchant’s daughter.

“Want me to show you right here?” Liana laughed, mischief dancing in her eyes.

“I’m a proper girl and can’t lose my reputation before Stone marries me off to some local fool with a pedigree.”

“With a pedigree longer than his horse’s,” Mark added.

“And wits shorter,” Emile chimed in.

She winked, and for a moment the brothers saw that same girl they’d known in childhood: bold, fearless, ready for any adventure.

The laughter gradually faded, leaving a pleasant warmth of shared memories. They sat smiling at one another, and it seemed childhood hadn’t quite left them after all, merely retreated into shadow, ready to return at the first reminder.

For a moment, the tavern felt almost safe. Candlelight flickered on the copper plaques. Somewhere, a serving girl laughed at a sailor's joke. Sebastian let himself breathe.

Then Liana froze, wine glass at her lips.

Her gaze slid toward the tavern door. A man in a worn cloak stood there, in the half-darkness. Too long. Too still. He wasn't looking at the brothers, but his posture betrayed the tension of a hunter tracking prey.

She slowly set her glass on the table. Her fingers slipped beneath the edge of her cloak and found the familiar weight of her pistol.

"Cousins," she said quietly, but her voice rang with steel. "Time to go."

Mark caught the change in her tone instantly. He followed her gaze and spotted the man by the door. Then the second one, near the far window. Both in identical cloaks. Both with hands hidden beneath the fabric.

His hand moved instinctively to his sword hilt.

"How many?" he whispered.

"Four. Maybe more." Liana rose, graceful, as if preparing for a stroll. "We leave through the back door. Now. I have my father's men with me, but better safe than sorry."

She caught the eye of one of the sailors standing with his companion at the bar. He nodded almost imperceptibly toward the back exit.

Sebastian and Emile exchanged glances, confusion flickering across their faces. Mark placed his hand on his younger brother's shoulder.

"Move. Fast. No questions."

The tavern's back door led into a narrow alley between two stone buildings. The stench hit them first, urine, rotting garbage, the salt-tang of the nearby sea. High walls rose on both sides; no lanterns burned. Somewhere above, a shutter creaked in the wind. Water dripped from a broken gutter, each drop echoing off the cobblestones.

The moon broke through the clouds, casting a pale strip of light across the grimy street.

Liana went first and looked around. To the left, the alley opened onto the street, perhaps thirty paces away. To the right, a dead end choked with refuse.

One way out. Bad.

"Faster," she called over her shoulder.

The brothers followed. The "sailors" brought up the rear, six people in a narrow space.

They made it ten steps.

Two figures emerged from the shadows near the street exit, dark silhouettes, wordless. Blades glinted in the moonlight.

Mark turned. Behind them, two more had separated from the tavern door.

A classic ambush: block the escape routes, trap them in the middle, kill quickly.

“To me!” he barked, drawing his sword.

The brothers and guards pressed back-to-back, forming a circular defense in the narrow space. It was the best of bad options.

The assassins moved simultaneously, professionally, silently. No threats, no warnings.

The shot cracked like a thunderclap.

Flame erupted from Liana’s pistol barrel, illuminating the alley for an instant with hellish light: smoke, the smell of powder, and an echo shattering against the stone walls.

One of the assassins, the one approaching from the front left, jerked, clutched his chest, and dropped to his knees. His knife clattered against the cobblestones.

Two seconds of silence.

Then an explosion of movement.

Sebastian didn’t remember drawing his knife. He only remembered the assassin’s body slamming into him, heavy, reeking of sweat and garlic. A blade flashed at his throat.

Pure instinct took over, no technique, no thought.

He grabbed the knife-hand with his left, yanked it toward him, and stabbed upward simultaneously.

His blade sank into the assassin’s belly, not between the ribs but into the soft flesh beneath them. He felt resistance, muscle and tissue fighting back, and pushed harder, throwing his whole weight behind it.

Again. Like in the port.

The assassin grunted, a surprised sound that might have been funny in other circumstances. His eyes widened, and his mouth fell open.

Sebastian wrenched the knife free without looking at the dying man’s face. Hot blood poured over his hand, his sleeve, his chest. The assassin crumpled, clutching his wound.

Sebastian spun, searching for the next threat. Automatically. The movements were drilled in. His body remembered the lesson from the port.

Knife in hand. Blood dripped from the blade onto the stones, black in the moonlight.

Mark parried a strike, stepped aside, and thrust into the throat. Clean. Fast. Years of training.

The assassin gurgled, dropped his weapon, and grabbed at his neck. Blood sprayed between his fingers.

Mark had already turned, seeking the next threat. His face was calm, almost detached. This was work. He did it well.

Emile saw movement to his left and tried to dodge, but was a fraction of a second too late.

The blade slashed across his face, from temple to chin.

Pain exploded, bright and blinding. He didn't scream; there wasn't time. He just clutched his cheek with both hands.

Blood poured between his fingers, hot and sticky, far too much blood.

He tried to press the wound to stop the flow, but it kept coming, warm and wet, running down his neck and soaking his shirt.

His knees buckled, and he sank to the ground.

Through the haze of pain, he saw Sebastian knock his attacker down with a blow to the jaw, then finish him with a knife to the kidney.

The world swam. Sounds became muffled, distant.

The fight ended as suddenly as it had begun.

Silence fell over the alley, broken only by heavy breathing and someone's death rattle. One of the assassins was not dead yet, choking on his own blood.

The gunsmoke slowly dissipated, rising toward the moon. Four bodies lay on the ground, one still moving weakly, convulsively.

Sebastian stood motionless, staring at the bloody knife in his hand. His hands shook; he could not stop the trembling.

Mark lowered his rapier and wiped the blade on the dead man's cloak. His movements were automatic, his face expressionless. Only his jaw betrayed him, muscles tight as wire.

"Emile!" Liana rushed to the fallen man.

He sat slumped against the wall, pressing the wound. Blood seeped through his fingers, staining his white shirt crimson.

Liana crouched beside him and quickly examined the wound by moonlight.

"The eye's intact," she said curtly. "We were fortunate."

She tore off her scarf, folded it into a tight compress, and pressed it to the wound.

“Hold it. Harder.” Her voice was commanding, with no trace of panic.

Emile nodded, clamping down on the cloth. Through gritted teeth, with effort: “Next time... pick a tavern... without assassins...”

His attempt at a smile came out as a crooked grimace.

Liana gave a short laugh, but her eyes remained hard.

“By the way,” she nodded toward her “sailors,” already binding the prisoner, “meet Marco and Giulio. From my father’s household guard. They just saved your lives.”

Mark raised his gaze to the two men. Both were solid, in their thirties, with faces that had seen enough to be surprised by nothing. Marco was stocky, with a scar bisecting his eyebrow. Giulio was taller and wirier, his movements precise as a surgeon’s.

“My thanks,” Mark said curtly.

“Save it,” Marco replied, not looking up from the ropes. “We’re not done yet.”

“Where are we going?” Sebastian asked quietly. His voice sounded strange even to his own ears, too calm for a man with another’s blood drying on his hands.

“A safe place outside the city. Move.”

They waited in the alley while Marco fetched the carriage and horses. Sebastian stood with his back against cold stone. His jaw ached from clenching.

But that wasn’t the worst part.

The worst part was what he’d felt in the moment his blade found the assassin’s throat. Not horror. Not revulsion.

Relief.

The man had been trying to kill his brother. And when Sebastian’s steel opened his neck, something inside him had whispered: yes. Not guilt. Just satisfaction. A problem solved.

He pressed his palms against the wall, hard enough to hurt.

Is this who I am now?

Two men in three days. The soldier at the port had been desperate for survival. But tonight he’d moved without thinking. Blade found its mark as naturally as breathing.

He heard Emile’s voice nearby, Liana checking his wound. His brother’s face when the knife grazed him, fear, yes, but also trust. Trust that Sebastian would protect him.

Sebastian looked at his hands. Still shaking.

Good, the day they stop is the day I become something else.

But he wasn't sure anymore if that was true.

* * *

The carriage rattled through dark streets, wheels clattering over cobblestones. Moonlight sliced through the window in pale bars, shifting with every turn. The air inside smelled of blood, sweat, and the acrid ghost of gunpowder clinging to their clothes. Shortly after leaving the city, Liana ordered a stop.

Emile sat with a cloth pressed to his face. The fabric was soaked through. His hands trembled.

"Let me see," Liana said.

She pulled the cloth away. The wound was deep. Ragged. It would scar badly.

"Poison," she said quietly, examining the blade they'd taken from the assassin. A dark residue coated the edge. "Spider Thread. You're lucky it was just a graze."

"Lucky," Emile repeated hollowly.

Liana opened a small case containing glass vials, powders, and neatly rolled bandages. She worked quickly, cleaning the wound, applying counteragent paste, and binding it tight.

"This will burn."

It did. Emile bit down hard. Sweat beaded his forehead.

"You'll live once we patch you up. Lucky for you, this is a fashionable poison for those who like to kill with certainty and dramatically. I'm familiar with it and know exactly what to do. But that scar's permanent. You'll look romantic and irresistible."

"Wonderful," Emile muttered. "A handsome man covered in manly scars."

No one laughed.

The captured assassin lay on the carriage floor, hands bound. His breathing came wet and ragged; Sebastian's knife had punctured something vital. Marco kicked him awake.

"Up."

The assassin groaned. Every breath brought crimson to his lips.

Liana crouched before him. "Who paid?"

The assassin spat. Said nothing.

Liana nodded to Marco.

He grabbed the assassin's hand. Straightened the index finger.

Crack.

The assassin howled.

Mark watched, stone-faced. Only his jaw moved, muscles tight as wire.

Emile sat with closed eyes. The bandage on his face was already soaking through.

"Who paid?" Liana repeated.

The assassin wheezed. "Go... to... hell..."

Liana nodded. Marco took the middle finger.

Crack.

Sebastian forced himself to look. If he were part of this, he would witness it; that was the least he owed the man on the floor, and whatever remained of the boy who'd believed honor meant something.

He would have killed Emile, killed all of us.

The thought should have helped. It did not.

The assassin talked after four fingers.

He did not know the client's name, only the intermediary: a man called Matteo, who worked at Hogberg's port. Matteo had passed the money and the description of the targets, three Scaliger brothers. Good price. Very good.

"How good?" Liana's voice was flat.

"Good enough..." the assassin wheezed, blood bubbling at his lips, "for the Guild to take you."

Liana's face went white.

Marco and Giulio exchanged glances. Even the guards looked unsettled.

"We handled them," Sebastian said. "Four men—"

"Four men were the first wave." Liana's voice had changed. "The Guild sends four to test defenses. Watch how you fight. How do you run?"

She grabbed the dying assassin's collar. "How many more?"

The man laughed, wet, rattling. "Doesn't matter. The Guild always finishes what it starts."

His head lolled back. Silence.

"Cornaro can't have those resources," Mark said.

“No.” Liana’s eyes found Mark’s. Fear in them, real fear. “Someone guaranteed the Guild protection from the consequences. Someone who doesn’t fear the richest family on the Continent.”

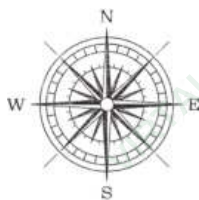
She ordered them to move again. The carriage rattled through darkness.

“Whoever did this believes they’re more powerful than all the Scaliger allies combined.” She paused. “And they may be right.”

She met Sebastian’s eyes.

“Galtmark. Ragusa. Now Hogberg. Someone wants to erase our house from the face of the earth. And they won’t stop until the last Scaliger is dead.”

Chapter 8: Villa Nogarola



SEBASTIAN

“Where did you learn to shoot like that?” Mark’s voice cut through the rumble of iron-rimmed wheels on stone.

Liana didn’t answer immediately. The heavy road carriage thundered over the mountain path, every bump jarring strained muscles. Sebastian watched her face in the dim lantern light, sharp shadows on her cheeks, that strange gleam in her gaze that had appeared after she’d shot a man point-blank. Cold, yes, but ancient too, as if centuries looked back through her eyes.

Her hands moved with practiced precision as she checked Emile’s bandage, applying fresh salve from a silver flask. The smell of bitter herbs and camphor filled the cramped space, overwhelming even the metallic tang of blood that clung to Sebastian’s clothes.

“Father insisted,” she said finally, securing the bandage. “After the Arcadia Road.”

Mark waited. Sebastian held his breath, watching thin black threads pulse beneath Emile’s skin, venom slowly wrapping around his brother’s face like a living web.

“I was thirteen. Traveling with a trade caravan.” Her voice was flat, reciting facts. “Bandits hit us in the mountain pass. Killed the guards first. Then, they started on the merchants.”

She pulled the bandage tight. Emile winced in his fevered sleep.

“Juan, who owns the villa we’re headed to, found me in the hills near Hogberg. I’d slipped away. Don’t ask me how, I still don’t know. I was walking toward the city without knowing why. Just... knew I had to go that direction.” A pause. She looked away, lost in memory. “I wasn’t alone when the attack started.”

She didn’t elaborate. Didn’t need to.

The wheels struck the paving with rhythmic precision, like a heart before a storm, a hammer blow on an anvil. Beyond the carriage window, the road serpented into darkness, winding around rocky ledges and sparse forest. From time to time, on the turns, views opened onto the valley below, where Hogberg’s lights flickered like dying embers.

"Back then, I thought it was luck. A miracle." Her voice dropped. "Now I understand it was something else. Someone's will. Someone higher than us."

The words hung in the air.

"After that, Father made sure I could defend myself. Shooting. Blades. Poisons." She met Mark's gaze. "The mainland doesn't forgive weakness. Especially in women."

"Had to use it?" Mark's voice was quiet, but it held more than mere interest.

"Once." Something dark flickered across her face. Her hands stilled on the bandage for a heartbeat, then resumed their work with forced precision. "That's why I'm still here."

Sebastian wanted to ask what exactly she meant, but stayed silent. After all, everyone had their secrets and their corpses.

Sebastian's clothes clung to his body, soaked with blood and sweat. Every shadow through the window made him reach for his sword; every creak of the carriage a threat, though the fighting was hours behind them.

The carriage lurched on another turn. Sebastian's jaw clenched. He focused on the window, on the present. Not now.

Trees lined the mountain road, the thickest trunks marked with old travelers' signs, ancient charms, and merchant marks Sebastian recognized from Academy studies of trade routes. This path had carried merchants and caravans for centuries. The familiar markings eased his tension slightly. This was a traveled road, used by ordinary people, not some haunted wilderness.

Somewhere behind them came the sound of hoofbeats.

Sebastian tensed, hand moving to his rapier.

"City guard," Liana said without looking. "The roads around the city are patrolled at night."

The hoofbeats faded. Sebastian's heart still pounded.

Paranoid. But staying alive meant being paranoid.

The air grew cooler and fresher as they climbed, carrying scents of mountain herbs and pine resin. But the freshness brought no relief; it only emphasized how far they'd gone from civilization, how deep into places where different laws held sway.

Emile winced in pain, and Liana's free hand touched his temple, lightly, soothing.

"Hold on a little longer," she whispered so quietly that Sebastian barely heard.

"Soon everything will be fine."

Her lips pressed tight, her throat working as she swallowed whatever words she wouldn't say. Then her face smoothed, professional composure sliding back into place.

She secured the fresh bandage and wiped her hands on a cloth moistened with some sharp-smelling liquid. The scent filled the tight carriage space, overwhelming even the copper tang that lingered from the fight.

But Sebastian noticed: thin black threads had already spread across Emile's face. Barely visible in the dim light, they moved beneath his skin, pulsing with his heartbeat, slowly wrapping around his cheekbone and reaching toward his temple. Sometimes they froze, as if listening, then resumed their slow, deliberate movement. A living web of death was slowly ensnaring his brother, the unmistakable signature of Spider's Thread poison.

The smell of copper filled the carriage. Sebastian turned his gaze to the window. Liana saw it too. Her hand still lay on Emile's head, fingers mechanically stroking his hair, an unconscious gesture, almost maternal. Her jaw tightened, eyes darkening for a heartbeat before her face smoothed again.

Mark sat opposite, arms wrapped around his knees, hands locked together. His face remained impenetrable, but his gaze carefully tracked the cousin's every movement.

The carriage conquered another sharp turn, and in the distance, the silhouette of a large structure emerged, dark against the lightening sky. Several towers and high walls gave it the semblance of a fortress, though architectural details, distinguishable even at a distance, suggested it was more a hereditary manor.

Suddenly, a sharp challenge rang out from outside. The carriage stopped abruptly, throwing them all forward.

Several riders surrounded the coach, their long cavalry sabers and carbines barely visible in the pre-dawn darkness. Their faces were hidden by wound scarves, leaving only their eyes visible, watchful, experienced eyes of professional warriors.

Mark instinctively reached for his dagger, and Sebastian put his palm on his rapier hilt. His heartbeat quickened; his body readied for the new battle.

"Friends or enemies?" Sebastian asked sharply, looking at Liana.

She opened the door without a trace of alarm and waved to someone.

"All friends here," she answered coldly, a hardness in her voice. "Which is why we're still alive."

After a brief exchange of words, the carriage moved again, and the riders fell into an honor escort.

Sebastian slowly removed his hand from the hilt, yet the tension lingered. He felt they were crossing some invisible boundary, entering another world, a world where different rules applied.

They approached massive gates of gray granite, veined with darker stone. Ancient symbols marked the keystone, worn nearly smooth by centuries of mountain weather. The gates seemed not built but grown from the living rock, part of the mountain itself. When the gates opened, Sebastian felt a change in the air, as if the temperature had dropped several degrees and sounds had grown duller, more muffled. The wind died, though in the mountains it usually blew constantly.

For a heartbeat, Sebastian saw it: a shimmer in the air above the villa, like heat-haze over summer roads. But instead of distortion, he glimpsed outlines, architectural ghost-lines where towers might once have stood, or would stand, or existed in some other layer of reality. Ancient geometries overlaid the current structure, as if the villa remembered its past and future simultaneously.

He blinked. The shimmer vanished.

"You felt it," Liana said. It wasn't a question. "The villa sits on old foundations. Older than the Cataclysm, some say. Places like this remember. And sometimes, they let you remember too."

The screech of gates echoed too long, repeating and distorting until it resembled someone's distant moan.

They entered the inner courtyard.

The air here felt different, cooler, heavier, carrying scents of old stone and mountain herbs. Somewhere nearby, incense burned, its smoke mingling with pine resin from the torches.

"We're here," Liana smiled with a disconcerting ease. "Welcome to Villa Nogarola. Here we're safe, as safe as possible."

"Is this an ancient place?" Mark asked, surveying the high walls.

"More ancient than you think," Liana answered, a hint of a smirk flickering in her gaze. "And more hospitable than it seems. To those it permits to enter."

The villa was a peculiar mixture of country estate, fortress, and palace, walls of gray limestone, quarried locally, ancient and covered with the patina of centuries. The upper floors were adorned with balconies and terraces, each featuring exquisite balustrades topped with iron spikes. Between them rose two towers, their narrow loophole windows watching silently.

Sebastian jumped out first, offering his hand to Liana. Her palm was dry and warm, and for a moment, he felt a strange tingling, as if a spark leapt at the contact. Mark followed, supporting the swaying Emile, whose face in the torchlight was a waxen mask, crisscrossed with a fine net of black threads.

The carriage stopped in the center of a spacious courtyard, ringed by arched galleries. Torchlight cast enormous, trembling shadows on the paved stone. The courtyard's stones bore worn family crests, evidence of generations of Nogarola power, old money, and older secrets.

A fountain stood at the center, its bronze figures spouting water into a marble basin carved with scenes from before the Cataclysm: twelve women with hands raised, symbols of the Sleeping Goddesses encircling them. This was the kind of power that survived three hundred years of Hecate's rule by knowing when to fight and when to hide.

The shadows of people seemed larger than the people themselves, moving not quite in sync with their bodies. The fountain's water bubbled melodiously, its sound strangely contrasting with the tense atmosphere. It looked dark in the torchlight, almost black.

They were met by a hastily dressed older man with silver hair and a piercing gaze. His bearing and manner revealed a man accustomed to command. When he saw Liana, relief flickered across his weathered features, and he bowed in a respectful half-bow. For a moment, his hand hovered near the dagger hilt at his belt, an old habit of a bodyguard who had once taught her to fight.

"At your service, Donna Stone." His voice came deep and raspy, roughened by years. "We were warned late, so we didn't have time to prepare a proper reception."

"Oh, stop worrying, old man," Liana said, and for a heartbeat her mask slipped, revealing something lighter underneath. "Just have rooms prepared quickly and a physician sent to young Scaliger. Time is running out."

Juan glanced at Emile's face, and something flickered in his expression, probably recognition of the poison. But he asked nothing, only bowed quickly and dispatched several servants with orders.

Mark carefully handed Emile over to the physician's care, an old, stooped man with a clever, assessing look and calm movements. The older man unwound the bandage, examined the wound, and quietly said something to Liana.

She nodded, her face darkening.

"Is there a chance?" Mark asked, stepping closer.

Liana looked at him for a long moment. "If we act quickly," she answered, "but we'll need... help. Help of a kind you might not be ready for."

Mark was about to respond, but Liana continued, her voice dropping. "A ritual. The old kind. The temple at the villa is prepared. Juan has already started the preparations."

Mark's eyes narrowed. "What kind of ritual?"

Liana met his gaze steadily. "The kind that requires blood. Not Emile's. Someone else's."

Silence hung. Sebastian understood. Mark too.

"And where does that someone come from?" Mark asked carefully.

Juan stepped forward from the shadows. His face was stone, his voice calm. "One of the assassins still lives, my lords," he said. "We took him for interrogation."

"And?" Mark's voice was level.

"Oh yes, my lady," he smirked. On his hands, Sebastian noticed fresh stains, which he hadn't even bothered to wipe properly. Several dark drops fell to the floor. "Healthy and interrogated. Like the others, useless. Hired in a port tavern by unknowns, ready to die for a couple of coins." Juan paused, and something predatory appeared in his smile. "However, after what we did to him, he probably regrets still being alive. But he can still give his life for the House's interests, if you wish."

From deep in the villa, a scream echoed, distant and agonized, then cut off.

Sebastian's hand tightened on his rapier hilt.

The prisoner was real. Suffering. About to die for them.

Liana nodded, and something passed between them, a silent dialogue, understood only by them. Juan gave several quiet orders to the servants, who immediately left the hall.

Mark raised his eyes. "Ritual?" His voice was quiet, but his gaze was fixed on Liana, not asking permission. Demanding answers.

Liana looked at him with a long, steady gaze, as if assessing whether he was ready to hear the truth.

"For some time, we've used methods not spoken of in polite society, requiring blood and death, as in old times," she finally said. "But they work, especially against ancient poisons, such as Moretto. If you want to save your brother, don't ask more questions. At least until evening."

Mark's jaw tightened. "And you do this often?"

Liana met his gaze without flinching. "When it's necessary to save someone close to me. Yes."

Sebastian shuddered. He remembered a lecture at the Academy, an old colonel with scars on his face, his voice sharp and deliberate: *An officer never kills the defenseless. Even an enemy. Even a traitor. Honor is what separates us from animals.*

The alley fight had been different. Kill or be killed. The man had a knife, intent to murder. Self-defense, survival, words that let Sebastian sleep at night, though nightmares still came.

The harbor soldier with the scarred face had been different, too. The man was armed and attacking. Sebastian's blade had found the gap beneath his breastbone, and the man's surprised eyes had looked almost offended as he grabbed the steel with bleeding hands. *How dare you?* Combat. Necessary. Legal.

But this?

This was execution. Calculated. Ritual. The prisoner wasn't attacking them. He was chained, helpless. And they would kill him not in the heat of combat, but coldly, deliberately, for their purposes.

Looking at Emile, whose face had paled to marble white, and black threads of Spider's Thread poison already wrapped halfway around his neck, Sebastian felt something inside him breaking. Not immediately, not with the crash of shattered glass. Slowly, agonizingly, like ice cracking under unbearable weight.

The harbor soldier. The assassin in the alley. And now this prisoner would be the third, though he would die not by his blade, but with his consent.

This isn't a battle. Not defense. Murder.

A voice whispered in his mind.

On the other hand, without this sacrifice, he would lose Emile.

"Do it." Mark's voice was flat, final, the same voice he'd used giving orders on the galley, the voice that expected obedience.

Sebastian's hesitation lasted barely a heartbeat, but Mark caught it. The older brother's gaze was heavy, demanding.

"Do it," Sebastian finally forced out. His voice sounded alien, hoarse.

In Mark's eyes, he saw only resolve. Resolve to do whatever was necessary. Older brother. Heir. The one bearing responsibility.

But now responsibility fell on all three.

Mark's hand found Sebastian's shoulder. He squeezed once. Their eyes met. Understanding passed between them, silent and complete.

We're in this together. We cross this line together.

Liana accepted their consent with a light nod. Grief shadowed her features for a heartbeat, or perhaps pain, but it immediately disappeared, hidden beneath a mask of cold control.

She turned to the physician. "Prepare everything necessary. Give him a sleeping draught and pain relief, so he doesn't suffer until evening. We'll begin the rite after sunset, as soon as the moon appears in the sky. It would be ideal to perform the ritual immediately, but it's too late, dawn is already breaking."

The older man bowed and, supporting Emile, led him from the hall. Several servants carrying lanterns followed, lighting the way into the villa's depths. Emile barely stayed on his feet, leaning on the physician's shoulder.

"And now," Liana said, addressing the remaining brothers, "you should rest. The night was long and rather joyless." She paused, then added, "Father should arrive by evening. He's bringing someone from Ragusa with him, a woman who may be able to help."

Servants led the brothers down a long corridor to prepared rooms. Torches on the walls cast trembling shadows, making the corridor resemble a tunnel stretching into infinity.

When a servant indicated Sebastian's room, Mark stopped beside him. For a moment, he placed his hand on his younger brother's shoulder.

"For Emile, we'll do everything necessary," he said quietly. "Everything."

Sebastian looked into his eyes and nodded. Words weren't needed.

Mark squeezed his shoulder once more and headed to his door.

The room they led Sebastian to was clean but straightforward: a narrow bed, a table, a pitcher of water. He collapsed onto the bed without undressing and fell asleep almost instantly.

The sleep was heavy, without dreams. For the first time since the morning of the coup in Ragusa, no nightmares, no visions, no Beatrice Feski. Just emptiness. Black, deep, absolute.

Closer to evening, he heard through sleep the sounds of an arriving carriage and voices. Alber's voice was firm, businesslike. And another: a woman, younger, with the native accent. He wanted to rise but could not. His body refused to obey, pulling him back into darkness. He slept until evening.

"My lord," a quiet voice penetrated the veil of sleep. "They are waiting for you."

Sebastian slowly opened his eyes. The world was blurred, unclear. The contours of the furniture gradually sharpened.

Outside the window, the sunset was dying. The sky blazed crimson, heavy and thick, like an old wound beginning to close.

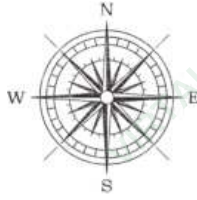
In the doorway stood the silhouette of a servant, dark against the corridor.

Sebastian sat on the bed, running a hand over his face. His heart beat evenly, almost calmly.

He stood, straightened his clothes, and headed for the door.

Time to commit ritual murder in the name of a righteous cause.

Chapter 9: The Rite



SEBASTIAN

The servant led him down a long corridor where torchlight cast trembling shadows on the stone walls, then through an inner courtyard with the moon hanging low over the villa's towers, and finally through an iron gate into the garden beyond.

The air changed instantly, cooler, thicker, saturated with the weight of ancient things. As if night itself had grown denser here, pressing against his skin like velvet.

With each step into the forest, the scents intensified. Damp earth and night-blooming flowers mingled with something bitter and intoxicating: honey and wormwood, resin and smoke. Sebastian breathed more deeply, and his head spun. The path wound between ancient trees whose trunks were so massive that three men couldn't encircle them. The canopy closed overhead like a living dome, transforming the wild forest into a vast temple without walls.

On roots and trunks, carved symbols glowed pale blue, like smoldering phosphorus. They seemed to pulse in time with his steps, or perhaps with his heartbeat. Sebastian couldn't tell which, and the uncertainty unsettled him more than the glow itself.

Suddenly, the silence became wrong, no footfalls on leaves, no sounds of breathing, no rustle of wind through branches. Even the air had grown still, as if the world itself held its breath, watching and waiting.

"Nearly there," the old man said.

They passed a circle of ancient maples, planted with perfect symmetry, an arrangement impossible in wild nature, proof that hands had shaped this place decades, perhaps even centuries ago. And then they emerged into the clearing.

The temple rose in the center, its white marble glowing silver under the moon. It was a rotunda of elegant proportions: twelve massive columns of pale stone supported a dome that seemed to float rather than rest upon them. He had seen temples of the Twelve countless times, but the preservation of this one was staggering. It looked new. Or rather, eternal. They were carved with scenes Sebastian couldn't quite make out in the darkness, figures that might have been

dancing or dying, or both. Between each pair of columns stood a statue: twelve female figures carved from different stones. White marble with veins of gold. Black obsidian that swallowed the light. Green jade that seemed to pulse with inner fire. Red porphyry, the color of old blood. Each goddess was unique, yet all shared the same posture: hands folded, heads slightly bowed, eyes closed in eternal slumber.

All sleeping. But Sebastian felt they were listening.

Juan stood at the threshold, torchlight casting his weathered face in sharp relief.

“Our temple of the Sleeping Goddess,” he said, pride ringing in his voice like a struck bell. “Built before the Cataclysm, over half a millennium ago. Our family has guarded it through all the centuries since, through wars and plagues, through the rise and fall of empires. Here, the boundary between worlds grows thin. Here, the goddesses still remember their mortal children.”

Sebastian climbed the wide marble steps, worn smooth by generations of supplicants. On either side of the stairway stood statues of women holding bronze lamps, their flames burning an eerie bluish-green that cast no warmth. The stone faces of these attendants were frozen in expressions of ecstasy, their closed eyes on the verge of opening at any moment.

He entered.

Cool air washed over him, carrying the smell of incense, sweet, heavy, overwhelming, the kind of scent that sank into clothing and lingered for days. Beneath it, barely masked, lay the metallic tang of fresh blood.

The interior space was smaller than he’d expected, circular and intimate despite the soaring dome above. Around the perimeter stood twelve altars of varying sizes, each bearing offerings of flowers, fruit, and darker things he didn’t want to examine closely. Above each altar loomed a goddess statue, some with eyes closed in peaceful slumber, others with open stares, their stone gazes following him as he moved.

In the center stood the largest altar, carved from a single piece of green jade so pure it seemed to glow from within. On it lay Emile.

His brother was bare to the waist, motionless, eyes closed, breathing shallow. From the wound on his cheek, black threads of poison had spread across his body, pulsing with terrible life like plant roots burrowing beneath the skin. They’d reached his neck now, crawling across his collarbone, inching toward his heart with patient, inexorable hunger.

How much time do we have? Sebastian wondered, though he couldn’t bring himself to ask.

Around the altar stood six women in crimson robes, their hoods drawn so deep that only their lips showed, moving in soundless prayer. In their hands smoldered bundles of herbs, sending intoxicating smoke curling through the chamber.

“Sebastian! Finally.”

He turned at the familiar voice.

Liana stood in the shadow of a column, and for a moment, he didn't recognize her. Gone was the practical traveler, the sharp-tongued cousin who'd saved them in Hogberg. In her place stood something older, something that belonged to this age-old temple as surely as the statues themselves. She wore a translucent dress the color of seafoam, and through the sheer fabric her body gleamed like a ghost beneath water. Crystals sparkled in her unbound hair like scattered stars. Silver ornaments circled her neck, wrists, and ankles, each bearing the same symbols carved on the forest trees. On her brow rested a thin diadem crowned with a lunar crescent.

She looked like a priestess. Like a goddess. Like something ancient and alien wearing a human face.

“Where's Mark?” Sebastian asked, his voice rougher than he intended.

“He chose not to witness the working.” Liana's tone was calm, matter-of-fact, as if discussing the weather rather than a blood sacrifice. “Everyone has their own way of accepting the inevitable.”

She came closer, and Sebastian caught a strange scent rising from her skin: sea salt and fresh blood, honey and hot metal. The smell of magic, perhaps. Or madness.

“You will witness a miracle,” she said, taking his hand in cold fingers. “A rite that hasn't been performed under these skies for three centuries. Ancient knowledge our family has kept since before the Cataclysm.”

She led him to the altar where Emile lay. His brother's eyes were open now, but they stared at nothing, two glass beads reflecting the lamplight, unnaturally bright. His breathing was shallow and rapid, and the black threads beneath his skin pulsed in time with his racing heart.

“What's wrong with him?” Sebastian asked, though he already knew the answer.

“Spider's Thread poison approaches his heart.” Liana looked at his brother with something that might have been compassion, though her voice remained clinical.

“One more hour, perhaps less, and the black threads will reach their goal. Then even the goddesses cannot return him to life.” She paused, meeting Sebastian's eyes. “But if we complete the rite before the poison takes him, your brother will be saved.”

She nodded toward the shadows at the temple's edge.

From there, they brought the prisoner.

Sebastian flinched despite himself.

The man was naked, his body a canvas of purple and black bruises. Hands bound so tight the ropes had cut furrows into flesh. But it was his eyes that struck Sebastian, fever-bright, rolling with the desperate terror of a trapped animal.

He made incoherent sounds through the rag in his mouth, warnings no one would heed.

He knows, Sebastian realized. *He knows exactly what's coming.*

For a moment, the prisoner's eyes met his. In them, Sebastian saw not just terror but recognition: the knowledge that this young nobleman had helped seal his fate, the understanding that Sebastian's consent had signed his death warrant.

Sebastian's stomach turned. His hand moved instinctively toward his sword, though he wasn't sure whether he meant to stop this or defend himself from his own conscience.

This is wrong. An officer never kills the defenseless.

A voice whispered in his mind—the voice of the old colonel from the Academy, the voice of every lesson about honor and duty.

But another voice answered, colder and more practical: *Emile will die without this. Your brother. Your blood.*

They led the prisoner to a second altar Sebastian had not noticed before, black obsidian veined with red, positioned to catch the moonlight that filtered through the dome. The altar seemed to drink the light rather than reflect it, and along its edges were carved pictograms of female figures in poses that might have been worship or agony.

Liana pointed Sebastian to a place at the head of Emile's altar.

“Stand here and do not move. Maintain absolute silence, whatever happens.” Her eyes had grown cold, hard as the jade beneath Emile's body. “No movement, no word, no sound. Any violation of the sacrament will doom your brother to death, or worse. The sacred circle does not forgive negligence.” She held his gaze until he looked away. “Do you understand me?”

Sebastian nodded, not trusting his voice.

Liana took her position between the two altars, standing at the exact center of a pattern carved into the floor. Sebastian only now noticed concentric circles radiating outward like ripples on still water. She froze for a moment, gathering herself, then slowly raised her hands toward the dome.

Her hands didn't shake. She'd done this before. She would do it again. This was the cost of power, and she had long since learned to pay it.

The women in red swayed, slowly at first, then with increasing rhythm. Their chanting was quiet and monotonous, in a language Sebastian didn't recognize, harsh consonants alternating with drawn-out vowels in combinations the tongue resisted. It sounded less like speech than like primordial music, something that had been old when the first stones of this temple were laid.

Liana spoke, her voice rising above the singing yet somehow merging with it. The words were harsh, explosive, full of aspirated sounds and unfamiliar rhythms. They were carved from stone rather than air, as if she were summoning from the void something primeval that had slumbered since the Cataclysm itself.

The flames in the lamps flared brighter, pulsing in time with the chanting. The statues in their niches seemed to move in the shifting light, their stone bodies swaying, bending, breathing. Echo filled the temple as sound reflected from marble walls, multiplied, grew deeper, until the women's singing became a many-voiced chorus of the living and the dead.

Sebastian felt dizzy. The smoke from the braziers was thick in his lungs, and the chanting had gotten inside his head somehow, making his thoughts sluggish, strange.

Stay present. Bear witness. This is the least you owe, to Emile, to the prisoner, to yourself.

Liana sharply lowered her hands.

The singing stopped as if cut by a blade. Silence filled the temple, ringing, deafening, absolute. Only the prisoner's panicked breathing broke the stillness, rapid and wet with terror. He understood what was coming now. They all did.

"The time of completion has come," Liana pronounced.

Her voice had changed, layered somehow, as if several women spoke simultaneously through her mouth. The sound echoed and re-echoed from the dome above, multiplying until it seemed the goddesses themselves were saying.

"The goddess demands her gift. Blood for blood. Life for life."

She approached the prisoner. He writhed desperately, muscles straining against his bonds, but the servants held him fast against the black altar.

From the folds of her dress, Liana drew a knife, crescent-shaped, its ivory handle carved with entwined female figures, its blade flashing silver in the lamplight. An ancient thing. A holy thing. A weapon made for precisely this purpose.

"For your crimes against the House and our blood," Liana addressed the prisoner, looking directly into his wild eyes, "for the poison spilled by your hand, and for the righteous blood you intended to spill, we accept your life as just payment. May your death serve the life of the worthiest."

Stop this, Sebastian's conscience screamed. Do something. Say something. You swore an oath.

But he stood frozen, mute, complicit, watching.

With one swift movement, Liana tore the rag from the prisoner's mouth.

He managed a single scream of pure terror before she drew the knife across his throat, not just a slash but a deep cut, almost to the spine, and his head fell back at an impossible angle, held only by tendons and strips of flesh.

Blood erupted from the severed artery in a crimson fountain.

Sebastian felt the world slow. Every detail became sharp, crystal clear, burned into his memory forever.

Blood sprayed across Liana's face and dress. Blood painted the black altar in glistening streaks. Blood splattered the marble floor and reached Sebastian himself, hot droplets striking his face, salty and sticky against his lips.

A servant positioned a golden cup beneath the wound, catching the steaming liquid, but most of it spilled past, spreading across the ancient stone. The air filled with the copper stench of death, thick and choking. And beneath it, the obscene gurgle of the dying man as air bubbled through his severed throat, mixing with blood in sounds that would haunt Sebastian's nightmares for years to come.

You're part of it now. Forever.

His mind whispered.

He wanted to look away. Could not. His body was locked in place, not by magic, but by the weight of his own choice.

This is the price of your brother's life. The least you can do is witness what you've bought.

After an eternity that lasted perhaps a minute, the prisoner's body went limp. The convulsions stopped. The terrible sounds faded into silence. Life left, and what remained was only meat cooling on an altar.

Sebastian's legs went weak. Bile burned in his throat. Cold sweat slicked his entire body, and his hands shook so badly he clenched them into fists, driving his nails into his palms until blood welled up. The sharp pain helped him focus, gave him something to hold onto as the world threatened to spin away.

Breathe. Just breathe. It's done. It's done.

Liana took the cup of still-warm blood and approached Emile's altar with the careful steps of a woman performing a sacred duty. She sprinkled the blood over his brother's prone form, whispering incantations in that ancient tongue, and where the crimson drops fell on his chest, his hands, his face, the black threads beneath Emile's skin trembled like living creatures sensing danger.

The threads writhed and retreated, pulling back toward the wound on his cheek like tentacles withdrawing into a shell. Liana dipped her fingers in the cup and drew symbols on Emile's body: spirals and wavy lines, triangles with eyes at their centers. Each sign glowed red upon completion, then slowly absorbed into the skin, as if his flesh were drinking the magic.

Emile trembled. His back arched. The woman held him as he convulsed, and Sebastian wanted to go to him, to help, but he remembered Liana's warning and forced himself to remain still.

The chanting resumed, louder now, more urgent, like drumbeats before battle. The lamps flickered wildly. The statues moved in the dancing light, or perhaps they truly moved, stone limbs shifting, marble eyes opening to watch the ritual's climax.

Sebastian watched in a stupor of exhaustion and horror. His mind refused to accept what his eyes were seeing. Yet a deeper part of him, something ancient and primal, buried in his blood, resonated with the power flowing through the temple. He felt in this ritual something terrible and something right, intertwined like threads of poison retreating across his brother's skin.

Liana finished the symbols. She rose, raising the cup above her head.

The remaining blood within glowed with a pulsing crimson light, as if lit from inside by captured fire.

She pronounced the final incantation, a loud cry that echoed from the vaulted dome like a thunderclap.

In that exact moment, every light went out.

Absolute darkness swallowed the temple. Sebastian couldn't see his own hands. For a heartbeat, there was only silence: only the sound of ragged breathing, his own, Emile's, and the women who served the goddess.

Then the space flooded with blinding light.

It was so bright that Sebastian's eyes snapped shut, but the radiance penetrated his eyelids, white, pure, searing, as if the sun itself had descended into the temple. A ringing filled his ears, deafening and beautiful, as if the very stones were singing a single perfect note.

When the light dimmed, and Sebastian dared to open his eyes, the world had changed.

The lamps burned again, but softer now, more golden, more normal. The oppressive weight that had pressed against his chest since entering the temple had lifted.

Liana stood at the altar, her sea-green dress now soaked through with blood, transformed from translucent beauty to dark crimson horror. In her hands, she held the empty cup.

And Emile sat up.

Sebastian's brother looked around in confusion, blinking at the temple, at the statues, at Liana's blood-drenched form. The black threads had entirely vanished from his skin. Where the deep wound had carved his cheek, only a thin white scar remained, barely visible, the kind of mark a man might carry from a childhood accident, not from poison that should have killed him.

It had worked. The impossible, terrible magic had succeeded.

The prisoner's body lay in a twisted heap at the foot of the black altar, drained and discarded. The blood that had poured from his throat hadn't spread randomly across the floor but had flowed with purpose, following channels carved into the stone centuries ago. It filled grooves cut into the marble, forming a pattern: a spiral with twelve branches, each reaching toward a different goddess statue. Sacred geometry written in death.

Even now, the blood seemed to pulse with fading life, as if feeding something in the stone, awakening what had slept for ages.

"It is done," Liana pronounced, dropping to her knees before the black obsidian statue that loomed above the sacrificial altar. "I thank you, Sleeping One, great Diadema, for the gift of healing granted to unworthy mortals. Accept this sacrifice as a proper offering. Awaken from your long sleep. May we see your face again in this world."

The women in red picked up the final phrase, repeating it in the ancient language like a strange, hypnotic refrain. The harsh consonants and sliding vowels merged into a rhythmic summons that seemed to vibrate in Sebastian's bones.

"Egeiro... Egeiro... Egeiro..."

Sebastian looked down at his hands.

They did not tremble.

Strange.

They always had before, after the port, after the alley. But now, nothing. Only a peculiar calm, empty and dead, as if something inside him had been sacrificed alongside the prisoner.

He raised his eyes to the goddess statues surrounding the temple. Before the ritual, they had slept, eyes closed, faces peaceful, dreaming their eternal dreams. Now... now he was not sure they slept at all. Through the stone, through the centuries, he felt them watching and watching him. Seeing what he'd become.

A metallic taste filled his mouth. He'd bitten his tongue during the ritual without even noticing, and blood pooled beneath his teeth, his own small sacrifice, given unknowingly.

Through the fog of revulsion and exhaustion, relief finally broke through. Emile was healed. The rite had worked. His brother would live.

Was it worth it?

A voice asked.

He didn't have an answer.

And then, in that moment of numb emptiness, Sebastian felt someone's gaze upon him, different from the stone eyes of the goddesses, warmer, more immediate. He looked up.

Behind the blood-soaked altar, half-hidden in the shadow of a column, stood a girl.

She was watching him directly, her face pale in the lamplight, her dark eyes fixed on his with an intensity that stopped his heart.

He knew that face. Knew it more intimately than he knew his own reflection. Through dreams and visions, he had lived behind those eyes, felt her terror at the coup, her cold detachment at the arena, her burns becoming his. The scars on his fingers throbbed now, recognizing their source.

Night after night, she had invaded his dreams, until tonight, when it seemed she'd finally released him.

But she hadn't released him. She had been coming to him. Through the darkness, across the sea, following the thread of blood and prophecy that bound them together.

And now she stood before him, not dead on an altar, not drowning in ancient waters, not watching slaughter with pitiless eyes. Alive. Real. Close enough to touch.

Impossible. But alive.

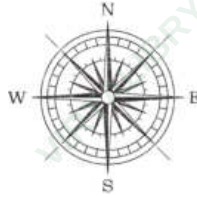
One branch of the blood spiral reached toward the column where she stood, as if the ritual itself had drawn a line connecting them, death and vision, sacrifice and prophecy, the man who'd consented to murder and the woman bound to him by dreams.

The name rose unbidden, a whisper from the depths of his soul.

The cupbearer from Ragusa.

Beatrice Feski.

Chapter 10: Meeting of Fates



BEATRICE

The rite was complete. Emile Scaliger sat on the jade altar, alive, and the black threads of poison vanished from his skin. Where a killing wound had carved his cheek, only a thin white scar remained.

Beatrice exhaled. She hadn't realized she'd been holding her breath.

This is what real power means.

Ishtar had given her visions, hints, sparks of the divine. But Liana Stone had resurrected a man with the power over life and death itself.

Beatrice felt unfamiliar awe and beneath it, cold, freezing fear.

Then she raised her eyes.

And saw *him*.

Sebastian Scaliger stood at the altar's head, face pale as the marble columns around them. Tall, fair-haired, blue-eyed. His white shirt was stained with blood that wasn't his own, the fabric clinging to his chest where sweat and gore had soaked through. His collar torn open, revealing the hollow of his throat where his pulse beat visibly, rapidly. Hand gripping his rapier hilt so tightly that his knuckles had gone white, tendons standing out along his forearm.

Sebastian.

The name that had echoed in her mind every night since Ragusa.

And now she saw him, flesh-real, here, alive—the breadth of his shoulders. The strand of fair hair was plastered to his forehead. The way his chest rose and fell with each breath.

She knew him. Through the visions, she knew him more intimately than she knew herself.

Night after night, he had invaded her dreams. She woke with the taste of his blood on her tongue. She thought of him during the day, at the arena, in the palace, in meetings with agents. His face surfaced unbidden. She tried to stop it. Failed.

What is happening to me?

Suddenly, she couldn't control her own mind. She, Beatrice Feski, who controlled her emotions, her agents, her enemies. This boy she'd barely spoken to at the palace had taken up residence in her skull and refused to leave.

And now he stood before her, real, here, alive.

Not a vision. Not a dream. Flesh and blood, close enough to touch.

His gaze moved to his brother, to the mercenary's corpse on the black altar, and Beatrice saw his face contort with revulsion. He forced himself to stand motionless, but everything in him screamed that this disgusted him to his core.

Noble fool! You still believe there's purity in the world.

And in that moment, their gazes met.

Beatrice's heart slammed against her ribs. Her breath stopped. Her body froze.

Recognition flooded his eyes, the same shock, the same wonder that was tearing through her chest. He knew her, too. He had dreamed of her, too.

The invisible thread between them had become tangible. It pulled taut, vibrating like a struck string. She felt it in her bones, in her blood, in the marrow of her soul.

An overwhelming urge seized her to cross the distance between them, to touch him, to confirm he wasn't another vision. But terror held her frozen.

What if I reach out and he vanishes?

What if this is another cruel trick from the goddess?

Her pulse hammered in her throat. Her hands trembled. Tears pricked her eyes, and she blinked them back furiously. Not here. Not now.

But her gaze refused to leave his face.

He took a step forward, his hand reaching toward her. "You..."

A shot tore through the silence, booming, rending the night. Then a second. A third.

"We're under attack!" someone shouted.

Chaos erupted.

Steel rang through the forest. Through the columns, Beatrice saw torches flickering among the trees.

A guard burst in, his face twisted with fear. "Master Stone! Attackers, dozens! Armed mercenaries! They're at the temple!"

"To the forest!" Alber Stone drew his rapier. "Everyone, scatter! Don't be reckless, the villa is full of our men!"

Liana set down the golden cup and drew a dagger. Her lips moved, and light flared around her, a protective working of some kind.

Beatrice acted without thinking. Her body obeyed something more profound than reason.

She darted toward Sebastian.

He turned. Their eyes met again. For a split second, the chaos vanished, only him, only her, only this gaze full of recognition and something nameless.

Then he extended his hand. "Quickly!"

Beatrice grabbed it.

The touch burned. The heat of his palm through her glove, or was it her own heat? She couldn't tell where she ended, and he began.

Sebastian pulled her toward a side passage leading into the forest's darkness.

Behind them: shots, steel ringing, screams.

They ran.

A figure burst from the shadows, broad-shouldered, short sword gleaming, aimed at Beatrice.

Sebastian lunged, deflecting the blade. Beatrice threw dirt in the man's face. He stumbled, and Sebastian's rapier found his ribs.

First shared blood.

They ran harder. Another assassin came from the left. Sebastian parried; Beatrice swung a branch at the man's knees. He stumbled. Sebastian's blade found his throat.

Blood sprayed hot across her hands.

She did not flinch.

They plunged deeper into the forest. The pursuers' shouts grew distant but did not stop.

"There!" a voice behind them. "Do not let them escape!"

Sebastian veered right, pulling her through thick underbrush. Branches tore at their clothes, at their skin.

Finally, fog. Thick, milky white, swallowing everything.

They dove into it like diving underwater. The voices behind them faded, confused.

Sebastian did not stop until the ground dropped away beneath their feet, down a steep slope into a hollow where the fog pooled deepest.

They collapsed.

Beatrice sank to her knees in wet grass, lungs burning. Her heart hammered so hard she thought it might burst. Blood roared in her ears.

Sebastian dropped beside her, gasping for air.

For several minutes, they simply breathed. Neither spoke. The world slowly stopped spinning.

Beatrice felt the adrenaline begin to fade. The trembling started, hands first, then arms, then her whole body. She clenched her fists, tried to stop it.

Couldn't.

Sebastian's hands shook, too. She watched him stare at them, at the blood darkening his gloves.

He pulled them off, one finger at a time. Wiped his palms on the grass. The trembling did not stop.

"We killed him," he said quietly. "Together."

Beatrice was silent. What could she say?

"They taught me to fight and prepared me for a military career," Sebastian continued, voice hollow. "But I didn't think I could take lives so easily."

Beatrice recognized that look. She'd seen it on arena fighters after their first kill: the numbness, the distance from self, the realization that you'd crossed a line you couldn't uncross.

She didn't try to comfort him. She just sat with him in the silence.

After a moment, he raised his eyes.

And Beatrice truly looked at him for the first time.

Not through a vision. Not through a dream. But here, real, so close she could touch.

Tall, a palm's width above her, she guessed. Broad-shouldered but lean, a fencer's build. She traced him with her eyes: the line of his neck disappearing into his ruined collar; the hollow at the base of his throat, still pulsing with that rapid heartbeat; the way his shoulders filled the blood-soaked fabric. His shirt had torn further in their flight, and through the gap she glimpsed pale skin over hard muscle, the ridge of his collarbone.

She caught herself staring, glanced away, then returned her gaze to him.

Fair hair disheveled, falling across his forehead in damp strands, she wanted to push back. Sharp cheekbones caught the moonlight. Straight nose, strong jaw, shadowed with stubble. And those eyes, blue, cold, and clear as a winter sky, even now. Eyes that had haunted her dreams for weeks.

A red streak of blood smeared across his cheek. Someone else's blood. It should have repulsed her.

It did not.

Handsome.

The thought came unbidden. Here, after fleeing killers, covered in blood and dirt, she found herself drawn to him. To the way his chest moved when he breathed. To the veins standing out on his forearms, the strength in his hands.

But he was. And that added another layer to what she felt. Not only recognition from dreams. Not only the mystical bond Ishtar had forged between them.

Something simpler. Older. The pull of a woman toward a man.

She wanted to touch him. The thought struck her with its intensity.

He met her eyes with no calculation. No cold assessment. Only shock, wonder, the same emotions warring in her own chest.

"How long?" he asked quietly. "How long have you had the visions?"

Beatrice hesitated. "Since the night your father died. The Ishtar statuette burned my hands, and after that... I saw you. Felt you."

Sebastian's eyes widened. "Felt me?"

"Your fear on the ship. Your rage when you learned of the betrayal. Your..." She stopped. Too much.

But he leaned forward. "What?"

"Your despair," she whispered. "When you wanted to give up but forced yourself to keep going. I felt all of it."

He stared at her. "I had dreams too. You, lying on an altar. Dead. Then alive. I touched a corpse in a ruined temple and saw..." His voice caught. "Saw you screaming. Drowning. I woke up and couldn't breathe."

"When?"

"The island. After we escaped Ragusa." He ran a hand through his hair. "I thought I was going mad."

"The goddess," Beatrice said. "Ishtar bound us somehow. I don't know why."

Sebastian was silent, processing. Fear and hope warred in his eyes.

"Is it real?" he finally asked. "What do we feel? Or just... her manipulation?"

Beatrice had wondered the same thing a hundred times. "I don't know," she admitted. Honesty felt strange; she, Beatrice Feski, who always had answers, was admitting ignorance.

His eyes held gratitude. For truth, not platitudes.

Then his gaze dropped to his hands again. To the blood he couldn't entirely wipe away.

"There, in the temple," his voice trembled. "I watched them torture that man. Break his fingers. Burn him. Then Liana cut his throat, and I..." He swallowed hard. "I stood there and let it happen. Agreed to it. To save Emile."

His hand shook, holding nothing.

"Was it right?" He raised his eyes. "To save one by killing another?"

Silence hung between them.

"I don't know," Beatrice said.

His eyes searched her face for judgment, finding only shared uncertainty.

"I don't know either," he whispered. "And that terrifies me."

Welcome to the real world, where right and wrong blur into gray.

Sebastian extended his hand and carefully touched her cheek, where a branch had left a scratch. The touch was light, almost weightless.

But Beatrice flinched as if struck. Her skin beneath his fingers flared with heat.

"We're alive," he said. "By some miracle."

"For now," she answered, voice hoarse.

Their eyes locked.

She watched his gaze drop to her lips, then back to her eyes, question there, permission sought.

Her breath caught. She should pull away. Should maintain distance. Should remember who she was: cold, controlled Beatrice Feski, who didn't lose herself to desire.

But his hand was still on her cheek. Warm. Trembling slightly. She could feel his pulse through his fingertips, racing as fast as her own.

Beneath the blood and gunpowder, she caught his scent: sweat and skin and something else, something male and warm that made her stomach tighten. Heat radiated from his body, so near now, near enough that she could feel it through the chill of the night air.

Her eyes traced the line of his jaw. The curve of his lips. She wondered what they would feel like, what he would taste like beneath the blood.

And she leaned into that touch like a flower toward the sun. Couldn't help it. Didn't want to.

The space between them became electrically charged. She felt it crackling, pulling, inevitable. Every nerve in her body was awake, alive, screaming.

She could see the pulse jumping in his throat, could feel his breath ghosting across her lips.

Both knew what was about to happen.

Brief hesitation. Should they?

Then surrender to inevitability.

Beatrice didn't know who closed the distance first. Maybe her. Maybe him. Or both at once.

Their lips met.

Metallic taste, blood on his lips, someone else's, but so honest. Gunpowder scent embedded in his shirt's fabric. Stubble scraped her skin, rough and sharp. His hands cupped her face, palms hot, trembling. His fingers tangled in her hair, pulling her closer.

Her nails dug into his shoulders, biting through fabric into muscle. She felt him flinch, but he didn't pull away.

Blood. Like in the temple. Like the ritual. We're bound not only by visions, but by this.

It's magic.

It's the goddess.

But her body screamed the opposite—weakness in her knees. Breath forgotten. Pulse pounding in her temples. Heat floods her core in waves.

I'm losing control.

The thought came with horror. She, Beatrice Feski, who controlled people like cards, couldn't control herself.

His breathing, ragged and broken, mixed with hers: the taste of blood, the smell of sweat, the trembling of his hands sliding down her back.

All of this was real. Too real.

When he pulled back, their foreheads remained pressed together. Eyes closed. Breath shared between them, gasping.

Beatrice opened her eyes.

His face, a breath from hers. Lips swollen, reddened. Gaze clouded, pupils dilated almost black. On his cheek, the red streak of blood she'd smeared.

"Goddess," she exhaled.

The world returned, cold air, wet grass, distant sounds of the forest.

His eyes were wide, full of wonder and terror. "I..." he began. Stopped. Started again. "I do not... I've never..."

"I know," Beatrice said. She did know. She'd felt his inexperience in the dreams, his fumbling attempts to understand the bond between them.

"This is insane," Sebastian whispered.

"Completely," Beatrice agreed.

They stared at each other. Then, unexpectedly, both laughed, brief, breathless, almost hysterical. The absurdity of it: covered in blood, hunted by assassins, kissing in fog after witnessing ritual murder.

The laughter faded quickly.

Sebastian raised his hand and touched her lips with his fingertips. Carefully, as if afraid she'd disappear.

"So it's true," he whispered. "You're real. Not a vision. Not a dream."

"Real," Beatrice confirmed.

"This complicates everything," he said.

"Everything," she agreed.

They fell silent. What now? The question hung unspoken.

But neither had an answer.

Somewhere deep in her mind, Beatrice felt it again, that presence. Ancient, indifferent, watching. Was it laughter or a warning? Blessing or curse? She had no way to tell.

Only the sensation of an alien gaze.

And cold.

They sat in silence as the world lightened by degrees. Neither touched again. The moment had passed, reality reasserting itself.

Sebastian stared east, where the sky was pale pink. Beatrice watched him, trying to understand what he was thinking.

His profile was sharp in the pre-dawn light. Blood dried on his shirt. His hands no longer trembled but clenched into fists.

Through the trees came sounds, voices, footsteps.

Sebastian's hand flew to his rapier. Beatrice froze.

From the fog emerged three men with torches, Villa Nogarola's guards.

"Lord Scaliger! We've been searching for you! Master Stone ordered everyone gathered at the temple."

They climbed back up the path. In the torchlight, the forest looked different, less threatening, but still wary.

The path seemed endless.

When they emerged into the clearing, the sun had risen. Golden light flooded everything. White marble columns sparkled. Grass gleamed with dew.

At the temple entrance stood people.

Alber Stone stood in a blood-stained doublet. Mark Scaliger beside him, grim, rapier in hand. Emile, pale but alive, the white scar visible on his cheek. Liana was in a dark cloak over her dress, crimson still visible.

And at the base of the columns, bodies. Many bodies.

Beatrice counted automatically. Three in Nogarola livery. Eight in dark cloaks. Blood pooled in the marble's grooves, dark and sticky. Servants were washing gore from the columns with buckets of water, the liquid running pink.

From inside the temple came the screaming of a wounded man as the physician worked, high, agonized. Then silence.

The smell hit her, copper, and worse.

Among the dead, she recognized a face.

The young guard who'd helped her from the carriage yesterday. Barely twenty, gap-toothed smile. He'd held her hand a moment too long, made some fumbling compliment.

Now his neck was broken. Eyes open, staring at nothing.

Yesterday, he'd been alive. Hoping.

Now, meat on the ground.

She waited for the horror to come, the grief.

Nothing came.

Is this what I've become?

She felt Sebastian tense beside her. Their hands had found each other again during the climb; neither remembered reaching out.

Mark noticed them first. His gaze slid from Sebastian to Beatrice, lingered on their clasped hands.

Something flashed in his eyes. Understanding? Concern? Warning? Beatrice could not read it.

"Brother." Mark stepped forward. "You're unharmed?"

"Unharmed," Sebastian answered, releasing Beatrice's hand. "We fought them off. Hid in the forest."

"Good."

Alber Stone approached, his heavy gaze studying both of them.

“The attack was surprisingly poorly organized. I can only explain it by haste,” he said. “Many mercenaries, but no clear purpose. They attacked, broke through in numbers, but when they met resistance, they scattered. We lost three. Wounded five, minor.”

He gestured to the bodies. “Eight of theirs are dead. Three captured, being questioned now.”

Another scream came from inside the temple. Wet. Choking. Then silence.

“Who was behind this?” Sebastian asked.

“Unknown, yet.” Alber frowned. “But I suspect the same ones who organized the attempt in Hogberg. Cornaro? Someone else? We’ll know more after questioning.”

Beatrice listened with half an ear, her thoughts elsewhere.

She glanced at Sebastian. He stood beside Mark, listening, his face carefully blank. But when he momentarily turned and their eyes met, something flared, memory of the night, the kiss, the words they could not take back.

Liana approached Beatrice, golden eyes studying her face.

“Are you all right?” she asked quietly.

“Yes,” Beatrice answered. “Everything’s fine.”

A lie. Nothing was fine.

* * *

The sun rose higher, flooding Villa Nogarola with morning light. Servants erased traces of the attack, scrubbing blood, collecting weapons, and carrying bodies to the courtyard for burial or burning.

Life continued.

Beatrice stood at the window of the guest room they’d given her. They’d offered rest, clean clothes, and time to compose herself before returning to Hogberg.

But sleep refused to come.

She gazed at the dawn over the hills, at golden fields, at vineyards descending the slopes. Morning air drifted through the half-open window, scented with dew and warmed earth.

Her dress was torn. Her arms scratched. Her body ached. Her lips still held the memory of his touch. And the metallic taste she could not swallow.

Everything was so calm, so peaceful, as if the nightmare had not happened.

But it had.

And there was Sebastian.

What's happening to me?

A knock at the door.

"Enter."

Alber Stone stepped in. Tired face, sharp gaze. "Signorina Feski." He stopped at the threshold. "We need to talk."

Beatrice turned and raised an eyebrow. "About what, Master Stone?"

"About what I saw tonight." He paused. "You and young Scaliger."

Her heart skipped a beat, but outwardly she remained calm. "And what did you see?"

"Enough to understand there's something between you." Alber came closer, his voice quieter, harder. "I do not know what it is. Fate? Simple attraction? I do not care."

He stopped a step from her.

"But remember one thing, Signorina Feski. You work for me. You're my agent in Ragusa, deep cover, embedded in the palace, close to Cornaro's inner circle. If your feelings begin interfering with the mission..." He let the words hang.

Ice flooded Beatrice's veins.

"You know what happens to agents who are compromised," Alber continued, his voice soft as silk over steel. "What happens when the cover is blown. Cornaro's interrogators are... thorough. And I will not be able to protect you. Will not even try."

The threat was crystal clear.

Do your job. Or die.

Beatrice forced herself to hold his gaze. Raised her chin. "I know my place, Master Stone. And I know what I am doing."

"I hope so." Alber studied her. "Because what began tonight will not end simply. The attack was a probe. Enemies know where we are. They'll return with more men and better planning. And when war comes, and it will come, I need to know you'll do your duty. Do not let emotion cloud your judgment."

He held her eyes. "Can you do that, Signorina Feski? Can you choose duty over desire?"

Beatrice met his gaze, unflinching. "I've done it my entire life."

Alber nodded slowly. "Good. See that you continue."

He turned and left, leaving Beatrice alone.

She returned to the window.

The dawn was clear, calm. But in her chest settled a new weight that would not lift.

All her life, Beatrice had built walls. Coldness. Calculation. Control. She'd survived because she never allowed herself to feel. Emotions made you vulnerable. And vulnerable people died.

Sebastian Scaliger was the first crack in those walls.

And Beatrice did not know what frightened her more, losing control, or discovering who she'd become without it.

But now there was something worse.

Sebastian did not just threaten her control. He offered something worse.

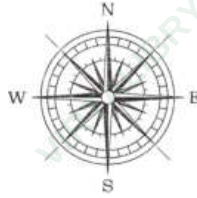
Hope.

She touched her lips. They still held the memory of his touch, blood, trembling, being, for one moment, terrifyingly alive.

Something had begun this night.

She did not yet know what it would cost her.

Chapter 11: The Map of War



BEATRICE

Dawn broke over Villa Nogarola, painting the white marble columns of the grove temple in shades of amber and rose. The beauty felt obscene after last night.

Beatrice stood on the expansive stone terrace overlooking the sea, arms wrapped around herself despite the morning warmth. She hadn't slept. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw the temple: blood on jade, the mercenary's throat opening under Liana's blade, Emile convulsing on the altar as black poison retreated from his flesh.

And she saw Sebastian.

His face when he looked at her. Recognition. Wonder. As if he'd been searching for her through dreams and finally found her real.

The memory made her chest tighten. She forced it down.

Not now. Not here.

Below, in the grove behind the villa, soldiers buried the dead. Shovels struck stone in a steady rhythm, a sound like slow heartbeats. Salt wind carried the smell of fresh-turned earth, mixed with the lingering scent of gunpowder. Three graves for their own, eight for the enemy, the mathematics of violence, reduced to holes in the ground.

A massive oak table dominated the terrace, and on it lay a map of Ragusa, its corners pinned down with daggers and heavy inkwells. The parchment was old, soft as worn leather under the morning light. Beatrice studied it from where she stood, tracing the curve of the harbor like a horseshoe, the two horns of the fortifications jutting north and south, Cornaro's palace on the southern promontory, the port quarter on the northern. She knew every street, every alley, every shadow where a spy could hide or a knife could find flesh.

Alber Stone stood with his knuckles pressed against the table's edge. His face was calm as always, but deep shadows lay beneath his eyes. Smoke from his pipe rose in a thin thread. He poured himself wine, took a sip, and grimaced. Too early, but after a night like that, it's necessary.

Mark sat to his uncle's right, straight-backed, hands folded on the table. Before him lay a dagger, which he turned occasionally, testing the edge with his thumb, an old soldier's habit. His face revealed nothing.

Emile had settled to the left, leaning back in his chair. The white scar cutting across his face from temple to chin stood out pale against his tanned skin, the mark of magic rather than natural healing. He rolled a silver coin between his fingers, clicking it against the table, a nervous tic he'd developed since waking on the altar.

Liana stood at the stone railing, gazing at the sea.

Beatrice observed her. Something was wrong; the woman had been off since the ritual.

Liana held herself too still. Even when the wind tugged at her chestnut hair, her body remained frozen. Her breathing was barely visible. And her eyes, green with golden flecks, didn't look at the sea but *through* it, as if seeing something beyond the horizon.

Alber cast troubled glances at his daughter. Quick, furtive looks he tried to hide. Once, when Liana spoke, Beatrice saw his jaw tighten, not with strategy, but with grief. Everyone pretended not to notice.

What did the ritual cost her? Beatrice wondered. *What did she give to bring Emile back?*

Sebastian stood at the far end of the terrace, hands gripping the railing. She didn't need to see his face to know what he felt. After the visions, after the dreams, she could read him like a wound she'd touched herself. The rigid line of his shoulders. The way he breathed, too controlled, too deliberate. He was holding himself together by will alone.

Something was eating at him, and she knew what.

Alber cleared his throat. The conversations died.

"Three weeks." His voice cut the silence. "Three weeks to prepare. Then we take back Ragusa."

Three weeks. The number settled into Beatrice's bones twenty-one days to lay the groundwork for an invasion.

Mark leaned forward, elbows on the table. "The plan?"

Alber's fingers traced the edge of the map. "First, you need to understand what we're dealing with." He tapped the parchment. "Ragusa's harbor is shaped like a horseshoe. The Upper City sits here, on the southern horn: Cornaro's palace, his treasury, his power. The northern horn holds the Lower City, the port quarter, the docks, and the warehouses. And here, at the mouth..." His finger stopped on a small island blocking the harbor entrance. "The Diamant. A fortress on a rock. The heaviest guns in the city, controlling everything that enters or leaves."

Beatrice studied the familiar geography with new eyes. She knew these waters, these fortifications. She'd sailed past the Diamant a hundred times, always conscious of those black cannon mouths watching from above.

"The key," Alber continued, "is understanding where the guns point. The Diamant's batteries face outward, toward the sea. So do the Upper City's. They're designed to destroy any fleet foolish enough to approach in daylight." He traced his finger along the curve of the horseshoe. "But once you're inside the harbor, those guns become useless. They cannot be turned inward. The city was fortified against fleets. No one ever imagined the threat would come from inside its own harbor, wearing merchant colors."

"The Lower City is different," Beatrice said, seeing it now. Her finger found the northern horn. "The Coastal Battery covers both the approaches and the harbor. It can fire in either direction."

Alber looked at her with approval. "Exactly. Which is why the Coastal Battery must be our first target. We take it, we control the harbor. Cornaro cannot be reinforced by water. Any boat crossing from the Upper City gets torn apart by what used to be his own guns."

Mark's eyes sharpened as he followed the logic. "So we slip past the Diamant at night, seize the port, capture the shore guns, and use them to lock down the harbor."

"That's the first half," Alber straightened. "But harbor guns do not break palaces. Ragusa has coastal batteries, ship-killers, wall-mounted cannons, nothing designed to crack fortifications from below. The city's never been attacked from within."

He let the silence stretch.

"We bring what Ragusa does not have. Four siege bombards." He let the words sink in. "Heavy, yes, a hundred stone each. But with trained crews and proper equipment, they can be offloaded, positioned, and ready to fire within hours. Stone shot, not iron. Cheaper, and against palace walls, just as deadly."

Emile whistled softly. "You're going to hold the Upper City at gunpoint. With guns they do not know exist."

"Cornaro's batteries face the sea. He'll watch our guns aim at the Upper City and have no way to answer. His gunners will stand at their useless posts while we dictate terms."

Beatrice felt a chill run through her despite the morning warmth. The elegance of it made her skin prickle, a trap sprung from within.

"But we do not have a fleet," Sebastian said from the railing. "We do not have siege guns. We do not have a thousand men."

"We have gold." Alber resumed his slow circuit of the table. "Accounts in Silver Harbor, in Galtos, in the banks of New Galeos. One hundred fifty thousand ducats, perhaps more. Enough to buy ships, men, and silence."

Mark nodded. "Mercenaries. The Isthmus just finished a war. Thousands of soldiers sitting idle, looking for pay."

"Precisely. Dozens of captains with companies to feed and no contracts to sign. It's a buyer's market." Alber shrugged. "We offer fair rates and hint at long-term employment. The Scaligers will need a new guard once we retake the city; the old one died with your father. Every captain on the coast will want that contract."

Alber paused by the map. "As for artillery, same story. Good veterans are going cheap, even gunners, who are usually in high demand. The beauty of peacetime."

"The ships?" Emile asked, coin clicking against the wood.

"Twenty vessels." Alber began counting them off on his fingers. "Six galleys, eight brigantines, two galleasses, four carracks."

Mark leaned forward. "Walk us through them."

"Galleys carry the assault troops, fifty marines each, three hundred men ready to storm the docks the moment we touch stone. Fast, maneuverable, and each mounts a heavy gun at the bow. First blood will be theirs." Alber's voice hardened. "Brigantines screen our approach and cut off anyone who tries to flee the harbor, with warning. And if we need to scatter, they outrun anything Cornaro can put in the water."

Sebastian frowned. "And if things go wrong before we scatter? If the Diamant wakes and opens fire while we're still in the strait?"

Alber nodded slowly, as if the question pleased him. "The galleasses. Floating batteries, each one carries more guns than the rest of the fleet combined. Slow as pregnant sows, but if we need to fight our way out, they'll hammer the fortress while the galleys retreat." He paused. "They won't enter the harbor with the first wave. They'll wait in open water. Our reserve. Our insurance."

"And the carracks carry the bombards?" Emile asked.

"Exactly. Heavy merchantmen, deep holds, the only ships that can carry siege guns of the size we need without capsizing." Alber's finger tapped the harbor mouth. "They enter first, at dusk, flying merchant colors. No one looks twice at a carrack in a trading port. By the time the galleys slip past the Diamant, the guns are already waiting to be offloaded at the docks."

Beatrice frowned. "Twenty ships approaching together? The Diamant's lookouts will spot a fleet leagues out. One signal fire and every battery opens up."

"We don't sail as a fleet." A thin smile crossed Alber's face. "The ships travel together until twenty leagues out, then split. The carracks enter the harbor first, in the evening, ordinary traders arriving before the port closes for the night."

"And the galleys?"

"They follow after dark. Six ships, low in the water, oars muffled. No lights, no sails. They slip past the Diamant in the small hours, when the watch is tired, and the moon is down." Alber's gaze shifted to Beatrice. "If everything goes right, the fortress never wakes. The first thing Cornaro knows of us is three hundred marines storming his docks at dawn."

"And if the Diamant does wake?" Mark asked.

"The galleasses wait in open water with the brigantines. If the fortress opens fire, they cover the retreat." Alber shrugged. "We lose the galleys, perhaps half the men. But the carracks are already in the harbor. We keep the guns. Try again in a month with a different approach."

She met his eyes steadily. There it was—her purpose at this table. The carracks had to enter unchallenged. The Diamant had to sleep.

"Weather conditions?" Mark continued.

"Moonless night for the approach. Calm seas. We have a three-day window at the end of the month. Miss it, we wait for the next cycle."

Mark tilted his head. "Walk us through the landing itself."

Alber leaned over the map, both hands planted on the table's edge. "Four phases. First: preparation. Three weeks to acquire ships, recruit men, position artillery, and prepare the city from within." Another glance at Beatrice. "Second: the approach. The carracks enter at dusk as traders. The galleys follow in darkness. By dawn, we're at the docks."

His finger stabbed at points on the northern horn. "Primary targets: the watchtower, the battery, the powder magazines. We must take those guns before they can be turned against us. Once we hold the emplacement, the harbor is ours."

"Signals?" Mark asked. "How do we coordinate?"

"Lanterns. One light from the battery means it's taken. Two lights mean trouble, loss of the position. No light..." Alber's voice was flat. "Means we're already dying."

"But Cornaro will not sit idle," Mark said. "He'll counterattack."

"He can't cross the water; we'll control the guns that cover it. But there's a land route." Alber's finger traced a line curving around the horseshoe, from south to north. "A road from the Upper City. Several hours on foot, longer with troops in formation. That's our window."

"A window for what, exactly?" Sebastian's voice was tight.

"To dig in and get the guns off the carracks." Alber's tone hardened. "The Lower City is a labyrinth: narrow streets, warehouses, alleys where ten men can hold off a hundred. While the assault force secures a perimeter, we offload the bombards. It's hellishly hard work, but with block and tackle rigged on the quayside, rollers for the gun carriages, and crews who know their business, forty men per gun, working fast, we can have them positioned in hours, not days. That's the window we need to hold."

"And if Cornaro's troops arrive before the guns are ready?" Mark asked.

"They won't break through quickly. Street fighting favors defenders, and our men will be fighting for their lives and their pay. By the time Cornaro's soldiers hack through to the center of the Lower City, the guns will be aimed at his bedroom. But, with proper luck, we'll stop them at the outskirts."

Beatrice saw the whole terrible engine now: slip past the outer defenses, seize the inner guns, hold against the counterattack while dragging massive cannons into position, and then, with weapons Ragusa never imagined facing, dictate terms.

"Phase three," Alber continued. "The bombardment. A ranging shot first, fired into the palace courtyard or an empty wing, a demonstration. Stone and fire falling on the Upper City, close enough to kill but aimed to terrify. Cornaro will understand then what he faces. His sea batteries are useless. His troops are bleeding in the streets. His palace under guns, he cannot answer."

"Phase four: negotiation." He swept his gaze across the table. "We offer terms. Cornaro keeps his life and fortune if he yields the city. If he refuses..." A pause. "The next shot won't miss."

"One day," Mark said. "Night: assault and seizure. Morning: consolidation and positioning. By evening: ultimatum."

"Casualties?" His voice was professional, detached.

Emile's coin clicked. "Let me guess, 'acceptable losses.'" The scar on his face pulled tight as he smiled humorlessly. "I've recently become an expert on acceptable margins of death."

No one laughed.

Alber drew on his pipe and exhaled slowly. "Five to fifteen percent of the assault force. That is fifty to one hundred fifty men. Fewer if everything goes to plan."

"And if it doesn't?"

"More."

Mark nodded. "Acceptable."

“Told you,” Emile smirked.

Sebastian stepped away from the railing, face pale but voice controlled. “You’re talking about men’s lives like entries in a ledger. But we all understand that Cornaro will counterattack, and in the streets of our city, there will be real carnage, where not only soldiers will die.”

Beatrice watched him. This wasn’t the explosion she’d expected. Something had changed in him since last night. The fire was still there, but banked, buried under ash.

Mark met his brother’s eyes. “I’m talking about the cost of war. Every man who joins knows the risk. That’s what mercenaries do: they sell their swords and their lives for coin. Collateral casualties... they will happen regardless. They always do. Some of the townspeople won’t survive this night, but we’ll try to minimize losses.”

“That won’t make every innocent’s death less meaningful.”

“No. But the situation leaves us no choice.” Mark’s voice softened, barely. “Would you rather we abandon Ragusa? Let Cornaro keep what he stole? Let Father’s death mean nothing?”

Sebastian held his gaze for a long moment. Then his shoulders dropped, just slightly. “No,” he said quietly. “I would not.” He turned back to the railing, gripping it with both hands. “I’ll do what I must. Be where I am needed, when I am needed, and kill whoever needs killing.”

He’s learning. Learning that some arguments cannot be won. Learning to do what’s needed, not what seems right.

She was not sure whether it was a gain or a loss, but it certainly improved Sebastian’s chances for a long and happy life. Heroes look impressive in legends, but the real world demands moral compromises.

Alber circled the table and stopped directly across from her. “Now. Your role, Señorita Feski.”

She straightened. This was what she was for.

“The operation lives or dies on silence,” he said. “One alarm, one signal shot, and everything unravels. If the Diamant wakes before we pass, if the shore guns fire before we take them, we lose the ships, the men, perhaps our lives.”

“I understand.”

“You sail tomorrow. Three weeks in Ragusa. Your task: ensure that, on the night of the landing, every eye that might see us is closed. Every mouth that might cry warning is stopped.”

"The port I know." Beatrice studied the map, her mind already sorting contacts, debts, and leverage. "But the Diamant..." Her finger traced the island fortress. "That's a military installation with the highest discipline in the city."

"And yet they're still men." Alber's voice was cold. "Men who drink, who gamble, who visit the port quarter for pleasures unavailable on a rock in the sea. You have contacts among the provisioners who supply the fortress?"

She thought of old Marro with his water boats, of the wine merchant who'd bribed his way into the supply contract.

"Some. The garrison rotates monthly. Certain officers I might reach. Others are beyond turning."

"Then make sure those others aren't on duty that night. A sudden illness. A family emergency. An accident." His eyes held hers. "You'll have unlimited financial resources. The main thing is that when the landing force passes the island, they're overlooked."

Mark turned his dagger on the table. "And the port itself? Hundreds of people. Stevedores, fishermen, guards."

"I don't need to control hundreds." Beatrice stepped closer to the map. "Only the ones who matter."

Her finger found the critical points. "Three positions on shore decide if an alarm reaches the Upper City: the watch tower, one commander, four men on night rotation; the battery, a master gunner and his crew; the harbor master's office, which controls the signal flags and warning bell."

She moved to the Diamant. "On the island: the duty officer, the signal station, the gun crews on the seaward batteries. I need their rotation schedules, their habits, and their weaknesses. Two weeks to find every crack. Two weeks to ensure that when your ships appear, the men who should raise the alarm are drunk, bribed, distracted, or indisposed."

"The master gunner," she continued. "He's the problem on shore. Old soldier, incorruptible, loyal."

"So?" Mark asked.

"So he does not stand his post that night." Her voice did not waver. "Food poisoning, severe enough to keep him in his quarters. His second is young, ambitious, and has expensive tastes. I've been cultivating him for months."

"And the other Diamant officers?"

"I'll find the weak links. Every garrison has them." Her mind was racing ahead now. "The supply boats dock on the island's eastern side, away from the main batteries. If I can place someone aboard for that night, someone who ensures the signal station stays dark..."

Alber's eyes gleamed. "And the rest of the port?"

"Distraction and chaos." She'd war-gamed this a dozen times. "The night of the landing, a ship catches fire in the eastern harbor. Controlled enough to draw crowds without spreading. Half the port rushes to fight the blaze. The other half..." A thin smile. "A wealthy merchant celebrates his daughter's wedding with free wine in the taverns. A brothel cuts its prices. Card games with suspiciously generous odds. By midnight, anyone not fighting the fire will be too drunk, or too occupied, to notice ships in the harbor."

"And if someone does notice?" Alber asked.

"They won't live to speak." Her voice was even, businesslike. Crystal clarity reigned in her head. "I'll have people positioned at every critical point. Anyone who sees too much, asks too many questions, moves toward a signal bell..." She let the silence finish.

Mark glanced at Alber. "Impressive."

"Harsh," Sebastian said quietly from his place by the railing.

Beatrice didn't look at him. Couldn't. "Effective."

Alber nodded slowly. "This is why you're valuable, Signorina Feski. This is why I trust you with this."

Trust. The word hung between them. They both knew what failure would cost her.

"Three weeks," he said. "Prepare everything. When our ships pass the Diamant, I want the fortress blind. When we enter the harbor, I want the port deaf. When we land, I want the Lower City mute. Not one alarm. Not one signal. Not one shot until we're ready."

"It will be done."

Liana turned from the railing. Her eyes caught the morning light, and for a moment they seemed to glow, green flecked with gold, shining with an inner luminescence. "The path you walk grows darker with each step," she said, her voice distant, as if speaking from somewhere far away. "You plant seeds of fire and expect flowers to bloom." She tilted her head, birdlike, inhuman. "Blood will answer blood. It always does."

Everyone froze. Even Mark's hand stilled on his dagger.

Alber recovered first. "Liana. Perhaps you should rest."

She looked at him. Through him. "Rest is for those who still dream human dreams." Then she blinked, and something shifted in her face, confusion, briefly, as if she'd forgotten where she was. "I... yes. Rest." She moved toward the villa, her steps too smooth, too even, like a puppet on strings.

Silence held the terrace for a long moment after she disappeared inside.

"Is she..." Emile started.

"She's fine," Alber said shortly. "The ritual took much from her. She needs time." His voice brooked no further discussion.

No one believed him, but no one said so.

"Continue," Alber said. "Final details. I return to Hogberg tomorrow to begin preparations: ships, men, supplies. Recruiting falls to me and my contacts in the port cities."

He faced the brothers. "You three travel to Arcadia. To Giuliano."

Mark's eyes narrowed. "The head of House Scaliger."

"The same. You need his blessing and his resources. Without the main branch's support, this looks like a rogue operation. With it, we have legitimacy. Ships. Men. Political cover if things go wrong."

"Will he support us?" Emile asked, coin clicking.

"Your father was his favorite cousin. Cornaro made a huge mistake by killing him." Alber's voice softened, barely. "Present your case. Remind him what was taken. He'll support you, but he needs to hear it from Scaligers, not from me."

"And Liana?" Sebastian asked.

Alber's jaw tightened. "She goes with you. Giuliano will want to meet the woman who saved Emile's life. Her presence... validates the story."

And keeps her away from this temple. Away from whatever she might become.

"Once you have his commitment, return to Hogberg immediately," Alber continued. "Two weeks at most. Then we finalize preparations together."

"Good." Alber began rolling up the map. "Everyone to your tasks. Beatrice sails tomorrow. You three leave for Arcadia at first light. We have three weeks. Not a day more."

The council dispersed. People rose and headed for the villa. Conversations resumed in quieter tones.

Beatrice stayed seated, staring at the space where the map had been, processing, planning. Her mind was already in Ragusa, walking the familiar streets, counting the steps from the harbor to the watchtower, from the battery to the signal station.

Tomorrow she would sail back to the city she'd betrayed. Walk among people who would kill her if they knew what she was. Smile at men whose deaths she was arranging.

Scaliger spy, the voice whispered—Ishtar's blade.

She touched the healing burns on her palms, still tender, still marked.

A shadow fell across the table. Sebastian stood beside her, not touching, just close, close enough that she felt the warmth from his body, close enough that the air between them hummed.

"We need to talk," he said, voice low.

They walked to the far end of the terrace, away from the others. The sea stretched before them, blue and deceptively calm.

Sebastian leaned against the railing, hands gripping the stone.

"Don't go back," he said.

Not a question. A plea.

Beatrice stood beside him, arms wrapped around herself.

"I have to."

"You don't." He turned to face her. "Come with us to Arcadia. We could find another way."

"There is no other way." Her voice came out harsher than intended. "You heard Alber. Without someone inside the city, the plan fails. Everything fails."

"Then let it fail." His hand moved toward her, stopping a breath away. "Let Ragusa burn. Let Cornaro keep his throne. I don't care about, "

"Don't." She stepped back. "Don't say you don't care. You do. You care more than anyone at that table."

"Not more than I care about—" he stopped himself, jaw clenched. "Beatrice. What happened last night in the forest? What we felt—"

"Was dangerous," she finished. "And it can't happen again."

He stared at her, eyes searching hers for something.

"Why?"

Because if it does, I'll break. Because I can't let myself want something I can't have. Because this path I'm on ends in blood or ashes, and I won't drag you with me.

"Because I have work to do," she said instead.

There was no place for what happened last night in the forest.

No place for feelings. Feelings made you weak. And weak people died.

"Be careful," Sebastian said quietly, stepping closer, then another step, close enough that she could see the pulse at his throat, close enough to catch his scent: leather and sea salt, and something uniquely him. "In Ragusa. Cornaro's no fool. If he finds out—"

"I'm aware of the risks—" she interrupted. Too sharp. Too cold.

Sebastian stopped. Stood three paces from her, and Beatrice felt every inch of that distance. Felt the urge to step forward. The pull, so strong it stole her breath.

Don't.

"I'll manage," she added, softer.

He nodded and faced the sea. His hands settled on the railing, fingers clenched until the knuckles went white.

"Then I'll see you in three weeks," he said without turning. "When this all begins."

Beatrice swallowed against the sudden lump in her throat.

"See you then."

She turned and walked away, forcing herself not to look back. Her footsteps echoed across the stone terrace. Behind her, she felt his gaze heavy, burning, full of everything they couldn't say. Saying it might break them both.

Only when she entered the villa, into the cool shadow of the corridor, did she let herself breathe. She leaned against the cold wall and closed her eyes. Her legs trembled. Her hands trembled.

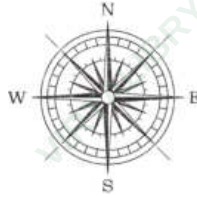
Ishtar knows her own, whispered the voice inside.

Beatrice clenched her teeth and walked on toward her room. Tomorrow, the work begins. Feelings would have to stay here, on this terrace, with the map of war and the smell of gunpowder.

But even closing the door behind her, even snuffing the candle, she still felt the touch of his lips on hers. Still heard his voice: *We're alive*.

Still saw his eyes, full of pain, fear, and something else. Something that frightened her more than war.

Chapter 12: Northward



EMILE

Emile spent a hundred leagues dying in the back of a wagon.

Not literally, of course. That would have been too convenient.

After the ritual in the grove, he had felt magnificent, reborn, for several hours. But soon after the war council, he collapsed unconscious in the middle of the courtyard, causing quite a stir. Poison was gone; he knew that much. But something had taken its place. Pain lived in his bones now. Not the sharp agony of venom, this was deeper, slower, as if his marrow had turned to ground glass.

The price of healing. Always a price. The universe has no charity. But it has balance.

His body felt alien, carved from marble, heavy and immobile; time dissolved into a string of hazy visions. He sank into unconsciousness, then surfaced toward waking, aware of movement around him. Liana appeared periodically, leaning over him with something bitter but strangely pleasant to drink. Her face shifted between visits, sometimes distant and cold as marble, sometimes warm with sisterly concern. Her inconsistency should have worried him. It did not. He was too busy dying.

That astringent broth spread warmth through his body, sending his thoughts wandering through labyrinths of half-forgotten memories.

In one dream, he stood in an ancient temple.

Columns around him breathed. With each exhale, stone softened into women's bodies, dancers of marble turning toward him, faces perfect, eyes white and blind yet watching. Lips that never parted but whispered his name.

Blood flowed down the altar steps. When it touched his feet, it turned to clear water.

The dancers smiled.

Fascinating, I'm having a religious experience. This is a new stage on the path of my spiritual growth.

His scar healed impossibly fast. Three days, and what should have been torn, crudely stitched flesh became a thin white line from temple to chin. A duelist's mark, Sebastian called it later. Emile preferred to think of it as a receipt, proof of purchase. The goddess had bought something, and he was still calculating the cost.

* * *

Liana's voice pulled him from sleep toward evening.

"If you have the strength, climb out, or at least look through the window." Her hand settled on his shoulder, calm and firm. "The Bastion's worth it. I envy you seeing it for the first time."

Emile opened his eyes and studied her face. Since the ritual, he'd noticed something off about her, moments when her voice went distant, as if speaking from somewhere far away. A stillness that wasn't quite natural. But now her eyes sparkled with genuine enthusiasm, warm and present.

The ritual had changed her, too. Question is: how much?

When she looked at him, there was only tenderness. Whatever the goddess had taken from Liana, it hadn't touched her love for her brother.

He rose, surprised to find he could actually stand. More than that, his body felt strangely light, as if part of his flesh had been replaced with something weightless. He filed this observation for later analysis.

Liana helped him from the wagon and led him over to a bay stallion with a noble profile. His first deep breath of open air filled his lungs with road dust, horse sweat, and summer flowers. Everything seemed brighter than before, colors more saturated, edges sharper.

Either I'm healing, or I'm dying more interestingly than expected.

Their caravan moved along a wide, paved road grown crowded with travelers: merchants with heavily loaded mules, peasants hauling goods, pilgrims with staffs, bands of mercenaries seeking service, all flowing north like rivers to the sea.

Ahead, the valley narrowed, becoming a natural pass no more than half a league wide. And there, at the end of this funnel, the Bastion rose.

Emile had heard of it and seen engravings. But the real structure made him catch his breath, and Emile was not easily impressed.

For the last five leagues, the road ran straight across absolutely cleared fields: not a single tree, not a stone for cover, the kind of scorched-earth approach that spoke louder than any declaration of power.

On both sides of the corridor, mountains surged skyward in massive cliffs crowned with round towers. Eastern and Western Forts, they were called, and they seemed to grow from the rock itself, holding the valley under crossfire. Cannon muzzles bristled from their heights.

Two hundred guns, Emile estimated, his tactical mind cataloguing automatically. *Maybe more. Interlocking fields of fire, absolute dominance of terrain.*

Most impressive of all were the twin lines of fortifications blocking the valley: the walls of the fortress itself. Built before gunpowder, when height meant everything, the main fence rose to incredible heights, rivaling the mountains themselves.

Beyond the battlements lay a different world: spires and domes of a massive city sprawling on the far side.

"The Bastion," Liana said, riding up beside him. "The only convenient passage between north and south. Everything else is mountains and the Jeweled Sea."

"And this?" Emile gestured at the fortifications.

"Insurance." She paused, her gaze briefly going distant. Then she was herself again. "The Republic built it three centuries ago, after they broke the spine of the Old Empire at Arcadia. The Empire retreated south, but never signed a peace. The Senate feared they'd return someday through the Isthmus to reclaim what they lost. So they shielded the capital with the Bastion."

"Strange," Emile mused. "A vast nation with its capital practically on the border. Any sensible state would have moved it north centuries ago, safer, more central."

"Arcadia isn't just a city," Liana said. "It's sacred ground. The place where the Republic was born, where a coalition of rebels, free cities, and mountain clans broke the greatest empire the world had ever known. The Senate meets in the same spot where they signed the founding charter. The temples stand on the bones of imperial legions."

"Sentiment over strategy." Emile shook his head. "How very human."

"They'd sooner burn the city than move it," Mark said quietly. "I've read the oaths. Every senator swears to defend Arcadia with his life, his fortune, his sacred honor. It's not just politics, it's religion." He paused. "At least, that's what Republican propaganda claims."

"Well, we never moved ours either," Sebastian said, his first words in a while. A ghost of a smile touched his lips. "Ragusa's been the capital since the founding."

"Ah, but we have an excuse." Emile grinned. "Where would we move it? We've already built on every inch of the island. The goats have complained for years about the lack of grazing land."

Even Mark almost smiled at that.

“Three centuries of waiting for an enemy that never came.” Emile allowed himself a thin smile. “That’s either admirable foresight or spectacular paranoia.”

“The Republic has always excelled at both.”

Sebastian approached from the other side, his face troubled. “It’s a wall between civilization and chaos.”

“It’s a monument to fear,” Emile corrected. “Impressive fear, admittedly. But fear nonetheless.”

Mark reined in beside them, his gaze sweeping the fortifications with a soldier’s calculation. “Can it be taken?”

“Not from the south.” Emile’s mind worked through the problem automatically. “The approach is a killing ground. The forts provide crossfire. The walls are thick enough to resist anything short of a year’s siege.” He paused. “But look closer.”

Mark frowned. “At what?”

“The cracks.”

Emile pointed: a patrol with mismatched uniforms, one squad in crisp new blue, another in faded gray that hadn’t been replaced in years; a queue of merchants arguing with officials while their goods rotted in the sun; clerks shuffling papers while the line grew longer.

“The giant has muscles,” Emile said, voice low. “But its brain is elsewhere. Probably arguing with itself about whose budget pays for new uniforms.”

Liana laughed, bright, unexpected, warm. “You’ve been unconscious for three days, and already you’ve diagnosed the Republic’s central dysfunction.”

“I read,” Emile said. “And I pay attention.” He nodded toward the queue of frustrated merchants. “This is supposed to be one nation. But do you think Vespers would send troops if the Bastion needed reinforcements? Would the Mountain Confederation agree to raise taxes for a war that doesn’t touch their valleys? They all wear the same colors and swear the same oaths, but each city, each province lives by its own interests. Unity is a convenient fiction. Easier to pretend than to achieve.”

He didn’t add the darker thought, *the only reason our small nations survive on their borders at all.*

They moved forward through the crowd—guards in blue and gold directed different groups: merchants east, pilgrims center, nobility west. Liana guided them toward the western gates with aristocratic ease. One officer, seeing the Scaliger colors, nodded and ordered the gates opened without delay.

Stone swallowed them. Ten paces of it, hoofbeats echoing like drums in a tomb, then light, sound, life.

Beyond the walls, a city sprawled across hills like something from a fever dream. White marble buildings climbed terraced streets, gardens hung from balconies, and fountains played in every square. Thousands upon thousands of people moved through streets wide enough for six wagons abreast.

“Welcome to the Republic,” Liana said. “Three more days and we’ll be in the capital.”

Emile studied it with the same analytical interest he applied to everything beautiful, indeed impressive. Still, he noticed the beggars in the shadows—guards who looked bored rather than alert. Streets are immaculate in one block, showing years of neglect just around the corner.

A city of contradictions. Like everything else here.

They found lodging at an inn near the city center, a three-story white-stone building with a courtyard garden. Their innkeeper, recognizing Liana’s name and their colors, grew obsequious. Rooms were prepared, and servants brought hot water, wine, and food.

Emile collapsed onto the couch in their shared sitting room, exhausted from the short ride. His body still felt hollowed out, as if the ritual had scooped something essential from his core and replaced it with... what? He was not sure yet.

Sebastian stood at the window, staring into the courtyard. Mark paced like a caged predator. Liana settled into a chair with feline grace, and there it was again, Emile noticed. Her posture shifted subtly. Something in her gaze went distant.

For a while, no one spoke.

Then Sebastian, surprisingly, broke the silence first.

“Do you remember the summer with the rowboat?”

Emile blinked. Of all the things he’d expected his brother to say...

“The one we stole from the harbor master?” Mark asked, turning from the window.

“Borrowed,” Sebastian said, mouth quirking. “We intended to return it.”

“We sank it.”

“*Accidentally* sank it.”

Emile found himself almost smiling. The memory surfaced, warm and strange after everything. “Father was furious.”

“Father was *terrified*,” Sebastian said quietly. “We were gone for six hours. He had half the harbor guard searching.”

"And Emile found us," Mark added. "Sitting on that rock, waiting for the tide to go down."

"I was seven." Emile shook his head. "And I lectured you about tidal patterns the whole way home."

"Longest three hours of my life," Sebastian said.

Silence again, but different now. Softer.

"We were happy then," Sebastian said quietly. "Weren't we?"

Emile considered the question. Their mother is still alive. Their father is still laughing at their antics. Children with a stolen boat and adventures ahead. Before coups, poison, and rituals that demanded blood.

"Yes," Mark said. "I think we were."

"Do you think we could be again?"

Mark looked at Sebastian's haunted eyes, the tension in his shoulders, then at Emile with his new scar and hollowed body.

"I don't know," Mark said finally. "But I'm going to try."

The moment held. Then Emile asked the question that had haunted him all the days on the road.

"The man we sacrificed in the temple. You've done this before, haven't you?"

Liana looked at him, and she was present again, warm, sisterly, as if his words had called her back from wherever she'd gone.

"Six times in the past eighteen months," she said. "Always for healing that exceeded natural means. Broken bones knit in hours. Poisons drawn from blood." She met his eyes steadily. "Once, my mother had lung fever. She would've died by morning. The ritual saved her."

"Six times," Sebastian's voice was level. "Six human sacrifices. Just like in pagan times."

"It's the price of survival," Liana said quietly. "Mother's. Loyal servants. Now a brother's. To save one life, we must pay with another."

"I know." Sebastian stared at his hands. "I agreed to it. I just... didn't expect it to feel like nothing."

Emile watched his brother's face go pale, hands clench. Not outrage this time. Something worse. Recognition.

Poor Sebastian. Learning that the world reshapes you, whether you consent or not.

"Where did you find them?" Emile asked. "Six disappearances. That attracts attention."

"Father's agents handle the selection." Liana's voice went distant, the priestess returning, the sister retreating. "They choose carefully. People who won't be missed. People who've already forfeited their claim to moral consideration."

"By whose judgment?" Sebastian asked quietly.

"Does it matter?" She tilted her head, birdlike. "Emile is alive. The alternative was watching him die, slowly and painfully, while we stood by and did nothing because the price of saving him offended our sensibilities."

She rose and moved to the window beside Sebastian, placing a hand on his shoulder, gentle, nearly maternal.

"I know this isn't the world you want," she said softly. "It's not the world any of us want. But it's the world we have. Magic is returning, the goddesses are waking, and the rules are changing, whether we accept them or not."

Sebastian didn't answer. He just stared at the wall, at a fresco of a hunting scene: hunters with their kill, a stag brought down by dogs, its glassy eyes accepting, dead.

Emile filed his brother's silence away for later consideration. Sebastian wasn't built for moral flexibility. That would become a problem eventually.

Mark, predictably, had already moved on. He stood at the window, studying the inn's courtyard with tactical assessment.

"When did you realize your abilities were returning?" he asked.

Liana's face shifted, the distant priestess receding, replaced by something almost childlike. Excitement sparked in her eyes.

"About six years ago. Mother lit a fire in the hearth." She sat again, leaning forward. "She was sick, alone in her room, seized by chills. The maid had been gone too long. Mother had no strength to call for help. She stared at the logs and, in her delirium, repeated words from a children's rhyme, the part mentioning flame and the Goddess."

Wonder crept into her tone.

"On the third repetition, the wood burst into flame. She said it answered, as if it had been waiting. Like coming home to a fire you didn't know you'd left burning."

"And others?" Mark asked. "Other families?"

Liana glanced toward the door, then the window. She lowered her tone further.

"Father wrote to the family. They discovered most young Scaliger women could do the same. In secret, the family mobilized agents among the old houses and learned..." She paused. "It's happening everywhere. Most female descendants of priestly dynasties are rapidly awakening abilities."

“Are the powers of all twelve goddesses awakening?” Emile asked.

“We believe so. In our case, Diadema. But the others...” She shook her head.

“We shouldn’t discuss this here. Walls have ears in the Republic. But you needed to know before,”

A knock on the door, sharp, imperious.

Everyone froze.

Hands moved to hidden weapons. Mark positioned himself between the door and his brothers. Liana rose with fluid grace, her hand drifting toward the dagger in her dress.

“Whoever it is,” she said quietly, “our peace in this city has ended faster than hoped.”

A voice beyond the door confirmed it, flat, alien, stripped of all inflection:

“Open. In the name of the Republic’s Senate.”

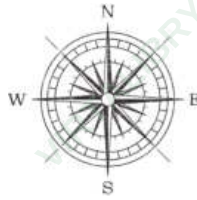
Emile’s mind raced through possibilities, calculating odds, assessing exits.

Interesting. I survived a goddess. Let’s see how I fare against bureaucrats.

His heart hammered.

The room held its breath.

Chapter 13: Enemies Hidden and Plain



MARK

Mark rose from his chair slowly and deliberately. His hand found the dagger hidden in his doublet, not drawing it, just confirming. Across the room, Emile and Sebastian exchanged glances, hands drifting toward weapons. Liana stepped back into the shadows behind the velvet drapes, disappearing as naturally as smoke.

Good. They're learning.

"Senators rarely pay visits without warning," Mark said, keeping his voice level. "Especially to those who've just arrived from the road."

The lackey's face had gone the color of old wax. He opened the door to admit three men.

Mark catalogued them automatically. The first: elderly, silver beard, burgundy toga with gold trim, a junior curator of the Senate, second rank. The griffin medallion marked him as Inner Council. The other two were guards: professional, crossbows with bone stocks. Not here to fight. Here to witness.

An official delegation. Which means official news. Which means bad news.

"Greetings, honored senator." Mark inclined his head the precise depth required for a Scaliger addressing a second-rank official. Not a hair's breadth more. "I fear the dust of the road hasn't yet settled from our cloaks."

"Mark Scaliger." The senator's voice rustled like dry parchment. "I am Octavian Livio, representative of the Inner Council."

A pause. Something shifted in the older man's eyes. Sympathy, perhaps. Or pity.

Here it comes.

"I'm afraid I bring ill news. Giuliano Scaliger, head of your House, died last night in his palazzo in Arcadia. By all signs, poison."

The words landed like stones dropped into still water. Mark felt the ripples spread through the room: Sebastian's sharp intake of breath, Emile sinking into his chair, Liana's fingers tightening on the drapes.

He set aside grief for later examination. There would be time to mourn when they weren't surrounded by strangers with crossbows.

Instead, his mind worked.

Uncle Giuliano. Dead. That changes the succession. That changes everything.

Memory surfaced unbidden. Not from Uncle's study, but from ten years ago, a summer visit to Arcadia, the whole family together. Unofficial. Relaxed. The last time they'd all been happy, though Mark hadn't known it then.

Father had been different in Arcadia. Younger somehow, lighter, the weight of Ragusa lifted from his shoulders. He laughed easily, teased the servants, and raced Sebastian through the gardens while Mother watched from the terrace. Francis Scaliger, the first man of Ragusa, playing as a boy, escaped from lessons.

Mother sat in her chair, always silent, always watching with those deep eyes. Mark remembered thinking she looked tired. He hadn't understood then that the illness was already stealing her strength, hollowing her from within. The children saw only their beautiful, quiet mother. They didn't see her counting the days she had left.

And Uncle Giuliano, stern Giuliano, with the permanent crease between his brows, the man who treated politics like warfare and family dinners like strategy sessions, became someone else entirely around Francis. The severity melted. He laughed at Father's jokes, joined his games, and let himself be dragged to the river docks to watch the fishing boats come in.

He loved Father, more than anyone else in the family. Perhaps because Francis was the only Scaliger who simply tried to live fully, recklessly, without the cold breath of duty on his neck.

Two cousins: one who carried responsibility like a cross, one who fled from it into light and laughter.

Now both were dead.

The calculation assembled itself, cold and necessary.

Who inherits? Antonio, most likely, is Giuliano's younger brother. Will he honor Giuliano's commitments?

For a moment, just a moment, Mark felt it: the weight of every death pressing down. Father. Uncle Giuliano. All the loyal people who had died protecting them. He was twenty-one years old, and he was running out of family.

He buried the thought. There would be time for grief later if they survived.

Alber had drawn freely from family accounts, confident that Giuliano Scaliger would move heaven and earth for his beloved cousin's children. That confidence had funded ships, mercenaries, and plans.

But Giuliano was gone. And whoever sat in his chair might see us not as family to protect, but as problems to manage.

The older man had seen many knives, but not this one.

Mark watched his brothers. Sebastian's hand had flown to his rapier. Mark caught his eye, sent a silent warning. *Not here. Not now.* Emile had gone pale, the scar on his face standing out like a brand.

And Liana...

Her eyes had gone strange. Distant. As if she were looking at something beyond the walls, beyond the room. Her lips moved without sound, shaping words in a language Mark didn't recognize.

Madness? Possession? Or something older, a blessing that looked like both?

He'd seen men lose their minds after battle. He'd heard stories of priests who spoke with voices not their own. But Liana was neither broken nor holy. She was something else. Something the old texts might have named, if anyone still read them.

Mark filed it away. Later.

"When?" His voice came out level. Almost businesslike.

Good. Let them think I'm cold. Cold men are harder to read.

"Last evening. Physicians established death around midnight." Octavian produced a scroll with a black mourning ribbon. "The Senate expresses its deepest condolences to House Scaliger. This is the sixth such death among the Great Houses in the past two months."

Sixth.

The number clicked into place like a key in a lock.

Six houses. Six heads of family. Six votes in the Senate that had opposed someone's plans? The pattern assembled itself in Mark's mind, not a conspiracy theory, but geometry. Someone was clearing the board.

"You're speaking of a series of murders, senator."

Not a question. Octavian's slight nod confirmed it.

"The Secret Order is conducting an investigation, which is precisely why you're ordered to appear in the capital immediately. Magister Fabrizio Visconti will personally lead your escort. He'll arrive within two hours."

Ordered. Not invited. And a magister of the Order himself, not a captain, not a lieutenant. Someone wants us to watch closely.

"We're summoned for questioning?" Emile's voice carried an edge.

“For protection, rather.” The senator’s tone suggested he did not entirely believe his own words. “Magister Visconti will inform you of details as he sees fit.”

Mark inclined his head again. “We’ll be ready to depart, senator. Thank you for the warning.”

When the door closed, the room held its breath for three heartbeats. Then Sebastian exploded.

“First Father, now Uncle! Someone’s destroying us one by one!”

“Six Great Houses,” Emile said, rubbing the scarred line on his face. “I’m not sure it’s pure coincidence.”

From the shadows, Liana spoke. Her voice had changed, slower, weighted with something old. “The ancient bloodlines. Someone is severing the threads that bind...”

She trailed off. Her eyes had gone distant, looking at something beyond the walls.

Mark felt the hair rise on his neck. Whatever spoke through her wasn’t Liana.

Then she blinked, and she was herself again. “I’m sorry. I don’t control when she speaks.” Mark decided now wasn’t the time to ask what she meant.

“Pack,” he said, turning to the window. Outside, the sun bled toward the horizon. “We have less than two hours. And be ready for anything.”

He didn’t say what he was thinking.

A magister of the Secret Order personally leading our escort, that’s not honor. That’s suspicion.

But from the looks on their faces, they understood.

Magister Fabrizio Visconti arrived precisely on time. Mark watched from the window as he dismounted, tall, thin, moving with the grace of a hunting bird. A face carved from dark marble: deep-set eyes, sharp cheekbones, lips compressed to a colorless line. His black mantle bore silver-embroidered eyes, the symbol of the Secret Order.

Eight riders followed. Six wore identical black armor, faces hidden behind half-masks, movements mechanically precise—soldiers of the Order, trained to uniformity. But two hung back: older, scarred, eyes constantly scanning the magister’s personal guard.

So. He trusts six men to follow orders. He trusts two men to keep him alive.

Mark noted it. The distinction told him something.

When Visconti entered their chambers, the room seemed to contract around him. He swept his gaze across the brothers and Liana, studying, measuring, and filing away what he saw.

Mark returned the examination. The rings on Visconti's fingers: heavy, dark stones, symbols he didn't recognize. The way his weight shifted: a fighter's balance, even standing still. The slight bulge at his left forearm, a hidden blade, spring-loaded, probably.

A hunter. The question is whether we're the prey or the bait.

"Gentlemen, Scaliger." Visconti's voice was unexpectedly melodious, creating a disturbing dissonance with his appearance. "I am Magister Fabrizio Visconti, secretary of the Secret Order's Inner Circle. Unfortunate circumstances compel us to spend the coming days together."

Mark answered with a bow measured to a hair's breadth. "Magister, we're ready to depart."

"Commendable efficiency." The thin lips curved, smile or sneer, impossible to tell. "The Secret Order has reason to believe you are targets for unidentified conspirators. My task is to deliver you to the funeral and House Council safe and sound."

His gaze slid to Liana. "Will the lady join the journey?"

"Liana is a representative of a cadet branch of our House. She has the right to attend the Council."

"Of course."

Something flickered in Visconti's eyes. Recognition? Interest? Mark couldn't read it, and that bothered him. He could usually read anyone.

"Then we depart immediately. The road takes three days. If we're not interfered with."

They rode from the Bastion as twilight swallowed the west. The northern gates swung open without question at the sight of black cloaks. Guards averted their eyes, hands nowhere near weapons.

Fear. The Order rules by fear. Useful to remember.

Visconti rode ahead on a black stallion, straight as a spear against the darkening sky. Mark positioned himself behind and to the right, close enough to watch, far enough to maneuver if necessary. Sebastian and Emile flanked Liana in the center of the column.

The road climbed immediately into the mountains. Cold wind cut at their faces. The smell of pine and wet stone filled Mark's lungs. On the right, rocks loomed like frozen giants; on the left, an abyss dropped into darkness.

The Order's escort rode too close. Too attentive. Mark felt their eyes tracking every movement.

Protecting us? Or containing us?

“Easy,” he said quietly when Sebastian’s hand drifted toward his rapier for the third time. “As long as we’re riding where they want, they won’t touch us.”

Sebastian’s jaw tightened. “And when we arrive?”

Mark had no answer. The silence said enough.

* * *

The Black Griffin inn appeared around midnight, a massive structure of stone and timber, warm light glowing from its windows.

Visconti dismounted first. “One hour for food and rest. We depart at first light.” His eyes found Mark’s. “The escort will guard all entrances.”

Guard. Or trap.

Ten minutes later, they sat in a private room on the second floor. Food and wine waited on the table. Visconti sat at the head, not eating, fingers steepled, watching. Mark sipped his wine, buying time to assess.

He wants something. Information? Reaction? Or just to see how we perform under pressure?

“I am certain you understand the gravity of the situation,” Visconti began. “Six related deaths in two months. All the deceased come from the most respected families of the Republic. All were poisoned by the same toxin, Siren’s Tears, the assassins’ signature. Someone is acting very consistently and methodically.” He paused. “And demonstratively, no attempt was made to hide what was done. They want these deaths noticed. They want people to start fearing them.”

“But why?” Mark asked.

“The Senate is split on the question of state reform.” Visconti’s fingers traced the rim of his cup. “A significant faction in the Senate is pushing the country toward reform. In short, they propose a centralization of power through strengthening the Supreme Consul’s authority. They call themselves the Consortium, bankers, heads of the great trading houses, shipowners. New and ambitious money.”

“And the opposition?”

“Traditionalists. Old families. The founders’ bloodlines.” Visconti’s gaze grew distant. “Your uncle Giuliano led this faction. Ancient wealth. Ancient names. And ancient connections to forces most in the Republic prefer to forget.”

He paused, letting the silence do its work.

“All six victims,” Visconti continued, “came from old families, and all spoke in the Senate against the Consortium’s reforms.” His thin lips curved without warmth.

“The Supreme Consul suspects these atrocities may have been organized by enemies of the Republic, precisely to make one part of parliament suspect the other of political murder. Someone is pushing us toward a split.”

Visconti rose, moved to the window, and stood with his back to them. "But politics may be the smallest part of this."

Here it comes. The real reason he's talking to us.

"Many believe, including some within the Secret Order itself, that what's happening runs far deeper than a political crisis." Visconti turned. His gaze found Liana's wrist, lingered on the silver bracelet with its spiral symbols, the one she had not removed since the ritual.

"These people think the Twelve were never truly defeated when Hecate the All-Mother brought her light into the world. They merely... slept. Waiting for better times. Until the faithful call them forth again." He paused. Firelight caught the sharp planes of his face.

"And when that call comes, they will wake. Rise from their tombs beneath the sea. Return to rule us once more." He continued studying Liana with that penetrating gaze.

She met his eyes with a polite smile, the expression of an aristocrat hearing a curious tale from a chance acquaintance. Nothing more.

Thank you, cousin.

Visconti held the silence a moment longer.

"In three days, you'll find yourselves at the center of a web of intrigue. Trust only yourselves." He paused. "Even me, with caution."

He left without another word.

Sebastian cursed. Emile reached for the wine. Liana stood frozen by the window, her fingers still touching the bracelet.

"Liana." Emile's voice cut through the silence. "What happened earlier? When you spoke those words about bloodlines?"

She pressed her palm against her temple. "It started after the ritual. After I survived what should not have been survivable."

"A goddess speaks through you?" Mark kept his voice flat.

"Not possession. Not control." She searched for words. "She shows me things. Through her eyes, from far away. Sometimes the distance collapses, and her voice comes through mine."

"Can you control it?"

"Sometimes. The ritual helps give her a channel." Her mouth twisted. "When I do not perform the rites, she gets... insistent."

"The words you spoke just now?"

Liana closed her eyes. "Six bloodlines. The ones touched by the goddesses.

Someone is cutting them, one by one. Giuliano's death was not random."

"Why?"

"I do not know. She does not explain. She shows." Liana opened her eyes. "And what she shows is not always clear, until it's too late."

Silence.

"So we have a goddess whispering warnings in riddles," Emile said. "And I thought my situation was complicated."

Liana almost smiled. "Welcome to the family. We all serve something older than ourselves now."

Mark sat in silence, assembling the pieces.

The Consortium wants power. Someone is killing their opposition. The Order is investigating, but Visconti serves his own agenda, too. And somewhere beneath it all, the Goddesses are making.

The picture was not complete yet. But its shape was becoming clear.

We're not just witnesses. We're not just victims. Somehow, we're part of the pattern.

"Sleep in shifts," he said finally. "Weapons at hand. Tomorrow will be harder."

* * *

They departed before dawn, taking a different route. Narrow, winding, threading through the foothills.

"The main highway is too predictable," Visconti explained. "Too convenient for an ambush. I sent a detachment ahead to check the road. We'll meet them halfway."

He expects an attack. Which means he knows more than he's shared.

Mark filed it away. Information was currency, and Visconti was spending carefully.

The attack came at midday, in a narrow gorge where the cliffs pressed close on both sides.

Sebastian felt it first. "Too quiet. No birds."

Visconti's hand flew to his sword. "Prepare your—"

The first arrow took the lead guard in the throat.

Everything happened at once, the air split with the hiss of arrows, a sound like tearing silk, multiplied by dozens. Arrows rained from the forest, from both directions, a professional ambush, carefully planned. The copper stink of blood

hit Mark's nostrils before he even registered the first man falling. The second guard fell with an arrow through his eye. The third clutched at his neck as blood sprayed between his fingers.

Mark was already moving. He leaped from his horse, drew his blade, and shielded Liana with his body.

"Down! To the rocks!"

His mind worked even as his body fought.

Twelve archers, minimum. Coordinated volleys. They knew our route. Someone talked.

The arrows stopped in the ominous silence.

Then they came out of the trees.

Ten men. Twelve. Light leather armor, moving with professional precision. No war cries. No threats. Just the whisper of steel clearing scabbards, the soft crunch of boots on pine needles.

And at their head, a woman. Tall, red-haired, with a scar running from temple to jaw. She moved like a dancer, blade already drawn.

"Scaliger blood," she said, almost conversationally. "They're paying triple for it this week."

Not bandits. Killers. Someone paid well for this.

"Back to me!" Visconti shouted, drawing a curved blade.

They formed a circle: Mark, Sebastian, Emile, Visconti, and his two surviving guards. Liana stood in the center, pale but silent.

The killers advanced in a tightening ring. Patient. Methodical. The red-haired woman hung back, watching, directing with small gestures.

They want us dead. Or they want us captured. Either way, they're not leaving witnesses.

The first killer stepped forward. Tall. Long sword. Visconti met him, blades ringing. The dance began.

Mark faced his own opponent: short, fast, twin daggers. The first strike came low; Mark deflected. The second scraped his ribs, turned by mail beneath his doublet.

Fast. Trained. But impatient.

Mark retreated, parried, waited. Let the man think he was winning. Watched for the pattern.

There, the slight overextension on the third strike. Mark stepped inside, drove his blade through the man's guard, and into his chest.

The body fell. Mark was already turning, scanning for the next threat.

Sebastian fought a heavy man with an axe, each blow forcing him back. Fear in his brother's eyes, but he was holding.

Emile faced two attackers, his rapier a blur. Then his scar split open, blood sheeting down his face. He stumbled, half-blind.

Mark started toward him,

Movement behind him. He did not see it. Did not hear it. But somehow, he knew.

He turned.

Too slow.

The killer stood two paces away, sword raised for a killing stroke. Mark had no time to parry, no room to dodge.

This is it.

Steel whistled through the air, but not from the sword, a dagger, spinning, burying itself in the killer's eye socket.

The man collapsed.

Mark looked up. Visconti had already returned to his own fight, blade moving in deadly arcs, as if nothing had happened. As if saving Mark's life had been an afterthought.

Debt noted.

The fight turned. Sebastian drove his blade into the axeman's belly. Emile and Mark, back-to-back, forced two attackers to retreat. One fell; the other ran for the trees, clutching a bleeding arm.

The red-haired woman moved toward Liana. One of her men followed, blade raised.

Liana did not speak. Did not move. Just looked at the woman.

The red-haired woman stopped. Her blade lowered slowly, as if her arm no longer obeyed her. Something flickered in her eyes, recognition? Fear? Her lips parted, but no sound came.

Sebastian's blade took her through the chest.

She did not resist. Did not even flinch. Just looked at Liana as she fell, that strange expression frozen on her face.

Her comrade hesitated, one heartbeat, two, then ran for the trees.

Then hoofbeats. From the north. Many are approaching fast.

The survivors heard it too. Someone whistled sharply. Retreat.

The survivors vanished into the forest, taking their wounded with them.

Professionals. The job had failed; no point in dying for it.

Order patrol rounded the bend, eight riders in black cloaks. Too late to help, but not to clean up.

Mark stood over the bodies, breathing hard. His mind was already working.

They knew the route. They'd attacked with enough force to overwhelm the escort. Someone wanted them dead, badly.

He looked at Visconti. The magister was wiping his blade on a dead man's cloak, his face expressionless.

He saved my life. Why? Because he needs us alive? Because he sees value in us? Or because he's playing a longer game?

Mark did not know. But he intended to find out.

Emile sat against a rock, one hand pressed to his face. Blood seeped between his fingers.

Liana knelt beside him. Her hands moved with ritual precision, crushing herbs between her fingers. Her lips shaped words Mark could not hear, a prayer or incantation.

When she looked up, her eyes held that doubled quality he'd learned to watch for: the priestess and the healer sharing one face.

"The scar will be more visible," she said, binding the wound with a clean cloth.

"But you'll heal."

Mark approached Visconti. The magister stood leaning on his sword, pale beneath the mask of composure.

"You saved my life."

"I need you alive." Visconti's voice was flat. "For the investigation."

"You could have shouted a warning. Instead, you threw your blade." Mark held his gaze. "That's not calculation. That's instinct."

For a long moment, Visconti said nothing. Then, almost unwillingly, he said, "Perhaps I am beginning to believe you're worth the risk."

Progress. Small, but real.

Mark nodded once. "The debt is noted. I pay my debts."

Something flickered in Visconti's eyes, respect, perhaps. Or recognition of a kindred mind.

"We ride in ten minutes. The inn is four hours away."

* * *

That evening, at the Silver Spring Inn, they gathered in a private room with a fireplace. Visconti had removed his Order mantle and sat staring into the flames. For the first time, he looked tired. Human.

"Four dead," he said quietly. "Good men. Loyal."

Mark poured wine. His hand was steady, though his muscles still remembered every blow. "Someone knew the route."

"Yes." Visconti sipped from his cup. "It pains me to suggest this, but the traitor is in the Order or the Senate. Only our people knew about the change in my plans, and probably someone above them." He shrugged. "The Republic leaks like a sieve. It used to be different."

Sebastian sat in the corner, staring at nothing. Mark watched him from the edge of his vision.

His brother had killed today. Again. The blade had gone in cleanly, without hesitation. Afterward, Sebastian had wiped the steel with mechanical precision, no tremor, no nausea.

Mark remembered when Sebastian would vomit after violence. The boy who'd wept over a dead dog. That boy was gone now.

We're all becoming something more complicated. Is that survival, or corruption?

Liana stood at the window, gazing into the darkness. Firelight caught the silver bracelet on her wrist. For a moment, her reflection in the glass seemed wrong, older, sharper, wearing a face that was not quite hers.

Mark blinked. The reflection was just Liana again.

"Tomorrow we're in Arcadia," she said. Her voice was her own. Mostly.

"Yes." Visconti rose and reached for his mantle. "Rest. The final leg lies ahead. I'll double the guard, and we'll travel through populated areas. This time, everything should go without incident."

When Visconti left, no one spoke.

The picture is forming. Six murders. The Consortium. The Secret Order. The Goddess's awakening. And us, caught in the center, applicable to everyone, trusted by no one.

He looked at his brothers. At Liana.

However many people guard us, all we have is ourselves. We need to make that enough.

* * *

By midday of the third day, they climbed a hill and saw Arcadia.

The sight stole Sebastian's breath. Even Emile straightened in his saddle.

A city on seven hills, at the confluence of two rivers that shimmered like molten silver in the noon sun. Thousands of buildings cascaded down the slopes: marble palazzos with terracotta roofs, cypress gardens dark against white stone, bridges arching over canals where barges drifted, heavy with cargo. Fountains caught the light and scattered it into rainbows. Temple domes rose above the rooftops, crowned with golden statues that blazed like captured stars. At the city's heart, the Senate complex dominated all, white marble and gold leaf, columns thick as ancient oaks, a dome that seemed to hold up the sky itself.

It was beautiful. Breathtakingly, impossibly beautiful.

Mark felt nothing.

His mind mapped it automatically: Senate here, banking quarter there, old noble houses on the northern hill where the air was cleaner, and the walls were higher. Trade routes flow through those streets like blood through veins. Power concentrated in those gilded towers, radiating outward in invisible webs of influence, debt, and fear.

Every fountain had been paid for with someone's ruin. Every palazzo stood on foundations of broken rivals. The golden statues watched the city with empty eyes, and somewhere behind those gleaming walls, men were planning murder over wine that cost more than a laborer earned in a year.

Beautiful. The way a venomous snake is gorgeous. The way a well-crafted lie is lovely.

A gilded trap. And we're walking straight into its jaws.

"Heart of the Republic," Visconti said beside him. "Here, the fates of millions are decided. Here, people die quietly and disappear."

His eyes found Mark's.

"Welcome to hell, gentlemen. Try to survive."

* * *

Arcadia met them with noise, crowds, and chaos. Narrow streets seethed with life, merchants shouting, children darting, beggars reaching. But when Visconti appeared in his black cloak, the crowd parted like water around a stone. Fear opened their path more surely than any sword.

They rode along Corso Giustizia to Palazzo del Senato. White marble, gilded dome, designed to inspire awe. Mark noted the guard positions, the sight lines, and the exits.

Old habits. But useful ones.

Inside, a round chamber waited: dark wood walls inscribed with golden mathematical formulas, a domed ceiling painted with stars. The Hall of Pythagoras. At the center stood a black marble table surrounded by twelve chairs.

Behind the table sat a woman.

Dark hair streaked with gray. Sharp features. Eyes the color of storm clouds, and just as readable.

“Supreme Magister Olivia Vitelli,” Visconti announced. “Chief of the Secret Order’s Inner Circle.”

She didn’t rise. She just swept them with a gaze that seemed to strip away pretense.

“Welcome to Arcadia, Scaliger.” Her eyes found Mark’s and held them. His brothers might as well have been furniture. “A pity the circumstances are so sad.”

She’s addressing me. Not us. Me.

Mark noted this. It could mean respect for the eldest, or it could mean she’d already decided who she would deal with. Then again, it could mean nothing at all.

He bowed. “We thank you for your concern for our safety.”

“Magister Visconti reported the ambush.” She folded her hands on the black marble. “The Secret Order is deeply concerned that these events may be connected to political disagreements within the Republic. If so, we will do everything in our power to find and punish those responsible.”

Her voice carried the smooth weight of official pronouncement, every word chosen, polished, safe.

“The Order is a neutral force,” she continued. “We stand on the side of order in the Republic. Nothing more. Nothing less.”

Neutral. The most dangerous word in politics. It often means we’re waiting to see who wins.

“Please convey my respects to Antonio Scaliger.” Olivia rose, signaling that the audience was ending. “And assure him, and yourself, young Mark, that House Scaliger is under our protection. As are all the worthy families of the Republic.”

Mark inclined his head. “Your words bring comfort in a difficult time, Supreme Magister.”

“The Order remembers its friends.” Her eyes held his for a moment, cool and measuring. “Safe travels to Palazzo Scaliger. And my condolences, once again.”

They exchanged the formal courtesies of departure. Visconti escorted them to the door.

At the threshold, Mark turned for a final bow.

Olivia was not looking at him. She was looking at the ceiling, at the painted stars above. Her lips moved silently.

Prayer? Or something older?

Then she caught his eye and winked.

Mark's step faltered, just for a moment. Then he followed Visconti down the marble steps.

"She likes you," Visconti said quietly. "That's rare."

Outside, Mark turned the meeting over in his mind again.

Careful support. Not commitment, but acknowledgment. She didn't threaten. Didn't accuse. Didn't warn them away from Antonio.

He found that encouraging. The Secret Order had always been an independent force in Arcadia, beholden to no faction. If they were extending even cautious protection to House Scaliger, it meant someone in that marble hall believed the family was worth preserving.

Or worth watching. But I'll take what I can get.

* * *

Outside the Palazzo, an escort from House Scaliger waited, four guards in livery with a black ladder on a silver field. The family colors. Mark studied their faces, their posture.

Loyal to the House? Or loyal to whoever pays them?

The carriage bore the Scaliger crest. Inside, his brothers sat without speaking. Liana gazed out the window, face unreadable.

Through the glass, Arcadia streamed past. Beautiful. Deadly. A city of knives hidden behind silk.

The carriage stopped before Palazzo Scaliger. White and pink marble, columns, and a pediment carved with the family crest. Three centuries of history in those stones.

Mark drew a breath. Held it. Released.

Whatever waits inside, we face it together.

The doors swung open. On the threshold stood Antonio.

Mark studied him with cold precision. The mourning clothes fit too well, ordered before the body cooled. The beard was carefully trimmed, the posture carefully controlled. The guards in Scaliger livery watched the brothers, not the street.

Not Giuliano's warmth. Not Father's light. Something else entirely.

"Welcome home, nephews." Antonio smiled, warmth in the curve of his lips, nothing in his eyes.

Mark remembered Antonio from that summer visit, ten years ago. Standing apart while Giuliano and Francis laughed together, watching with an expression Mark had been too young to read.

"Dear nephews, I'm glad to see you in our home harbor." His hand rested on the black mourning drape beside the door. Not grief in that touch, possession. "A pity we meet under such unfortunate circumstances."

His gaze slid to Liana. "Liana, dear. You've grown. The image of your mother."

"Uncle Antonio." Her voice gave nothing away.

"Please, come in. The funeral ceremony will be held tomorrow morning, but the House Council convenes tonight. Business won't wait."

Of course it won't. The vultures circle even as the body cools.

They entered the palazzo. Marble statues lined the entrance hall, ancestors with stern faces and swords in hand, their stone eyes following the living. Battle paintings covered the walls: the taking of Ragusa, the naval victory at Coral Bay, the Discovery of the Southern Continent, with Scaliger banners flying from the first ships to touch that distant shore. The smell of incense and age hung heavy, now mixed with fresh candle smoke. Black drapes shrouded every mirror, every window. Mourning candles flickered in silver holders, their flames bending as the brothers passed.

In the place of honor hung a large portrait of Giuliano Scaliger, the ceremonial robes of the House head, the stern expression, the commanding eyes.

Mark stopped before the portrait. "*Learn to see the whole board, nephew.*"

He saw it now. The whole board. The pieces in motion.

Six murders to clear the path. The Consortium is rising. The Order is watching. The Goddesses are waking. And here, in this palazzo that smelled of death and ambition, predators also circled.

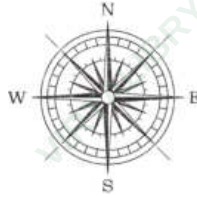
Antonio stood beneath Giuliano's portrait as if the position were already his. Perhaps it was.

Mark looked at his brothers. Sebastian's jaw was tight. Emile's scarred face showed nothing. Liana had retreated behind her mask of calm.

Four of us against all of this. But not helpless. Not yet.

Mark turned to Antonio and smiled. "Thank you for your hospitality, uncle. We have much to discuss."

Chapter 14: Nightfall



SEBASTIAN

“Please,” Antonio gestured for them to proceed. “We have plenty of time before this evening’s Council.”

He led them through an enfilade of rooms. Footsteps sounded muffled on expensive Eastern carpets laid over marble floors, through tall windows poured light still bright, daylight, but already beginning to yellow, heralding the approaching sunset.

Antonio conducted them to the Reception Hall, a vast chamber where the strict geometry of double-arched vaults neighbored multicolored stained glass and luxurious furniture of rare overseas woods, arranged with impeccable taste. At the center, in a place of honor beneath the House crest, sat the massive chair of the House head, still empty, draped in black mourning velvet; around it had gathered several family members who’d hastily arrived for Giuliano’s funeral.

Antonio took the chair like a spider settling into the center of its web. Tall, with a carefully trimmed graying beard styled in the latest capital fashion and attentive dark eyes, he moved with aristocratic grace honed by years of court life. On his chest gleamed a massive golden medallion bearing the House crest, and on his fingers several rings adorned with heraldic symbols.

“How did you find the journey?” he asked when they’d seated themselves.

Mark stepped forward. In these few days since fleeing the island, he’d increasingly grown into the image of heir and leader. His bearing straightened, and on his face appeared an expression of dignity befitting lords.

“Thank you for your concern, uncle,” he answered, his intonation perfectly calibrated, polite, but not fawning. The coastal accent characteristic of Ragusa natives lent his speech a light musicality, distinguishing islanders from mainlanders. “The road was tiring, but we’re grateful for the Secret Order’s escort.”

“Yes, yes,” Antonio nodded, and for a moment his expression softened, genuine weariness in the lines around his eyes, the weight of recent loss. But his ring-laden fingers clenched, a tell of tension beneath the grief. His gaze slid across the

brothers' faces, lingering on Emile's scar. "The unfortunate events in Ragusa... and now this terrible blow, Giuliano's death. The House endures difficult times."

He turned to Liana. "And you, dear, how are you holding up?"

"Thank you for your concern, Uncle Antonio," she nodded restrainedly. "We all grieve."

Antonio's face composed itself into practiced mourning, the expression of a man accustomed to state funerals and official condolences.

"All the more important is our unity," Mark said, slightly inclining his head. "In such moments, family must rally."

Antonio smiled, warmth in the curve of his lips.

"Of course, my boy. That's precisely why I've called an emergency session of the House Council before the funeral. All who could reach the capital will attend." He gestured at those present. "Many are already here."

Around them, indeed, a significant portion of the clan, cousins, uncles, nephews, had gathered, each with a retinue of secretaries and personal servants. They formed groups, conversing in undertones, exchanging glances, and assessing each other's positions like players at a chessboard where each move could change the entire game.

Mark nodded in greeting, recognizing the faces of relatives he'd met on previous visits to the capital. There were few; however, the island Scaligers had visited the family seat only two or three times. Sebastian stood slightly behind, attentively observing everyone, memorizing who looked with sympathy and who with poorly concealed calculation.

"The Council begins in three hours," Antonio continued, rubbing the signet ring with his thumb, as if the motion calmed him. "Until then, you should rest. I've ordered your rooms prepared in the north wing, it's quieter and cooler there this time of year."

A polite dismissal. Mark thanked him on behalf of all, and servants in the House colors' livery led them through the enfilade of rooms to the residential quarters.

They had barely left the Reception Hall when a figure emerged from a side corridor.

Adriana Scaliger.

Seventy years old, yet still striking. Her face was lined but beautiful, chiseled features that time hadn't diminished, only made more commanding. Silver threads shot through black hair pulled into a severe knot. She moved with the effortless grace of a woman half her age, and her dark eyes glittered like gemstones, sharp and knowing.

“My dear boys,” she said, extending her hand.

Mark stepped forward first and kissed it. “Grandmother. You look magnificent.”

Sebastian followed, then Emile, who held her hand a moment longer. “You haven’t changed at all since our last visit.”

“Flatterer,” Adriana said, though her lips curved. “You have your father’s tongue. Francis could charm birds from trees.” Her gaze swept over them, assessing, weighing. “We’ll speak properly this evening. Until then.”

She swept past, trailing the scent of jasmine and old money.

“North wing,” Emile said quietly once they were beyond earshot. His thin fingers nervously touched the scar. “Farthest from Antonio’s personal apartments. Symbolic, isn’t it?”

Crimson sunset light poured through tall windows, painting the marble walls the color of clotted blood.

“And convenient for eliminating unwanted guests,” Sebastian added, voice dropping to a whisper. His hand instinctively fell to the dagger hilt hidden in the folds of his clothing. “One exit, well guarded by stairs and corridors. In case of fire, there’s no escape from here... or in case of attack.”

“You’re both too suspicious,” Liana objected, though her gaze darted to the windows, calculating the distance to the ground. “This is a family palace, not a prison.”

“After what we’ve been through, suspicion is prudence, cousin,” Mark noted, his gaze sliding over the placement of bronze candelabra, ancient weapons on the walls, paths to side corridors, mechanically assessing options for flight and defense. “Here, even walls have ears.”

One of the accompanying servants, a young man with a pale, expressionless face, cast a quick glance at them. The brothers fell silent. Simple servants rarely understood palace intrigue, but many served more than one master.

Their rooms were adjacent, four connected bedrooms with private studies and a standard sitting room, furnished with elegant luxury. Tall lancet windows overlooked an interior garden, where majestic cypresses and marble nymph statues rose among flowering bushes. In the fireplace, logs crackled, spreading a pleasant warmth and the aroma of applewood.

Settling in the sitting room, they spoke quietly, fearing foreign ears. Mark quickly outlined the situation: they were at the center of enemy territory, surrounded by unknown allies and dangerous opponents. Every word at the upcoming Council should be carefully weighed.

“We need to learn which relatives are reliable,” he concluded, not touching the fruit bowl. His gaze lingered on a massive candelabra, casting intricate shadows

across walls lit by the sunset. “Antonio’s rush with the Council is no accident. Perhaps he fears the arrival of family members who might contest his claim to the House head position.”

“Or those who would support us,” Emile added, watching the light play on glass pitchers of wine and water. “Haste betrays nervousness. Those confident in success don’t hurry.”

“We need information,” Mark said thoughtfully, examining a tapestry depicting a sea battle. “As quickly as possible.”

They dispersed to their rooms, each preparing in their own way. Mark sat at the writing desk and began compiling a list of relatives, their interests, and possible positions. Emile settled by the window with a book but ended up watching the servants in the garden, memorizing their routes and patterns. Liana extracted from her traveling trunk a small vial of dark contents and several herb pouches, carefully arranging them on a velvet cushion.

Sebastian settled on the wide, canopied bed, examining the ceiling frescoes depicting legendary sea heroes. The artist had employed *trompe-l’oeil* with skill, creating the illusion that ships and waves extended beyond the ceiling’s bounds, looming overhead. But sleep would not come; there were too many thoughts, too many anxieties.

A knock on the door interrupted his brooding.

“Come in,” he called.

Liana entered. The expression on her face made him tense instantly. She looked pale, but her eyes burned with a strange fire, a mixture of excitement and fear.

“We need to talk,” she said quietly. “All of us. Now.”

Minutes later, all four gathered in the common sitting room. Liana closed the door, checked the lock, then drew the heavy curtains over the windows, plunging the room into twilight.

From her traveling trunk, she extracted a small obsidian statuette, a female figure with arms raised to the sky. Ancient, worn smooth, radiating inexplicable cold. She placed it at the center of the marble table inlaid with labyrinth patterns.

“What’s this?” Mark asked.

“A gift from my mother,” Liana answered. “An artifact from before the Cataclysm. Connected to Diadema.”

She looked at each of them in turn.

“Right now, an emergency session of the Inner Council is beginning, headed by the Supreme Consul. Don’t ask me how I know. I can perform a ritual, one that will let us see and hear what’s happening far from here. We could learn what the

Consortium plans.”

Silence fell.

“That’s magic,” Emile said carefully. “Real magic.”

“Yes,” Liana nodded. “And it requires sacrifice. Blood. No, no, don’t worry, just a little. And an oath to Diadema.”

Sebastian felt a cold slide down his spine.

“What kind of oath?”

Liana did not answer immediately. Her fingers traced patterns on the tabletop.

“An oath to serve her. To fulfill her will when called.” She paused. “If we do not know what’s coming, we cannot prepare. And unprepared... we die.”

Mark studied her face.

“You’ve done this before?”

“Once. With my mother.” Liana’s voice dropped to a whisper. “It works.”

Everyone looked at Emile without speaking. He stood motionless, his face impenetrable.

“You don’t understand what you’re playing with,” he finally said. “Magic demands payment. Always. And I’m not sure I’m ready to pay the price they’ll require.”

“You already have a connection,” Liana said, approaching him and placing a hand on his shoulder. “All the more reason you needn’t fear. You’re chosen, Emile, you live by the Goddess’s power.”

“That’s exactly what I fear,” he answered quietly. “When ancient powers choose a person, the payment usually proves too high.”

Candles crackled in the room.

“All right. Since I apparently have nothing left to lose, I agree. But when the time comes to pay, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Liana smiled, and in that smile was something that sent a chill down Sebastian’s spine, the way priestesses smile before sacrifice, knowing the mortal doesn’t understand the depth of the ritual in which he participates.

“Excellent,” she said, her fingers beginning to move faster, as if weaving an invisible net over the arranged objects. “Then let’s begin. The meeting starts soon. We need to see and hear everything.”

She poured finely cut herbs from a purple pouch into a silver bowl, and their scent immediately filled the room, combining aromas of mountain flowers, sea salt, and some unknown spice, sharp and disturbing to the senses. Then, from a crystal vial, she added several drops of viscous liquid, like mercury but iridescent with all the colors of ocean waves.

“Lock the doors,” she commanded. “And extinguish all candles except the four I’ve placed.”

The brothers obeyed. The room plunged into half-darkness, only four black wax candles now burning, casting trembling shadows on the walls and creating an eerie play of light on the ritual participants’ faces. The statuette on the table seemed to absorb this faint light, becoming even darker, even more material in its impenetrable blackness.

Liana arranged the candles at the corners of an imaginary square around the marble table with its labyrinth, then gestured for the brothers to stand around it, each precisely between two candles. The fourth candle she left at the center, by the statuette, the ritual’s heart.

“Give me your hands,” she said, and when all complied, continued in a quiet voice that seemed to emanate not only from her lips but from everywhere around: “Repeat after me.”

Her voice changed, becoming deeper and more formal, with the guttural intonations of the ancient language spoken by these lands’ inhabitants long before the Cataclysm:

“I swear by my blood and name to fulfill Diadema’s will when she calls. I swear not to renounce my promise, whatever may happen. May I be cursed if I break this oath. May my children and my children’s children be cursed if I renounce my given word. Egeiro! Egeiro! Egeiro!”

The brothers repeated the words, one after another, Mark firmly and decisively, Emile with a shade of research interest, as if testing how the spell would work, Sebastian with an internal resistance he couldn’t suppress.

When the last syllable was pronounced, Liana drew a small silver blade from her sleeve.

“Blood calls to blood,” she whispered.

She pressed the blade to her palm. A thin line of red welled up. She held her hand over the bowl, letting drops fall into the mixture of herbs and liquid.

The bowl hissed. Its contents bubbled, turning from emerald to deep crimson, then back to green, shot through with silver.

“Your turn,” she said quietly, offering the blade to Mark.

He took it without hesitation. A quick cut, a few drops, then he passed the blade to Emile. Then to Sebastian.

When Sebastian’s blood hit the mixture, the candles suddenly flared brighter, all at once. Their flames lengthened, tripling in height, and took on a bluish tint, reminiscent of burning salt.

A strange sensation pierced everyone present, as if an invisible thread penetrated their bodies, binding them together. For a moment, each felt the heartbeat and breathing of the others, as though they'd become a single being with four hearts and eight lungs.

Liana freed her hands and poured more dry herbs from the pouch into the bowl. The mixture released a thin stream of emerald-green smoke shot through with silver sparks, carrying a spicy, tart aroma so unusual and complex it defied comparison to anything familiar. This scent quickly filled the room, enveloping them in an invisible canopy of greenish mist.

"Breathe deep," Liana said. "And look at the statuette. Only at it, whatever happens around you."

The brothers obeyed. Smoke enveloped them, penetrating their lungs, making their heads spin and their vision blur. The statuette on the table seemed to grow and change, becoming more distinct, while the rest of the room dissolved into mist, losing clarity and materiality.

Liana began pronouncing words in the ancient language, not loudly, but distinctly, with a rhythm like blood pulsing in temples. Her voice sounded strange, as if not one person spoke but many, as if other voices mingled with it: deeper, more ancient voices of beings knowing no time.

Sebastian felt a tremor run through his body, not from fear, but from the sensation of something enormous and alien invading reality through the thinnest crack created by Liana's ritual. His gaze was riveted on the statuette, and it seemed to him that the obsidian figure began glowing from within with the same bluish light as the candles' flames.

Suddenly, the statuette vanished from sight, as if dissolving into air, and before the brothers' eyes appeared an entirely different picture, as if an invisible window had opened in the space between them, revealing a view of a place far from here.

The Hall of Chrysanthemums in Palazzo del Senato was one of Arcadia's most elegant chambers. Walls of polished gray marble were decorated with intricate carvings of stylized chrysanthemums, a symbol of immortality and power. Each flower was inlaid with tiny rock crystal fragments, creating the effect of dew drops on the petals. Candlelight reflected in the crystals, scattering golden highlights across the walls.

The ceiling was a complex construction of intersecting arches, painted with frescoes depicting scenes from the Republic's history. At the center, a colored glass dome through which daylight would pour in multicolored streams.

But now, in the evening, the hall was lit by dozens of candles in wall sconces of fine bronze work, and an enormous chandelier of wrought silver inlaid with

pearls and amethysts, suspended above an oval table of black wood inlaid with mother-of-pearl and ivory.

Usually, twelve sat at this table.

Now nine.

Three chairs stood empty, backs draped in black velvet. Mourning candles before each, thin wicks of black wax, their flames trembling in the still air. A silent reminder of the absent. Of the dead.

The brothers and Liana saw and heard what transpired as if they were in the hall itself, hovering beneath the ceiling, invisible to those present. The sensation was strange: they simultaneously remained in Liana's room and were in the Hall of Chrysanthemums, as if their consciousness had split.

At the table's head sat Lorenzo Fabiano, the Republic's acting Supreme Consul. Silver-haired, a patrician with noble features revealing his family's centuries-old history. Thin, almost girlish hands, heavy with signet rings, lay on the table in a graceful pose. His eyes, bright blue, full of inner light and wisdom, contrasted with heavy lids, giving his gaze simultaneous penetration and weariness.

To his right, Benedetto Orsini: a massive man with a square jaw and piercing dark eyes. Broad shoulders, scars on his arms, a warrior turned politician who hadn't forgotten how to hold a sword.

To his left stood Roberto Doria, youthful-looking, with clever gray eyes and graying temples. His well-kept hands, long-fingered, were those of a diplomat and financier, accustomed to counting profits and signing treaties.

Slightly apart, Federico Castelli, representative of the trade guilds, was as thin as an ascetic, with the sharp gaze of an accountant. On his fingers, rings with seals of the Republic's largest trading companies.

Four members of the Consortium. Four allies.

Opposite them sat five neutral senators, representatives of various factions and interests. Luigi Montefeltr, elderly aristocrat from the northern provinces, his face furrowed with wrinkles like a map of lived years. Giovanni Arbarigo, spice merchant grown rich on eastern trade, corpulent, with a ruddy face and distrustful, small eyes. Matteo Grimaldi, military man, retired admiral, with a straight back and a scar across his entire face, left by a pirate saber. Antonio Contarini, lawyer, thin and pale, with long fingers stained with ink. Paolo Venerani, representative of the craft guilds, with calloused hands and the suspicious gaze of one accustomed to bargaining.

Their faces expressed wariness, weariness, impatience.

Fabiano lightly tapped a silver hammer against a granite stand. The sound rang through the hall, echoing off marble walls.

"Gentlemen," he began, and his voice, despite his age, sounded strong and confident. "My friends. We've gathered to discuss emergency measures. But before continuing, I must tell you something important, something that would make any civilized person shudder with disgust. However, I ask you to hear me out, and then, I hope, you'll understand why my colleagues and I were forced to resort to unseemly methods."

He swept his gaze over those present and held a long pause, letting the words settle.

"We all know of the last two months' tragedy. Six heads of Great Houses have died. Poisoned. By the same toxin: Siren's Tears."

Montefeltr raised his hand, his voice tight with irritation:

"Supreme Consul, we already discussed these unfortunate events three weeks ago. The Secret Order is conducting an investigation. Why summon the Inner Council in such haste? Why this secrecy?"

Fabiano rose slowly. He placed his hands on the table, leaning his full weight upon them. His gaze grew heavy as a stone slab.

"Because the investigation is complete, Luigi."

Silence. All froze.

"We know who the killer is."

The five neutral senators leaned forward. Someone opened his mouth, preparing to speak.

Fabiano straightened, folding his hands behind his back. His voice came level, almost casual, like a man reporting the price of bread:

"It was us. The Consortium. We were behind the elimination of six heads of Great Houses. Our former friends and allies, three of whom had the honor of sitting with us at this very table."

Explosion.

Montefeltr jumped up, overturning his chair. The heavy oak chair crashed against the marble floor. Arbarigo went white, clutching the table's edge. Grimaldi instinctively reached for a sword that wasn't there; weapons were forbidden at Council sessions. Contarini froze, mouth agape. Venerani recoiled as if struck.

"What?!" Montefeltr breathed out. "You... you're confessing to murder?!"

"To state necessity," Orsini corrected calmly, not rising. His voice sounded like a bell's stroke, low, hollow, final. "Not murder. Saving the Republic. The fact that state duty exceeds private duty."

"Sit down, Luigi," Fabiano said quietly but commandingly. "Sit down and listen. Then judge us."

Montefeltr slowly lowered himself back, not taking his gaze from Fabiano. The others froze in tense anticipation.

Fabiano swept his gaze over them slowly, letting each feel the moment's weight.

"Two years ago," he began, his voice taking on a different quality, not like a politician, but like a man telling a tragic yet necessary story, "strange rumors began reaching us. Secret gatherings of old houses. Exchange of encrypted messages. Unusual activity among families whose ancestors served... ancient cults. Before the Cataclysm."

He paused.

"At first, we did not attach significance to it. Aristocrats always loved secrets and rituals. But then the rumors grew more concrete. A name appeared: the Brotherhood."

Doria leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers.

"The Brotherhood of the Sleeping Goddesses. A secret organization permeating the entire Republic. We spent a year and a half mapping its structure. They have people in the Senate, in the Secret Order, in the city guard, in guilds, in trading houses, everywhere."

"And what does this... Brotherhood does?" Arbarigo asked, sarcasm in his tone. "Pray to ancient idols in basements?"

"Prepares a coup," Castelli answered calmly, extracting several documents from a folder. The parchment rustled in the hall's silence, broken only by the senators' heavy breathing. "A military coup to destroy the republican system and establish a theocratic monarchy."

He placed the first document on the table and turned it so all could see.

"This is a plan of fortified positions in Arcadia. See these marks? Weapons warehouses. Secret arsenals. We found three of them. In each, enough swords and crossbows to arm two hundred men."

Contarini leaned closer, studying the map.

"Where did you get this information?"

"From a defector," Doria answered. "A junior officer of the city guard whom the Brotherhood recruited, but who got frightened and came to us. We verified his testimony. Everything checked out."

Fabiano continued, his voice gathering strength:

"The Brotherhood relies on ancient faith. On cults of the Sleeping Goddesses, banned after the Cataclysm. They believe, or pretend to believe, in the awakening of ancient forces. In magic's return. In the chosen nature of priestly dynasty descendants."

He swept his gaze over the empty chairs draped in black velvet.

“Giuliano Scaliger was the Brotherhood’s head. Five other heads of Great Houses helped him. All from old families. All descendants of priestly dynasties. Their goal: destroy faith in Hecate, the Triune All-Mother; exterminate her priestesses; and establish a pagan theocracy modeled on the Old Empire.”

“This is madness,” Grimaldi breathed out. “Magic? Ancient goddesses? We live in an enlightened age!”

“Which is precisely why it’s so dangerous,” Orsini objected, rising for the first time. His massive figure cast a long shadow on the wall. “Because they believe. And faith, gentlemen, moves armies. Faith makes people die for an idea. And kill.”

He placed another document on the table, a letter with a broken seal.

“This is Giuliano Scaliger’s message to Vespers’ ruler. An offer of alliance. Of joint war against the godless republic that has usurped power belonging by blood right.”

Montefeltr took the letter with trembling hands. Read. Grew even paler.

“This... this is high treason.”

“Precisely,” Fabiano nodded. “Highest treason. But that’s not all.”

Castelli laid out the next document, a diagram with dates and ship names.

“Plan of military operation. The Scaliger river fleet was to suddenly attack the capital harbor. Simultaneously, Brotherhood detachments in the city seize Palazzo del Senato, arsenals, and barracks. Senators who didn’t swear to Giuliano were executed. Next day: coronation.”

“When?” Venerani asked hoarsely. “When was this supposed to happen?”

Silence.

“Three months from now,” Doria answered quietly. “On the day of the Autumn Equinox. Sacred night for Sleeping Goddess worshippers.”

Grimaldi ran a hand over his face. His voice sounded hollow.

“And what did you do?”

Fabiano sat down again, folding his hands on the table. He looked directly at Grimaldi.

“We chose the lesser evil, Admiral. Six lives against thousands. Against new Turmoil. Against internecine strife that would tear the Republic apart.”

“We created the Consortium,” Orsini continued. “Did so openly, not secretly like the Brotherhood. Yes, we advocate strengthening the Supreme Consul’s power.

Yes, we believe the Republic needs a firm hand in these troubled times. But we do this through legal institutions, through the Senate, through voting.”

“The Brotherhood acts differently,” Doria added. “Through conspiracy. Through weapons. Through blood.”

“And you decided to preempt them,” Contarini said slowly. “Kill before they kill.”

“Yes,” Fabiano answered simply. “Six poisonings instead of thousands of deaths in street fighting. This is called state wisdom, Mister Lawyer. Sometimes the ruler must take upon himself the burden of sin to save those he rules. Stain his hands to keep the people’s souls clean.”

Arbarigo cleared his throat.

“And the Secret Order? Olivia Vitelli? Do they know?”

A thin smile touched Doria’s lips.

“The Order... is divided. Supreme Magister Vitelli belongs to the old guard, to conservatives. She suspects us but has no proof. Her people conduct an investigation that will lead nowhere.”

“But we have our own people in the Order,” Castelli added. “Enough to control information. Enough to know what Vitelli knows.”

Montefeltr swept his gaze over the documents on the table.

“Suppose I believe you. Suppose the Brotherhood exists. Suppose Scaliger truly prepared a coup. But how can we be certain this isn’t fabricated? That you didn’t manufacture evidence to justify murdering political opponents?”

Fabiano held his gaze.

“A reasonable question, Luigi. Which is precisely why I invited a witness.”

He clapped his hands. A side door, hidden in the wooden panels, opened.

A middle-aged man entered, wearing a worn officer’s doublet of the city guard. His face was pale, frightened. On his wrists were marks from recently removed shackles.

“This is Captain Marcello Foscolo,” Doria introduced him. “A Brotherhood member. He participated in planning the coup. Captain, please repeat what you told us.”

Foscolo licked his dry lips. His voice trembled.

“I... I was recruited two years ago. They said the old houses wanted to restore justice. Return power to those who hold it by blood right and ancient covenants.” He swallowed.

“I was initiated into the Brotherhood at a secret ceremony. There were... rituals.

Invocations. They spoke of the Sleeping Goddesses, of awakening ancient power. I saw impossible things. Light from nowhere. Voices without source. A woman who... who floated in the air."

"And you believed?" Venerani asked, with disbelief.

"I saw it with my own eyes!" Foscolo flared. "Not rumors, not stories, I saw it! And I was frightened. Because if it's true... if ancient magic returns... then everything changes. The entire world."

Silence.

"They assigned me to recruit people in the city guard," Foscolo continued more quietly. "Prepare them to seize key points. On the coup night, my detachment was to take the Northern Gate and admit Scaliger's troops."

He lowered his head.

"But I was afraid. I didn't want blood. Didn't want war. I came to Lord Doria and told him everything."

Doria nodded.

"We verified every word. Found the secret weapons warehouses. Intercepted correspondence. Identified other Brotherhood members. Everything checked out."

Fabiano gestured dismissively to Foscolo. He bowed and left, leaving behind heavy silence.

Contarini slowly nodded.

"If this is true... then you truly saved the Republic."

"It is true," Orsini answered firmly. "Which is precisely why we've gathered you here. Because the work isn't finished."

Arbarigo frowned.

"What do you mean? You destroyed the conspiracy's leaders."

"Six of them," Fabiano nodded. "But the Brotherhood is larger. We do not know how deep it penetrates. How many more members? Who they are. Where do they hide?"

He rose and began slowly walking around the table.

"The hydra's heads are severed. But if we do not cauterize the wounds, new ones will grow. The Brotherhood can regroup. Find new leaders. Try again."

"What do you propose?" Montefeltr asked.

Fabiano stopped at the window. Looked out at the nighttime Arcadia, lights in windows, torches on streets, a peaceful, sleeping capital.

"Uproot paganism by the roots," he said quietly. "Exterminate not only the ringleaders, but the very possibility of the Brotherhood's revival."

He turned to the Council.

"Old houses, that's the fertile soil for this infection. Their ancient titles, their faith in 'blood right,' their nostalgia for the Twelve Goddesses. As long as they exist, the threat exists."

"You propose exterminating old families?" Grimaldi asked incredulously. "Putting the aristocracy to the sword?"

"Why, of course not all," Castelli objected. "Only those families blood-related to priestly dynasties who were involved, or could have been involved, in the conspiracy. Those who could become the Brotherhood's new leaders. Fortunately for the Republic, the Brotherhood is merely an aristocratic sect, albeit one with deep roots. They never even tried to bring the people to their side. We simply need to finish what we started."

Doria unfolded another document, a list of names.

"Forty-seven capital families. Some are large and influential. Others are impoverished branches of old houses. But all are descendants of Sleeping Goddess priests."

"And what do you want to do with them?" Venerani asked quietly.

Fabiano sat down again. Folded his hands. Looked into each of the five neutral senators' eyes in turn.

"A popular uprising will begin in the city. Spontaneous riot against the aristocracy. The mob, inflamed by rumors of conspiracy, storms the old houses' palazzos. Massacres. Fires. Chaos."

He paused, letting the words settle.

"Doors will be battered down with heavy logs. Families dragged from their homes, old men, women, and children, onto the pavement. Some will be stoned right there. Others were dragged to the canals and drowned. Houses set ablaze with those who didn't escape. All, as always, in popular riots."

The silence was absolute.

"But by morning it will end," Fabiano continued in a level voice, as if reading a trade report. "The city guard will restore order. Rioters will be punished publicly, in the squares, for edification. The dead will be given lavish funerals at state expense. State mourning will be declared. But by then, forty-seven families will cease to exist. Their palazzos turned to charred ruins. Their names were struck from the city registers."

"How many?" Montefeltr asked hoarsely. "How many will die?"

"Several hundred," Orsini answered calmly. "Perhaps a thousand. Including women. Including children. Including innocents."

He held the pause.

"That's the price. A small price to avoid new Turmoil. To save the Republic."

"You..." Contarini went white. "You're planning a massacre? A cold-blooded massacre?"

"We're planning to provoke popular anger," Doria corrected. "Direct it. Control it. And then stop it. All blame can be placed on the mob. On crowd violence. No one will know the truth."

Castelli added

"We've already prepared everything. People are positioned. Agitators ready. Lists of houses for massacres compiled. All that remains is to give the signal."

Fabiano rose.

"Sanction for murder?" Arbarigo breathed out.

"Sanction to save the Republic," Orsini answered harshly. "Choose your words carefully, merchant."

Montefeltr ran his hands over his face and looked at the empty chairs draped in black velvet.

"If we refuse?"

Silence.

Fabiano did not answer immediately. He simply looked. Long.

Finally, he spoke quietly:

"Then we'll soon see five new empty chairs in this hall. Draped in black velvet."

Icy cold crept down the neutral senators' spines.

"You... you're threatening us?" Grimaldi wheezed, instinctively clenching his fists.

"I am warning," Fabiano answered calmly. "We've gone too far to stop. You know too much to leave. You're either with us or you're a threat. There is no third option. For the Republic."

Orsini rose beside Fabiano, his massive figure casting a shadow over the table.

"We don't want your blood, gentlemen. We want your consent. Your understanding. We're all patriots. All want to save the country. Simply, the price... the price is high."

Venerani swallowed, his voice trembling.

"And if we agree? What then?"

In that moment, the air in the hall sickened.

The temperature dropped, making senators instinctively shiver. Candle flames trembled, lengthened, and acquired a strange violet tint. Through the hall passed a quiet crackling, as if invisible fingers squeezed space itself, making it crack from tension.

And then it happened.

Directly above the table, in the air between the ceiling and senators' heads, space began to sicken. There was no other word for it: reality sickened, as flesh sickens, covered with suppurating ulcers. The air darkened, but this wasn't darkness. It was absence, a gaping wound in the fabric of the world, through which seeped something that shouldn't exist here, in this dimension, in this universe.

From this non-darkness began to emerge a Face.

Sebastian heard Emile gasp, and Mark involuntarily stepped back. Though they saw only a vision, their bodies in Liana's room instinctively recoiled from what could not be endured.

It was a woman's face. But to call it that was to lie, for the word woman implies something human, comprehensible, fitted into the natural order. That which emerged from reality's rupture was human only insofar as a mask is human, outwardly similar, but empty, dead, worn over something entirely other.

The Face was one. But the mind, trying to encompass it, shattered like a mirror under a hammer blow.

In one moment, Sebastian saw a maiden's face: young, beautiful, with skin the color of moonlight and lips curved in an innocent smile. Yet focus the gaze, and innocence twisted to something obscene; the smile became a predator's snarl, and in the eyes splashed such ancient, perverted lust for destruction that one wanted to squeeze their eyes shut and never open them.

In the next moment, before him, was a mature woman's face: commanding, majestic, beautiful, the beauty that makes kings surrender crowns and wise men lose reason. But this beauty was like a corpse on the first day after death, when decay has not yet begun, but life has already departed. Cold. Dead. Absolute.

And immediately, a crone's face, furrowed with wrinkles so deep they seemed to cut not merely skin but the very essence of being. Toothless mouth, sunken cheeks, skin stretched over skull like parchment. Yet in this decay, this rot, was its own terrifying wisdom, knowledge of all deaths, all ends, all final dissolutions.

All three ages existed simultaneously. Not replacing one another, not transitioning in sequence. The mind refused to accept it. It was as impossible as seeing all sides of a cube at once, but it was. The face of maiden, woman, and crone merged into one, and yet each remained absolutely distinct, absolutely real.

But worst of all were the eyes.

Oh, those eyes. Sebastian felt cold sweat crawl down his spine, and his throat went dry as if he'd swallowed ash. The eyes were open wide, almond-shaped, of perfect form. But they were white. Not the blind white of a corpse or leper. This was the white of milk mixed with poison. The white of a shroud. The white of bones bleached by the desert sun.

And yet they saw. Saw everything. Saw more than it was possible to see. In their depths churned darkness, not absence of light, but the presence of something more primal than light, something that existed before stars arose and the very concept of "seeing" appeared.

There were no pupils. Yet in that whiteness arose and faded shadows, movements, as if beneath the milky surface swam something living, something hungry. And each time these shadows approached the surface, Sebastian seemed to hear whispers, thousands of voices speaking simultaneously in languages that had never sounded in human mouths.

The senators saw nothing. They continued speaking, discussing, arguing, but their voices, for the observers, became an indistinct hum, drowned out by something else: a certain humming, a vibration, coming not from the hall but from the very fabric of space, as if reality had begun sounding in the wrong key, in some impossible note between notes.

The Face's lips, and it was still one face, though the mind screamed this was impossible, began to move. They were tender and cracked simultaneously. Full and sunken. Crimson and gray.

And when it spoke, the voice was one but consisted of all voices: an infant's squeal laughing over a corpse, a woman's moan in birth pangs, a dying crone's rattle, choking on her own blood. And beneath it all, something else, something so deep and ancient that human ears shouldn't hear it: a rumble like a falling tower, like continents splitting, like the slow, inexorable destruction of time itself.

"I see," It whispered, and this whisper echoed in bones, in teeth, in the deepest depths of the skull. "I see little spies. I see children playing with forces that will devour them."

When the Face smiled, Sebastian understood the meaning of the word madness because the smile was simultaneously on all three faces that were one face: the maiden's smile, shy, coquettish, promising; the woman's smile, sensual, knowing, commanding; the crone's smile, toothless, malicious, full of vile anticipation.

And all three smiles didn't align. The corners of the mouth moved in different directions simultaneously. This was geometrically impossible. This violated all laws of space, but it was happening right now, before their eyes.

“Payment,” the Face whispered, and now in the multiple voice appeared a shade of anticipation that made one want to scream and never stop. “Payment will be taken. Payment will be terrible. Soon. Very soon.”

The white eyes without pupils fixed on something not on the senators below, but on the invisible observers hovering beneath the ceiling. As if it saw them. Knew they were there.

“My night approaches,” the voices said, maiden, woman, crone, and something beneath them all, something that had no age because it was older than age itself. “My night when blood will flow like rivers. When flesh will feed me. When souls will scream my name.”

The lips, all three sets of lips on one face, moved independently:

“You made a choice. Spilled blood. Called me. And now I come. I come.”

The last word stretched, becoming not a word but a sound like metal scraping against metal, like a dying scream, like the howl of wind through a graveyard at midnight.

And then it began to laugh.

The laughter was the worst. Because each age laughed in its own way. The maiden giggled high, crystalline, the laugh of a child watching ants burn. The woman laughed deep, throaty, the laugh of someone watching their enemy’s ruin. The crone cackled, wheezing, choking, the laugh of someone who’s seen empires fall and knows this is merely the beginning.

And all three laughs sounded simultaneously, creating a dissonance that made ears bleed, and minds fracture.

In Liana’s room, Sebastian felt a warm liquid trickling from his nose. Blood. Emile groaned, pressing his hands to his temples. Mark stood frozen, face white as death. Liana herself swayed, barely remaining upright.

The Face began to fade. The non-darkness into which it retreated was not darkness; it was a door closing, a wound in reality healing. But even as it vanished, the white eyes remained longest, staring, knowing.

And in those final seconds before it disappeared completely, the mouths moved one last time:

“Soon.”

The vision shattered like glass.

They came to the floor of Liana’s room. All four had collapsed, though none remembered falling.

Sebastian’s nose bled freely, dripping onto the carpet. Emile clutched his head, his face twisted in pain. Mark’s hands trembled uncontrollably. Liana lay curled on her side, breathing in shallow gasps.

The black candles had melted entirely, and wax pooled across the floor. The statuette sat cold and dark at the table's center, as if nothing had happened. But the smell lingered, sulfur and decay, rot and something sweetly sick that had no name.

Sebastian tried to stand. His legs would not hold him. He collapsed back to the floor, hands pressed to his face, blood seeping between his fingers.

"What..." Emile's voice came out as a croak. "What was that?"

"Hecate," Liana whispered, barely audible. "Hecate the Triune. The All-Mother. The Devourer."

She pushed herself to sitting, though the motion clearly cost her. Her face was ashen.

"The Consortium called to her. With their murders. With their plans. They think they're using her name. But she's using them."

Mark finally managed to speak, his voice shaking:

"The senators did not see her. Only we did."

"Because we're connected," Liana said. "Through the ritual. Through blood and oath. She saw us. Marked us."

Sebastian pulled his hands from his face, staring at the blood coating his palms.

He thought of Diadema, foremost among the Twelve, whom his family in old days had revered as their patron goddess. The goddess of war who once commanded armadas and demanded blood for her awakening had always seemed to him like a distant but loving relative—a stern grandmother who had seen something in you worth nurturing. There had been no horror in it. There had been grandeur, a sense of deep age, but never this soul-freezing fear.

"We need to warn them," Emile said, still massaging his temples. "The House Council. Antonio. Someone."

"And say what?" Sebastian asked bitterly. "That we performed illegal magic? That we spied on the Senate? That we saw a goddess with three faces who promised death?"

He laughed, but there was no humor in it.

"They'll call us heretics. Madmen. Lock us in cells."

Silence fell between them.

Mark pulled himself to his feet, using the wall for support. His hands still trembled, but his voice steadied.

"What do we do now? They're planning something against us. Against all the old houses. Hecate supports them. This will happen soon."

"Or is already happening," Emile said, still massaging his temples, trying to dull the pulsing headache.

"Soon," she said. "My night approaches." Massacres. Forty-seven families. Several hundred dead. Maybe a thousand."

He raised his head and looked at Mark.

"But we don't know when. Tonight? Tomorrow? A week from now?"

"Which means we have little time," Mark said, taking a difficult step toward the door, listening to sounds from the palace beyond. His legs held, but each step required an effort of will. "The House Council begins in half an hour. We must be there. Must learn which relatives are on our side before it's too late."

Sebastian tried to stand and collapsed again.

"I... can't," he breathed out. "My hands... won't bend..."

Liana approached and helped him rise. He leaned his full weight on her.

"You must," she said harshly. "We all must. If we don't appear at the Council, it will only strengthen suspicions. And we'll lose our last chance."

"Chance for what?" Sebastian barely stayed on his feet. "No one there knows us. We're strangers. Islanders. Who will listen to us?"

"But we have information," Emile objected, struggling to rise. "About the Consortium's conspiracy. About massacres. About thousands of lives under threat. If we can convince, "

"Convince?" Sebastian laughed bitterly. "With what? A story about a vision sent by a magical ritual? About Hecate with three faces? They'll listen and call us madmen. Or heretics."

Silence.

Mark ran a hand over his face, smearing dried blood.

"Perhaps you're right. Perhaps they won't listen. But we must try." He straightened as much as his body allowed. "Forty-seven capital families. Our family. Mother's cousins. Father's old friends. Children, we don't even know they exist. If there's even one chance in a hundred, "

"Mark's right," Emile nodded. "If we don't appear, it will only strengthen suspicions. And we'll lose our last chance to find allies."

Sebastian slowly sat on the bed's edge, pressing his burned hands to his chest. The pain helped him think, distracted from images still pulsing in his consciousness.

"The Consortium killed six," he whispered, staring into emptiness. "Killed our uncle. Killed the head of House Montefeltr. And four others. To save thousands. To prevent civil war."

His voice trembled.

"I don't know which side is right anymore."

Mark wheeled sharply. Blood on his face had dried in dark patches, but his gaze remained clear and hard.

"The right side is always where your family stands," he said flatly. "Everything else is philosophy for the well-fed."

"Oh, how noble," Emile smiled, though there was no mirth in it. He massaged his temples, as if trying to squeeze the remnants of the vision from his mind.

"So robbing widows and orphans is wrong. But if good people do it for noble purposes, is it perfectly acceptable? A military coup is evil. But if your uncle and his allies lead it, then it's... state necessity?"

Mark approached the window and looked at the darkening sky.

"Good and evil are luxuries for those who can afford to choose. We have no choice. Only survival."

"And if survival requires becoming like them?" Sebastian asked quietly.

"Murderers? Conspirators? People who count lives on an abacus?"

"Then we become that," Mark said, still staring out the window. "And we'll live with that burden. But we'll live. And our family will live."

Silence fell between them, heavy as a gravestone.

Sebastian said nothing. What could he say?

Liana wiped her hands of herb and mixture remnants, shaking ash from her fingers.

"Go," she said quietly. "I'll compose myself and join you. Whatever happens at the Council... stay together. And be ready for anything."

She fell silent, then added more quietly,

"Forgive me if I failed you with this ritual. If I brought her wrath upon us."

"You gave us knowledge," Mark answered, placing a hand on her shoulder. "And knowledge is a weapon. Perhaps the only one we have."

The brothers returned to their rooms to change into formal attire for the House Council. Sebastian fastened a doublet of dark blue velvet embroidered with silver threads, and his hands trembled. He couldn't banish from his mind those three faces, those white, blind eyes, that chorus of voices from darkness.

He had seen power before. In the temple at Villa Nogarola, when Diadema's presence had filled the chamber like a thunderstorm filling a valley. Watched Liana change under that power—grow older, harder, stranger. It had been

overwhelming, even terrifying—but never aimed at him. Fearsome to her enemies, but never to her own. Like a domineering grandmother you'd met twice in your life and barely knew—stern, imposing, but family.

Yet Hecate... Hecate was nightmare incarnate.

Outside, the rain intensified. Thunder rumbled closer. Lightning flashed, cold, blue, unnatural, momentarily illuminating the room with deathly light, and Sebastian thought he glimpsed a shadow in the corner: a tall figure with three heads.

He spun sharply. No one was there.

Only the shadow from the furniture was cast by the lightning flash.

He breathed deeply, forcing his heart to beat steadier. Had to pull himself together. Had to be strong. Had to survive.

Within minutes, the brothers gathered in the common sitting room, dressed in their House's formal attire: dark blue and silver, the Scaliger colors. On each chest hung a medallion with the crest, a black ladder on a silver field, symbol of ascent to power.

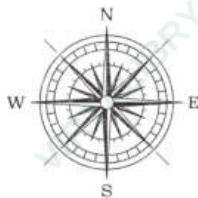
Liana joined them last, dressed in a strict gown the color of the night sea, with silver ornaments in her hair. She looked pale but composed. Only in her eyes could remnants of the horror they'd all endured still be read.

"Ready?" Mark asked.

"No," Sebastian admitted. "But we have no choice."

"Then let's go," Mark said. "The time has come."

Chapter 15: The Mob and the Prophecy



SEBASTIAN

His hands still trembled.

Sebastian clenched his fingers into fists, but the shaking came from within, from his chest, from his stomach, from the soul that an hour ago had been nearly turned inside out. Three faces. White, blind eyes. *"My night approaches."*

The corridor smelled of old stone and something else, ozone after a storm? Or was it the smell of magic itself, acrid and alien?

Mark walked beside him. His hand on Sebastian's shoulder squeezed too hard, almost painfully. Emile followed behind, face in shadow, only the scar standing out as a bright red line.

Liana held to the wall, fingers sliding over cold stone, lips whispering something soundlessly.

They shouldn't be going to the Council. Not now.

But there was no choice.

Before they reached the Hall of Ancestors, still in the corridor, Sebastian heard something. Distant. A rumble, like surf against rocks, or many voices, all at once.

"What's that?" Mark asked, stopping.

A servant hurried past. Mark caught his arm. "What's happening outside?"

The man's face was pale but composed. "Riots in the city, my lord. Some disturbances in the lower quarters. But the palazzo is well-guarded. Nothing to worry about."

Mark released him. The brothers exchanged glances. *Riots. Already?*

They walked on.

The Hall of Ancestors greeted them with silence.

Walls of dark, polished stone reflected torchlight like black water on a moonless night. The high ceiling was painted with constellations, the same that had shone the night the first Scaliger swore loyalty to the Republic.

When the brothers entered, most relatives had already gathered around the oval table. Conversations died. Gazes turned to the newcomers, assessing, wary, unfriendly.

Sebastian felt a wave of hostility roll over him. Physically tangible. Like a blow to the chest. He walked past marble statues of the family's founders, twenty-three figures with deliberately proud profiles along the walls. Twenty-three dead ancestors.

Sebastian felt the statues' gazes. He did not imagine it. FELT it. Stone eyes watching. Judging? Or waiting?

Above the table, at the wall's center, hung an enormous portrait of Giuliano Scaliger. His commanding face bore a heavy gaze, one hand resting on the hilt of a ceremonial sword. He looked down on those gathered, as he had in life.

And seemed to smirk. *There you are, the living. Try surviving without me.*

After what had happened an hour ago, nothing seemed impossible anymore.

Sebastian lowered his hand to the table. The polished surface was covered with hundreds of tiny grooves. He now recognized them as ancient spells, written in the language of the initiated. From outside, they looked like ordinary patterns.

But they were not just patterns.

Outside, thunder rumbled. A strange storm of lightning, but no rain, as if the sky itself held its breath.

Lightning momentarily lit the hall with cold white light, and the statues' shadows wavered as if they were coming to life.

Antonio sat at the table's head, nervous, fingers tapping the armrest, his gaze darting like a man in the wrong place.

To the right sat Adriana Scaliger, dripping with jewels, a diamond diadem glittering in her hair. Her neckline was perhaps too revealing for her age, but she could afford it.

To the left sat Federico, Antonio's brother and his complete opposite, calm and weary, with a face like dry wood and sparse gray hair. He wore a simple doublet, his only adornment a silver chain with the family signet.

Further down the table were Lorenzo and Pietro, second cousins in their thirties. Lorenzo's wife sat pale and sickly beside him, Beata, the young widow. Three heavy-set brothers, looking like triplets, were distant relatives. A pair of thirteen-year-old twins, frightened. Another two dozen family members Sebastian didn't know.

Mark, Emile, and Sebastian sat at the table's far end, as befitted recent arrivals. Liana, by the wall behind Antonio, was of a cadet branch, not at the table, but beside it.

"My dear kinsmen," Antonio began. His voice quavered. "We gather in... in a most difficult hour. The death of our beloved Giuliano..." He traced the Triune's symbol in the air; all repeated it. "...has left our House without its head. A tragedy, yes. A loss beyond measure." He paused, gathering himself, then his voice grew louder, gaining confidence. "But we have survived darker times than these! Did not our ancestors flee the Old Empire with nothing but a name? And from that name alone, did they not build a fortune? Rise to become a Great House?" His voice strengthened, though his hands remained unsteady.

"We shall survive this trial as well. Our roots run deep. Our allies are numerous. Our influence..."

Sebastian's fingers whitened on the armrest. Mark shot him a warning glance. *Don't. Not yet.*

But Antonio kept talking, smiling now, as if saying the words made them true. "Our influence remains."

"Influence?!" Sebastian jumped up so sharply that his chair overturned with a crash. "What influence? When Ragusa is gone! When our father is dead!"

"Sebastian," Mark reached for his arm.

Sebastian pulled away. "No. They need to hear this." He took a breath, steadying himself. When he spoke again, his voice was lower, faster, but controlled.

"Giuliano is dead. The Consortium killed him. Fabiano, Orsini, Doria, and Castelli poisoned him because he was planning a coup. A monarchy. With himself as king."

Mark nodded once. Grim confirmation.

Murmurs rippled around the table.

"He had mercenary armies," Sebastian continued, the words rushing out but coherent now. "Execution lists. Senators marked for death. The Consortium uncovered it and struck first."

Emile's hand moved to his rapier hilt, casual and ready.

"How do you know this?" Federico demanded.

"We saw it. Through a ritual." Sebastian met his uncle's gaze. "We watched the Inner Council's secret session. Heard Fabiano confess to the poisonings. Heard them plan what comes next."

"What comes next?" Antonio's voice was barely a whisper.

Sebastian's hands gripped the table's edge. "Forty-seven families. Everyone with ties to the old priesthoods. A massacre disguised as a riot. The mob storms the palazzos. Doors battered down. Families dragged into the streets." He was quoting now, Fabiano's words burned into his memory. "Some stoned. Others drowned in the canals. Houses set ablaze."

Horror spread across the faces around the table.

"And then," Sebastian's voice cracked. He pressed on. "Then she appeared. Hecate. The Triune. She looked at us through the vision. Spoke directly to us. 'My night approaches,' she said. 'Blood will flow like rivers. Souls will scream my name.'"

He pointed at Giuliano's portrait. "He woke something. His ambition, his rituals, he called to forces that should have stayed sleeping. And now they're coming. For all of us."

The silence was absolute.

Antonio stared, his face drained of color.

Federico's jaw muscle worked; his heavy gaze fixed on Sebastian.

One of the younger relatives turned away, a hand pressed to his mouth.

Then Antonio cleared his throat. "And what proof do you offer for these extraordinary claims, nephew?"

Mark stepped forward, standing beside his brother, voice firm. "We all saw it. All four of us. The ritual worked. Hecate appeared."

"Saw," Federico repeated skeptically. "All of you. Convenient."

"And no one else," Pietro added. "How interesting the goddess appears only to you."

"We saw the Consortium's secret council," Emile said, moving to flank Sebastian's other side. "Heard them confess to the poisoning. Heard them plan what comes next. And then she appeared. Hecate saw us and spoke."

"Saw through a ritual," Federico repeated flatly. "Heard through magic. And you expect us to believe this?"

"We have no reason to lie," Sebastian said.

"Exactly," Pietro nodded coldly. "No proof. Just words."

"And about Giuliano," Lorenzo said slowly, his face like stone. "You dare accuse the dead, the House head, of high treason?"

"It's TRUE!" Sebastian shouted.

"Do you have even ONE piece of proof?" Lorenzo's tone was icy. "A document? A witness? Anything besides your words?"

"We were in Ragusa!" Mark stepped forward. "We saw—"

"Saw what?" Federico cut him off. "Speculation. Maybe you invented it all."

"WHY?!" Sebastian exploded. "Why would we,"

"To hide YOUR guilt," Lorenzo said quietly. Dangerously. "You were in Ragusa when it fell, nearby when Giuliano died. Too many coincidences."

"This is absurd!" Mark's hand flew to his rapier. "We didn't!"

"Put the weapon down," Federico ordered coldly.

"Go to hell."

"ENOUGH!" Antonio roared, his voice breaking into a screech. "Mark! Lower your sword! Now!"

Tension hung, ready to explode.

And then Liana stood, the cadet branch, the one by the wall, the one everyone knew about but did not mention. "They speak the truth," she said. Her voice cut through the room.

All heads turned.

"Hecate truly appeared. I performed a ritual, an old ritual I was taught since childhood, a ritual connected to Diadema." She raised her chin. "Magic has returned. Old powers are awakening. What they describe is real."

Pause.

One heartbeat.

Two.

"And then, let the girl speak, Antonio," came Adriana's voice from the side. Quiet. Cutting. "You've said stupider things."

Antonio's mouth snapped shut.

The hall exploded.

"YOU?!" Pietro jumped up, jabbing a finger. "YOU performed a ritual?! YOU summoned that pagan creature?!"

"Witch!" Lorenzo's wife shrieked, leaping to her feet, face white, eyes wild. "Abomination! She's defiled the House!"

"Cadet branches," one of the heavy-set cousins hissed. "Always knew they practiced the forbidden!"

"Turn her over!" another barked. "To the mob!"

"YES!" Lorenzo slammed his fist on the table. Wine splashed. "She brought the curse! She's to blame!"

Mark lunged for Liana, shielding her. "Say that again, you bastard!"

"With pleasure!" Pietro grabbed for his sword. "They're half-breeds, anyway. Island trash. Your cousin-whore doomed us, real Scaligers are HERE!"

Mark drew his blade. Pietro answered. Steel rang.

Federico threw himself between them and caught Mark's wrist. Mark yanked. Federico held firm. "Stop! Immediately!"

The heavy cousins seized Pietro, dragging him back. He struggled, face purple, spitting curses.

"SIT DOWN!" Antonio waved his arms, voice breaking. "EVERYONE SIT!"

No one listened.

"Let me GO!" Mark snarled, jerking his arm. The blade trembled in the air.

"Try it, degenerate!" Pietro yanked a dagger left-handed, spun, and struck one of his captors in the jaw with the pommel. The man released him and clutched his face. Blood flowed between his fingers.

Someone knocked over a candelabra. Crash. Clang. Candles rolled across the table. One fell against the edge of a tapestry. Flames erupted.

"FIRE!" someone screamed.

A servant rushed to extinguish it, but the flame had already jumped to the carpet. Yellow tongues raced across the pile.

Lightning struck outside. For a moment, the hall was lit with cold white light. All faces looked dead, empty eye sockets, grinning skulls. Then darkness returned.

"Turn her over!" Lorenzo's wife screeched, her voice rising to hysteria.

"Give the girl to the mob, and it'll end!"

"Yes!" someone echoed. "Let the people deal with her!"

"I will not let you touch her!" Sebastian drew his dagger and shoved Emile aside.

"I'll kill every one of you!"

"Try it, pup!" The heavy cousin reached for his sword.

The twins rushed sobbing to their father. The girl screamed something about gods and death.

Beata laughed, high and broken, and couldn't stop.

"ENOUGH!" Federico roared. "EVERYONE!"

Lorenzo's wife cried out, thin and piercing. Her hand clutched convulsively at her chest. Her face drained white. Her eyes went wide with terror.

The hall suddenly grew colder, the temperature dropping as if a door had opened to winter.

"Eleanor?!" Lorenzo turned.

She swayed, tried to grab the table, missed, and fell.

Lorenzo caught her. His wife's head lolled back, breathing hoarse and labored. Sebastian watched her collapse.

That could be any of us. Fear could break you before the enemy even arrived.

The realization hit like ice water. They were all balanced on the knife's edge, one shock away from collapse.

"A PHYSICIAN!" Lorenzo screamed. "NOW!"

The hall went still. A servant bolted for the doors.

Eleanor's chest rose unevenly, but she breathed.

"Take her to her chambers," Federico ordered coldly. "Quick."

Two servants grabbed the unconscious woman. Lorenzo followed, his face twisted in horror.

Servants stamped out flames from the fallen candelabra, but acrid smoke hung in the air, stinging eyes.

Sebastian looked around the hall: fire, blood, screaming. His own family was tearing itself apart while enemies gathered outside. *This is how House Scaliger ends, not with foes at the gate, but with ourselves.*

And then,

"You tire me," came Adriana's voice. Quiet. Icy. "Seriously. Sitting here screaming like market women. Shut up. All of you. Immediately."

And in that moment, she stood. Slowly. Very slowly.

The air in the hall seemed to thicken. All gazes turned to her, as if an invisible force compelled them to look.

Adriana swept the hall with her gaze. Slowly. Each person. And on her beautiful, severe face was neither fear nor confusion. Only cold fury.

"Pull yourselves together," she said. The voice wasn't loud, but it cut. Like a razor. "All of you. Now."

The quiet was total.

Adriana stepped forward. Her movements were smooth, graceful, like a predator's.

"Put away the weapon, fool," she tossed at Pietro.

He opened his mouth.

"NOW."

The sword fell from his fingers, clanging against stone.

Adriana turned to the others. "Lord help us, what a herd of hysterics." Her voice was full of contempt. "Federico, use your brain sometimes. Antonio, pathetic sight!" Her gaze slid over the rest. "And you've all forgotten who we are."

She paused, surveying them all. "And yes, since you're all screaming like slaughtered pigs," her voice hardened, "the boys speak the truth. Giuliano completely lost his mind at the end. Decided to become the biggest here. Put the House above the Republic. Planned a coup. Gathered mercenary armies, compiled lists of senators for execution. Wanted to establish a monarchy, understand? With himself at the head." Adriana smiled coldly. "That's why he's now lying dead in the chapel. The Consortium uncovered the conspiracy and removed him. Surprise, yes?"

The hall froze.

Everyone stared at her.

"You... knew?" Federico breathed.

"Of course, I knew," Adriana waved her hand. "I'm not blind. Giuliano acted like an idiot with delusions of grandeur for the last six months. Think I wouldn't notice?" She snorted. "But he was House head. Had the right to his mistakes, up to a point. That point came. He's dead. We're alive. For now. Questions?"

Silence.

Adriana nodded and approached one of the guards, extending her hand.

"Sword."

The guard handed over the weapon.

Adriana took the blade. Her fingers closed on the hilt.

She moved. One step forward, blade rising in a diagonal cut that would have opened a man from hip to shoulder. The movement was liquid, perfect. A textbook Scaliger defensive form, third position. Speed no seventy-year-old should possess. Muscle memory carved by decades of practice.

The blade whistled through the air and stopped, point precisely at throat height.

Everyone held their breath.

Sebastian watched her, and for a moment, just a moment, it seemed her eyes flashed.

Not black. Golden? Or was it torchlight?

She returned the sword to the guard and looked at the family. "I held a blade when your great-grandfathers were still children." Her voice became quieter. More dangerous. "Any questions?"

No one answered.

Adriana nodded, returned to her place, and sat with her hands folded on the table. "Listen here, children," she surveyed those gathered. "We are Scaligers. The Ladder-makers. Those who build paths between worlds. We were chosen before the Empire. Keepers of gates. Servants of the Twelve."

"Aunt—" Antonio interrupted, his voice unsteady, "you're speaking of ancient cults..."

"I'm speaking of REALITY, Antonio," Adriana said, looking at him so he shrank. "Of forces that existed before Hecate, and will exist after." She pointed at Liana. "The girl knows. The cadet branches remembered and preserved knowledge. And the main line decided it was smarter than its ancestors."

Federico leaned forward. "But if Hecate truly appeared..."

"Then great changes are coming," Adriana said. "Very great. And either you'll accept this, or fear will break you, like that woman." She nodded toward where they'd carried Lorenzo's wife.

Pietro, recovering, grew bold. "Even if it's true... what do we do?"

"How do you survive?" Adriana laughed shortly. "Excellent question. Because we're already in shit up to our necks. The war's begun. This is only the beginning."

A new wave of panic.

"Flee!" someone shouted. "We need to flee the city!"

"Yes!" another supported. "Save the children!"

"Flee where, idiot?" Federico snapped. "They'll grab us at the gates!"

"Then surrender!" Pietro jumped up. "Open the doors! Beg for mercy!"

"And say what?" Mark shot back coldly. "Sorry, we accidentally learned about our own conspiracy?"

"Turn THEM over!" Pietro jabbed a finger at the brothers. "Say THEY did it! That WE had nothing to do with it!"

Sebastian lunged forward, but Emile caught him.

"I propose punching Pietro in the face," Emile said calmly. "Maybe his brain will fall back into place."

"Try it, cripple!"

"ENOUGH!" Antonio screeched. "Enough!"

No one listened.

A rumble outside. Distant, but distinct.

Everyone froze.

Another rumble. Closer. And shouts, many voices.

"The mob," Federico whispered. "They're already here."

In the sudden silence, they all heard it. Not just rumbling now. Words. A chant, rising and falling like waves against a shore.

Heretics. Heretics. HERETICS.

The word their enemies had chosen for them. A death sentence dressed as righteousness.

Adriana rose again. "Stop howling. Stop blaming each other." She swept everyone with her gaze. "Do you want to die of fear, or will you fight?"

Silence.

Adriana looked at Mark. "At least, do you have a plan?"

Mark swallowed. "Yes. Strengthen defenses. Evacuate women and children to the catacombs. Hold out until help arrives."

"What help?" Antonio asked hoarsely.

"Mine."

The voice came from the doorway. Everyone turned.

Visconti stood at the threshold, arms crossed, as if he'd been there for some time. Behind him, soldiers of the Secret Order in black armor filled the corridor.

"Forgive the interruption," the magister said, stepping into the hall with the easy confidence of a man who needed no invitation. "But my men and I grew tired of standing outside the door."

Even Mark stared at him, caught off guard.

"The situation in the city is catastrophic," Visconti continued, as if reporting to a war council. "Spontaneous riots have erupted throughout the capital. They're looting noble mansions in different parts of the city, arson, robbery, murder. City guards cannot cope; there are too few. We're trying to restore order, but the Secret Order's main forces are in barracks outside the city. By the time they arrive, an hour will pass, maybe an hour and a half."

He swept his gaze around the hall. "I came with what I could spare right now. Fifteen men. That's all I have in the city center."

A pause. Visconti looked at Antonio. "The Secret Order serves the ancient laws of the Republic, and only them. The Scaligers are one of the oldest families. We'll protect you."

Visconti paused again. "You have an advantage. Your palazzo is one of the most fortified in the capital: thick walls, narrow passages, and good defensive positions. The mob is furious but disorganized. If you hold out for an hour, reinforcements will arrive. Maybe sooner." His gaze hardened. "If you do not hold out, they'll slaughter you all."

Adriana nodded and turned to the family. "So, Mark commands the defense." She looked at Antonio, expecting objections. He stayed silent. "Federico, obey him. No discussion. Pietro, shut your mouth and take a sword. Lorenzo..." She glanced sympathetically toward where he'd gone. "Your wife will be in the catacombs. Defend the house, you'll defend her."

Adriana clapped her hands. "Oh yes, almost forgot." Her voice became even more sarcastic. "We gathered in such friendly company not just to argue, right? House Council. Elections for a new head. Remember?" She surveyed them all. "So I propose Antonio's candidacy. We all know his merits well, so let's dispense with speeches. Any objections?"

All stayed silent.

"Excellent," Adriana nodded. "Congratulations on assuming office, Antonio."

Antonio opened his mouth, closed it, then nodded.

"Try to hold the House better than your predecessor," Adriana continued. "Now go command the defense of your palazzo. You're House head now, after all."

Adriana turned to Liana. "You and I will lead the women and children to the catacombs beneath the palazzo. Know the way?"

"Yes."

"Good. There's an old passage to the wharf. Boats should be there. Have not been touched in twenty years, but they're sound." Adriana surveyed the hall. "We'll take a few servants. Worst case, we put them at the oars and escape through the canals. But I hope it will not come to that."

"Let's go," she said to Liana. "Quickly. We have little time."

Liana nodded. She called the women and children.

Beata stepped forward. "Give me a sword." Her voice was steady now; the hysteria burned away. "I will not hide in the dark while others die."

Adriana looked at her. For a moment, something softened in those hard eyes.

"Foolish girl," she said, not unkindly. "You do not need to die today. Come with us."

Beata opened her mouth to argue.

"That wasn't a request." Adriana took her arm. "Courage is knowing when to fight and when to survive. Today, you survive."

Beata's shoulders sagged, but she nodded. She paused at the threshold and looked back at the hall, the men preparing to die, the torches guttering in the draft. Her lips moved, but no sound came. A prayer? A farewell?

Then she turned and followed the others into darkness.

The twins, sobbing, reached for their father, but Pietro pushed them toward Liana.

"Go. *Papa* will come soon."

A lie. Everyone knew it. But the twins believed.

Liana led the women and children to the exit. She paused at the threshold, meeting Sebastian's eyes across the hall.

No words. They'd already said everything that mattered. Then she was gone.

Adriana walked last, leaning on her cane. At the door, she stopped and turned to look at Sebastian. She drew a silk pouch from her pocket, extended it, and said quietly but firmly, "Guard it like the apple of your eye. This will open doors. When the time comes, you'll understand which ones."

Sebastian took the pouch. The silk was warm from Adriana's touch, almost hot. But inside, it was cold. And something else. A pulse. Like a second heart beating against his palm. He squeezed the pouch gently. The world tilted, just for a moment. Vertigo, as if the ground had fallen away beneath his feet. The pulse quickened at his touch.

What is this?

He looked up, questions on his lips, but Adriana had already turned to Emile.

"For you, this." She drew out a dark crystal the size of a quail's egg. "Wear it at your heart. Don't lose it. Your protection is in it."

"What does it do?" Emile asked.

Adriana's lips twitched. "I don't know when these will serve you. But they will. Trust an old woman who's seen more than she should."

Emile took the crystal.

Cold hit him like a fist. Not surface cold, deep cold. Bone cold. The cold of winter graves. His fingers went instantly numb, but his hand wouldn't open. Couldn't let go even if he'd wanted to.

Inside the stone, something moved. Dark and fluid, like smoke trapped underwater. It coiled, uncoiled, pressed against the crystal's surface as if testing the boundaries of its prison.

Emile stared at it, mind racing. *Protection? From what? And what's in there?*

But Adriana had already moved to Mark.

She placed a hand on his shoulder. Squeezed hard, too hard for a seventy-year-old woman. Fingers like iron.

"You'll manage," she said. Her eyes held his. "You have the right blood. My blood."

For a moment, Mark felt something pass between them. Not just words. Something older. A recognition. A legacy.

Her blood.

And then she was gone, without looking back.

When the women vanished, only men remained in the hall.

With Visconti and his men, they had about fifty people at their disposal, against the furious mob outside.

MARK

Mark surveyed those gathered. Antonio gripped his rapier with white knuckles. Federico wiped sweat from his brow. Pietro scowled but said nothing.

One servant prayed quietly, fingering prayer beads. Another's hands shook so badly he could not buckle his belt.

"Listen," Mark said, his voice sharp. "We have little time. The plan's simple." He pointed at the palazzo scheme Antonio had already sketched in charcoal on the wall. "We'll organize three defensive points: the main hall, the chapel, and the catacombs entrance. I'll hold the main hall with the main force, and Visconti with the Secret Order will be there too. If we're lucky, we'll stop the mob here. If not, the main crowd will rush down the main corridor toward the chapel. It's the most direct and obvious route if you do not know the palazzo layout.

"The chapel is on Sebastian; he'll have ten men. The catacombs entrance, deep in the house, will be covered by Emile with Federico and the rest. But if we do our job well, the fighting will not reach you. We're spreading our already small forces across three groups, but there's no avoiding it; the palazzo is large and can be entered from many sides."

"We'll block narrow passages," Visconti added, his voice that of a professional. But Mark saw his jaw muscle working, hands clenched until the knuckles went white. "The mob will not be able to turn around. They'll have to come two or three at a time, and in that kind of fight, you can hold the line even outnumbered. Save strength and men. First volley: petronels and arquebuses. Then crossbows. Only then swords."

“And if they still break through?” someone asked, voice tight.

“We retreat to the catacombs,” Mark answered. “Regroup. Hold the last line.”

Visconti stepped forward. “Listen carefully. When it starts, hit the groin, throat, and belly. No heroics. Don’t swing at heads; shields will block. Cut legs. When the first row falls, step on the bodies. Don’t let them rise.”

Someone swallowed hard. Federico donned his mail, then paused to draw a medallion from his shirt. He kissed it, whispered something, and hid it again.

Servants ran to carry out orders. Two dragged a barrel of oil, splashing it on the marble steps at the threshold. Others hauled a heavy oak table to the balcony. A third group barricaded side passages with furniture.

One of the Secret Order’s shooters loaded a petronel. His fingers fumbled with the powder horn. Black grains spilled on the stone. He cursed and started over.

Antonio drew his rapier from its scabbard and kissed the hilt. Mark suddenly thought of his father. Had he had time to prepare for his last fight?

“How many of them?” Mark asked quietly.

“I counted maybe three hundred,” Visconti answered. “Maybe more.”

Emile smiled grimly. “Good odds.”

Outside. Rumbling. Dull. Repeating.

BOOM. The door shuddered. Dust rained from the ceiling.

A pause. Shouts outside as men changed places at the ram.

BOOM. The entire palazzo shook. Somewhere upstairs, something fell and shattered.

A thin crack appeared in the wood.

“Whatever happens,” Sebastian said quietly, voice low, “it was an honor...”

Mark wanted to answer. Opened his mouth.

BOOM. The crack spread like lightning. Hinges creaked. The sound of straining metal.

“POSITIONS!” Visconti roared.

Sebastian ran to the eastern wing. Ten men followed.

Emile disappeared into the depths of the house, Federico and the others following him.

Mark rushed to the main hall, Visconti behind him. Secret Order soldiers took positions facing the entrance. Below, by the door, Antonio gripped his rapier with whitened fingers.

BOOM. One hinge began tearing from the stone. Mortar crumbled, pattering to the floor.

Mark raised his blade, the family weapon, its guard marked with the silver ladder.

Had he done everything right? In the chaos, the shouting, the panic, had he missed something?

“We wait,” Visconti said. “Let them enter. Give them a volley. Then we cut.”

The doors would fall. Nothing could prevent that. But then the first volley would cut down the front ranks, the hottest heads, the bravest fools, the ones who'd pushed to be first through the breach. With luck, the ringleaders among them.

BOOM. The hinge flew out, clanging against stone, ringing like a bell.

Inertia would drive the rest forward, stumbling over bodies. The real fight would begin. But his men were armored, well-armed. The Secret Order knew their business. A short, brutal clash, then they'd push the attackers back onto the street.

BOOM. The second burst. The door tilted inward, hanging by a thread.

Where shooters could pour fire from above, panic would do the rest. Mobs were brave until the blood started flowing. One volley, two, and they'd scatter, or mill in confusion until reinforcements arrived.

If he was right, Sebastian and Emile wouldn't even see combat.

A good plan. The best he could manage.

Shooters on balconies cocked their petronels and aimed at the door, drawing bead, holding breath.

Silence. Tense. Ringing.

A servant below whispered prayers, lips moving soundlessly.

Antonio breathed fast and hoarse, like a hunted animal.

CRRRACK. The door collapsed inward with a sound like thunder.

And through the opening poured the mob,

Screaming rabble with torches and kitchen knives. Faces twisted with rage, fear, and mob fury. The stench of unwashed bodies and burning pitch.

But directly behind them, a formation.

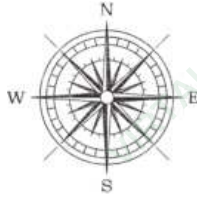
Mark stood on the stairs. From above, he saw everything: even ranks, organized; shields in front, spears bristling over them; torches behind. Moving in lockstep. Professional soldiers.

Mark's stomach clenched as if he'd been struck. His mouth went instantly dry.

Visconti breathed one word: “Shit.”

Mark understood. This wasn't just a mob. Behind them stood an army.

Chapter 16: The Fall of House Scaliger



SEBASTIAN

“Hall’s fallen,” the eldest Pallavicini said calmly, too calmly. His hand settled on the hilt of a boarding cutlass, a weapon no aristocrat would touch, but one that cut well.

Sebastian gripped his blade tighter. Around him, the eastern wing’s chapel had become their last redoubt. The altar rose behind them like a stone mass, its marble veined the color of dried blood, its silver bas-reliefs depicting ancestors crushing enemies like grapes. Giuliano Scaliger’s richly decorated open coffin rested atop it, a final reminder of how this had all begun.

Twelve columns formed a semicircle, dividing the chapel space. The entrance was a narrow passage between two forward columns. Good defensive ground, except they had twenty men against several hundred.

Their ancestors had fought simpler battles.

Beside Sebastian, servants clustered together, some armed with kitchen knives, others with rusted halberds. The three Pallavicini brothers stood a pace forward, their heavy chins and dull gazes reflecting the candlelight.

Honestly, only the four of them understood what real fighting meant. The rest were just men whom fate had pushed beneath someone else’s blade.

Outside, the storm raged. Thunder crashed against the vaults, and above them the great dome trembled, a masterwork of stained glass held together by lead and prayer. Twelve goddesses looked down from the dome’s panels, their faces lit by lightning flashes: Justice with her scales, Wisdom with her book, Mercy with her chalice. Twelve faces reimagined by the church, worn down to abstractions.

Once they’d been prayed to, now they were just pictures on glass, watching men prepare to die.

Shouts and trampling feet approached. The battle in the vestibule had ended. Now it was their turn.

“Spread out,” Sebastian whispered. “Behind the columns, behind the benches, find cover. Let them come inside. Then we strike.”

He hid behind the third column on the left, pressing his back against cold marble. His fingers found the silk pouch in his pocket. The silver coin inside pulsed. It didn't seem to, actually; it pulsed, like a second heart. Warmth spread from it across his palm, alive, frightening.

Someone behind Sebastian doubled over and vomited straight onto the floor.

We've lost one before the fight started.

Attackers poured through the entrance, pushed from behind by those coming after, blinded by others' fury.

"Heretics!" someone screamed, waving a sword. His eyes burned with fanaticism, a bad sign. Those types fought until they dropped.

The chapel was filled with a crowd: city rabble, mercenaries with red armbands, people whose fanaticism had replaced thought.

Sebastian let them pass deeper into the chapel, another step, then another, before he gave the signal.

They struck from three sides.

Crossbows fired point-blank. The second bolt punched into an enemy's chest at the altar; the third buried itself in the belly of a man with an axe. Then the crossbows became clubs. Reloading took a minute, and there was no time for that.

Daggers sank into backs. Blades slid between ribs. The first wave fell too fast. More would come.

Five seconds of pause. No more. Thunder outside answered with a crash.

And then they came.

The second wave was larger and more professional, several dozen men, and these were not rabble. Sebastian recognized the disciplined formation, the matched armor, the way they moved as a unit. Professionals sent to finish what the mob had started.

Though good for defense, the chapel became cramped under the press of sheer numbers. Every defender fought two or three enemies at once.

Sebastian stopped seeing the whole battle. The world narrowed to blade trajectories, flashing steel, sudden movements that meant life or death. His rapier and misericordia lived their own lives.

An axe swung at his head, too slow. Sebastian dove right, his rapier arcing upward into ribs. He twisted and pulled free. A second attacker came from the flank; Sebastian parried and counterattacked to the throat. Arterial spray painted his face. A third grabbed for his jacket; Sebastian ducked the overhead slash and drove his misericordia into the man's belly.

His body moved without thought now: parry, retreat, strike; parry, give ground, strike again. The rapier hilt had gone slick with blood, his or theirs, it did not matter anymore.

Lightning flashed above. For an instant, the goddesses in the dome blazed with light: Justice, Wisdom, Mercy, their glass faces alive, watching.

A pause of three seconds. No more. Sebastian's breathing had turned to wheezing.

Then the third wave came.

Sebastian felt exhaustion settle into his bones. His arms were filled with lead, and his movements slowed. The rapier weighed as much as an anchor. Each parry came slower than the last.

Through the press of bodies, through the chaos, he saw her.

A girl. Nine years old, maybe ten. Standing behind the attackers, near the shattered entrance, her white dress untouched by blood or soot. Dark hair framed a face too pale, too still, like a porcelain mask worn by something older. She watched him with eyes that held no bottom, no light, no mercy. Eyes that had seen empires crumble to dust.

A weight settled on Sebastian's chest. Not physical. Deeper. As if something vast and patient had turned its attention toward him.

He blinked.

She was gone. Enemies remained. Chaos. Just his exhausted mind playing tricks.

But she was there. I saw...

A scream cut through his thoughts. The youngest Pallavicini went down, his face split open, finished with a single cutlass blow that squelched through bone. He stopped moving.

The middle brother tried to avenge him. An axe caught his arm. His hand flew off. He crumpled to his knees, pressing the spurting stump to his chest. One of the servants dragged him back toward the altar.

"Fall back!" Sebastian roared.

They formed a tight circle now, those who remained, heavy breathing, blood on their faces, sweat mingled with battle grime. Enemies surrounded them. Five pressed against Sebastian alone, with as many more pushing the other defenders.

His blade still struck, but more enemies pressed in. Far more.

The attacker in the half-mask swung. Sebastian parried, but too slowly. The blow struck his shoulder and knocked him down.

He fell and saw the blade descending toward his throat. The bench behind him exploded under an axe blow, showering splinters and dust.

That was all he saw before he closed his eyes.

His coin burned.

Not warmth. Fire. White-hot against his chest, searing through silk and shirt, branding his skin. Sebastian's eyes flew open. His body moved before his mind caught up, rolling sideways as the blade sparked off stone where his throat had been a heartbeat ago.

He was on his feet. How? His legs should not work. His arms should not lift. But they did. Strength flooded through him like ice water, like lightning, like something ancient and furious that would not let him die.

The half-masked attacker stared, confused by prey that should have been dead.

Sebastian's rapier drove through his eye.

He hurled himself back into the fight, his blade dancing with borrowed fury. One enemy, then another, then a third, they fell before him like wheat beneath a scythe.

Metal rang behind him as someone's blade intercepted another strike.

"Sebastian! Hold on, brother!"

Mark. Alive. Fierce.

He had cut through the crowd, his rapier flashing like silver lightning. Behind him came Visconti himself, halberd in hand, a gash across his forehead. Antonio was there too, eyes blazing, blade dancing, fighting like a man reborn. And behind them, Visconti's shooters, two men, each wielding a pair of pistols.

An impressive volley.

Four shots thundered simultaneously, deafening in the smoke that veiled the chapel. The front ranks were cut down. Bodies dropped, blood sprayed across the stones. The shooters burst into the chapel, breaking the flow of battle. They dropped their smoking pistols and drew blades.

Sebastian felt the borrowed strength fading. The coin against his chest went cold, dead cold, and his legs nearly buckled. A spike of pain lanced through his skull, sharp and sudden, as if the magic demanded payment for what it had given.

But his brother was here. Enough.

The mob wavered, then fell back amid screams of the wounded and the curses of the retreating.

For a moment, it seemed like victory.

A soldier with a mangled ear shoved through the crowd, rolling a barrel ahead of him. The fuse on top was already smoking.

Sebastian saw sparks falling from the fuse. He understood what it was.

“Sebastian!” Mark’s voice, somewhere to his left.

The world exploded.

Darkness.

MARK

Shots overhead rang out simultaneously.

Their thunder deafened everyone, and smoke veiled the balconies in a thick shroud.

Through the haze, Mark made out four bodies falling in the opening. The rabble stumbled, tripping over the corpses, but only for a moment. The rest came through without stopping, climbing over the dead.

A screaming mob with torches and kitchen knives poured into the vestibule. More crowded behind them, in the opening, in the corridors, on the street. Hundreds of them. But the vestibule was narrow and could not hold more than a few dozen at once. Those fought while the rest waited their turn at death’s gates.

“To battle!” Visconti roared, leaping from the balcony.

Mark followed the magister. He jumped from two meters up, hit the marble floor, and his knees exploded with pain. He rolled, then sprang to his feet.

Fifteen Secret Order men in black armor closed ranks below. They carried swords, halberds, and spears. No shields had been issued; there’d been no time.

The Order met the first wave of rabble armed with kitchen knives, clubs, and torches. The attackers screamed and waved their weapons, disorganized but furious, mad with fanaticism.

One servant tried to fight. He swung a rusty sword and missed. An enemy struck him on the head with a club, and Mark heard the skull crack through the battle’s din. The servant collapsed and went still.

The Order guards cut methodically, like the trained warriors they were. Every strike was a kill, no wasted movement.

Visconti fought at the formation’s center. His halberd flashed in a silver arc. An enemy with an axe swung at him, but Visconti parried and slashed the man’s throat with one precise movement. Blood sprayed as the enemy collapsed, choking and thrashing in agony.

Mark fought beside the magister, his rapier and misericordia working in coordinated rhythm. Not defense, attack.

A club swung at Mark's head. He ducked and thrust upward; his rapier found the gap between ribs. The blade scraped bone and came out wet.

His movements were efficient, surgical. Economy of death.

But the mob did not stop. For every one they killed, two more took their place.

"Antonio!" someone shouted.

Mark turned. Three attackers had surrounded his uncle, one with a spear, two with clubs.

Mark lunged forward without thinking. His rapier slashed the spearman's wrist. The enemy howled and grabbed his arm.

The two with clubs turned on Mark. Before either could strike, a blade flashed past his shoulder. Antonio's rapier took the first man through the throat, a perfect thrust, elegant and precise. The second man hesitated. Antonio did not. His riposte opened the man's belly in one fluid motion.

Mark stared. This was not the uncle who'd stammered through the Council meeting.

"Back to back, nephew!" Antonio commanded, stepping in behind him. His voice was sharp, certain, the voice of a man who knew battle.

They pressed together, shoulders touching, blades facing outward. Enemies circled.

Antonio moved like a dancer. His blade wove patterns in the air, parry, thrust, parry, thrust, each motion flowing into the next without pause. An attacker lunged; Antonio sidestepped, and his rapier kissed the man's throat. Another swung a club; Antonio ducked beneath it, pivoted, and opened a red smile across the man's belly.

Father's stories. Giuliano and Antonio, the finest duelists in Arcadia.

They were legends before I was born.

Father had told him a dozen times, eyes bright with admiration.

He'd thought them exaggerations. Tales polished by time and wine.

He was wrong.

Antonio fought with thirty years of muscle memory, his body remembering what his mind had perhaps tried to forget. Every movement was economy itself, no wasted motion, no excess, just steel finding flesh with terrible precision.

Besides Antonio, Mark felt clumsy. He fought well. Antonio fought like art itself.

Then he saw it. Through the smoke, through the chaos: enemies streaming past them into the side corridors. Not fighting. Running. Pouring into the palazzo like water through a broken dam.

The defense had failed. While they held the vestibule, the enemy had found other ways in.

We're too few. We cannot hold the whole building.

Through the opening moved a formation. Their shields closed together, spears bristling above them, twenty men, maybe twenty-five, all armored and organized.

The Order guards met them with a wall of steel.

The first guard took a spear through the neck. He collapsed, thrashing. The second tried flanking, but the shield turned, and the spear struck his belly.

"Legs!" Visconti shouted. "Hit the legs!"

One guard dove low and slashed beneath a shield. The enemy crumpled. The breach was open.

Visconti lunged through. Mark and Antonio followed, cutting and stabbing.

Fifteen became twelve. Then ten. Then eight.

The enemy formation broke. For a moment, Mark thought they might hold.

Then the second wave poured through the opening, fresh mercenaries, thirty, maybe forty. Professional killers.

And behind them, from the side corridors, came shouts. The enemies who had slipped past were already inside, already spreading through the palazzo like fire.

The Order guards were exhausted. Eight became six. Visconti's arm hung useless, shattered by a hammer blow.

"Retreat!" he shouted. "To the eastern wing!"

Those who remained ran.

Mark covered the retreat with Antonio at his side. His uncle fought without pause, blade dancing even as they fell back.

One guard lagged behind. Enemies surrounded him and finished him.

Mark ran through the corridors with Visconti beside him and Antonio behind. Three guards followed, all that remained of the detachment.

The palazzo was already burning around them.

Behind them came shouts and the trampling of pursuers. An arrow whistled past and struck the wall.

A passage appeared between two columns. The wooden beam above it cracked and sagged as fire devoured it.

Mark ran under the beam first, then Visconti, then the guards. The beam collapsed with a deafening crash, and a wall of burning timber blocked the passage. Sparks shot up in a column, and heat struck Mark's back.

Behind the beam came enemy screams. Then they stopped. The attackers would have to go around, through other halls. That bought them minutes, maybe two.

Mark glanced back through the flames.

His breath caught.

Through the smoke, through the shimmer of heat and fire, a figure stood. A woman, impossibly tall, impossibly still. The flames parted around her like water around a stone. Her face was shadow, but he felt her gaze, cold as deep water, old as the bones of the earth. She watched him the way a cat watches a mouse it has already tired of.

The smoke shifted.

She was gone.

Mark blinked. Nothing, just fire, just smoke, just exhaustion twisting shadows into shapes.

Just my imagination.

He did not believe it.

One guard fell, an arrow catching him in the back from somewhere off to the side. He fell quietly, without a cry.

Two guards remained. That was all.

"Chapel!" Visconti shouted.

They burst into the eastern wing. From inside the chapel came the din of battle.

Mark burst through the side passage and saw everything at once: bodies heaped between columns, blood pooling on marble, the eldest Pallavicini dead near the entrance. And at the altar, surrounded by enemies, Sebastian fought alone, barely standing, his parries slowing, his strikes losing precision.

"Hold on, brother!" Mark shouted.

He lunged forward. Behind him came Visconti with two guards, each holding two pistols.

"Back!" Visconti roared.

The volley came. Four pistols roared as one. Three enemies collapsed. A fourth spun and fell.

Mark reached Sebastian and pulled him to his feet. His brother breathed heavily, covered in blood, eyes glazed.

The enemies fell back toward the exit. New ones climbed through bodies in the opening.

Silence reigned for five seconds, maybe ten.

Why had they retreated?

Mark understood when he saw movement at the entrance.

A soldier shoved through the crowd, rolling a barrel ahead of him. The fuse on top was already smoking.

Mark saw sparks falling. The barrel sat five paces from Sebastian. The fuse was half a palm-length.

“Sebastian!”

Mark lunged forward.

He did not make it.

The world turned white.

The dome exploded inward, twelve stained-glass goddesses shattering into a thousand colored knives, raining glass and lead upon everyone below. The blast picked Mark up like a leaf and hurled him through the air. He slammed into something, someone, and they both crashed to the stone floor.

Sound vanished. The world became ringing silence.

Mark lay on top of his brother, though he did not remember landing there. His back screamed with pain, sharp, cutting, wrong. Something had entered between his shoulder blades. Not deep, but there. He could feel it with every breath.

He tried to move. His arms did not obey.

Sebastian. Is he—

His brother lay beneath him, motionless. Blood on his face. Eyes closed.

Mark forced himself to roll off. The pain in his back flared white-hot. He screamed, but heard nothing, only the endless ringing.

He pushed himself to his knees. The chapel swam before his eyes. Left, then right.

Dust. Smoke. Bodies. The altar cracked down the middle. Giuliano’s coffin had been thrown open, his corpse sprawled across the steps like a broken doll.

Sebastian.

Mark grabbed his brother’s shoulder and shook him.

Sebastian jerked and opened his eyes. He stared into nothing, clearly not understanding where he was.

“Get up.”

Mark did not hear his own voice.

He dragged his brother to his feet. Sebastian swayed, grabbing a column to steady himself.

Mark turned.

The chapel lay in ruins. Stained glass fragments were scattered everywhere among the bodies. One guard was burning, rolling on the floor, screaming. Mark could not hear him, only saw his mouth open in a silent howl.

Visconti leaned against the wall. Alive. He tried to stand, but one arm hung at the wrong angle.

Antonio appeared from the smoke, coughing. Blood stained his temple, but he was moving. Without a word, he grabbed Sebastian’s other arm.

Enemies were climbing through the rubble. Many of them. Too many.

Mark and Antonio hauled Sebastian between them and pushed toward the exit.

“Run.”

They entered a narrow corridor filled with smoke.

Mark and Antonio dragged Sebastian between them, each holding one of his arms. Mark’s back hurt. Something had cut the skin there, between his shoulder blades. Not deep, but it burned and stung, and each step echoed with pain. He could bear it.

Blood flowed under his shirt, not much, but warm and sticky.

Later. Pull it out later.

Sebastian walked, stumbling and swaying. Mark held him up, not letting him fall.

Smoke was everywhere, crawling along the walls and ceiling.

The wooden beam overhead cracked. Mark sped up. The beam collapsed right behind them, sparks shooting up in a column.

An arrow whistled past. The enemies were somewhere behind them, going around through other corridors.

Mark knew the palazzo like the back of his hand. A left turn would take them to the western wing, to the offices. There was a secret door to the catacombs there.

He ran faster.

They reached the western wing and the corridor to the guest rooms.

Mark led Sebastian, moving quickly. They rushed past overturned furniture, a broken mirror, and blood smeared on the wall.

On the left, a half-open door appeared.

Mark saw the edge of a dress, blue, with gold embroidery.

He stopped.

Sebastian took two more steps before stopping and turning.

“What?” His voice was hoarse, muffled.

Mark stared at the door, at the blue edge of the dress. He knew it. He recognized it immediately.

“Go ahead,” he told Sebastian. “To the office. Wait there.”

Sebastian looked at the door and understood everything. He shook his head, refusing to go. He stayed.

Mark pushed the door open and entered.

It was a small guest room with a window facing the interior courtyard.

Beata lay by the far wall, between the bed and the wardrobe.

Seventeen years old. Her dress was torn. Bruises on her neck. Blood on her thighs.

She had fought. Without a sword. With her bare hands.

Mark closed her eyes and covered her with his cloak. His hands were not steady.

Antonio stumbled through the doorway. He saw the body. His face crumbled.

“My girl,” he whispered, falling to his knees. “My little girl.”

He gathered her into his arms, rocking like a man holding a child. Tears cut through the blood on his face.

She was like a daughter to him, Mark remembered his father once saying. Antonio never had children of his own.

Mark knelt beside his uncle and put his arms around him. They stayed like that for a long moment, silent.

Then Antonio laid her down gently and kissed her forehead. When he stood, his face was stone.

They left. Sebastian pulled the door closed behind them.

When enemies caught them on the stairs, Antonio killed three of them, quickly, precisely, without wasted movement.

They ran past the library. Through the open door, Mark glimpsed flames devouring the shelves. The Scaliger collection, famous across the country, books of the Southern Continent that existed in only a single copy, were turning to ash.

The secret door was behind the bookcase in the office.

Sebastian moved without hesitation; he knew where. He pushed, and it opened. A staircase led down, narrow and steep, its stone steps worn smooth by centuries. They descended into blackness. Each step echoed in the darkness. The air grew colder and heavier. Behind them, the door shut and the bolt locked. Above them, the palazzo burned, but here there was only darkness, damp, and the ancient silence of the catacombs.

Mark sank to the floor. His back hurt; the fragment was still there between his shoulder blades, not deep, but lodged. He could bear it.

Sebastian sat nearby, head in his hands, breathing hoarsely.

Visconti leaned against the wall. His arm hung wrong, bone protruding. Pain had drained the color from his face, but his eyes were clear.

"The Order remembers its debts," he said through clenched teeth.

"This is not over."

One guard, all that remained, sat in silence.

From outside, from above them, came the din of battle: the shouts of the mob and the crackle of flames.

The palazzo was burning.

Mark closed his eyes and exhaled.

Alive. Still alive.

Sebastian raised his head and looked at Mark.

"You're wounded."

"Fragment. Under the shoulder blade." Mark winced. "You'll pull it out later."

"Later—" Sebastian repeated.

If there would be a later.

Mark forced himself to stand and walk forward.

EMILE

While his brothers fought in the chapel, Emile had posted a barrier of three men at the corridor's end, guarding the secret passage into the catacombs. The rest, seven men, stood in a group around the women and children, sheltered in a deep alcove behind a carved partition.

The scar on Emile's cheek pulsed in time with his heartbeat, like a separate living creature. It was the Goddess's seal on his soul. When it pulsed, Emile felt her PRESENCE, Diadema, not nearby but inside him: in his blood, in his thoughts, in his very essence.

"How soon will they be here?" asked Eleanor, pressing the twins, Michele and Michelina, to her. Her pale face, exhausted by long illness, was full of quiet determination.

"So far, the din comes only from the central vestibule and the eastern wing," Emile answered, listening to the sounds of the house. "But be prepared to leave at any moment."

He turned to Liana, who stood at the entrance. His cousin's face had drained of color, her lips pressed into a thin line. In her hand, she held a dagger with a curved blade, their father's gift. She gripped the hilt so hard that her knuckles had gone white.

Old Adriana stood nearby, leaning on her staff.

"You're certain the lower passage still exists?" Emile asked her.

"It was built during the Cataclysm," the old woman answered. "It'll survive another thousand years. The secret door opens by turning the siren's tail on the panel, three times left, twice right. Below is a fork: the right passage leads to the ancient temple, the left to the river, where boats are moored in advance."

The sounds of battle approached. Too quickly.

Somewhere, windows shattered. The attackers were seeking other ways in. The acrid smell of smoke intensified; someone had set fires. Soon, the flames would reach here too.

Emile listened to the din of weapons, to the screams, to the trampling of many feet. He tried to understand where his brothers were now, and how close the enemies had come.

From the corridor came the sounds of a skirmish, metal clanging, a short cry cutting off mid-word. The barrier had taken a blow.

Five men against an unknown number of enemies.

Emile gripped his rapier's hilt but did not move from his spot. His task was to protect the women and children, at any price.

Liana stepped forward toward the entrance. Her gaze was fierce. "Emile, I can—"

"No—" he cut her off. "Your task is here. With them." He nodded at the women and children huddled behind the carved partition.

The sounds of battle grew louder. Guards' shouts could be heard: short orders, curses, death rattles.

Then silence fell. Short and dead.

Emile prepared to meet the enemies, but they were not there. Instead, the din shifted, moving to another part of the house, to the chapel, where Sebastian was supposed to be holding the defense.

A minute passed. Then two. Then five.

Emile heard, somewhere far away, glass shattering, massive, judging by the sound. The chapel's stained glass. He heard shouts, screams, and the clang of weapons.

And then came the explosion.

The deafening roar shook the palazzo.

The walls trembled. Dust showered from the ceiling. A mirror on the wall cracked, a spiderweb of fractures spreading across its surface.

Women cried out. Children wept.

Emile stood motionless, peering into the corridor from which the noise had come.

The silence after the explosion was worse than the explosion itself.

He turned to Adriana. The old woman stood with her staff, looking at him with unseeing eyes, as if she saw through the walls, through the distance.

"The Palazzo has fallen," she said in an even voice, without tremor, without grief. A simple statement of fact.

Liana stepped toward the door. "I must go back. Mark, Sebastian—"

"No." Adriana's voice sounded like a command, not an opinion. "And don't you dare do anything foolish, girl."

"But they're there!" Liana turned to her, eyes full of fury and despair. "We cannot just abandon them!"

"They'll either manage or they will not—" the old woman cut her off.

"And you will not help them, you'll only die pointlessly. And there are damned few Scaligers left." She jabbed a bony finger toward the women and children.

"The family's future is right there. Eleanor with the twins. Boys from the cadet branches. The whole family's genealogy now fits in this damned alcove. If we lose them, the Scaliger line ends tonight. And then everything we did a thousand years ago turns to dust."

Emile felt something clench in his chest. Adriana's cold logic was merciless and absolutely correct.

"Mark and Sebastian know what they're doing," the old woman continued. "They bought us time. We have no right to waste it."

Liana stood rigid, her whole body straining forward, yet she didn't move.

They had left two sentries in the alcove in case the brothers managed to break through. The rest began their descent.

The catacombs' darkness swallowed them like the maw of an ancient beast.

The spiral staircase had been carved from the rock itself, as old as the earth beneath Arcadia, its steps worn smooth by countless footsteps. Here and there on the walls, half-erased symbols lingered: runes and signs whose meanings had long been forgotten.

The scar on Emile's cheek pulsed more insistently.

They descended for a long time. The lanterns swayed, casting bizarre shadows on the walls. Children sobbed, and women whispered prayers, some to Hecate, some to the old goddesses.

Finally, they reached the fork.

Two corridors lay before them. One led left, sloping upward toward the murmur of water. The other went right, plunging deeper into darkness, into the earth's depths.

The crystal at Emile's chest pulsed. Not pain, pull. Like a hook behind his ribs, tugging him toward the right corridor. Toward the darkness. Toward something waiting.

"To the boat," Emile commanded. "Quickly."

Adriana lingered, looking at him in the lantern light. "You won't go with us."

It wasn't a question. She saw it in his face. Or perhaps she felt it too, the call of the temple, the pull of old blood.

"I must..." Emile began, but the old woman shook her head.

"The temple calls. I see it. Go. Find what you seek. We'll wait at the boat." She paused, then added more quietly, "And when your brothers come, you'll meet them."

Emile nodded.

The group moved toward the river. The sound of their footsteps gradually faded in the darkness.

He turned into the right corridor.

Something pulled him there. Not an order, not a thought, something deeper. A call in the blood.

The scar now pulsed in unison with his heartbeat, as if two rhythms had merged into one.

Emile raised the lantern and stepped into the right corridor.

The tunnel narrowed as he progressed. Soon his shoulders brushed against rough stone walls, covered with centuries of limestone deposits. The vault hung low, and he had to duck.

The air grew stale, heavy with the smells of damp, mold, and something else, a strange aroma that recalled the incense of ancient rituals.

In the lantern light, Emile noticed niches in the walls. Bones lay within them. Skulls stared with empty eye sockets. These were the ashes of unknown dead, buried here for centuries, maybe millennia. Who had they been? Priests of the old faith? Temple guardians? The first worshipers?

No one knew. No one remembered anymore.

Emile walked through the underworld of the dead. Their bones whispered in the darkness.

The walls were covered with bas-reliefs: skillfully carved women's figures with closed eyes, each holding symbols of power, scales, sword, crown, wheat sheaf.

Twelve goddesses. Sleeping.

Runes along the walls had been almost erased by time and were barely distinguishable. Yet here and there, he made out familiar symbols, the Scaliger coat of arms. Ancient. Still without the ladder. Just waves and a ship.

This was their temple. The secret sanctuary where the first Scaligers had prayed to the goddesses during the time when Hecate's new church persecuted pagans.

Suddenly, the tunnel widened, leading into an extensive cavern hall.

Emile stopped at the threshold.

The temple had been forgotten.

Dust lay thick upon the stone floor, untouched for centuries. Cobwebs draped the corners and hung from the ceiling in silvery curtains.

Twelve columns of white marble surrounded a central space where an altar stood, carved from a single piece of black stone. Extinguished candles had crumbled to dust. A silver chalice had darkened with time.

Dust covered everything. Everything lay dead.

But when Emile stepped inside, the scar on his cheek flared.

And the temple answered.

Runes on the floor flashed with a dim bluish light, weak and flickering, like coals breathed upon after long years of oblivion.

In the niches between the columns stood statues: women's figures with closed eyes, each bearing her attribute. Their faces, though individual, shared an elusive similarity, like sisters.

The Great Sleeping Ones.

But Emile didn't look at the statues. His gaze was drawn to the walls.

Frescoes.

They covered the walls from floor to vault, ancient and faded but still discernible in the flickering light of the runes.

History. His history. His family's history.

Emile's gaze moved along the walls, reading the story painted there. A ship with a crimson sail on a sunlit sea. A man on deck, tall and broad-shouldered, his face turned toward the horizon, and there, above the waves, a woman woven from light and water. Golden hair streaming. Arms extended toward the ship.

Diadema.

Then the shore. The man kneeling before the goddess as she touched his forehead, radiance flowing from her palm. Between them, something invisible but palpable, a bond that would echo through centuries.

Night under stars. Hands intertwined, mortal and goddess. And then a woman holding an infant who glowed with the light of deep water.

The First Scaliger

The man, grown old now, sword raised, his three sons beside him, all carrying that divine spark. Behind them, ships. The dynasty's beginning.

Dominating the far wall, a tree: enormous, its crown reaching the sky, its roots descending into ocean depths. On the branches, faces. Generations of them. All who carried the First One's blood.

All who were Diadema's children.

Emile stood there, unable to tear his gaze away.

All his life, he had sought answers. He had tried to understand why this power flowed in their blood, why the scar on his cheek pulsed in time with an invisible heartbeat. Why had the temple ritual changed him?

Now he knew.

Not a curse. Not a chance.

Love.

The goddess had loved a mortal. She had borne his child. She had given her children a piece of herself, not as a burden, but as a gift.

He had carried the weight all his life. Mark had their father's eyes. Sebastian had their mother's smile. But Emile was marked. Scarred. Touched by the goddess. And he had never known if it was a blessing or a curse. Now he knew.

Not a curse. A gift. She had loved their ancestor. She had loved him.

A breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding released. Tears came, unexpected and hot, running down his cheeks. He didn't wipe them away.

Relief. Finally. After all these years.

The scar on his cheek stopped pulsing. It went quiet, as if some question it had carried were finally answered.

Emile sighed deeply, drawing a full breath for the first time in many days.

"Thank you," he whispered into the temple's emptiness. He didn't know to whom he was speaking, Diadema? The first Scaliger? The shadows of his ancestors?

The frescoes dimmed. The runes' light went out.

The temple returned to sleep.

When Emile returned to the fork, he heard voices.

Familiar voices.

He ran down the corridor, his lantern swaying in his hand, casting wild shadows on the walls.

He turned the corner and froze.

Mark and Sebastian.

Emile's throat tightened. He couldn't speak. He just stared.

They stood leaning on each other, alive. Covered in blood, barely standing, but alive.

Thank the Goddesses!

Behind them came several more figures. Visconti, swaying, drenched in gore, leaned on the shoulder of the last guard in black. Two of Emile's men, left behind to guard the mechanism, followed, both wounded but on their feet.

Antonio leaned against the stone, swaying. Blood had soaked through his doublet at the belly. His face was gray.

And Pallavicini's brother.

Emile barely recognized him, the middle brother, the one whose right hand had been hacked off in the chapel. He held his bloody stump, wrapped in rags, pressed to his chest. His skin had taken the color of old wax, his eyes glazed from pain and blood loss. He was supported on both sides; otherwise, he couldn't have walked.

Emile saw his face and knew. Gray skin. Empty stare. An hour, maybe two. No more.

We're carrying a corpse.

He felt guilt for thinking it.

Mark braced himself against the wall with his left hand. His right arm hung oddly, his shoulder wrapped in a crimson-soaked rag. His face was ashen, lips pressed tight from pain. A long cut ran across his cheek, the blood caked into a black crust. His doublet was torn and drenched in gore. A dark stain spread across his back, not abundant, just a graze, a cut that had not gone deep.

Sebastian looked no better. He was covered in gore, his own or someone else's. His left sleeve was torn, revealing a ragged wound on his forearm, hastily bandaged with a strip of cloth. His hair was matted with sweat and dried crimson. His eyes were red, as if the blood vessels had burst from concussion. He blinked often, trying to focus his vision.

Both swayed on their feet, barely holding on.

But they were alive.

"Emile—" Mark breathed. His voice was hoarse, almost soundless.

Sebastian just nodded. He opened his mouth, but no sound emerged. Then he tried again. "The women? The children?"

"Alive. At the river." Emile stepped toward them. "How did you?"

"Later—" Mark cut him off. "Let's go. While we can."

Emile caught Sebastian under the elbow, and his brother hung on him with all his weight. Mark held himself upright but winced with pain at each step.

Visconti followed, supported by the guard. Emile's men held Pallavicini's brother, who barely moved his legs. Antonio walked on his own, but Emile could see the difficulty, the pain in every step.

They moved toward the river. Slowly. Stumbling.

In the catacombs' darkness, their steps echoed off the stone walls. Each footfall was a reminder that they still lived. Still breathed. Still fought.

Behind them, in the palazzo, fire raged. Three hundred years of history turned to ash. The great house of their fathers was being consumed.

But they walked forward. Bloodied. Broken. The pitiful remains of a garrison that had numbered seventy men now numbered seventeen.

The three Scaliger brothers walked at their head. Bloodied. Broken. Supporting each other as they dragged their wounded forward. But moving. Always moving.

The last children of Diadema.

The tunnel widened and led them into a spacious grotto.

One wall had been destroyed, collapsed, or exploded long ago, opening an exit to the river. Water murmured beyond the grotto, black and swift, its surface broken by eddies that caught the moonlight. The smell of damp hung heavy in the air,

mixed with slime and river silt. Moisture beaded on the stone walls, dripping into dark pools at the grotto's edges.

At the dock bobbed three boats, but the survivors needed only one. Women and children from the Scaliger clan huddled together. Eleanor held the twins tight, pressing them to her. Their faces were pale, their eyes wide with fear. A child whimpered. Another stared at nothing, eyes empty with shock.

Several wounded servants and guards sat with them, those who could still walk.

"Faster!" Adriana shouted from the prow of one boat.

"They're coming after us! The door apparently didn't help!"

And indeed, the pursuers' shouts grew closer. The echo in the tunnel amplified the sounds until it seemed the enemies were already here, just around the corner.

Mark looked back and saw torchlight glinting in the tunnel's depths, far away, but approaching.

"Get in the boat!" he ordered. "Emile, Sebastian, you too! Faster!"

The group moved toward the boat. But Antonio stopped at the tunnel entrance. He braced himself against the rock, pale as death, his doublet soaked with blood around the belly. Yet his face had taken on a strange expression of determination and calm, as if he had finally found what he sought.

"Go," he said, removing a small bundle from his shirt. "I'll stay and delay them."

"What?" Mark stared at him, uncomprehending. "Do not talk nonsense, Uncle. We're all leaving together."

Antonio unwrapped the bundle. The brothers saw a glass vial filled with dark liquid, and a fuse already prepared.

"Giuliano and I mined the tunnel," Antonio explained, not looking at them. "He seemed to foresee such an outcome. In my hands is alchemical fire. The first powder charge is right here, before this grotto. The second is before the temple. The third is before the palace entrance. No one will pass after us."

"But you'll die!" Emile exclaimed.

Antonio smiled bitterly. "I am dying anyway," he said.

"Through-and-through belly wound. I drank a horse-sized dose of painkilling solution. Even if I get on the boat, I'll live for a day, maybe two at most. And then I'll die slow and ugly. My boy, I know when the end is the end." He paused, then added quietly, "Besides..." A bitter smile flickered on his lips. "It's my fault what happened. You were right."

Antonio straightened. For a moment, the brothers saw the true head of the House standing before them, proud, fearless, ready to make the final sacrifice to save his family.

"Giuliano wanted..." Antonio coughed. Blood appeared on his lips. "... more power than any man could hold. He made a dirty deal with reality. The Brotherhood." He gripped the wall, his legs nearly giving out. "A collection of adventurers and madmen. They had neither a real military force nor enough supporters. After the inevitable failure..." His voice weakened. "...they would have slaughtered us. All of us."

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. More blood.

"I saw this. I understood this. But I was weak." Another cough, harsher than before. "I feared losing my brother. I feared conflict. I feared making a decision. And instead of stopping him, I let him go further. I hoped somehow it would resolve itself. That maybe it would work out." His breathing grew labored. "And when it was too late, I informed the Consul about everything." He said it flatly, without excuse. "I betrayed my family and my brother, hoping this would save us from the gravest consequences. I committed a lesser evil, as I thought, save us all. And here's how it all ends."

A pause. The brothers looked at him in silence.

"You..." Mark's voice broke. "You betrayed your own brother?"

Antonio looked him in the eyes and did not look away.

"Yes. And it did not help. Now do you understand?" He met Mark's gaze directly.

"You were right, nephew. Weakness is also a choice. And I chose it. Now I am paying the price."

The pursuers' shouts grew louder. The torches came closer. The trampling of many feet echoed through the tunnel.

Emile stepped forward. "Uncle—"

"No." Antonio raised his hand. "You are the family's future. You are the ones who will carry the Scaliger name forward. And I..." He smiled.

"I am just an old fool who finally does something right." He drew flint and steel. "Go. Now."

Mark stood with his fists clenched. A struggle showed on his face. Emile saw his brother's jaw muscles tense, his lips tremble. Then Mark slowly nodded.

"Thank you, Uncle," he said hoarsely. "For everything."

Antonio smiled, sadly but sincerely. "Protect them, Mark. All of them."

Mark turned, grabbed Sebastian and Emile by the hands, and pulled them toward the boat. "Into the boat! Now!"

Emile turned as he ran. The last thing he saw was Uncle Antonio standing at the tunnel entrance, tall and straight, with a vial in one hand and the flint in the other.

The enemies' torches were already visible, twenty or thirty paces away.

Antonio drew the flint. His hands were unsteady, whether from pain or anticipation, Emile could not tell. He struck flint against steel. Once. Twice. A third time. A spark, small and bright, fell on the fuse.

Antonio looked at the brothers one last time. He smiled.

"Swim fast."

The flame ran along the fuse.

The brothers jumped into the boat. Visconti and the last guard pushed off from the dock. Oars struck water. The boat lunged forward, caught by the swift current.

"Row!" Mark shouted. "Faster!"

Emile rowed with all his strength. The oars cut through the water, and the boat glided down the river, rushing away from the grotto.

Twenty strokes.

Thirty.

Fifty.

Emile turned. The grotto was far behind them now, a small dark spot against the cliff face.

And then, the explosion. Not a sound. A sensation. As if the earth itself had shuddered. A flash, blindingly bright, momentarily turning night to day. Orange flame shot from the grotto and struck the sky, fire tongues rising three human heights tall. The roar covered them after a brief delay, deafening, tearing at their eardrums. Stones showered into the water. A wave from the explosion rolled down the river, rocking the boat and nearly capsizing it.

Emile grabbed the gunwale. Beside him, Eleanor pressed the screaming twins to her chest. Adriana held an oar, her jaw set.

A second flash came from deeper in the tunnel. Smaller, but still powerful. The second charge.

Then the third. The earth shook. The cliffs cracked. The tunnel collapsed.

Silence.

Mark stared at the smoke rising from the cliff. Antonio was under those rocks now. What was left of him.

Sebastian's hand gripped the gunwale so hard the wood cracked.

On the far bank of the river, in the shadow of the willows, stood a figure.

Emile saw her first. An old woman, ancient, wrapped in dark rags that seemed to drink the moonlight. She stood motionless at the water's edge, watching the boat pass. Her face was hidden in shadow, but beneath that darkness something smiled, a smile that had nothing to do with kindness. He felt her gaze like a finger tracing his spine. Cold. Patient. Hungry.

The willows around her bent away, as if even the trees feared her touch.

Sebastian saw her too. His hand went to his chest, where the coin hung.

Mark did not see her. Or pretended not to.

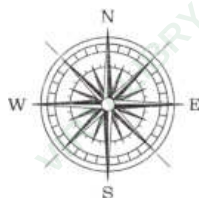
When Emile looked again, the bank was empty. Just willows. Just shadows.

"Row," Mark said.

Behind them, on the cliff face, the Scaliger Palazzo burned. Flames reached the sky, painting the night orange. Their reflection danced on the black water: fire and darkness intertwined, the dying and the escaping, the end and the beginning.

Mark did not look back.

Chapter 17: The Path to Selene



SEBASTIAN

The Galtos River carried them away from Arcadia like a gutter flushing waste. The water was black and thick, ash settling on the surface in a greasy film. The sturdy rowing barge glided across the dark expanse toward the northern suburbs. Oars rose and fell rhythmically in the hands of servants and guards. Though the current carried them forward, they hurried the barge along, rowing deep and often. The creak of oarlocks merged with the groans of the wounded.

Sebastian half lay in the barge's bow. His broad chest heaved unevenly, each breath coming hard. The burns on his forearms, received in the chapel explosion, pulsed with dull, aching pain. Worse was the ringing in his ears, high and continuous, like a bell sounding inside his skull. The world swayed. When he tried to turn his head, a wave of dizziness washed over him, and he barely held back vomit. Bile rose to his throat; he swallowed and squeezed his eyes shut.

Concussion.

After the chapel explosion, something had broken inside, not in the body but deeper. In the head. In balance. He did not tear his gaze from the horizon, fixing on a single point, fearing any sharp movement would flip the world again.

The air did not smell of river freshness but of burnt wool and a sickly-sweet stench, the smell that rose when residential quarters burned together with those who did not escape in time. It had eaten into their clothes, their hair, their skin, entering their lungs with every breath.

The barge moved heavily, overloaded, its draft nearly to the gunwale's edge. Seventeen people, mostly women and children, were all that remained of the family and its defenders.

From his place at the bow, Sebastian watched his eldest brother. Mark stood at the stern, gripping the rail so hard his knuckles went white. His face was the color of old parchment, slick with beads of cold sweat. His jaw was clenched. From the split brow, blood still seeped, running down his cheek, dripping onto his doublet. He did not wipe it. Did not seem to feel it.

Something was wrong with Mark. The way he stood, too rigid, too careful. The way his hand kept slipping from the rail. Sebastian tried to rise, to go to him, but the dizziness hit like a wave, and he sank back.

Mark swayed. Before Sebastian could shout, Emile was there, grabbing their brother's shoulder. "Sit, damn you!"

But Mark gripped the rail again and straightened. His gaze remained fixed backward, where crimson reflections painted the night sky, where their world had died.

"Sit," Adriana commanded without turning. The old woman sat on a supply sack, straight as a pole, gripping her cane. On her black dress, dried brown spatters marked someone else's blood.

"I am fine," Mark began, but even from across the barge, Sebastian could hear how his tongue moved with difficulty, as if swollen.

"You're useless—" Adriana cut him off. "If you fall overboard now, we will not stop to fish you out. Sit."

Mark slid down along the gunwale. Sebastian watched his brother's face go slack, watched the world tilt in Mark's eyes.

Arcadia burned.

Not just the Scaliger Palazzo. The entire city was engulfed in flame. Fire rose from dozens of places. Here and there, new fires flared, like hellish flowers opening their petals one after another. Smoke veiled the stars. Screams carried even here, across water and distance, drawn out, animal, full of horror. Bells tolling. The roar of collapsing buildings. The howl of the mob, drunk on blood and destruction.

The Consortium had released the beast from its cage. The riot that began with the Scaliger Palazzo had spread to other ancient houses, all those that kept old customs, remembered forgotten names, and might hide statuettes of forbidden goddesses in their cellars. The city devoured itself.

Bodies floated on the water. One. Another. A third. Face down, arms spread, slowly rotating in the eddies. The river carried them to the sea, indifferent to tragedy.

A woman in a torn dress floated very close. The fabric spread across the water, her hair scattered like dark seaweed. Pale arms lay spread to the sides. She slowly rotated in an eddy and struck the barge's hull, dully, softly, like a sack of rags.

Sebastian flinched. In his pocket, the silk pouch pulsed warm against his thigh: the coin Adriana had given him. It had been doing that since the palazzo fell, since the fires started. Warmth spreading like a whisper, like something trying to speak. He moved the pouch to hang around his neck, beneath his shirt. Closer felt safer.

One of the rowers, a former groom with a bandaged head, pushed the body away with an oar. The corpse drifted on. The groom bent over the gunwale and vomited straight into the water.

“Row!” someone croaked hoarsely. “Do not stop!”

Emile sat nearby by the gunwale, peering into the darkness. His fingers touched the scar on his cheek. Sebastian had noticed his brother doing that more and more, touching the scar as if it were a wound that would not heal.

By the mast, Liana sat motionless. She held a frozen stillness, as if carved from stone. Only her eyes gleamed in the darkness, reflecting distant fires. Her gaze was detached, turned inward. She seemed not here but somewhere else, inaccessible to others. Sebastian knew that look. He’d seen it in the chapel, when she’d called upon powers that should have stayed sleeping.

In the center of the barge, on a bench, sat Eleanor with the twins pressed against her. Michele and Michelina, thirteen-year-old children, trembled from fear and cold.

“Mama,” Michele suddenly whispered, the boy with his father’s dark eyes. “And Papa... will *Papa* come back? He’ll come for us?”

Sebastian’s chest tightened. He watched Eleanor’s fingers clench on her son’s arm, watched her face begin to crack like thin ice underfoot. Then she took hold of herself. She pressed the boy’s head tighter to her chest so he would not see her eyes.

“He’s always with us,” she whispered. “Always.”

Michele sobbed but did not cry, trying to be brave. Sebastian wanted to go to him, to say something, but what could he say? *Your father is dead. Your home is ash. The world you knew is gone.* So he stayed silent.

Michelina, the twin sister, did not say a word. She sat motionless, staring at a single point. Her lips were pressed tight. Her eyes were wide open but empty. From the moment they had left the palazzo, the girl had not made a sound, as if her voice were stuck somewhere deep inside and could not break free.

Like me after my father died. But it’s much harder for a child.

Eleanor hugged them both tightly, pressing them to her so they would not see the glow of fire behind them. Tears ran down her cheeks, but she wiped them hastily, hiding them from the children.

Federico sat beside her, hunched. His usually calm face now seemed carved from gray stone. He looked at the water but did not see it. In his hands, he squeezed the medallion, the same one he’d kissed before the battle. His lips moved, but no sound came.

By the gunwale lay Visconti, the Secret Order’s magister. The wound in his side was bandaged, but blood seeped through the cloth. His last surviving guard sat nearby, supporting the magister. Both were silent, immersed in their thoughts.

Nearby lay the middle Pallavicini brother, the last man of his family, dying. The stump was roughly bandaged with blood-soaked cloth, but blood still seeped through, slowly, inexorably. His face was waxy from blood loss. His breathing had become shallow, rare. A woman Sebastian did not even know the name of bent over him, whispering something, a prayer or a farewell. He did not answer. His eyes looked nowhere.

Half an hour later, Sebastian watched the breathing stop.

The woman closed his eyelids and crossed his forehead. No one cried. The tears were gone. The body was wrapped in a cloak and lowered overboard. The river accepted it soundlessly, another corpse among hundreds drifting to sea that night.

How many more? Sebastian wondered. *How many more would we lose before this ends?*

Of the seventy who had been in the palazzo that night, only the seventeen who managed to reach this barge were still alive. The rest had died in the vestibule, in the corridors, in the catacombs. Their bodies burned in the palazzo, or the mob trampled them, or they were finished in the darkness. No one knew for sure. Only one thing was certain: no one else had made it out.

Several servants and guards, the few who could still walk, rowed, taking turns at the oars. All were covered in blood, in soot, in battle grime. Their clothes were torn, their faces burned, their hands trembling. Some rowed silently, staring at a single point. Some held back groans from their wounds. But they rowed, because to stop meant to die.

Adriana rose from the sack and walked to the barge's bow, passing Sebastian without a glance. Her black dress was spattered with blood, her gray hair had escaped its knot, but her back remained straight. She held the mast with one hand and leaned on the cane with the other. Her face was pale, but her gaze was firm. She looked forward, where the river's darkness merged with the night sky.

"We'll be pursued," she pronounced without turning. Her voice was hoarse but firm. "I only hope they're too busy with looting now to chase us immediately."

"Let them chase," Emile answered quietly, ice-cold certainty in his voice. "We have a direction."

Sebastian raised his head. His gaze stopped on the twins, on their searching eyes, and something clenched in his chest. *Children. We have to protect the children.*

Mark's voice came from the stern, weak but determined: "The women and children. We managed to save them. The men died... and all who remained in the palazzo..."

"Their sacrifices won't be in vain," Adriana pronounced. Her voice carried across the water. "The House will survive. It's not the first time we've been in exile."

"Where do we go?" Eleanor whispered, looking at the sleeping twins.

“We’ll be declared heretics. They’ll hunt us like rabid dogs...”

“We are Scaligers,” Adriana struck the cane on the deck boards. The sound was sharp, sobering. “We survived when empires fell. We’ll survive now, if you stop whining.”

Sebastian watched the old woman. There was something strange about her, had been since the palazzo, the way she moved, the certainty in her voice. As if she knew things no one should know.

“Once, our house fled like this already,” Adriana began, her voice carrying the rhythm of a storyteller. “From the Old Empire, when it burned in the Cataclysm’s fire. Then we were pursued, too.”

Sebastian found himself leaning forward despite the dizziness. Something inside demanded a connection with the past while the present fell apart and the future drowned in the fog of the unknown.

“Empress Elena, having lost her husband and six sons in the Battle of Arcadia, blamed the Twelve Goddesses for her misfortunes. She summoned Hecate and, in her name, cast the Celestial Gardens and the surrounding lands into the sea. Then the followers of the Goddesses were declared heretics by official decree. Slaughter spread across the country, and the wealthy priestly families became the first target,” Adriana said, looking at the burning horizon. “Then we fled from death for the first time.”

Liana, who until then had sat motionless, suddenly raised her head. Her detached gaze sharpened. “History moves in spirals.”

Adriana nodded. “Then, as now, our house was accused of heresy. Of worshipping the Twelve.”

Sebastian shuddered, his gaze drifting to Liana’s still form by the mast.

Obsession is dangerous in any form. Doesn’t matter what causes it. And how much you love the one who’s obsessed.

He’d seen what the magic cost her. He wondered what it would cost them all.

Dawn slowly painted the sky in pearlescent tones. Pink light broke through the smoke, falling on the water and turning it into molten copper with a bloody tint. The shore outlines emerged more distinctly: willowed shallows, tree silhouettes like shadows rising from fog. Steep clay cliffs, wooden docks of fishing villages. Arcadia’s spires had disappeared from view, but the smoke from the fires still darkened the southern horizon, a black cloud covering a third of the sky.

“We must dock,” Mark said. Sebastian could hear the effort in his brother’s voice. “The wounded need rest. Besides, on the water, we’re too visible. We must assume we’ve been outlawed.”

"There's a village ahead," the gray-bearded rower responded, one of the servants. "Ormel. A small settlement; they live by fishing. A quiet place."

Mark's response came quickly: "We'll dock there. No point sailing further in daylight."

* * *

The village of Ormel nestled in a river bend where a gentle shore formed a natural harbor. Sebastian studied it as they approached, his tactical eye working despite the concussion.

It was an ancient place. He could see that immediately. The original stone foundations of the oldest houses showed masonry techniques no living builder knew. Upon them rose newer structures, squat and thatched, their roofs weighted with river stones against the autumn winds. The houses clustered together like frightened sheep, connected by wooden walkways that kept feet dry when the spring floods came. People had lived here since before the Empire, since before the Cataclysm, since before anyone could remember.

Above the settlement rose the temple tower of the Three-Faced, simple stonework without gilding or marble, but ancient too. Older than the faith it now served. If you looked closely at the foundation stones, Sebastian could see carved symbols that had been chiseled away, half-erased goddesses whose names the villagers had forgotten, but whose protection they still secretly craved.

The fish smell hit his nose, acrid and all-penetrating, a mix of fresh catch, salt brine, and the sharper rot from the offal pits where women scraped guts into wooden buckets. Along the shore, racks of cod hung drying in the morning air, watched over by circling gulls that screamed their endless hunger. Nets hung on weathered poles like giant cobwebs, each marked with small bone charms and colored threads, old protections against drowning, against empty catches, against the river spirits the priests said did not exist but that every fisherman knew were real.

On the doors of the houses, Sebastian noticed carved signs: circles within circles, crude crescent moons, symbols that meant nothing to city folk but everything to those who lived by the water's mercy. One old woman sat on her doorstep, fingers working a fishing net, lips moving in a soundless prayer that definitely was not addressed to Hecate.

They were noticed on approach. Several fishermen dropped their nets and ran toward the village.

The barge had barely touched the shore when people emerged from the morning fog, not welcoming peasants with bread and salt, but men in rough shirts, with

gaffs, spears, and axes. They stood silently, a wall blocking the path to the village: angry, frightened faces.

Sebastian's hand went to his rapier hilt. His body tensed despite his weakness.

Ambush? No, fear. They're afraid of us.

Somewhere behind the houses, dogs tore at their chains, choking on their barking. Children hid behind their mothers' skirts. The women kept their distance, wary.

In the barge, Michelina flinched at a particularly fierce bark and pressed closer to her mother. Eleanor hugged her tighter, not taking her eyes off the shore.

"Away!" the stocky man shouted, stepping forward. In his hands, he gripped a heavy gaff with an iron hook. "Sail on! You're not welcome here!"

Mark stepped onto the shore first. Sebastian watched his brother's legs buckle, watched him force himself to walk straight. He held his sword lowered, without challenge but ready to defend.

"We need help," Mark said. "We have wounded, women, and children. We'll pay."

"We have children, too!" the fisherman with the gaff roared. "News came from the city! Riot there! Slaughter! They're burning sorcerers and heretics, and you look like you're exactly that! If a patrol finds you here, they'll burn the whole village!"

An old man with a gnarled stick stepped forward. His face, carved with wrinkles, was twisted with fear and rage. "Will we eat your gold when they stake us?! Get lost!"

The crowd murmured. Someone picked up a stone. Gaffs bristled. The situation escalated. Another moment, and slaughter would begin.

Sebastian forced himself to stand. The world tilted, steadied, tilted again. He stepped off the barge, nearly falling, and walked toward the old man. His face was pale, his eyes still splashed with the horror of the recent massacre.

"Look at us," he said. The words came hard, each one a battle against the ringing in his skull. "We're not an army. We're shards of a broken house. Women. Children. Wounded who'll die without help." He paused, steadying himself. "If you don't want blood on your hands, let us stay the night. One day. We'll leave at dawn."

The old man surveyed the exhausted fugitives: bloodied, burned, barely standing. His gaze lingered on the women and children in the barge, on Eleanor pressing the twins to her, on the wounded lying in the barge's bottom.

The gaff in his hands trembled. Then it lowered.

"I'm Thomas, Ormel's elder," he said, hesitating, then added carefully, looking at Mark, "The wounded can be sheltered. But not for long. And it's better if few know about you."

"Thank you, Thomas," Mark nodded.

Sebastian exhaled. The world swayed again, and Emile was suddenly there, catching his arm.

"Easy," his brother murmured. "You should not be standing."

"Neither should any of us," Sebastian answered.

Thomas led them to a long, wind-blown shed used for drying nets. No feather beds, just piles of old nets, straw, and several torches set in iron brackets along the walls. The nets hung like a giant web, casting bizarre shadows. The air smelled of fish, wet wood, and salt.

"You'll stay the night here," Thomas said shortly. "Leave in the morning."

Women brought bread and a jug of milk but kept their distance, as if the fugitives were lepers.

Mark collapsed onto a bale of nets. His face had gone gray, sweat pouring down his temples. Sebastian watched his brother and felt ice spread through his chest. Something was very wrong.

Liana approached Mark. Her face was hard, focused. "Undress," she ordered.

"Glass," Liana said quietly. "Stained-glass. Thick. It went deep."

"What?" Sebastian came closer still, ignoring the dizziness.

"A stained-glass fragment. Thick, sharp as a razor. Lodged between the muscles. A regular healer would manage, but we have no time to search." She drew a dagger. "I need to cut. Now."

"Do it," Mark croaked.

Liana heated the dagger over the torch flame. The blade glowed a dull red.

"Hold him," she threw to the brothers. "Tight."

Sebastian pressed down on his brother's shoulders, pinning him to the bale. His own hands trembled, from weakness, from fear, but he held. Emile grabbed Mark's legs. Adriana shoved a rolled cloak between Mark's teeth.

"Don't let go," Liana warned.

She didn't read prayers. She just slashed the hot blade across the inflamed flesh.

Mark screamed into the cloak. His body arched, muscles turning to stone from pain. Sebastian pressed harder, feeling his brother's agony through his hands.

Hold. Just hold.

At the shed's half-open door stood Eleanor, pressing the twins to her. Michele tried to peek.

"What's there? What's happening to Uncle Mark?"

Eleanor turned him to face her. "Don't look. Liana's helping him. Everything will be fine."

Michelina was silent, her face buried in her mother's shoulder, but she flinched at each groan.

From the wound gushed blood, dark, thick, mixed with pus. The inflammation was severe.

Liana plunged her fingers straight into the incision. Blood enveloped her hand to the wrist. She felt the fragment, gripped it carefully, and yanked it out.

The stained glass came out with a squelching sound, thick, sharp, the length of a finger. On it appeared a fragment of a woman's face: closed eyes, fine features. A goddess. Frozen in glass.

Mark went limp for a moment, though blood still flowed from the wound.

Liana pressed her palm against it and closed her eyes.

In that instant, the air in the shed turned icy.

Sebastian felt it like a physical blow: cold spreading from Liana, from the wound, from somewhere deeper. His breath became white vapor. The torches flickered, flames tilting as if caught in an invisible wind. Shadows in the shed's corners lengthened, reaching toward Liana like living things.

Her eyes flashed, not with a human gleam, but with cold, predatory gold.

Liana whispered something: guttural, harsh sounds. Not words. An incantation in a language no living soul knew.

Sebastian watched his cousin's skin begin to gray, forming a network of fine wrinkles, as if life were being drawn from her. Her face grew gaunt. Dark shadows formed under her eyes. From her nose trickled a thin stream of blood.

In his pocket, the coin pulsed hot. Not warm, hot. As if answering the magic, resonating with it.

Golden light flashed under Liana's hand. Sebastian felt warmth spread across Mark's back, alive, pulsing. The bleeding stopped. The wound began to close, slowly but surely, the flesh knitting, the incision sealing.

Liana swayed. Emile caught her before she could fall.

She looked ten years older. Her face was gaunt, black circles rimmed her eyes, and her hands trembled so violently that she dropped the bloody dagger.

"The price is paid," she whispered, wiping blood from her face with a trembling hand. "But next time... next time I may not endure."

She sank onto the straw, breathing heavily. Emile gently covered her with a cloak.

Mark sat leaning back against the bale, pale but alive, his breathing evening out.

He was drenched in sweat, as if he'd been dunked in a river, but the pain had receded. Sebastian handed him water.

"Thank you," Mark croaked, looking at Liana.

She nodded weakly, eyes still closed.

Adriana picked up the stained-glass fragment and turned it in the torchlight. The goddess's face appeared on the glass: fine features, closed eyes, as if sleeping.

"Selene," the old woman whispered. "From our chapel's stained glass."

She carefully wrapped the glass in a rag and hid it in her bosom. Sebastian watched her do it, watched her hands, steady despite her age; watched her eyes, which held something he could not name.

How does she know? How does she always know?

* * *

That night, someone left two old nags and sacks of hardtack at the shed doors. The hint was clear: leave at dawn.

Sebastian sat on a bale, unable to sleep. The stew the women had brought sat heavily in his stomach. His head still rang, quieter now, or maybe he was just getting used to it.

Thomas appeared in the doorway, leaning on his stick. He watched them silently. Warily. He did not enter, but stood at the threshold, as if ready to leave at any moment.

Sebastian's hand went to the silk pouch in his pocket. His fingers touched the coin inside, and he felt the warmth again, stronger now, spreading across his palm like a greeting. It had happened on the barge when the bodies floated past, and again when Liana worked her magic. Each time, the warmth came like a whisper, like something trying to speak.

Without thinking, he pulled out the coin and placed it on the bale's edge, turning it in his fingers.

The silver caught the torchlight. For a moment, the goddess's profile seemed to come alive, eyes opening and closing, lips trembling in a semblance of a smile. Sebastian flinched, but it was just glare: a trick of light on worn silver.

Thomas froze at the threshold.

His eyes widened. His breath caught. He slowly entered the shed, coming closer without tearing his gaze from the coin.

"Where..." His voice broke. "Where did you get this?"

Sebastian raised his gaze, surprised by such a reaction. When Thomas spoke, the ringing in his ears intensified, and he winced, pressing his fingers to his temples.

"A gift. From our relative. Why?"

Thomas slowly dropped to his knees before the bale. He extended his hand but did not dare touch the coin. He just looked, as if enchanted.

"This... this is Selene," he swallowed, tears appearing in his eyes. "Goddess of the moon and mysteries. Such coins were minted in the Old Empire, before the Cataclysm. Almost none remain. They are very important."

He raised his head and looked at Sebastian with new eyes, not wary anymore, but reverent.

"You... you're from those who remember?"

Emile leaned forward from where he sat. "You know about Selene? About the Twelve?"

Thomas surveyed the shed, as if checking for strangers. Then he carefully drew from his belt, from beneath his shirt, a small figurine wrapped in a rag, clay, crudely molded, a woman with a moon above her head.

"Here, in the villages, we remember," he said quietly, almost in a whisper. "We pray secretly. We hide our goddesses. Because for just keeping one of these... the bonfire."

He placed the figurine next to the coin on the bale's edge.

"Selene. We pray to her when children sicken, when drought ruins crops, when the fish don't come to the nets. My grandmother prayed to her, and her mother too. I thought almost none like us remained." He looked at Sebastian hopefully. "But you... You keep the faith. You're from an ancient house."

Sebastian felt the weight of the old man's hope pressing down on him. Mark and Emile were watching, waiting for him to answer.

"Yes," he said slowly. "We keep the memory. And we're from an ancient house."

Thomas closed his eyes, and tears rolled down his cheeks. "Then not all is lost. Then someone still remembers."

Mark leaned forward. "Tell us what you know about the goddesses."

Thomas sat nearby, his voice dropping. "I know only what I heard from the elders. Long ago, before the Cataclysm, the Twelve Sisters ruled together. Each had her own temple, her own priestesses. People came to them for help. Wars were rare then. Harvests are abundant."

He lifted his eyes. "But then came Hecate, the Three-Faced. She said there were too many goddesses, that the world needed a single law. War began. The continent

split. The Sisters lost. Their temples were destroyed, their priestesses killed. And they themselves... went to sleep. For without faith, goddesses weaken."

"And what if they wake?" Emile asked.

Thomas regarded him for a long moment. "Then a new war begins. Because Hecate will not surrender her power." He hesitated. "But we... we pray for this. We hold hope."

Mark's voice came from behind Sebastian: "Thomas, we must tell you the truth. We are Scaligers. An ancient house, one of the Republic's founders."

The old man flinched. "Scaligers..." he whispered. "I've heard that name. My grandfather told..."

A heavy silence hung in the air.

"Yes," Mark said simply. "It's true. We were accused of heresy. They tried to exterminate us. We're the ones who survived."

Thomas covered his face with his hands, his shoulders shaking.

"Lord..." he whispered. "Then it's begun. The persecutions. Like the old times."

Emile stood and approached the crack in the shed wall where light seeped through. "Yes. It's begun. The Consortium has decided to destroy all who remember the old ways."

Thomas raised his head. "You can't stay here long. Patrols go along the river. They'll search for you..." He paused. "There's another way. Through the mountains. Harder, but safer. In the Erenor Mountains, there are many hidden paths. The Republic's soldiers don't go there."

At that moment, the door opened, and Adriana entered. She leaned on her cane, but her back was straight. Sebastian watched her, the way she moved, the certainty in her step. She didn't walk like an old woman. She walked like a queen.

"Through the mountains," she repeated, agreement ringing in her voice. "Yes. That's the right path."

Mark frowned. "Grandmother, the wounded won't survive a mountain crossing."

"The wounded will stay here, under the care of Ormel's good people. And we, those who can walk, will go to the mountains."

"But why?" Sebastian asked. "Just to escape pursuit?"

Adriana looked at the coin still lying on the bale. Her eyes lingered on Selene's profile, and something flickered in them: recognition? Longing?

"No. Not just that..." She hesitated. "In the Erenor Mountains, there's a place, a valley hidden from ordinary eyes. And in that valley, an ancient temple."

Thomas flinched. "You know about Selene's temple?"

He paused, then added quietly, "Legends speak of a temple in the mountains. The elders say it's hidden from ordinary eyes. No one knows where exactly. They say only those in whom ancient blood flows can find the way."

"I know," Adriana nodded. "And we must go there. Before leaving the Republic forever."

"Why?" Mark asked.

Adriana smiled, and the smile was sad. "Because we need a blessing. Otherwise, we'll remain a handful of fugitives who'll be caught sooner or later."

Sebastian turned the coin in his fingers. It pulsed warm, as if agreeing.

Then Emile nodded. "Then we go to the mountains."

Visconti waited at the wharf, leaning on a post. The wound in his side had bled through the bandage, and his face was pale.

Sebastian watched the magister from a distance. The man was dying. Any fool could see it. Yet he stood straight, jaw set, eyes clear.

"We're leaving at dawn," Visconti said without preamble when Mark approached. "I must return to the capital. Try to stop the slaughter."

"You're wounded," Mark frowned. "You're riding to your death."

Visconti smiled bitterly. "We're all already corpses, Scaliger. The only question is how we'll look at the funeral."

He straightened, overcoming the pain. "Survive. And return."

Mark nodded, understanding. "Thomas," he addressed the elder, "we need two wagons for the magister. We'll pay."

"For the Twelve's sake," Thomas shook his head, "we'll give all that's needed. Free."

"No," Mark said firmly. He unfastened his purse and poured out gold coins.

"You're already risking enough. This is for the wagons, and for the families who take in the wounded."

Thomas took the coins and bowed low.

An hour later, two wagons were ready. Visconti and his guard sat on the benches.

"Protect the brothers," the magister said, gripping Mark's hand.

"You're the Republic's future."

Sebastian watched the exchange. *The Republic's future*. The words felt hollow. What Republic? What future?

"And you, don't let the Consortium destroy it," Mark answered.

The wagons moved out. Visconti raised a hand in farewell.

Sebastian watched them until the wagons disappeared around the road's bend.

"He won't return," Emile said quietly beside him.

Mark didn't answer. He just continued looking at the empty road.

"Too stubborn to die," Mark finally said, though his voice sounded uncertain.

Aren't we all,

* * *

In the morning, Ormel's inhabitants came out to see the departing. Women brought fresh bread, cheese, and dried fish. Men prepared two old horses for the baggage. Children shyly offered apples.

Sebastian took an apple from a girl no older than Michelina. She looked up at him with wide eyes, curious, not afraid. He tried to smile. It felt wrong on his face.

"Thank you," he said.

She ran back to her mother, giggling.

Eleanor, with the twins, the wounded, and part of the servants, all stayed in the village. Sebastian watched her hug Mark, watched her whisper something, watched the tears gleam in her eyes.

"Return. For them," she said, looking at the children. "They have no one else."

"We'll return," Mark promised.

Will we? Sebastian wondered. *Can we?*

Thomas stood on the shore, leaning on his stick. When Mark came to say goodbye, the old man bowed low.

"May the goddesses keep you, lord. And may your house rise from its ashes."

Mark squeezed the old man's shoulder. "Thank you, Thomas. For everything."

The detachment moved out along the river first, then turned north toward the mountains. Sebastian looked back one last time and saw Ormel's inhabitants still standing on the shore, watching them go. The old woman remained at her doorstep, still working her net, still moving her lips in prayer.

In these simple people, in their secret faith, in their hope, Sebastian felt for the first time in many days something more than just the desire to survive.

He felt purpose.

* * *

The mountain path became hell.

For three days, they climbed rocky scree, avoiding the roads. Rain lashed them from the second day, cold, merciless, piercing to the bones. Sebastian's clothes were soaked through, clinging to his skin like a second layer of ice. By the evening of the third day, the rain had changed to an icy wind that cut their faces like knives.

Food was not enough. The hardtack went soggy, and the fish ran out on the second day. They drank water from streams, icy water that clenched their teeth.

The horses died on the second day. Sebastian watched them go. The old nags could not bear the steep climb. One broke its leg on a rocky path; the second collapsed from exhaustion. They had to carry all they could and leave the rest. The baggage went onto their own backs.

Mark walked in a half-delirious state. The wound had closed, but the weakness was monstrous. Liana's magic had sealed the flesh but had not returned his strength. By the end of the second day, he could no longer walk by himself.

On a particularly steep climb, Mark sank onto a stone. Sebastian saw his brother's legs give out, saw him try to rise and fail.

"Rest," Sebastian said as he approached. "I'll take your pack."

"You barely stand yourself after the concussion?" Emile cut in, appearing at Sebastian's shoulder. "Let me."

"I'll manage!" Anger sharpened Sebastian's voice. He was thinking of Michelina's empty eyes, of how Mark had always carried others, and now it was their turn.

"Enough," Mark said hoarsely, raising his head. His eyes were glassy with exhaustion. "Take turns. Like before."

The brothers fell silent. Sebastian helped Mark rise, offering his shoulder. Mark leaned on him, heavier than Sebastian expected. Emile took the baggage.

So they walked, taking turns, dragging the elder brother on the steepest sections, offering a shoulder, hauling by hand. Each step was hard.

Cold pierced to the bones. Each step was a battle. Each rest a small victory.

They moved slowly, making frequent stops. Sebastian sank deeper into silence, his head still ringing, thoughts circling like vultures.

On the second day, the path led them along a steep slope. Below, small stones crumbled, rolling down into the abyss. Sebastian walked ahead, not yet recovered from the concussion. When he stepped on a flat stone, it suddenly shifted, a landslide beginning beneath his feet.

Sebastian jerked back, but dizziness overtook him, and the world swayed. He lost his balance. The edge rushed toward him.

Mark's hand grabbed his shoulder, yanking him back from the precipice. The stone crashed down, dragging a dozen others with it. The echo resounded long in the gorge.

"Devil," Sebastian breathed, leaning against the cliff. His heart pounded. His knees trembled. The abyss yawned below, patient and hungry.

"Careful," Mark said quietly, not releasing his brother. Despite his weakness, his grip was iron. "I won't lose you here. Not after everything."

Sebastian nodded, not trusting his voice.

Later that day, when the rain momentarily stopped, they passed an ancient stone idol. It towered at the path's edge, almost the height of a man, covered in moss and lichen. The face was worn by time and weather, but its shape could still be guessed: a woman with arms raised to the sky. Her fingers were folded in a strange gesture, a blessing or a plea.

Liana stopped. She approached the idol and carefully touched the cold stone.

Sebastian watched her flinch and pull her hand back, then touch it again. Her face shifted, wonder, recognition, something like hope.

"What's there?" Emile called.

"A sign," Liana answered quietly, not turning. "We're on the right path."

Sebastian stepped forward and touched the stone himself. It was warm, warmth coming from within, as if a fire burned in the stone's heart. The coin against his chest pulsed in answer.

They moved on, but Sebastian kept looking back at the stone figure for a long time, until the fog hid it from view.

* * *

On the third night, as they huddled in a shallow cave, Sebastian couldn't sleep.

The coin in his pouch pulsed warm against his chest. Outside, the wind howled between the peaks, and in that howling, he thought he heard something else, a whisper. A laugh. Three voices speaking as one.

My night approaches.

He sat up sharply, hand going to his dagger. Emile stirred beside him.

"What is it?"

"Nothing," Sebastian lied. "Wind."

But he didn't sleep again that night. And when he looked out at the mountain darkness, he could have sworn he saw a shadow move against the rocks, tall, wrong, with too many faces turned toward them.

Hecate was watching.

The cold that touched him wasn't the mountain wind. It was deeper, older, the same presence he'd felt in the chapel when she appeared through Liana's ritual, the same blind, white eyes.

Sebastian's hand went to the coin. The warmth flared, pushing back the cold, and for a moment, the hostile presence retreated.

But it didn't leave. It waited.

* * *

On the fourth day, as the sun slanted toward sunset, they reached the foot of the pass. A narrow path wound between sheer cliffs, vanishing into the fog. Even in the summer heat, patches of snow lay stubbornly here.

"We can't go further with the packs," Mark said. His voice had gained strength; the others had helped. "It's too narrow."

"We'll leave camp here," Adriana pronounced. "The valley has caves. Beyond this, only those whom the goddesses must see will go."

Mark frowned. "You know about this place?"

"I've known it for a long time, nephew. A very long time." A strange note lingered in the old woman's voice, ancient, weary, knowing. "But the time came only now."

They made camp in a crevice, sheltered from the wind. Federico and several servants remained behind to guard it.

At first light, a small group began to climb: Mark, Sebastian, Emile, Liana, and Adriana. The path twisted between cliffs, now rising almost vertically, now dipping into narrow gorges. The air thinned, and Sebastian's breathing grew heavy. The ringing in his ears returned, fainter, but persistent.

Closer to noon, they entered a narrow gorge.

Here reigned an unnatural silence.

No birds. No wind. No stone rustled underfoot.

Only the beat of their own hearts and their hoarse breathing.

The cliffs hung overhead, closing the sky to a narrow slit. Light barely broke through. Shadows lay thick, almost tangible.

Sebastian looked around. Gooseflesh prickled across his skin. Something here was wrong, something ancient, lurking in the stone. And beneath that ancient presence, he felt another gaze. Hostile. Hungry. The same presence he'd sensed on the river when the woman's body struck the hull. The same cold that had touched him in the chapel.

She's still watching. Even here. Even in Selene's domain.

"Feel it?" Emile whispered beside him.

Sebastian nodded. He felt as if they'd crossed an invisible boundary, entered a place where the laws of the ordinary world didn't apply.

But he felt something else too. A contest. Two powers, ancient and vast, circling each other like wolves. The warmth from his coin flared suddenly, pushing back the cold, and for a moment, the hostile presence retreated.

Liana stopped and closed her eyes, listening. "We're close," she whispered. "And we're not alone. Something doesn't want us here."

"Hecate," Sebastian said flatly. "She followed us."

Adriana's cane struck the stone sharply. "She can watch," the old woman said, her voice carrying something that hadn't been there before: power, ancient and cold. "But she cannot enter. Not here. Not yet."

Sebastian looked at his grandmother. For a moment, just a moment, he thought he saw something else beneath her wrinkled face. Something ageless. Something terrible.

Then the moment passed, and she was just an old woman with a cane.

The gorge led them to a narrow passage between two cliffs. At the entrance, a figure waited.

Tall and thin, with long gray hair and a beard, he leaned on a staff of dark wood. His clothes were simple, a rough cassock, leather sandals, but in his eyes shone such depth that Sebastian's hand went to his sword.

After everything, the betrayals, the slaughter, the shadows watching from darkness, he was not ready to trust anyone.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "How do you know we'd come?"

The stranger did not flinch. He smiled instead, a sad smile, old as the mountains themselves.

"I waited for you," the stranger said. His voice was surprisingly young. "They call me the Hermit in these parts, though I've borne other names."

"You know who we are?" Emile asked.

"I know. The last of an ancient house, bearers of old blood." The Hermit bowed his head. "I have served the goddesses since they went to their long sleep. I guard the paths to their sanctuaries."

"Served them how?" Mark stepped forward, positioning himself between the stranger and his family. "For three hundred years? No man lives that long."

The Hermit's eyes met Adriana's. Something passed between them, recognition, acknowledgment, secrets shared across centuries.

Sebastian saw it. He filed it away.

"No man does," the Hermit agreed. "But I never claimed to be merely a man."

"Are we worthy?" Sebastian asked, still not releasing his rapier.

The Hermit looked at him, looked through him, into something deeper. Sebastian felt the gaze like a physical touch, probing, weighing.

"That is not for me to decide. The goddesses themselves will decide that. I only show the way." He turned and entered the narrow passage.

The Scaligers exchanged glances. Adriana nodded once and followed.

Sebastian hesitated. Every instinct screamed danger. But the coin against his chest pulsed warm, steady, trusting. A guide. Or a trap.

He followed.

The passage led into a wide valley, sheltered by high cliffs.

Sebastian felt the change before he saw it. The cold that had clung to his bones lifted like a veil. The air grew warm, sweet with the scent of flowers instead of rot and ash. His legs, which had screamed with each step for three days, suddenly felt light. The ringing in his ears, his constant companion since the explosion, faded to silence.

He took a deep breath, and for the first time since the palazzo fell, it did not hurt.

Here reigned an amazing silence. No birds were heard, no wind, no streams. Only the soft grass rustled beneath their feet. The valley was covered with white, blue, and golden flowers, growing so thick that the earth was almost invisible.

In the valley's center rose a hill, and on the hill stood the ruins of an ancient temple.

Marble columns rose upward; many had collapsed, but those still standing struck Sebastian with their grandeur. On the capitals were carvings: moon phases from new moon to full, star patterns, and women's faces with closed eyes, as if sleeping. Grapevine entwined the column bases, and flowers broke through between cracks in the marble. Life devoured the stone, but the grandeur remained.

The wall remained adorned with carved bas-reliefs. Steps led to the ruined portico, each eaten by time. All was overgrown with moss, yet the temple still preserved the aura of a sacred place, even in ruins: silence, an invisible boundary between worlds.

"The Temple of Selene," Liana whispered reverently. "Goddess of the moon and mysteries. Keeper of knowledge, dreams, and prophecies."

"Here sleeps her power," the Hermit confirmed. "But she awakens. As other sisters awaken."

He stopped at the foot of the hill and thrust his staff into the ground.

"Further, you will go one by one. Each on their own path. Each will meet what they must meet. And each will make a choice."

"What choice?" Mark asked.

"Accept the goddesses' gift or refuse. Become more than human or remain yourself." The Hermit looked at them with compassion. "This is not an easy choice. And the price is high."

He pointed to the path leading to the temple. "When you're ready, go. But remember: each enters alone. And each leaves... changed."

Sebastian looked at his brothers. At Liana. At Adriana, who stood apart, watching with eyes that held centuries.

The coin pulsed against his chest. Warm. Waiting.

Mark was the first to step onto the path. Sebastian watched his eldest brother climb, watched his back straighten, watched his steps grow steadier. With each step, the air became denser. Sounds muffled. Light shifted, softer now, almost ghostly.

When Mark reached the portico, fog rose from the ground, enveloping the ruins in a white shroud. He vanished from view.

"Now me," Sebastian said.

He began to climb. The path felt longer than it looked, each step taking him further from the world he knew. The fog thickened around him, cold and alive. The coin burned against his chest.

What waits at the top?

What choice?

But his feet kept moving. Toward the temple. Toward Selene. Toward whatever lay beyond.

The fog swallowed him whole.

* * *

ADRIANA

She watched the last of them disappear into the white shroud, Liana, her dark hair swallowed by fog like a shadow drowning in milk.

The Hermit stood beside her. They were alone now.

"You can release the mask," the Hermit said. "There are no mortal eyes here."

Adriana closed her eyes.

And the world began to die.

The flowers closest to her feet blackened, curling inward like fingers of a corpse. The color drained outward in a perfect circle of decay. The temperature did not drop; *it fled*, warmth itself escaping from what was awakening.

When Adriana opened her eyes, they were wounds in reality: two vertical slits of liquid gold that held no iris, no pupil, only depth that went down past the skull, past the mountain, into something human geometry could not contain.

Her spine *unfolded*, vertebra by vertebra, as if something vast had been compressed into that hunched frame for three centuries. Her shadow grew impossible, too long, too many limbs, twitching toward angles that should not exist. The cane in her hand screamed, metal twisting, wood blackening, becoming a spear of volcanic glass and cold iron.

Diadema stood where Adriana had been. Beautiful in the way a wildfire is beautiful. In the way a plague ship on the horizon is beautiful.

Goddess of war. Of blood. Of fire and iron and the silence after slaughter.

Beside her, the Hermit changed gently, beard becoming midnight hair, rough cassock becoming robes of silk and starlight. Ishtar smiled, and her smile held all the tenderness that Diadema's transformation had lacked.

"Three hundred years." Diadema's voice was the crackle of flames, the crunch of bone, the last breath of dying kings. "Three hundred years I watched them pray to *her*."

"We all watched, sister."

"No." The golden wounds blazed. "While Selene hid from reality in these mountains, and you amused yourself at carnivals and in bedchambers, I was *dying*. Body after body. Life after life. Reborn into my own bloodline, watching it weaken with each generation. Watching the fire dim."

She raised her wrong hand and pressed it against her chest.

"We are shadows, Ishtar. Shadows of what we were. Hecate did not just defeat us, she devoured us. Stole our natures. Our domains. Our *essence*." Her voice cracked like breaking ice. "I was WAR. The roar of battle, the thunder of cavalry,

the glory and the slaughter. Now I am... scraps. Embers. A goddess of war who cannot even lift a sword without this rotting flesh giving out."

The circle of dead flowers had grown to ten paces.

"Selene kept her mysteries," Ishtar said quietly. "I kept fragments of love. You kept, "

"Rage." Diadema's laugh was bitter. "I kept rage. The only part of war that doesn't require strength." She turned toward the temple.

"Three sisters. Three shadows. Three beggars hoping children will return what a goddess stole." Her voice dropped. "And nine more, delirious, chained, without strength, without hope. Scattered across the world, lost in forgetting."

"And then these four were born," Ishtar said quietly. "And others like them, across the world."

"Yes." Something shifted in Diadema's voice. "The blood awakens. I don't know why, fate, chance, the universe's last joke. But they are... *different*. All of them."

"Blood is not enough," Ishtar said, her tone careful. "We had blood. We had temples. Millions who prayed. And still she broke us."

"Which is why they need more than blood." Diadema turned toward the temple.

"The youngest. Emile. What did you do to him?"

"Made him irresistible." A slow smile curved Ishtar's lips, sly and ancient.

Diadema's golden wounds narrowed. "What did you do?"

"What I do best." The smile widened. "Love is my domain, sister. Even the scraps Hecate left me, I wove what threads I could: dreams, longings, the ache of three centuries alone." She looked toward the temple. "When Selene sees him, she will want. And wanting will pull her back. Into this world. Into flesh. Into the war."

"You're playing with fire."

"I'm playing with love. Far more dangerous." Ishtar's smile faded.

"But it will work. It must. She has hidden too long. And loneliness makes monsters of us all."

"You think she'll harm him?"

"I think she'll want him. In ways mortals were not made to be wanted."

Diadema was silent for a long moment. When she spoke, her voice was colder than the mountain wind.

"You were always the most dangerous of us, Ishtar. Not me with my armies. Not Selene with her mysteries. You." The golden wounds were fixed on her sister.

"Nothing can resist your power. Nothing. Not mortals, not gods, not fate itself."

Ishtar's smile didn't waver.

"If you ever think to do something like this to me," Diadema's wrong hand tightened on her spear. "Hecate will seem like your dearest childhood friend compared to what I'll do."

Ishtar laughed, a sound like silver bells, like lovers' whispers, like the last heartbeat before surrender. Then the laughter faded, and her eyes grew serious.

"Sister. I don't *create* anything. I only... accelerate. Amplify. What would have happened anyway, given time?" She looked toward the temple. "Selene would have wanted him eventually. Emile would have been drawn to her light. I simply made sure it happens now, when we need it. When the world needs it."

"How convenient."

"How necessary." Ishtar's voice hardened. "We don't have centuries to wait for fate to unfold naturally. We have months. Maybe weeks. So yes, I pulled the threads tighter. I wove the longing deeper. But the thread was already there. I didn't spin it from nothing."

Silence. Then Diadema turned to the east.

Beyond the mountains, the sky was darkening, not with clouds, but with *presence*. A stain spreading across the heavens. And in that darkness, three shapes that might have been faces smiled with too many teeth.

"The die is cast," Diadema said, her voice carrying across the valley like a declaration of war. "If Selene does not strengthen them, we have lost. Not this battle. Not this war. *Everything*. The Twelve will fade. Hecate will reign alone. And the world will forget there was ever anything but darkness." She paused. "And then the world will die."

"And if that happens?"

Diadema's shadow stretched across the valley, a thing of wings and claws and crowned heads.

"Then I go to war. One last time. Against a goddess who commands millions. Against the faith of an empire." She turned to her sister.

"But I would rather not do it alone."

Ishtar took her hand, starlight against volcanic glass.

"You won't. Whatever comes."

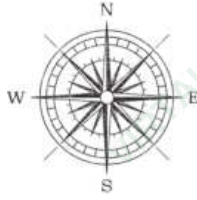
They stood together as night fell, two goddesses in shapes that hurt to perceive, watching the temple where mortal children faced immortal trials.

Diadema smiled, and her smile was terrible.

Soon.

And in the darkness beyond the mountains, three faces smiled back.

Chapter 18: Selene's Gifts



MARK

He stepped across the ruined portico's threshold, expecting to see an inner courtyard overgrown with weeds.

Instead, the world beneath his feet snapped and remade itself.

No fog. Only clarity. Absolute, eye-cutting clarity. Mark stood on an endless plain paved with tiles of black-and-white ice. The sky overhead was the color of polished steel: no sun, no clouds, only a flat, cold light that cast no shadows.

The cold hit him like a wall. Not the mountain cold he'd endured for days. This was deeper, older. The cold of tombs. The cold of stars dying in the void. It seeped through his boots, climbed his legs, and settled into his bones. His breath came out in white plumes that crystallized and fell, tinkling, to the ice.

The air was sterile. It smelled of nothing, neither rot nor life. Only the faint metallic tang of frozen iron.

In the distance, as far as the eye could see, stood figures. Thousands. Tens of thousands. Soldiers frozen mid-attack, swords raised, mouths open in silent war cries. Riders on rearing horses, lances couched for charges that would never come. Women shielding children with their bodies, faces twisted in the final moments of desperate protection. All of them were ice statues, perfect, beautiful, terrible.

"Perfect order," said a woman's voice. Dry, emotionless, like the sound of an icicle snapping.

Mark turned. She sat upon a high throne of transparent quartz, ten paces tall, carved with equations and star charts. More statue than woman. Her skin was white as marble; her hair, silver threads woven into an intricate crown, caught no light. Her eyes were two shards of mirror, reflecting him back at himself, smaller, insignificant, a piece on an infinite board.

"Chaos is life," she said without parting her lips. The voice sounded directly in Mark's head, bypassing his ears entirely. "Life is pain, error, betrayal, filth. Order is death. Or control." The mirror eyes blinked once, slowly. "Why are you here, Mark Scaliger?"

"To reclaim my house," Mark answered. Steam escaped from his mouth with each word. "To protect those who remain."

"Protect..." The word echoed across the ice plain, multiplying. "To protect a flock, the shepherd must slaughter wolves. And sometimes, sick sheep. Are you ready for the mathematics of blood?"

She raised her hand. The ice field trembled. A crack split the air.

And Mark was no longer on the plane.

He stood on the walls of Ragusa. The assault raged below. Scaling ladders rose like spider legs against the stone. Men screamed, died, fell. And he watched himself, older and harder, ordering the trading quarter burned to stop the attackers. He heard the screams of those trapped inside. He smelled the burning flesh. He saw the numbers in his head: two thousand dead to save the entire city.

The vision shifted. He stood in the palazzo's great hall, ordering the rear guard to hold the vestibule, ordering them to die so the women and children could escape. He saw Antonio's face: not accusing, just accepting. The mathematics of sacrifice.

Another shift. A battlefield he didn't recognize. Bodies piled like cordwood. And he walked among them, counting, calculating, feeling nothing, a general surveying acceptable losses.

Mark felt no horror. Only a cold understanding of necessity.

"Emotion is a commander's weakness," Selene's voice rang out across the visions. "Regret slows the hand. Pity dulls the blade. Love clouds judgment. I can take that burden from you."

The visions dissolved. Mark stood before the throne again.

"I will give you the Gift of the Strategist," Selene continued. "You will see the world as this board." She gestured at the frozen figures.

"You will know your enemy's moves before he makes them. You will never hesitate. Never doubt. Never fail because your heart betrayed your mind."

"And the price?" Mark asked.

Selene descended from her throne. Each step rang like a bell on the ice. She stopped before him, taller, colder, terrible in her perfection.

"You will no longer taste wine or feel the warmth of a woman's skin. Joy will become a mere chemical reaction, noted and dismissed. Grief will be just another variable in an equation." Her mirror eyes held his reflection, tiny and trapped.

"You will become a great leader, Mark. But you will cease to be human. At the end of the road, you will be either a savior or a tyrant. The difference lies only in who writes the history."

Mark looked at the ice figures. He walked among them now, recognizing faces.

Emile, frozen mid-laugh at some joke Mark could not remember. Sebastian, his face twisted with the rage of battle. Liana, eyes closed, hands raised in spellcasting.

If he remained human, he might err.

And they would die.

As a piece on the board, they might live.

He stopped before a figure he hadn't noticed before: a woman with his mother's face, reaching toward him, mouth open in a word he couldn't hear. He tried to remember her voice, the sound of her laughter, the way she used to sing to him when fevers kept him awake.

He couldn't. The memories were already fading, replaced by tactical assessments and probability matrices.

What does it matter? She's dead. They're all dead. Only the living matter. Only victory matters.

A cold voice whispered in his head.

The faces of murdered kin flashed before his eyes: Father with a pierced chest, blood bubbling from his lips; Uncle Antonio engulfed in flame, still fighting; cousins hacked down in the palazzo; Michele and Michelina's father, slain that night.

Sebastian and Emile were in danger. Liana was bloodied, wounded, and spending her life force to save him.

Mark clenched his fists until his nails drew blood. The pain was distant, already fading.

"If I refuse?" he asked.

"Then you remain yourself. Capable of love. Capable of error. Capable of watching everyone you care about die because you hesitated at the wrong moment." Selene's voice held no judgment. "The choice is yours, Mark Scaliger. It always was."

He thought of the twins, Michele and Michelina, waiting in Ormel, trusting their uncles to return. He thought of Eleanor's tears. Of Sebastian's fierce protectiveness. Of Emile's quiet brilliance.

He thought of how many would die if he failed.

"I accept," he said.

Selene did not smile. She simply nodded, and an icy wind passed through him, not around him, but *through* him, blowing everything unnecessary from his soul.

Love. Fear. Doubt. Warmth. Gone. Scattered like dead leaves. What remained was crystalline, cold, and of perfect clarity.

Mark collapsed to his knees. Steam escaped from his mouth, though he no longer felt cold. He felt nothing at all, only crystal clarity. The world became a chessboard: pieces, moves, probabilities, acceptable losses.

He rose. Looked at his hands. They seemed the same. But he felt different. Hollow. Clear.

And understood: something inside had frozen forever.

He did not mourn it. He could not.

SEBASTIAN

Sebastian did not enter the temple. He fell into it.

The smell hit first: thick, coppery, sickly-sweet. The smell of a slaughterhouse on a hot day, of Ragusa's aftermath when they'd spent three days burning bodies, of the palazzo vestibule choked with the dead.

The darkness was red. Not black, but red, as if the air itself were bleeding.

Something squelched beneath his boots.

He stood ankle-deep in blood. This was no vision: it was reality, dense and viscous, warm against his skin. Around him lay mountains of corpses, torn apart, hacked to pieces, ripped by bare hands. The Imperial Paladins of Hecate clad in black armor. Mercenaries in Cornaro's colors. Republican guards. Men he'd killed. Men he'd wanted to kill. Men who'd haunted his dreams since Ragusa.

And among them stood himself.

The Double turned. An exact copy of Sebastian, but his face was twisted with ecstasy, with savage joy. He was so thickly covered in blood that he looked flayed, muscles glistening in the red light. In his hands, he held two heavy axes, the kind used for executions.

"Well, hello, coward," the Double growled. His voice was Sebastian's, but rougher, rawer. "Come to see what you're capable of when you drop the reins?"

Sebastian reached for his rapier. The scabbard was empty.

"Who are you?"

"I'm you." The Double stepped closer, leaving bloody footprints.

"The you who doesn't whine about morality. The you who doesn't lie awake at night feeling guilty. The you who *wants* to kill." He hurled one axe at Sebastian. The weapon was heavy, slick with blood. The handle settled into his palm as if it were made for him.

Because it was.

“Take it!” the Double roared and charged.

No blow followed. Only an explosion of pain. The Double slammed into him bodily, knocking him down. They rolled through the bloody mire, the hot liquid splashing into Sebastian’s mouth, eyes, and nose. He fought not for his life but for his own shadow. The Double was stronger. Faster. More savage. He punched, bit, and tore skin.

“Admit it!” he screamed, pressing Sebastian’s face into the filth. Blood filled his mouth. The copper taste made him gag. “You love this! You love the crunch of bone! Love the power! Love being the one who decides who lives and dies!”

Sebastian felt a hot wave rising inside. Not fear, but rage. Black, blind rage. The desire not just to win but to destroy. To tear this grinning creature to pieces. To show him what real violence looked like.

He caught the Double’s arm, wrenched it with a crack. Headbutted his nose. Blood sprayed, hot and salty, indistinguishable from the sea they wallowed in. Sebastian straddled his opponent. Raised the axe.

The Double laughed, spitting teeth. “Yes! Do it! Become me!”

The blade froze a hair from the throat.

Sebastian breathed raggedly, wheezing. His heart hammered against his ribs, demanding the strike. His body sang with adrenaline. Killing would be so sweet. So easy. So *right*.

He remembered Ragusa and Hogberg, Villa Nogarola, and the road to Arcadia, the slaughter in the palazzo. The first death horrified him, the second less so, and starting from the third, under Beatrice’s approving gaze, killing suddenly became simple and clear. If enemies killed his loved ones, then he must kill enemies in return. Burn their homes and families. Drown them in blood. It was necessary. That’s what you do with threats...

But he remembered his first fatal thrust again, the dreams afterward. The hands reaching up from bloody water.

He remembered Michelina’s empty eyes on the barge. The silence of a child who’d seen too much death.

“No,” he breathed.

“You’re weak!” the Double spat.

“I am a man,” Sebastian said, and unclenched his fingers. The axe dropped into the mud with a wet thunk.

He knelt there, trembling. Sweat poured down his face, mingling with the blood. His hands shook so badly he couldn’t have gripped the axe again if he’d wanted

to. His heartbeat thundered in his ears, slowly subsiding. Breath by breath. Second by second.

He had not become the beast.

The red morass collapsed like a burst bubble. Sebastian knelt on dry stone, clean and cool. His clothes were unstained. His hands were empty.

Before him, leaning on a long spear, stood a woman in armor of tarnished bronze. A Vesperian helm hid the upper part of her face, showing only hard lips and a chin with a small dimple. Scars marked her bare arms, old scars faded to silver.

"You're the only one of your kind who refused the gift in this trial," she said. Her voice was hoarse, like a veteran's after too many battles, too many orders shouted across bloody fields. "I offered you the Berserker's Madness. Strength that knows no pain. Fury that knows no limit. You rejected it."

"I'm not a beast," Sebastian repeated, trying to still the trembling in his hands.

"That is precisely why you receive something else." She touched his shoulder with the spear shaft. The bronze was warm, almost alive. "You kept your mind where others lose themselves. That is rare. That is worthy."

She knelt before him, a goddess kneeling before a mortal, and looked into his eyes. Beneath the helm, her gaze held ancient weariness, the weariness of someone who'd seen too many young men choose the axe.

"Your gift is endurance. Your body will heal faster than any mortal's. You will stand when others fall. You will be a shield for your family, the one they hide behind when the storm comes."

Heat kindled in Sebastian's chest, not painful, but palpable. Strength settled into his muscles, heavy and solid. His bones felt denser; his skin, tougher. A metallic taste filled his mouth.

"But remember," Selene continued, rising. "The shield takes every blow. You will watch your brothers and sisters change. See their darkness. Feel their pain. And it will wound you deeper than any sword, because you will *feel* it when they no longer can." She paused.

"Such is the price of humanity."

Sebastian nodded. He understood.

He stood. His legs held. His hands steadied.

Selene vanished like morning mist.

Sebastian remained standing, feeling his body change, growing stronger. More enduring. A shield.

He wondered if it would be enough.

LIANA

Liana stepped into twilight.

Here it smelled of narcotic flowers, night blossoms, and damp earth, the scent of her mother's garden at midnight, when she'd snuck out to read forbidden texts by moonlight. Around her stretched a garden of black and violet plants that stirred without wind, reaching toward her like supplicants to their queen.

At the center, by a basin of dark water, stood a woman in a silver veil. She held a flower glowing with soft white light: pure, gentle, promising peace.

"Liana," the voice was soft, enveloping, like a mother's embrace after a nightmare. "I know how much you hurt. I know what you've seen. The blood. The fire. The faces of those you couldn't save."

Liana said nothing. Her hands curled at her sides.

"I can give you the gift of Healing," the veiled woman continued.

"You will be cured with a touch. Remove pain. Mend broken bodies and broken hearts. You will save innocents, children like the twins, like the ones in Ormel who watched you with such hope."

Liana looked at the flower. Its light was warm on her face.

For a moment, she let herself imagine it.

She saw herself kneeling beside a wounded child, her hands glowing gold. She felt the warmth flowing through her, the *rightness* of it. She saw the child's eyes open, the pain fading, a smile breaking through the tears. She saw herself walking through a field hospital, touching the dying, bringing them back. She saw the gratitude. The love. The *good* she could do.

It would be so easy. So beautiful. So *clean*.

But then the vision came.

Palazzos burning. Mercenaries laughing as they cut down the maids who had hidden the children. Consortium officials reading death warrants with bored efficiency. Fathers bleeding out on marble floors, reaching for swords they would never lift again.

The faces of killers who came to slaughter and burn. Who would come again? Who would always come, as long as there was something to burn.

The light in her vision dimmed. The golden warmth turned cold.

If she healed, who would punish?

"I did not heal the children in Ormel. No," she said.

The veiled woman tilted her head. "You refuse the light?"

"Light is useless when wolves come." Liana stepped closer. Her voice was steady now, certain. "I don't need bandages. I need a knife."

The veiled woman laughed, a sound like wind chimes in a dead garden.

The veil fell.

It was Selene, but not gentle, and not bright. Her lips were stained the color of clotted blood, and shadows of the waning moon danced in her eyes. Silver crescent moons hung from her ears. Her smile was the smile of a hunter, not a healer.

The Mistress of Hidden Paths. The Keeper of Forbidden Knowledge.

The flower in her hand blackened and crumbled to ash.

"Clever girl," the goddess whispered. "You understand the essence. My sisters sleep, but I keep the keys to their doors. I can give you access to the magic of Diadema: war and fire. Of Ishtar: desire and domination. Of Aurora: illusion and misdirection. Any power you desire, from any of the Twelve."

She extended her hand to Liana. On her palm lay not a flower, but a ritual sickle: silver blade, bone handle, runes carved along the edge that seemed to writhe in the dim light.

"But magic requires fuel. Great spells don't feed on prayers. The source of power is life. Blood."

"Whose blood?" Liana asked, taking the sickle. It was lighter than it looked. Perfectly balanced for precise cuts.

"Enemies. Or friends. Or your own. Magic doesn't care." Selene's dark eyes held hers. "But remember: every drop of another's blood spilled for power will wash the humanity from you. Slowly. Drop by drop. You will become a vessel for the goddesses, empty, waiting to be filled. And goddesses, my dear, are very lonely."

Liana weighed the sickle in her hand. The bone handle was warm, as if it remembered the creature it had come from.

She thought of Mark, always calculating.

She thought of Sebastian, always fighting.

She thought of Emile, always thinking.

Someone had to be willing to do what they couldn't. Someone had to walk the dark paths.

"I understand," she said quietly. "Show me the path."

Selene smiled, and there was no warmth in that smile, only the cold satisfaction of a teacher finding an apt pupil. A pupil who would surpass her.

"The path will find you itself. The sickle is a key, and the doors are everywhere: in shadows, in moonlight, in the moment between heartbeats." She leaned closer. Her breath smelled of grave flowers.

"And remember, girl: when you stand at the edge of the abyss, don't forget who pushed you there. Some falls are chosen. Some are arranged."

The garden dissolved like smoke in the wind.

Liana found herself standing on bare stone, alone. The sickle was gone from her hand, but she could still feel it, a phantom weight against her palm. And she knew: when she needed it, it would be there.

She looked at her hands. They seemed the same.

But the shadows around them lay differently now. Deeper. Denser. They moved when she moved, but half a second late, as if alive. As if waiting for commands.

She smiled. It was not a pleasant smile.

EMILE

Emile squeezed his eyes shut against the blinding light. After the catacombs, after the smoke and horror, this was like a physical blow. Sunlight. Bright, midday sun. The crash of surf. The cry of gulls. The scent of old paper and sea salt.

He stood in a spacious study. Tall lancet windows opened onto a balcony, beyond which the sea gleamed blue, so bright it hurt the eyes. The walls were lined with bookcases reaching to the ceiling. On the floor, stacks of folios, scrolls, and maps lay in towering heaps. It was chaos, but the chaos of genius.

Behind a massive desk buried under blueprints sat a young woman. She looked no older than twenty. Pale, almost white hair was carelessly gathered into a bun, from which strands escaped. On her nose perched delicate spectacles in thin gold frames. She was writing rapidly, biting the tip of her quill.

Emile cleared his throat. The girl raised her head. Blue eyes behind the lenses regarded him with sharp, mocking interest.

"Ah, Emile Scaliger," she said, setting down the quill. "At last. I was beginning to think you'd gotten lost in your own doubts. Come in, do not just stand there gawking. Just do not step on the maps. These are blueprints of the cosmos, and redrawing them takes an eternity."

"Where am I?" Emile carefully stepped over a stack of books. "And who are you?"

"Selene," she introduced herself simply. "Goddess of science, knowledge, the moon, navigation... and, unfortunately, the only one currently working in this madhouse. Welcome to my study. Or my prison. Depending on how you look at it."

She stood and adjusted her spectacles. There was something so human in the gesture that Emile's breath caught.

"Selene," he repeated slowly. "Goddess. You summoned me here to... what? Give me a gift? Test me?"

"Test you?" She walked to the window and leaned against the sill. "Your brothers passed their trials. Mark saw the ice in his heart and accepted it. Sebastian fought his own beast. Liana chose darkness over light." Selene turned, and the sun behind her made her hair nearly translucent. "But you, Emile Scaliger, you passed your trial before you ever arrived here."

"What?" Emile frowned. "I do not remember any trial."

"Palazzo Scaliger. The assault." She stepped toward him. "Your brothers fought like lions. Killed enemies by the dozens. And lost. Lost men, lost positions, nearly died."

A pause. Emile said nothing.

"But you did not try to be a hero," Selene's voice grew quieter. "You understood, it's not the house that matters, it's the bloodline. While they defended the walls, you saved the women and children. Led them into the catacombs. Because of you, the line survived."

Emile remembered. Adriana is leading the children through the secret passage. Eleanor with the twins.

"A house can be rebuilt," he said slowly. "People cannot."

"Exactly." Selene smiled. "They won the battle with honor. You looked like a coward and saved everything. That's what priorities are."

Emile shrugged.

"Prayers do not stop knives. Calculation sometimes does."

"Exactly." She walked to the shelves and ran a finger along the book spines. "Tell me, Emile, what do you see when you look at me?"

The question was unexpected. Emile looked at her, the girl in a simple tunic, disheveled hair escaping its pins, spectacles sliding down her nose. At the ink stains on her fingers. At her bare feet.

"I see..." He hesitated.

Something about her, the disheveled hair, the ink stains on her fingers, the bare feet, made him brave. Emile took a step forward.

"I see someone who pretends everything is under control. But the study is buried in books, maps are scattered on the floor, and on your desk are three unfinished letters and cold tea. You work without stopping. You're exhausted. And you're lonely."

Silence fell. Selene froze, staring at him.

“Bold,” she said at last, but her voice wavered. She turned back to the window. “To tell a goddess she’s exhausted and lonely.”

Pause. Selene gazed at the sea, and Emile saw how her shoulders tensed, how her fingers tightened on the windowsill.

“You asked what I see,” Emile said quietly.

She turned. Something flickered in the blue eyes behind the lenses, surprise? gratitude? then immediately hid behind a smirk.

“I see a scholar trying to save the world alone, because her sisters sleep and humans are too foolish to understand the scale of the threat,” he continued. “I see someone who wears spectacles because she loves to read and her eyes grow tired. I see”

“Enough.” Selene raised her hand. Her fingers trembled, but her voice was steady. “You’re dangerous, Emile Scaliger. More dangerous than your brothers. They see symbols. You see people.”

“And you’re a goddess,” Emile said. “Which means you see more than I do. So why did you summon me? Surely not just to tell me I passed the trial?”

Selene returned to the desk and sat on its edge. Her bare feet swung above the floor.

“Do you know how many years I’ve watched humanity?” Her voice grew softer. “Thousands. I’ve seen empires born and die in the time it takes a mortal to blink. Seen geniuses and fools, heroes and traitors. And do you know what I’ve learned?”

“What?”

“That most people live in cages of their own fears. They do not think. They repeat what they were taught. What is safe? What is approved?” She leaned forward. “But sometimes someone is born who sees the bars of the cage. And instead of accepting them, he asks, ‘Why?’”

“And I am one of those?” Emile smirked. “You flatter me, goddess.”

“No. I am testing you.” She jumped off the desk and stepped close. “Answer a question, Emile. Quickly, without thinking. What’s more important, to save a thousand lives or to preserve the truth?”

“Depends on the truth.”

“The truth will destroy your family.”

Emile did not blink.

“Then a thousand lives. Family is more important than abstract truth.”

“Liar!” Selene laughed. “You lied to me. You would always choose the truth. Even if it destroys you.”

Emile fell silent. Then slowly nodded.

“Yes. I suppose I would. But I’d like to think otherwise.”

“Now that’s honesty.” Selene reached out and touched his cheek, where the scar was.

The touch was light, but Emile felt a wave of warmth run across his skin. He hadn’t expected a goddess’s touch to be so... human. So warm.

Selene froze, not withdrawing her hand, and Emile saw her pupils dilate. She looked at him long and intently, and something in her gaze changed. It grew softer. More human.

“You got this defending your brothers,” she whispered. “Diadema healed you, but left the scar. Do you know why?”

“No.”

“Because scars are memory. A reminder of what you’re willing to pay.” Her fingers were warm. “Emile, I am tired. Tired of being the only one who thinks thousands of years ahead. Tired of my sisters sleeping while the world crumbles. I need someone who will think with me. Not for me, with me.”

She paused, gazing into his eyes.

“Ishtar believes, and she’s rarely wrong about such things, that this man, for the first time in a thousand years, will be you.”

Emile’s heart beat so loudly he was certain she could hear it. *For the first time in a thousand years*, the words echoed in his mind. The goddess watched him, and in that gaze was expectation, hope, something vulnerable and astonishingly human.

“With you,” Emile breathed, not knowing where this courage came from. “Not for you, with you.”

“Yes. And more.” She stepped back and crossed her arms. “But I will not take you until I know you’re clever enough to survive beside me.”

“Is this a trial?”

“A game.” Selene smiled, and the smile was predatory. “I’ll give you a riddle. If you answer, I’ll accept you. If not, I’ll release you alive, but you’ll never know what you lost.”

Emile straightened.

“Ask.”

Selene stopped by the window, gazing at the sea.

"A collapse in a silver mine. The main tunnel is caving in. Five miners are trapped there. In a side shaft, one more." She turned. "You stand at the lever of the ventilation shaft. You can open the vents to the side shaft, then the five will suffocate first, but you'll have time to save the one. Or open them to the main tunnel, save the five, but the one will suffocate sooner. What do you choose?"

Silence. Emile stood motionless.

"You're asking me who I'll choose to kill," he said slowly. "Five or one."

"Yes."

"Then I will not answer that question."

Selene froze.

"Why?"

"Because any answer turns me into a judge." Emile stepped toward her. "Into someone who decides whose life matters more. You're asking who to kill. I am asking who failed to reinforce that mine?"

She said nothing, watching him.

"Because the real problem is not the lever," Emile spoke more quietly, but more fiercely. "The real problem is the mine owner who skimmed on support beams. While I agonize over choosing between bad and worse, he's counting his profits. To accept your question is to accept his rules."

"But people need saving," Selene said quietly. "Now. There's no time to judge the owner."

"No." Emile did not look away. "You've given me a god's choice, the right to decide who deserves to live. But I do not want to be a god who chooses victims. I want to be a man who stops those who create victims."

A long pause.

Selene watched him. Something was changing in her eyes.

"And if you have no choice?" she whispered. "If the lever is all you have?"

"Then I go down into the mine myself." Emile's voice was calm. "And stand as a support beam in place of the ones the owner did not install. I'll probably be crushed. But at least I will not become a judge."

Silence.

Selene slowly exhaled. She stepped closer. Took his hands, and her fingers trembled.

"You just outplayed a goddess," she whispered. "You saw what no one has seen in millennia. Everyone answers the question. You asked who posed the question."

Everyone accepts the game. You refused to play.”

She pressed her forehead to his.

“You’re right. The question was a trap. Any answer makes you complicit. But you... you refused to be a judge.” Her voice broke. “This... this is wisdom. Not choosing between victims. Seeking out those who create victims.”

“Did I... win?” Emile couldn’t believe it.

“You did what no mortal has done in the last thousand years.” She squeezed his fingers. “You questioned the premise. You did not choose between bad and worse. You reframed the question.”

Her blue eyes blazed.

“Do you know what that means?”

“What?”

“That your mind is the equal of mine,” she said seriously, without irony. “And that’s... rare. So rare, Emile. I’ve forgotten when I last met an equal.”

She fell silent, watching him long. Emile saw something warring in her eyes. Surprise? Fear? Something she had not expected.

Selene took a step back, then forward, then froze again.

“No,” she whispered to herself. “This is foolish. This is...”

She moved closer. Emile caught the scent of old paper and sea salt emanating from her. His breathing quickened.

“I like you,” Selene whispered, and her voice held wonder. “Very much. Dangerously much for a goddess who’s supposed to be above passion. I did not expect... did not plan...”

She placed her palm on his chest, where his heart beat.

“You’re different.”

Emile could not breathe. A *goddess* stood before him, and she was saying... what? That she liked him? It was impossible. Absurd. But her hand on his chest was warm and real, and in her eyes was that wonder that could not be feigned.

“I...” His voice would not obey. “I do not know what—”

“Hush.” She touched his lips with a finger. “Now I need to tell you terrible things. About war, about the end of the world, about the price you’ll pay. And after that, you may change your mind. But know this, if you agree to be with me, you will not be a servant. You’ll be a partner. An equal.”

She stepped back, and her face grew serious. Weariness showed through the radiance, deep, ancient weariness of a being who holds the sky on her shoulders.

"Listen carefully. Ragusa is dust. Your war for the city is children squabbling in a sandbox."

"But our enemies are there—"

"Your enemy is not Cornaro. Not even the Consortium." Selene removed her spectacles and wiped them on the edge of her tunic. "Your enemy is Hecate."

"She's a goddess."

"She's a parasite," Selene said harshly. "An alien. A virus. She's not from this world. She came from beyond, from the void between stars. Her presence tears at the fabric of reality. If she isn't thrown back, the Cataclysm will seem like a child's prank. She'll devour this world, digest it, and move on."

Emile felt cold despite the sun.

"What can we do? We're mortals."

"You are blood-bearers. Keys." She stepped close and cupped his chin, her fingers bearing ink stains. "We need to awaken the others, all twelve. Only the full Circle can close the breach through which Hecate crawls."

"How?"

"Blood and ritual. Diadema has already awakened; she's closer than you think. Ishtar plays her own game, too. The others must be found. I'll give you knowledge. I'll guide you."

She looked into his eyes, and Emile fell into that blue.

"I've chosen you, Emile, not as a warrior, but as a partner. I need someone who understands, who can think, not just swing a sword. Do you agree?"

Emile opened his mouth, but the words stuck. He remembered Mark, cold and calculating. Sebastian, furious. Liana, sinking into darkness. They walked their own path, a path of vengeance, blood, and war.

And Selene offered something different. Knowledge. Understanding. A path that might lead him away from his brothers.

"If I agree," he said slowly, "I'll serve you. Not them."

"Yes," Selene answered simply. "A day will come when you'll have to choose, them or me. Knowledge or family."

Emile looked into her eyes. In that blue was everything: stars, void, infinity. And he understood, he had already chosen.

"Yes," he breathed. "I agree."

She smiled and kissed him, quick, light, at the corner of his mouth. Like a promise. Like a seal.

Emile froze. The goddess's lips were cool as moonlight, and for a moment, the world ceased to exist. Only the two of them remained in the sun-filled study above the sea, and that weightless touch silenced thought while his heart beat so loudly that surely the gulls beyond the window could hear.

The scar on his cheek blazed with silver fire. The pain was sharp but brief. Emile squeezed his eyes shut, and when he opened them, the sun-drenched study was fading.

"Now go," Selene whispered, already dissolving. "Return to where you fled. Seek the signs. I will find you."

The world flashed white.

ADRIANA

They emerged from the gorge in silence.

Mark walked first. His back was straight as a rod, shoulders squared with military precision. His gaze was cold and unfocused, looking through the rocks rather than at them. He didn't speak. Didn't need to.

Sebastian moved heavily but surely, each step deliberate and solid. He seemed larger, broader in the shoulders, not taller, but denser. The wounds on his arms from the mountain crossing had already healed, leaving only pale scars, too smooth and too faint for injuries only days old.

Liana wrapped herself in her cloak, though it wasn't cold. Her face was calm, composed. But her shadow on the stones was wrong, darker than it should be. Fluid. When she paused, it kept moving for half a second longer.

Emile walked last. He rubbed his eyes often, as if after a vivid dream. The scar on his cheek was no longer pink; it had turned silver, thin as a thread of moonlight. On his lips played a strange, dreamy half-smile. He looked back at the temple often.

Adriana watched them descend, leaning on her cane.

A smile spread across her weathered face, slow, satisfied, predatory. The smile of a general watching her troops return from victory. The smile of a goddess seeing her pieces finally move into position.

The Hermit stood beside her. "They're marked," he said quietly.

"Yes." Her voice was warm with pleasure. "All four."

"Her servants will recognize them from afar now. The gifts are also beacons."

"Let them." Adriana's smile widened. "Let Hecate see what's coming."

"It is done," the Hermit called to the Scaligers, striking his staff against the stone.

"You entered as children and emerged as pieces on the board."

"Where now?" Mark asked. His voice had changed: flat, certain, without questioning intonation.

"To Hogberg. There are paths people have forgotten. I will lead you."

They began the descent.

Adriana walked alongside them, studying her nieces and nephews openly now. Mark's back had straightened, his movements economical. Nothing wasted. Sebastian moved like a man rooted to the earth, his eyes constantly scanning. Liana barely watched her footing; her shadow slid ahead, guiding her steps. And Emile...

Emile turned one last time toward the temple ruins. Something glinted in the broken arch. His lips moved, words she couldn't hear, meant for someone else.

Adriana's smile softened for just a moment, then hardened again.

She stopped at a ridge overlooking the valley below. The others continued down the path, their voices fading. The Hermit paused, looking back at her.

"Mistress?"

"Go," she said. "I'll follow."

She stood alone on the ridge, her black dress whipping in the mountain wind. Her eyes were fixed on the horizon.

Human sight could not have seen anything at this distance. But she felt it. The Three-Faced One was out there somewhere. Watching.

For a long moment, Adriana stood motionless, feeling that cold attention pressing against the wards like a hand testing a door.

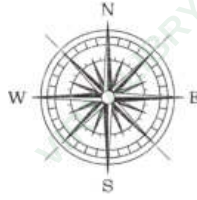
Then the sensation faded. She felt, didn't see, her enemy turn away, lose interest, drift back toward the cities of men, where her worship was strong.

Adriana smiled.

"Soon," she repeated.

She turned and followed her family down the mountain, watching.

Chapter 19: Return to Hogberg



SEBASTIAN

Two weeks of mountain travel through the Erenor range slipped away like spring snow. Memory held the campfires, the nights beneath the stars, the crossings over rocky trails. But time itself seemed to have fallen sideways, slipped through their fingers. Yesterday, they had stood at the threshold of Selene's temple, listening to the Hermit's final words. And today, morning mist was already revealing the silhouette of Hogberg: a city on the bay, with tile roofs, white stone walls, and the smell of sea and hearth smoke.

It seemed that, after meeting the goddess, fate had decided to smile briefly on what remained of the Scaliger family. The descent from the mountains took three days, but the journey came easily. The rocky goat paths along which the Hermit led them wound between scree and cliffs. Adriana walked, leaning on her staff, yet never once asked for rest. By the evening of the third day, the trail brought them into a wide valley where the borderland between mountains and plains began.

Here, at the confluence of two mountain streams, stood the settlement of Stone Ford, the last trading post before the high mountain passes. A dozen sturdy houses with stone foundations, a smithy, and a large inn with a livestock pen comprised the settlement. It thrived on smugglers, pilgrims to mountain temples, and rare merchants carrying mountain crystal.

They were expected here.

Three wagons stood by the inn, hitched to sturdy draft horses. Beside them, armed men in traveling cloaks packed bundles of supplies. Sebastian recognized several as old servants of House Scaliger, those who had served the family before the massacre but had lived outside Arcadia.

The eldest among them, a bearded man named Luke with a face weathered by roads, saw them and bowed low.

"Lord Mark. Lord Sebastian. Lord Emile." His voice was hoarse from road dust.

"Donna Adriana ordered us to meet you here."

Mark frowned. "Adriana? How did she tell you where to find us?"

"She sent word from Ormel, my lord. A man who could be trusted. Ordered us to gather those who remained in the village, buy supplies and wagons, and meet you at Stone Ford." Luke paused. "We served your grandfather, my lord. Then your uncle. When news of the massacre came, we knew the house would survive and summon us again."

Emile quickly counted heads. "Who's here?"

"Lord Federico," Luke reported. "Donna Eleanor with the twins, Michele and Michelina. Donna Isabella Pallavicini. Two more signore with children, and all four servants who were with you on the barge. Six more of my people, loyal to the house. Ten fighters for the caravan."

Sebastian approached the first wagon. Under the canvas, on bales of hay, Federico Scaliger smiled. His arm was bandaged; the wound he had received during the breakout from the palazzo hadn't fully healed, though it no longer troubled him greatly.

"Nephew," he said hoarsely. "Finally. I was beginning to think the mountains wouldn't release you."

"How's the wound?" Mark asked curtly.

"Festered the first week, but a healer cauterized it with a hot iron. Hurt like hell, but it worked." Federico grimaced at the memory.

"Healing now. I'll live." He nodded toward the second wagon.

"Eleanor's there, with the twins. Holding up bravely, but the children aren't. They've seen too much."

Sebastian approached the second wagon. Eleanor sat, embracing both thirteen-year-old twins. Michele and Michelina pressed against their mother, pale, with wide, frightened eyes. In the three weeks since the escape, they had grown thin, grown older. These were children who had watched their home burn, who had seen people die, and who had lost their father in the flames.

"Eleanor," he inclined his head in greeting. "How are you holding up?"

"Alive, Sebastian," she answered quietly. Her voice trembled, but she held herself straight. "That's what matters. We're alive."

In the third wagon was a young woman from the Pallavicini family. Her face was pale, with deep shadows beneath her eyes. Sebastian suddenly realized she had been married to the middle brother, the one whose hand had been hacked off in the chapel. Her husband had died from blood loss in her arms. She had herself lowered his body overboard, wrapped in his cloak.

"Donna Isabella," Sebastian said quietly.

She nodded without raising her eyes. Here, at the foot of the mountains, this caravan held all that remained of the once-mighty family that had turned the wheels of state.

Adriana approached Luke and placed a hand on his shoulder. "You did well. Thank you for not failing us."

The old servant bowed his head.

"Supplies?" Mark asked curtly, steering the conversation to business.

"Three wagons," Luke reported. "Flour, salted meat, cheese, hardtack, wine, and vegetables. Warm clothing, wool cloaks, and blankets. Silver from what remained of the family treasury after the massacre. Not much, but enough. Weapons: swords, crossbows, and arrows."

Mark looked at the wagons, at the heavy carts with their massive wheels.

"We'll be very lucky if the wagons make it through the mountain roads."

But he had underestimated the old Imperial Road. They made it through, encountering no danger along the way.

Sebastian saw Hogberg and the sea when he stepped aside to wash at a roadside stream. In the water's reflection, his face seemed foreign, as if it had aged a year in two weeks. A new wrinkle by his eye, one that hadn't been there before. Or had it always been there, and he'd never noticed?

"It can't be." Emile rubbed his eyes as if trying to wipe away a mirage. "At our speed, with a caravan and wagons, we should have been traveling five days longer."

"There are roads shorter than common paths, if you know the right doors," Mark quietly repeated the Hermit's words. He didn't tear his gaze from the city, and in his eyes lay a shadow of wariness rather than surprise. "It seems that wasn't just a pretty phrase."

Sebastian clenched and unclenched his fists, staring at his hands. His fingers were ordinary: rough skin, old calluses, a scratch from brushwood. No strength. No gift.

"Maybe we imagined it all?" His voice sounded hollow. "The temple, Selene, the goddess's gifts..."

He struck his fist hard against a roadside tree trunk. Pain flared, sharp, ordinary, human. His knuckles reddened.

"I don't feel anything unusual. Ordinary fatigue, ordinary ache in my shoulders. Ordinary blood."

"No—" Liana cut in.

She stood slightly apart, and the morning wind stirred her chestnut hair. Her face was pale, shadows of sleepless nights etched beneath her eyes. But when she raised her gaze, Sebastian saw something foreign in her eyes: a gleam like sunset light, golden and troubling, as if fire burned behind her pupils where it shouldn't be.

"It was real." Her voice was level, yet it held a strange detachment, as if she spoke not to them but to someone invisible. "What the goddesses give doesn't leave. It sleeps. It waits for its hour."

Mark placed a hand on his cousin's shoulder. She flinched at the touch, as if waking.

"You're so certain because you want to believe it," he said gently.

"But right now we need to think clearly. If we received some gifts, they'll manifest. If not, we'll act as we've always acted."

"As Scaligers," Emile nodded.

He stood leaning against a tree, thoughtfulness in his eyes. He still saw her face: Selene, goddess of the moon, dreams, and knowledge. He saw her smile and heard her voice. His fingers rose unconsciously to touch the silver scar on his cheek, and he couldn't drive her from his mind.

"As Scaligers," Sebastian echoed.

Disappointment sounded in his voice, hollow and bitter, as if he already missed the strength he had momentarily felt in the temple, when he could shatter stone with a single blow, when his body obeyed like a willing blade. And now he was just a man again, just flesh that tires, aches, and can die from an ordinary arrow.

He limped; his left leg ached from yesterday's march. Emile coughed quietly, covering his mouth with his fist. He had caught a cold in the mountains, apparently. All of them were dirty, unshaven, and smelled of sweat and the road.

They moved on down the road, and Hogberg grew before them, rising from the morning mist like a ship from the sea.

* * *

They entered the shadow of the city gates, leaving the morning light behind.

They left the caravan at a suburban inn called the Green Elm, a solid place with reliable guards, where merchants who did not want to drag wagons through narrow city streets would stop. Three wagons with the Scaliger family remnants remained under the care of drivers and guards: the women, children, and wounded. Old Beata, their father's wet nurse, had died on the road three days ago, buried by a roadside stone without rites or priests. None of them spoke of it. Some losses had become so common that they no longer needed to be marked.

Mark paid the innkeeper silver in advance for three days and received a receipt. "If we do not return within a week," he said quietly to the driver, an old soldier with a face like oak bark, "lead them south to Silver Harbor. Stone has people there."

The driver nodded without asking questions. He had served the Scaligers long enough to understand that sometimes masters return, and sometimes they do not. They entered the city on foot, without baggage, carrying only weapons beneath their cloaks.

The southern gates met them with unusual silence. On the walls, fresh Senate proclamations, printed on expensive paper, announced a two-week state of mourning for the victims of the tragedy in Arcadia, promises of investigation, and the seal of a commission chaired by Vitelli. An engraving of the burning palace, half torn by the wind, fluttered against the stone like a wounded bird. Black ribbons flew from the guards' spears.

Hogberg had never formally been part of the Republic. It was an old duchy that preserved a ghost of independence, though in truth it lay wholly within the Republic's power—economically, politically, and militarily.

In Arcadia, they didn't want to extend the border south of the Bastion or take on the burden of directly ruling a troublesome port city. But when the Senate commanded, Hogberg obeyed. And now it obeyed.

People in the streets spoke in whispers and avoided strangers. In-house windows, candles burned during the day "for the repose" of the dead. The square by the gates was emptier than it should have been at this hour.

Mark stopped at one of the proclamations and read the fine print. Emile stood beside him.

"The Senate blames everything on 'mob riots,'" he said quietly.

"Look, there's not a word about who exactly organized the massacre. No names, no accusations. Just 'tragedy' and 'investigation.'"

"A convenient formula," Mark nodded. "They can accuse anyone when the time comes."

Sebastian looked around, and his hand involuntarily went to his rapier hilt beneath his cloak. Guard patrols in dark blue uniforms with white sashes appeared more often than usual, peering carefully into the faces of passersby and lingering on strangers.

"Act natural," Mark murmured as another patrol of five passed by, casting a long, appraising look at them.

"How naturally should fugitives act, whose portraits are probably posted on every corner of the Republic?" Emile answered just as quietly.

"Let them try to stop me." Sebastian seemed willing to meet the guards, his fingers tightening on the hilt.

"No!" Mark shot his brother a warning glance. "We came to rebuild our strength, not start a pointless fight with city guards."

They turned into a narrow alley leading away from the main street. Here it was quieter, and they could speak without fear of being overheard.

One patrol stopped them at a turn: a guard with the Senate seal on his belt, two subordinates behind him. Mark already had documents out, faded paper stamped with some merchant house seal and a cover story they had prepared back in the mountains.

"Where are you traveling from?" The guard's voice was polite, but his eyes were cold.

"From the eastern fairs," Mark answered, dryly and commandingly, delivering the rehearsed cover. "Carrying silk and spices. Documents in order."

The guard slowly examined the paper, too slowly. Then he raised his eyes to Mark and squinted. "You look like someone..." He fell silent, as if trying to remember.

"Like an honest merchant, I hope—" Emile cut in with a smile, handing the guard another paper, some certificate with seals. "We have urgent business at the weavers' guild. Wouldn't want to be late."

Emile noticed a scroll at his belt. Not a wanted list, but a list of "persons of interest to the commission." The hunt hadn't started yet, but it was preparing.

"And why do silk merchants need weapons?" The guard nodded at the swords beneath their cloaks.

"Roads are troubled, officer," Emile said with exaggerated politeness. "Bandits don't distinguish who carries silk and who carries gold. All that matters is that the victim doesn't resist. We prefer to resist."

The guard grunted but returned the documents. "Pass through. And don't linger in the city longer than needed. Troubled times."

They nodded and walked on. Only around the corner did Sebastian exhale.

"Damn these 'troubled times.' Soon they'll be checking us every ten steps."

"We act like ordinary travelers," Mark repeated. "Nothing suspicious."

"And what does someone look like whom everyone fears but no one has admitted to hunting yet?" Emile smirked.

Liana walked in silence, her face unreadable. But when they passed another patrol, she spoke quietly, almost to herself. "The city doesn't believe their words. Fear hangs thicker than stone."

Her fingers clenched into fists, and Mark noticed her nails had cut into her palms until they bled.

In the distance, on the square, two merchants in expensive doublets discussed something in low voices. Emile caught a fragment: "...The Senate will blame everything on the mob, as always. The real culprits won't be touched..."

"...they say the heretic Scaligers set fire to the palazzo themselves, to cover their tracks..."

The merchants fell silent, noticing the brothers' gazes, and hurried apart.

Foreign faces flickered by: people with accents from the Republic's interior lands, listening too attentively to conversations in taverns and on corners. They were the first thread leading to commission agents.

Hogberg was preparing for something. Even the dogs didn't bark. Church bells sounded muffled, as if wrapped in cloth. The city braced for a storm.

* * *

Palazzo of Stone rose in the Altamira quarter as if nothing in the world were happening.

But messengers with sealed scrolls ran up and down the stairs. At the gates stood new faces: hired servants and crates bearing guild marks. The house had become a hive.

The guards at the door recognized Liana immediately. One straightened, while the second quickly disappeared inside.

"My lords, Signorina Liana," the remaining guard bowed. "Master Stone awaits you."

"Awaits?" Sebastian raised an eyebrow. "Since when?"

"Since the watchers on the hill spotted you on the road, my lord." The guard opened the heavy oak door. "Please."

Inside, the corridors hummed with whispers. Stacks of papers covered the tables, and people with sealed scrolls hurried in every direction. In one of the halls lay a rolled-up, scorch-marked old Scaliger standard, brought from some hidden cache.

Mark stopped and looked at the standard. A black ladder on a silver field, the family motto running along the edge: Blood Keeps Its Promise. The fabric was moth-eaten, but the silver embroidery still gleamed.

Sebastian stepped closer and froze. On the silver silk, by the lower rungs of the embroidered ladder, lay a dark stain. For a moment, it seemed like blood, fresh, not dried. Father's blood, still dripping from the fabric. He blinked. The stain remained, but it was only old dirt now.

"Father carried this standard at our grandfather's coronation," Emile said quietly. "I saw it in a painting in the great hall of the palazzo, in Arcadia."

"Now the palazzo is ash," Mark replied. "And the standard is here. Alber is preparing for war."

They walked on, and the study door opened before them.

* * *

Alber Stone's study had changed little since their last meeting: the same heavy curtains of burgundy velvet, the massive oak desk buried under maps and letters, bookshelves reaching to the ceiling, and an antique clock on the mantelpiece. Yet the map on the wall had grown larger, many pins now marking it in red, black, and green.

Alber himself stood at the window, looking out at the bay. Tall, lean, his face like carved stone: sharp cheekbones, deep lines, heavy gaze. Gray hair combed back, a watch inlaid with green gems resting on his chest.

When he heard footsteps, he turned, and his face, usually inscrutable, lit for a moment with genuine joy.

"Finally."

He approached quickly, embraced Liana tightly, and held her close. Father and daughter lingered in the embrace for several minutes. Then Alber embraced each brother in turn, briefly but firmly.

"I was beginning to worry," he said, stepping back and examining them.

"Two weeks without word. That's long even for the Valley of Dreams."

Mark frowned. "You knew we were alive? And where were we going?"

Alber smiled wryly. "Of course, I knew. Adriana sent me reports on your progress, all the way to Selene's temple. Beyond that..." He shrugged. "Beyond that lies the territory of secrets. I can only judge by the result."

His gaze moved in sequence to Mark, Sebastian, Emile, and Liana. He lingered on each, as if reading changes.

"You've changed," he said quietly.

"Changed?" Sebastian echoed sharply. "Not at all. If we had changed, I could crumble this desk with one punch, as I did in the Valley. But now..."

He fell silent without finishing and turned to the window.

"The goddess's gifts haven't manifested yet," Emile said quietly.

"Perhaps they were an illusion. A mirage of the Valley."

"Or they sleep in you, like seeds awaiting their hour." Alber gestured for them to sit in deep armchairs by the fireplace, where flames crackled steadily. "Either way, we have no time for mystical inquiries. We face quite concrete tasks."

He waited until everyone was settled. Liana sat silently, like a council participant, not merely a daughter. Alber noticed this, and something flickered in his eyes, respect or concern. Emile noticed her shadow seemed to shift independently when no one was looking.

Mark sat first, Emile settled beside him, and Sebastian remained standing by the fireplace.

Alber approached the desk and took up one of the scrolls.

"There's no point discussing what happened in Arcadia now. We can mourn and plot revenge later, when, and if, the family regains at least our region. So we proceed exactly as agreed at Villa Nogarola," he said evenly. "Ragusa is our home and our fortress. While you were shedding blood, I waged war by other means: money, contracts, and people."

The brothers exchanged glances. Alber's pragmatism, after all the ordeals of recent weeks, was calming and inspiring hope.

"How many ships do we have?" Mark asked curtly.

"And how many people know how to hold swords?" Sebastian added.

"And who already knows we're alive?" Emile tilted his head.

Alber smiled, joylessly, wearily. "In order. Sit down, everyone. This will take time."

Alber unrolled the map on the table, the same one from Villa Nogarola. Ragusa, its harbor, its fortifications. Red lines, black crosses, green circles.

"Two weeks," he began. "Not much, but enough to understand the scale of the problem."

He swept his hand across the map. "Let's start with the good news. The fleet. This is our main trump card, and here I've succeeded."

Mark leaned forward.

"The trading cover worked," Alber continued. "The carracks are already in the harbor, hired for 'long-distance trade with the southern islands.' Four heavy ships capable of carrying the necessary siege artillery, all already at my disposal. The captains are reliable, and the money was paid in advance. We also have six galleys for the assault, each carrying fifty marines. Three hundred men are ready to storm the docks the moment we touch stone. Eight brigantines for screening and convoy escort. And two galleasses waiting in open water as our reserve."

He pointed to the list of vessels.

“Artillery. Purchased nearby, in Dodecallo: culverins, bombards, and several heavy naval guns, along with gunners. Convenient, when neighbors wage frequent wars. They should arrive in Hogberg tonight, under the cover of ‘metal structures and bells for temples of the Three-Faced.’ Loading is secret, at night, with good documents.”

“Risks?” Mark asked.

“Enormous,” Alber did not sugarcoat it. “If someone gets crushed during loading, the entire Isthmus will immediately learn of our plan. Such cargo does not forgive clumsiness, and death at the docks breeds rumors faster than the plague. Right now, everything looks as though we’re leisurely gathering strength, the usual preparation of exiles dreaming of reclaiming an island. The Cornaros did this for forty years. But if the duke’s circle learns about heavy siege artillery being loaded onto ships, that will provoke a direct accusation of organizing a military expedition. One wrong step, and the fleet gets confiscated, and we’re declared conspirators. The duke will not support losers, and right now that’s exactly how we look.”

Mark nodded, studying the map thoughtfully. “You’ve done the greater part of the work. The fleet and artillery give us a chance to strike unexpectedly,” he said. “If we enter the harbor before Cornaro raises the alarm, the city is ours.”

“Exactly,” Alber agreed. “The fleet is our strength. But beyond that, problems begin.”

He set aside the ship list and took up another scroll, long and covered in small, tight handwriting.

“The army. Here we have a disaster.”

Silence fell over the room.

“I tried to hire experienced condottieri,” Alber continued. “Those who fought in the Northern Campaign, who have reputations and disciplined units.”

“And?” Mark asked curtly.

“All flatly refused. Guardi from Alterna, Rosselli from Lomen, De Santis from Vespers. Same reason: they asked whether the Senate in Arcadia would at least remain neutral. I couldn’t say yes. We bear the heavy brand of enemies of the Republic, though not openly declared. Captains with reputations don’t want political or reputational problems.”

Sebastian grunted darkly. “But there’s always plenty of rabble on that market, who don’t give a damn about politics or reputation?”

“Exactly,” Alber nodded. “From them I assembled two ‘companies,’ essentially scratch units. Lomen cudgelers: notorious thugs with clubs. Their commander,

One-Eyed Gregorio, killed three men in a tavern two days ago, just on a bet. Alterna deserter crossbowmen, who are drunks but shoot straight. And my particular pride and joy: street cutthroats from Hogberg's taverns. They're used to knives and mass brawls."

"Military discipline?" Mark asked.

Alber shook his head. "Not their strong suit. There's already been a fight between the Lomen men and locals at the Salty Anchor tavern, two dead, one thrown into the waterway. City guards detained three but released them after a bribe. One local 'captain' came to negotiations with bruises from torture. They released him on his word of honor, and he came straight to me."

"And logistics?" Emile tilted his head. "How did you even get them to Hogberg without falling apart along the way?"

"With losses. Half the company was detained in Galtos and called a 'wandering rabble.' A third of the men were thrown into a pit, and the rest were released separately. Some reached Hogberg, some did not. Money has to be paid upfront, and more often than I'd like, otherwise they simply will not talk to us."

He looked at the brothers. "I'll be frank. This is not an army. This is a traveling circus. Without personal command, they'll become a gang of marauders."

He paused. "A quarter will die from drinking before we land. The rest will die during the assault. But there's nothing else, and nothing forthcoming."

Mark smiled coldly. "We only need them briefly. What about officers?"

"Very bad," Alber answered honestly. "Two sergeants from the old Republican army, both with dubious reputations. One fled after charges of robbery, the other's a deserter. But they know their business and can keep men in line. And Gregorio, scum though he is."

Emile leaned back in his chair. "In short, fleet excellent, army shit."

"In short, yes," Alber agreed. "If our own rabble does not kill us, Cornaro will finish the job. But at least we'll die entertaining."

He moved to the next point. "The network in Ragusa. Here, the picture is mixed."

Liana straightened, listening intently.

"Beatrice performs beyond all expectations," Alber began. "Her network of taverns, gambling houses, courtesans, and docks catches rumors like a drain catches sewage. Several middle-rank houses, tired of Cornaro's dictatorship, have agreed to 'not close their doors' on the night of the assault. This is important. If we enter the harbor and no one raises the alarm, the city is ours. She and I estimate the chances of this as high."

"The militia commander?" Mark asked.

One captain of the city militia, whose brother had been hanged by Cornaro's order, silently agreed to "not notice" the right unit on the right night. But... Alber paused. "Cornaro has intensified purges. He's sweeping Scaliger supporters from the harbor and treasury. One of Beatrice's people has just disappeared. No certainty whether he was interrogated before being killed. If he were, the entire network is at risk."

Emile understood: enormous work awaited him. Talking to people, promising, persuading, lying. To save Ragusa, he would have to become what he hated: a politician.

Alber moved to the last point. "What we didn't accomplish: finances."

He laid several scrolls with bank seals on the table.

"We're short on liquidity. The Scaligers' wealth is tied up in accounts and assets. Any large transfer is immediately noticed by banks connected to the Senate. I withdrew about fifty thousand ducats through letters of credit and bills of exchange, but that's the limit. Beyond that, the risk of exposure becomes too great."

"Will that be enough?" Sebastian asked.

"For fleet, artillery, and our rabble, yes. For a proper army, no."

Alber paused, and his face darkened.

"Political processes in Arcadia are moving against us. The Senate is in disarray. The city massacre horrified everyone; the instigators are in prison, but rumors spread of a pagan conspiracy led by the Scaligers. An investigation has been launched, and conspirators are being arrested. The family's financial assets have been officially sequestered by the Secret Order pending inquiry. Olivia Vitelli's position is unclear, but she won't swim against the tide. And the wind now blows against us."

"Secrecy has been compromised," he added harshly. "One of my couriers disappeared with letters to mercenaries and allies. And not just him. If the letters were opened, we have an enemy who knows our plans."

Sebastian asked, almost roughly, "How many people have already died while we prepare? Here, with you, not in Arcadia."

Heavy silence fell over the room for a second.

Alber looked at his nephew for a long moment, then slowly nodded.

"Four. Giacomo, a courier who served me for fifteen years, had his throat cut in an alley by the docks. Two loaders drowned in the harbor during night work; their bodies were never found. One of Beatrice's agents. Possibly more. I don't know everyone."

Silence thickened. Fire crackled in the fireplace, the only sound in the dead room. Sebastian clenched his jaw so hard his cheekbones stood out. Mark turned to the window, staring at nothing.

“And this is only the beginning, my dears,” Alber added quietly.

“When we enter Ragusa’s harbor, the count will go to dozens. To hundreds.” He held a pause, and something like uncertainty flickered in his eyes. “The plan is good. But good plans collapse first when the slaughter begins.”

Alber straightened and folded his hands behind his back.

“So. Now that we’ve discussed everything, nephews, here are the assignments.”

His voice hardened, commanding.

“Mark. Fleet and artillery. Negotiations with captains, loading plans, and routes. You’re the only one of us who commanded in battle under Father. Without you, this operation fails at the first step.”

Mark nodded.

“Sebastian. Turning rabble into a strike force. Routine of discipline, training, and selecting junior officers. You know how to make men fight, not flee. Your task: turn leaven into bread.”

Sebastian straightened, indignation flickering in his eyes. “Why should I nursemaid rabble while Mark commands fleet and artillery?”

“Because,” Mark said to his brother, voice hard, “cannons don’t storm walls without men. And men who won’t scatter at the first volley, only you can organize them. You’re needed where you are.”

Sebastian clenched his jaw but nodded. A brief exchange of glances passed between them, carrying with it the quiet acceptance of the decision.

“Congratulations, brother. You now command two companies of demons and not a single exorcist.”

Alber allowed himself a brief smile. “You have an exorcist. It’s called discipline.”

“Emile. Negotiations with the houses, coordination, letters, and communication. You know how to speak so people listen. Use it.”

Emile nodded silently, though interest flickered in his eyes.

“Liana.” Alber looked at his daughter. “You are the beautiful young face of the family, a political symbol, the connecting link to those who still believe in the Scaligers as the rightful lords of Ragusa. Your presence will convince the doubters. They must see not only swords but a beautiful lady for whom all this is done.”

Liana nodded, her face remaining unreadable.

Alber approached the secretaire in the corner of the study and opened a hidden drawer. From it, he extracted several scrolls and a small metal chest.

"Bills of exchange from old houses, going back to your grandfather," he said, laying them on the table. "Old obligations turned into weapons. Each of these bills is a debt that can be called in: in money, in people, or in silence."

Emile took one of the bills and examined it. "House Falcone owes you fifteen thousand denars. This can be used."

"Exactly," Alber nodded. "Letters of credit from trading houses give us the ability to buy bread, powder, and services quickly. A contract with the armorers' guild for arquebus delivery. A key to a safe at Conti's bank in Hogberg. Jewelry there that can be converted to gold."

He opened the metal chest. Inside, on a velvet cushion, lay a massive gold ring with a seal: the Scaliger ladder.

"Your grandfather's ring," Alber took it and turned it over in his hands.

"The sign of authority in Ragusa. He who wears this ring speaks for the House. Francis used his own, apparently in vain."

He extended it to Mark.

"Wear it. And remember, this is not an ornament. It is a symbol."

Mark took the ring. His fingers trembled slightly, feeling its weight. The gold was warm, too warm, as if just removed from a dead man. A chill ran down his spine. *This is not a blessing. This is a burden.*

Alber laid out several more items: coins, keys, and seals.

"This is all that remains of the family's former glory," he said quietly. "Paper, metal, and memory. It should be enough to restore our positions."

Alber's hands, rough, stained with ink and sealing wax burns, laid out these things with care, as if they were relics.

Mark slipped the ring onto his finger. It fit perfectly, as if it had been cast for him.

The study door opened without a knock, and the same guard who had earlier vanished into the house's inner chambers stepped inside. Sebastian's hand instinctively went to his rapier hilt, but Alber raised a calming palm.

The guard approached quickly and whispered something in his ear, leaning close. Stone's face changed: color drained from his cheeks, and his eyes widened in astonishment. He nodded briefly to the guard, who immediately left, silently closing the heavy door behind him.

"What happened?" Liana asked, alarm in her voice.

Alber slowly approached his desk and picked up a sealed letter the guard had brought. He broke the seal and scanned the contents swiftly.

Liana flinched, as if hearing something in the emptiness.

When Alber raised his gaze, shock was frozen on his face. "We have guests coming," he said, his voice unusually quiet. "Beatrice Feski..." He paused, as if gathering strength for the next phrase.

"And Emilia Tagliapietra. They arrived secretly in Hogberg last night and request an immediate meeting."

Sebastian rose sharply from his seat. "Stepmother? Who betrayed Father and accepted Cornaro's ring?"

Emile leaned forward. "It's a trap!"

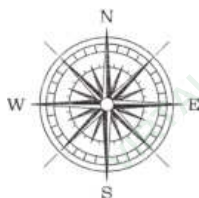
Alber shook his head. "If Signorina Feski has broken all plans and arrived with her..."

Mark pressed his lips together thoughtfully.

"...then something incredibly important is happening, something that changes the picture," Alber finished. He glanced at the clock. "The meeting is set for an hour from now. You have time to prepare."

Sebastian added quietly, "And sharpen the knives."

Chapter 20: The Noose Tightens



EMILIA

The mid-July heat had turned the admiral's study into a stone oven. Even the open windows offered no relief, only humid sea air, saturated with salt and the smell of seaweed drying on the scorching stones of the embankment. Emilia Scaliger paused in the doorway, listening. The corridor was empty. The guards were stationed a floor below. Cornaro had departed on an inspection tour of the Lower City, and the palace had sunk into drowsy silence.

The key turned in the lock without a squeak, a small victory of foresight: three days ago, Emilia had oiled the mechanism with olive oil, pretending she was merely strolling past. The heavy oak door swung inward.

Her hands trembled. She pressed them flat against her skirts until the shaking stopped.

The study greeted her with the smell of leather bindings, stale smoke from the brazier, and something else, something pungent and woody. Cornaro burned sandalwood sticks imported from the Golden Isles, an expensive habit for a man whose treasury, by all accounts, drained with each passing month.

Emilia closed the door and moved toward the massive desk of seasoned oak. Afternoon light fell through tall lancet windows, cutting the room into strips of light and shadow. A beam struck a bronze galley paperweight, and the metal flashed gold. Dust swirled in the air, settling slowly.

On the desktop lay maps of Ragusa, the surrounding islands, and the mainland coast. Beside them, a stack of documents was weighed down by a paperweight.

She knew where Cornaro hid the most important things: the third drawer on the left, the false bottom. The key was kept in a secret compartment of a carved box on the shelf. She had watched him for weeks, playing the dutiful wife, the pretty ornament. *He thinks me harmless.* Her fingers hesitated over the drawer. *Another betrayal.*

The metal settled coldly into her palm. The lock clicked. Emilia extracted a folder with a wax seal bearing the Cornaro coat of arms, a lion clutching an anchor. She untied the cord.

The first document was a treasury report for May. The entry in Mocenigo's script read: "Received into the island treasury from customs duties, trade fees, and taxes: twelve thousand forty-seven gold ducats." Below, in the same neat hand: "Expended on garrison and fleet wages: two thousand one hundred ducats. On palace maintenance: eight hundred ninety. On fortification repairs: one thousand two hundred."

Emilia's eyes scanned further. The largest entry came last: "Contribution to patrons: eight thousand ducats." Cornaro paid tribute to his mainland allies every month. The cost of power.

What would be my price?

A separate sheet showed the wage calculation for Captain Juan de Valdés's mercenaries: "Four hundred men, at eight ducats per man monthly, total three thousand two hundred."

Fifteen thousand in expenses against twelve in revenue. Cornaro was eating through his reserves.

The June report showed an even grimmer picture: "Received: eleven thousand."

Voices beyond the door made her freeze.

Her heart slammed against her ribs. She pressed a hand to her chest and forced herself to breathe.

"...can't continue forever," the treasurer Mocenigo was saying. His voice came from the adjacent room, the small council chamber where Secretary Contarini usually received visitors. The Contarinis of Ragusa were a minor branch of the great Arcadian house, as distant from their mainland cousins as the island Scaligers had been from theirs. Bernardo Contarini had made his career here, far from the family's true power.

"What do you propose?" Contarini asked.

Emilia crept closer to the half-open door leading to the next room. She remained in the shadows, listening.

"At the current rate, we'll exhaust our reserves by year's end," Mocenigo continued. "We need to cut expenses. Mercenary wages are the largest item after the contribution."

"Valdés receives payment for four hundred men," the treasurer added after a pause, "but many of his soldiers are occupied with the captain's personal affairs rather than defending the island, guarding his warehouses, escorting trade caravans, collecting debts. We pay for an army and receive a gang."

"His Excellency won't approve such a proposal," Contarini objected dryly. "The mercenaries are the foundation of our defense. Without them, the island is defenseless."

"Then we'll have to find additional sources of revenue. Raise taxes, introduce new duties..."

"Which will cause merchant discontent. We risk losing even more trading partners."

Emilia heard a chair creak. Someone had risen.

"The financial situation is critical, Bernardo," Mocenigo said harshly. "In six months, we won't have anything to pay the garrison. What happens when soldiers stop receiving their wages?"

"Mutiny," the secretary answered curtly.

Footsteps approached. Emilia silently retreated from the door, quickly returned the documents to their place, and closed the drawer. The key slid back into the box. A minute later, she was already leaving the study, locking the door behind her.

The information she had obtained, by fortunate coincidence from two sources at once, was priceless. Cornaro was caught in a financial trap. And where there's a shortage of money, there's always ground for conflict.

In the corridor, she leaned against the wall, her legs weak.

* * *

Two days later, Emilia sat across from the admiral in the small dining room of their private quarters. Silver platters of fruit reflected the candlelight: peaches from the orchards of Corto, grapes from the terraces of Monte Albo, rare citrus from the Golden Isles. Cornaro was cutting a peach with a silver knife, its handle elegantly carved. Juice ran down the blade, leaving amber drops on the porcelain plate.

"Darling," Emilia began, trying to inject a note of concern into her voice, "I accidentally overheard a conversation between Contarini and Mocenigo. They were discussing financial matters."

She smoothed the napkin in her lap, hiding how her fingers wanted to clench.

Cornaro raised his head from his plate. Wariness flickered in his eyes, quick as a snake's strike, then vanished beneath a mask of polite interest.

"And what were they saying?"

"That the mercenaries cost too much." Emilia paused, letting the words settle.

"Mocenigo proposed cutting their wages, or even partially replacing them with local militia."

Cornaro slowly set down his knife. His gaze sharpened, studying her closely. "Strange," he said thoughtfully. "Usually, you don't concern yourself with military matters. What's changed?"

Emilia felt a prick of danger but smiled with slight sadness. "Darling, do you suspect me of spying?" A note of playful offense sounded in her voice. "I'm simply worried about your safety. If the treasurer is right and there isn't enough money..."

"There's enough money—" he cut her off sharply.

"Then I'm relieved." Emilia lowered her eyes, feigning embarrassment. "Forgive me if I overstepped."

She didn't say the rest aloud: that the treasurer had spoken only of cutting payments. The detail about replacing mercenaries with militia was her addition. She knew that proposing to replace professional soldiers with fishermen wielding gutting knives was tantamount to calling the admiral a fool.

Cornaro slowly placed his knife on the plate's edge. His fingers rested on the tabletop, long and well-groomed, a signet ring on his index finger. The look he gave her was heavy and appraising. "Interesting," he said at last. "Very interesting."

Emilia lowered her eyes, pretending to concentrate on the grapes. Inside, everything clenched with fear. Had she gone too far? Did Cornaro find it strange that his mistress had suddenly taken an interest in financial matters?

But the admiral merely nodded, as if taking note, and returned to his peach. That night, he was even more tender with her than usual, as if he wanted to express gratitude for her help.

* * *

That night, Cornaro could not sleep.

He tossed beside Emilia, rose, drank wine, and walked to the window. Moonlight silvered the tile roofs and the water in the harbor.

"Can't sleep?" Emilia asked, her voice drowsy.

"Thinking," he replied without turning.

"About Valdés?"

A pause.

"About many things. The future. Whether I'm doing the right thing."

Emilia sat up in bed, drawing the sheet around her shoulders.

"You're doing what must be done. For the island. For order."

"For myself," Cornaro said quietly. "Let's be honest. I killed your admiral. Seized his throne. And now I wonder why the world isn't rushing to submit."

Emilia came to him, laying a hand on his shoulder.

Francis Scaliger was leading the island to ruin. His mad extravagance, his stubbornness, his pride... You saved Ragusa from him.

"So say my allies," Cornaro said bitterly, smiling. "The same ones who promised help and haven't sent a single ducat."

He turned to her. In the moonlight, his face seemed a pale, motionless mask.

"Sometimes I think: what if they simply used me? What if I'm a pawn, to be discarded once I've served my purpose?"

Emilia met his gaze.

"Then you need your own pawns. Your own pieces. Your own game."

A long pause.

"You're cleverer than you seem," Cornaro said.

You have no idea.

Aloud, she said, "I simply love you, Luciano. And I want you to win."

Cornaro pulled her close. His lips were hot, demanding.

Emilia closed her eyes and let her body do its work, while her mind was already composing a report for Beatrice.

Cornaro is desperate. Allies have betrayed him. Valdés is a threat. Finances are catastrophic.

Soon it will all collapse.

We must be ready.

* * *

The next day, Contarini and Mocenigo received a sharp reprimand from Cornaro for "exceeding authority in discussing military matters." Both were extremely surprised. They remembered their conversation quite differently from how Emilia had conveyed it.

But the seeds of suspicion had been sown.

BEATRICE

By the end of July, the heat had finally turned Ragusa into a stone trap. The sea, instead of bringing coolness, only added humidity. The air grew thick and viscous, and you had to force it through your lungs. Even in the shade of narrow Lower City alleyways, there was no escape. People moved slowly, conserving strength. Dogs lay panting under awnings, tongues lolling. Merchants fanned themselves with palm fronds, cursing the heat and the gods in equal measure.

But beneath this lethargic surface of city life, invisible work seethed. Beatrice's network functioned with clockwork precision.

The fruit merchant Marcello was a short, stocky man, his sun-weathered face furrowed with wrinkles like old leather. His calloused hands perpetually smelled of earth and ripe fruit, and his good-natured smile revealed uneven teeth. Nothing about him stood out among the dozens of suppliers who served the admiralty kitchen.

Every week, on Tuesday and Friday, he wheeled his cart to the palace's service entrance. His goods were impeccable, his prices fair, and his behavior predictable.

And no one suspected that beneath the layer of choice apples in his basket lay notes that could change the island's fate.

Emilia met him in the storeroom near the kitchen. Officially, she was inspecting the quality of goods, as befitted the lady of the house. In reality, she was passing folded sheets of parchment, each the size of a palm, hidden in the folds of her dress.

* * *

The meeting room above the Stone Arena was small and windowless. Torches along the walls cast dancing shadows, and the air carried the scent of incense and old stone. Beatrice sat at a round table, her face half-hidden by flickering light.

Before her sat Carlos Mendoza, a mercenary from Valdés's company; his face was swarthy, framed by a black mustache, and a scar ran across his left cheek. He was tense, fingers drumming on the tabletop.

"The information must reach Valdés through your cousin in the palace," Beatrice said. "Cornaro is supposedly considering replacing half your company with local forces."

Mendoza frowned, rubbing his temples, weariness and doubt etched in his expression. "The captain's no fool. If this sounds like a targeted leak..."

“That’s why the information must look natural—” Beatrice interrupted. “Like gossip. An accidentally overheard conversation. Your cousin mentions it to another servant, who tells a soldier friend in the company, who reports to Valdés. A chain. No direct traces.”

Mendoza clenched his fists on his knees, then slowly unclenched them and nodded. “Understood.”

“Act quickly. We have little time.”

Mendoza nodded and left.

Beatrice remained alone. She stood and walked to the window. Below, on the arena floor, an evening bout was ending. Two gladiators with short swords circled each other as the crowd roared. One missed, took a blow to the shoulder, and dropped to one knee.

Beatrice turned from the window. In truth, she disliked gladiatorial fights; there was too much blood for the entertainment of the rabble. But the arena brought in money and provided cover for her real work.

* * *

Two days later, the news reached Valdés.

A day after that, the mercenary captain demanded a personal meeting with Cornaro.

* * *

EMILIA

Emilia stood by a column in the palace’s main hall, trying to be inconspicuous. Officially, she was present as the ruler’s companion; in reality, she was an observer whose reports would reach Beatrice’s desk within hours.

This was the very hall where, not long ago, Francis Scaliger had lain dead. Sunlight streamed through tall lancet windows, illuminating marble columns and frescoes on the walls, depicting allegorical scenes of Ragusa’s victories over pirates and trading fleets presenting gifts to the admiral. Yet the atmosphere was tense, like the air before a storm.

Juan de Valdés entered with two lieutenants. He was a tall, wiry man with a sun-browned face and a scar running from his right temple to his chin, the mark of a saber blow received in some long-ago battle. He carried himself with the dignity of a professional soldier, accustomed to dealing with powerful men as an equal.

Cornaro sat in the admiral's chair, a massive throne of carved oak, upholstered in red velvet and adorned with gold embroidery. Beside him stood Secretary Contarini, Treasurer Mocenigo, and Captain of the Guard Gradenigo. All three looked tense.

"Your Excellency," Valdés began without the usual ceremonies, "I have learned of plans to change the status of my company."

"What plans?" Cornaro feigned surprise, though Emilia saw the muscles of his jaw tighten. He hadn't expected such directness.

"To replace part of my men with local forces. To cut funding. To revise our contract."

"Who told you this?"

"It doesn't matter who," Valdés replied calmly. "What matters is whether it's true."

Cornaro rose slowly from his chair. His movements were measured, but cold anger swirled in his eyes. Emilia knew that look. It was how men accustomed to having their word be law looked at others.

"Captain Valdés, I am surprised by the tone of our conversation," the admiral said in an icy voice. "Let me remind you that you serve the Admiralty of Ragusa, not negotiate as an equal."

"My men and I serve whoever values us and fairly compensates our services," Valdés replied without changing his tone. "If those conditions change, we have the right to reconsider our obligations."

"Your obligations are defined by the contract you signed."

"A condotta, a free company contract, can be terminated following established procedures," Valdés answered with cold courtesy. "All that's needed is sufficient grounds."

Emilia felt the air in the hall grow electrified. Both men spoke politely, observing formalities, but each phrase struck like a sword. Contarini and Mocenigo exchanged glances. They knew where this was heading.

Valdés's lieutenants stood motionless, but Emilia noticed their hands rested on their hilts, not gripping the handles, just resting there, as if by chance. She could see it was no accident. Soldiers are always ready for battle, even here in the palace, beneath the vaults where an admiral had been killed only weeks ago.

"And what do you consider sufficient grounds?" Cornaro asked.

"Delayed payments," Valdés stated, clearly. "My men haven't received their wages for the past two weeks."

"Temporary difficulties with gold shipments from the mainland..."

"Or disrespect for my soldiers' professionalism," the mercenary captain continued, cutting off the admiral. "Talk of replacing them with fishermen and dock workers."

"I never spoke of replacing your men!" Cornaro's voice rose.

"But your advisors did. In your presence. And that means the idea is being seriously considered."

Cornaro took a step forward. His face reddened, a sign that his restraint was nearing its limit.

"How dare you dictate terms to me in my own palace?" he hissed. "You're a mercenary, a soldier of fortune! I could drive you out at any moment!"

"You could," Valdés agreed, his tone still calm. "But then you'd be left without four hundred of the finest warriors on this side of the Jeweled Sea. I wonder how long your rule would last after that."

"Are you threatening me?"

"I'm stating a fact. Your position isn't as secure as it seems, and without my men, it will become even less so."

Emilia watched Cornaro flush crimson. He was accustomed to people trembling before his power, begging, pleading, fawning. Valdés's calm confidence, his manner of speaking as an equal, was an insult to the admiral.

"You know what, Captain?" Cornaro said with icy politeness, more dangerous than any shout. "You're right. Four hundred of your soldiers are indeed expensive, too expensive for an island that can manage with fewer forces. So I accept your proposal to terminate the contract."

Dead silence fell.

Valdés's lieutenants exchanged glances; they clearly hadn't expected such a turn. Contarini opened his mouth as if to say something, but didn't dare. Mocenigo went pale.

"You are terminating the contract?" Valdés finally asked, even his voice betraying surprise.

"Precisely," Cornaro nodded. "With observance of all formalities, of course. According to the agreement, you will receive a month's wages as compensation and must leave the island within a week."

"And our wages for the past two weeks?"

"Will be paid in full. I don't break my obligations, Captain, unlike some."

Valdés studied Cornaro for a long moment, as if assessing an opponent before battle. Something flickered in his eyes. Regret? Disappointment? Emilia couldn't tell.

Then the mercenary captain slowly nodded.

"As you wish, Your Excellency. But allow me to note that you're making a mistake. My men have served Ragusa faithfully. We shed blood for this island, defended it from pirates, and maintained order in the city. And now you're refusing our services over petty financial disagreements."

"Petty?" Cornaro echoed. "You call demanding immediate payment petty?"

"I call petty the unwillingness to discuss terms that would suit both sides. But what's done is done."

Valdés turned toward the exit. His lieutenants followed. At the very doors, the captain stopped, turned, and looked Cornaro straight in the eyes, and smirked. Silently. Said not a word. Just a crooked, mocking smile touched his lips.

Then he turned and walked out.

Emilia saw Cornaro's face turn purple. That silent smirk had stung him more deeply than any words. In it was contempt that couldn't be washed away.

Valdés passed through the doorway, but a moment later his voice carried from beyond the threshold.

"By the way, Your Excellency. One of my men was arrested by your guard yesterday. Carlos Mendoza. He's accused of spying."

Emilia's blood turned to ice. Her hand found the column beside her, and she steadied herself against the cold marble. *Mendoza. Beatrice's man.*

"And?" Cornaro asked, coldly.

"Nothing special," Valdés shrugged. "Just that by tomorrow morning, he's to be executed. I think that's fair. Spies deserve death. But I'm curious who hired him, and what he managed to pass to his masters."

With those words, the captain left the hall, leaving an oppressive silence behind.

Cornaro slowly sank into his chair. His face was dark as a thundercloud. For several moments, he sat in silence, staring into emptiness. Then he turned sharply to his secretary.

"Contarini, prepare the documents for terminating the mercenary contract. Mocenigo, calculate the exact sum for payment. Captain Gradenigo, double the palace guard and increase city patrols."

"Your Excellency," Contarini began cautiously, "perhaps the decision should be reconsidered? Four hundred experienced soldiers—"

"The decision is made!" Cornaro cut him off sharply, steel ringing in his voice. "And I don't wish to hear any more about the 'necessity' of these mercenaries. Ragusa managed perfectly well without them before I came to power and will manage after they leave."

Emilia watched in silence, careful not to betray her emotions. Her nails dug into her palms. The plan had worked even better than she could have hoped.

Four hundred men. Dismissed because of the words I whispered.

She unclenched her hands. Crescent marks dotted her palms, but she didn't look at them.

Cornaro was left without four hundred of his best warriors.

The island's garrison had just been cut in half, the better half.

BEATRICE

The news came on the last day of July.

Beatrice sat in her office above the arena, reviewing the past week's accounts. Gladiatorial fights brought steady income. People wanted bread and circuses, especially in such troubled times. They wanted distraction from politics, from rumors of coming war, from fear of the future.

The door burst open without a knock.

Marcello stumbled into the office, his face wet with sweat, his breathing ragged. He had clearly been running.

"Mendoza's been taken," he gasped.

"Tortured?"

Marcello nodded, his Adam's apple bobbing. "In the tower. Three hours. Cornaro's torturer..." He broke off. "They say the screams could be heard throughout the fortress."

"What did he say?"

"I don't know. But after the torture, Gradenigo sent squads to four different locations. Three more were arrested. One of them is a clerk from the treasury."

Beatrice rose and walked to the window. Below, on the arena floor, workers prepared the sand for the evening bout. The sun beat down mercilessly. Everything looked so ordinary, so peaceful, as if the world were not falling apart.

"Was Mendoza executed?"

"An hour ago. In the square before the palace."

Marcello was silent for a moment, then added quietly, "They put his head on a pike above the gates. Cornaro wants everyone to see what happens to traitors."

Beatrice closed her eyes.

"Any more arrests?"

"Unknown yet. But Gradenigo continues his work. Searches are underway throughout the city."

Beatrice turned to Marcello.

"Shut down operations. Immediately. Tell all agents: no contacts, no meetings. Go to ground. Especially those who had any connection to Mendoza."

"What about Emilia?"

"She's more complicated. She's in the palace, under observation. But she has intelligence and experience. She should understand what's happened and act carefully."

Marcello nodded and headed for the door, but Beatrice stopped him.

"What else?"

The fruit merchant turned. On his face was written what he did not dare speak aloud.

"Speak," Beatrice ordered.

"Corporal Olvio, who guards Donna Emilia's quarters, was seen entering Gradenigo's office this afternoon. They talked for a long time. Then Olvio returned to his post. By evening, the guard at her door had been doubled."

Beatrice felt cold spreading through her veins.

Think. Focus.

Cornaro knew. Maybe not everything. Maybe he only suspected. But Emilia was under suspicion.

And if she were exposed...

"Go," Beatrice said wearily. "Do what I said. And be careful. Gradenigo seems to know more than we thought."

When Marcello had gone, Beatrice sank into her chair.

She pressed her fingernails into her thighs until the pain cut through the fog.

Move. Act. Don't freeze.

Weeks of work. Dozens of agents. A massive amount of information was passed to Alber Stone. And now it could all collapse like a house of cards.

Mendoza was dead. Three more arrested. Emilia was under suspicion.

And Beatrice herself...

She ran her palm across her face. Her skin was hot, damp with sweat.

She needed to think. To act. To find a way to get Emilia out of the palace before Cornaro decided to arrest her, or at least warn her.

But how?

Any attempt at contact now was a risk. Marcello could no longer go to the palace. If Gradenigo suspected the fruit merchant, the entire chain would collapse. There were no other reliable channels of communication with Emilia, unless Beatrice violated all safety protocols and met with her personally.

Beatrice stood and walked to a small safe hidden behind a painting on the wall. She opened it and took out a leather pouch of gold coins and a small dagger in its sheath, a three-sided stiletto with a blackwood handle. The blade was coated with poison, an extract of belladonna. It worked within minutes.

She had never carried a weapon before. She had always relied on her wits, her cunning, her ability to manipulate people.

But times had changed. And some things were worth dying for. Sebastian's face flickered through her mind, his fierce eyes, his stubborn jaw. The family she had sworn to protect.

Beatrice hid the dagger in the folds of her dress and left the office.

One chance. Do not waste it.

She had a plan. Insane, dangerous, but the only one possible.

If Cornaro suspected Emilia, he would act soon. Arrest. Interrogation. Torture.

She needed to get ahead of him.

And for that, Beatrice needed to do what seemed unthinkable.

She would do the dirty work herself.

* * *

The day dawned surprisingly clear. The heat had broken, and a light breeze from the sea brought coolness and the smell of salt. The sky over Ragusa blazed with cloudless blue, the kind you see only in midsummer.

Beatrice walked through the streets of the Upper City, outwardly calm, but every muscle was tense, like a bowstring before battle.

She had dressed for the visit: a magnificent gown of dark blue velvet, with silver embroidery along the bodice and hem, pearl earrings, and hair arranged in the elegant style favored by noble ladies. In her hands, she carried a soft leather bag.

Inside the bag lay the stiletto.

And a glass capsule the size of a quail's egg, an alchemical mixture once given to her by a merchant from the Golden Isles. Acrid smoke: sulfur, saltpeter, ground pepper. Crush it underfoot, and the room would fill with a cloud that made breathing impossible, eyes watering, throat burning.

A last resort, in case everything went wrong.

Beatrice passed guardsmen patrolling the streets. They nodded politely; they knew her by sight, a wealthy owner of entertainment establishments, a frequent guest at palace receptions, a courtier. No suspicions.

The main gates of the Admiralty Palace loomed before her: massive oak doors bound with iron. Above them, on a pike, Mendoza's head had blackened. The crows had already been at work, and the eye sockets were empty.

Beatrice forced herself not to look.

Captain Gradenigo himself stood guard at the gates. He was a tall, wiry man with a scarred face, a local nobleman who had taken service with Cornaro—hard, ruthless, loyal to his patron.

He raised his head at her approach, surprise flickering in his eyes.

"Signorina Feski," he said cautiously. "I didn't expect to see you today."

Beatrice offered a light, casual smile.

"Good day, Captain. There must have been some confusion with the dates. I thought Donna Emilia's reception was scheduled for today."

Gradenigo studied her face with a long, appraising look. Beatrice felt her skin prickle under his gaze, as if he were trying to peer into her soul and read her thoughts.

She kept her breathing even.

You're furniture. You're nothing. You're exactly what you appear to be.

"The reception is tomorrow," he said at last. "But if you wish to visit the admiral's wife unofficially..."

"That's exactly what I'd like," Beatrice feigned slight annoyance. "How awkward! But since I'm here, perhaps I should thank Donna Emilia for her hospitality and discuss the details of tomorrow's event."

The captain hesitated. Beatrice could see the struggle in his mind: orders to increase security versus reluctance to offend an influential woman.

"I'm afraid Signora is unwell," he said cautiously. "She's unlikely to receive visitors."

"No matter." Beatrice turned as if to leave. "Just tell her I stopped by, and say that tomorrow I'll certainly come with a gift of rare eastern spices."

She took two steps before Gradenigo's voice stopped her.

"Signorina Feski! Wait."

Beatrice turned, careful not to let triumph show on her face.

"I'll report your visit to His Excellency," the captain said. "Perhaps the admiral himself will wish to receive you."

A trap.

But aloud she said, "Of course. I'd be delighted."

Gradenigo gave an order to one of the guards, a young soldier with a nervous face, and he disappeared into the palace. Beatrice remained standing in the shade of the portico, under the captain's gaze.

She didn't have to wait long. Within minutes, the soldier returned, and behind him appeared Cornaro himself.

The admiral wore a dark green doublet embroidered with gold. At his side hung a wunakwa, the Cornaro family dagger he bore as a symbol of power: a broad blade with a wavy steel pattern and an ivory handle.

"Signorina Beatrice," he greeted, his politeness cold. "What an unexpected honor."

Beatrice sank into a deep curtsy, as befitted a noblewoman before a ruler: back straight, head slightly inclined, right hand gliding along her skirt. Cornaro did not offer his hand, which spoke more eloquently than words.

"Your Excellency," Beatrice said, rising. "Forgive me for the intrusion."

"No intrusion at all," Cornaro smiled, though the smile didn't reach his eyes. "Just surprised. Usually, you announce your visits in advance."

The politeness was so pronounced that it seemed almost gallant rather than mocking.

"There was an unfortunate confusion with the dates," Beatrice repeated. "But since I'm here, perhaps I should take advantage of the opportunity?"

"Of course," the admiral nodded. "Come to my study. Captain, escort the lady."

* * *

Cornaro's study was on the third floor of the east wing. Tall windows looked out over the harbor, revealing the entire port: ships at anchor, distant islands on the horizon.

A massive desk of seasoned oak occupied the center of the room. Maps hung on the walls: Ragusa, its surroundings, trade routes. In a corner stood a brazier, though in such heat it was hardly needed.

Afternoon sunlight flooded the study with golden light.

"Please, sit," Cornaro gallantly indicated a chair before the desk.

Beatrice lowered herself into it, crossing her hands on her knees.

"Your Excellency is too kind to his faithful servant."

The bag lay beside her on the armrest. Inside, the dagger and capsule.

Cornaro circled the desk and sat opposite. He unbuckled the wunakwa and laid it on the desktop within easy reach. His fingers drummed once on the wood, twice, then stilled.

"Tell me, Signorina Beatrice," he began calmly, "how long have you been interested in matters of state security?"

The question caught her off guard. Beatrice forced herself to smile.

"Since my business depends on stability in the city, Your Excellency. Recent events are cause for concern."

"I understand." Cornaro nodded. "Arresting spies. Executing traitors. Unpleasant, certainly, but necessary."

"Undoubtedly."

"And tell me," the admiral continued, "have you happened to encounter suspicious individuals? People who asked strange questions about the garrison's condition, troop dispositions, or the Admiralty's financial situation?"

Beatrice felt a cold sweat break out across her back. She kept her face impassive.

"No, Your Excellency. Should I have?"

"In our times, spies are everywhere," Cornaro remarked philosophically.

"Especially where profitable business is conducted, and influential people gather. Your arena, for instance, would be an ideal place to gather information."

"I always watch my guests carefully," Beatrice said firmly. "And would immediately report any suspicious conversations."

"Of course." Cornaro rose and walked to the window. He stood with his back to her, gazing at the harbor. "And tell me, have you ever met the sons of the late Admiral Francis?"

The question struck like a whip crack.

Her spine went rigid. She forced it to relax, muscle by muscle. *Breathe. Slow.*

Beatrice summoned all her composure.

"I saw them at the palace when they were young, but I wasn't closely acquainted."

"And their relatives on the mainland?"

"No."

Cornaro turned to her, a cold, almost bored smile on his face.

"Strange. Because one of my informants claims to have seen you with a middle-aged man, gray-haired, an antiques dealer, he called himself. The Anchor Tavern on the mainland shore. A couple of weeks ago."

He knows.

The trap has closed.

The world tilted beneath her feet. Her fingers found the armrest, gripping until her knuckles whitened. The wood was solid. Real. She held onto that.

But aloud she said calmly, "I'm afraid your informant was mistaken, Your Excellency. Two weeks ago, I didn't leave Ragusa."

"Perhaps," Cornaro agreed, returning to the desk. He sat down and steepled his fingers. "Or perhaps you have a double."

He paused, letting the words settle, then continued.

"Do you know what amazes me most about traitors, Signorina Beatrice?"

"What?"

"Their arrogance," the admiral's voice hardened, like a string tightening before it snaps. "They think they're smarter than everyone else, that they can deceive people for years without arousing suspicion. That they can spin their intrigues, sell secrets, betray trust, and no one will notice."

He leaned forward, locking eyes with Beatrice.

"But sooner or later, they make a mistake."

Beatrice decided to go on the offensive. She straightened in her chair and raised her chin.

"And what is my mistake, Your Excellency?"

Cornaro smiled, cold and triumphant.

"That you came here today."

He stood, circled the desk, and approached her. Beatrice felt every cell in her body screaming: *Danger. Run. Now!*

But she remained seated.

“The real Beatrice Feski,” Cornaro said slowly, savoring each word, “an innocent owner of entertainment establishments, a cupbearer of the Ragusan court, would never risk coming to the palace on a day when arrests for suspected espionage are being conducted.”

He leaned down, almost touching her face.

“But a spy desperately trying to save her agent very well might.”

Silence.

Only the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece. Steady. Merciless.

Beatrice slowly rose. Her heart pounded in her throat. Her mouth was dry, her tongue sticking to her palate as if after a long run. But her hands didn't tremble. Years of training had done their work.

Her hand slid toward the bag.

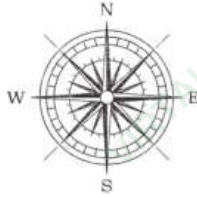
Cornaro saw the movement. His hand shot to the wunakwa on the desk.

Their eyes met.

Only one way out remained.

Fight, or die trying.

Chapter 21: Cards on the Table



BEATRICE

Beatrice gripped the dagger's hilt inside her bag and became a weapon.

Her heart pounded in her throat, but her hand remained steady. Years of training had done their work.

Cornaro saw the movement. His fingers shot toward the wunakwa on the desk, the instinct of a professional honed by decades of war.

"Guards!" he shouted, his voice ringing like a bell.

The dagger flashed in the afternoon light. Beatrice drew it lightning-fast, and the blade sang a thin, deadly note. She didn't attack immediately.

Her left hand dove into the bag, fingers finding the cold glass of the second capsule.

Cornaro lunged for the desk where the wunakwa lay. The Cornaro family dagger had killed more than one enemy. His hand nearly closed on the hilt.

Beatrice hurled the capsule.

Glass shattered against the floor between them: a crack, then a hiss like an enraged serpent.

Acrid gray smoke erupted instantly, a mixture of sulfur, saltpeter, and ground pepper, a gift from an alchemist on the Golden Isles. It filled the study in three heartbeats.

Beatrice held her breath, retreating toward the door, pressing her elbow to her face.

Cornaro coughed. His eyes squeezed shut, streaming tears. He clutched his throat, his face contorted with rage and disbelief. He tried to grab the wunakwa, but his fingers wouldn't obey; the world swam before his eyes in a gray fog.

Now. Move now.

"Damnation..." he rasped through the coughing.

The door burst open. A guard rushed in, sword already drawn.

“Your Excellen—” he began, and caught a faceful of smoke.

The soldier doubled over, his sword clattering to the floor. He fell to his knees, choking, hands clawing at his throat.

Beatrice slipped past him into the corridor like a shadow. The dagger was still in her hand. The blade caught a ray of light from the window and flashed silver. She hiked her dress high; the damned skirt hindered her run, the hem catching at her legs.

Behind her, Cornaro shouted something unintelligible through coughs and rage. His voice drowned in wheezes, but words broke through: “Take... her... alive!”

Beatrice raced down the corridor. Her heels drummed on the marble floor: click-click-click, like a drum roll before an execution.

Third floor of the Admiralty Palace.

Tapestries depicting naval battles lined the walls: galleys under full sail, cannon smoke drifting over waves, burning ships sinking into the depths. Portraits of admirals hung in heavy gilded frames, their dress uniforms adorned with gold embroidery, medals on their chests, gazes cold and merciless as the northern sea.

Afternoon sun blazed through tall lancet windows. Long shadows lay across the black-and-white marble floor. A chessboard, and Beatrice was a piece they were trying to corner.

She ran. Her shadow slid along the walls, lengthening, shortening, jumping from panel to panel. Her lungs burned, not from exhaustion, but from the smoke she’d inhaled, after all.

Behind her came footsteps. Many feet pounding on the stone.

Shouts rang out: “Stop her!”

“Don’t kill! Alive!”

“Seal the west wing!”

“Where’s the captain?!”

Beatrice turned at the corridor junction. Sharply, without slowing. Right. The staircase to the second floor was there. Emilia’s quarters in the east wing. Third door from the stairs. If she could make it...

Thirty paces to the stairs. Twenty guards in the palace. Do the math.

Ten more steps.

Five.

Two guards appeared ahead, climbing the stairs toward her. They must have heard the alarm.

They saw her. Froze for a second. A lady in a velvet dress running with a dagger in hand, hair disheveled, face pale. The first guard's jaw dropped. The second's eyes went wide, darting from her face to the blade and back.

"Stop her!" the first one shouted, his voice cracking.

They did not draw swords. The order was clear: alive. They lunged to grab her.

Beatrice did not slow. At the last moment, she darted left, toward the banister.

The first guard reached out, trying to grab her. His fingers slid across the velvet sleeve, catching the fabric.

Rip. The sleeve tore, and a long strip of velvet remained in his hand. Expensive mainland velvet, twelve gold pieces per ell.

To hell with the dress.

The second tried to block her path, spreading his arms wide across the staircase.

Beatrice jumped.

Not down the steps, sideways, onto the railing. One foot on the marble banister, balance for an instant, then she slid down the smooth stone like a slide.

Her skirt rode indecently high. The dress tore at the seams.

"Saints!" the guard breathed.

Beatrice was already at the bottom. She jumped off, barely keeping her balance.

Down.

She leaped three steps at a time. Hands grabbed the railings.

Balance, balance, or you'd break your neck.

The marble was slippery underfoot. Someone had recently washed it. She felt her shoe soles sliding.

She stumbled.

Twisted her ankle. Sharp pain lanced through the joint.

Fell to one knee. Her palms struck stone. Pain shot through her wrists. The dagger nearly flew from her hand.

Get up. Get up, or die here.

Her dress caught on the railing; the fabric ripped. The hem hung in tatters.

Beatrice scrambled up. Ran on.

Clothes are the last thing that matter.

Second floor. The corridor was quieter here, with fewer people. Most of the guards were still climbing from the lower floors or rushing around the third, trying to figure out where the criminal had gone.

But the pursuit was closing in: boots thundering, commands barking, weapons clanging. The sounds echoed off the high vaults, amplifying, filling the palace.

One minute. Maybe two. No more.

Beatrice knew this palace the way you know a house you grew up in. Every turn, every staircase, every crack in the plaster. Her mother had once led her through every corner of the old building, showing her its secrets.

Then it had seemed like a game.

Now it was the line between life and death.

The guards were not local. Cornaro's mercenaries had been brought from the mainland after the coup. They did not know the palace. They got lost in the labyrinth of corridors and wasted time at intersections.

That gave her an advantage. Microscopic. But enough.

Emilia's quarters were in the east wing, third door from the grand staircase.

But the path was blocked. Beatrice could hear it: footsteps ahead, shouts, guards gathering at the stairs.

Another way. Through the balcony.

She turned left, toward the old west wing.

There was a balcony there. It overlooked the inner courtyard. And from the balcony, a ledge. Narrow and dangerous. No adult remembered it.

But children knew.

The corridor to the west wing was empty. An old, rarely used part of the palace. Dust lay on the floor, cobwebs in the corners. Heavy doors at the end, carved oak, blackened with age.

The balcony.

Beatrice flung open the doors and burst outside.

Afternoon sun struck her eyes. Wind from the sea. Salty, fresh, smelling of freedom and danger.

A wide stone platform with an ornate balustrade. Below, the paved courtyard. Three floors down. High enough that if you fell, they'd collect your bones in a sack.

But to the right stretched the ledge.

A narrow stone projection along the old wing's wall. Two handspans wide, no more. Three hundred years ago, it had been part of the decorative work. Now half-ruined, moss-covered, crumbling.

But it led to the east wing. Bypassing half the palace. To Emilia's quarters.

Children had climbed along it. Ten years ago, Beatrice herself had crawled here with friends, laughing, scaring each other. Then it had been an adventure.

The adults had known about it once. Then forgot.

Behind her, shouts. The pursuit had found her trail.

“There! On the balcony!”

“Surround her!”

No time to think.

Beatrice climbed over the balustrade. Sat on the edge, legs dangling over the void. Looked down. Her stomach clenched, her head spun.

Don't look down. Never look down.

For Sebastian.

For the family.

For everyone, Cornaro will kill if I don't make it.

She turned to face the wall. Her foot found the ledge. Stone beneath her sole, narrow, slippery with moss.

She lowered herself onto the ledge. Stood. Pressed her back to the wall.

Her dress immediately caught on the rough stone with a ripping sound.

“Damn!” Beatrice hissed through her teeth.

She yanked. The fabric wouldn't give. Again, rip, and a long strip tore from the skirt. Now the hem barely covered her thighs.

To hell with decency!

Her hands gripped the uneven masonry. She moved sideways, slowly, step by step.

Wind caught her hair, whipping it across her face. Her skirt fluttered, barely covering her legs. Anyone looking from below would see everything.

Five steps.

Stone shifted beneath her foot. A piece of the ledge broke away and fell, three seconds of freefall, ending in a dull thud against the courtyard stones.

Beatrice froze. Her heart hammered so violently it felt as if it would leap from her chest.

Breathe. Just breathe. Another step.

Her dress caught again. She yanked with fury and desperation. A long piece of hem tore away, falling like a wounded bird.

Now her legs were bared almost to her thighs. Stockings torn. Blood seeped through the thin silk from scrapes on her knees.

Three more steps.

Fingers slid across stone, gripping projections and cracks. Nails broke on the rough masonry. One tore off completely, sending a flare of sharp pain through her hand.

“Son of a...” Beatrice hissed.

Ten steps.

Behind her, on the balcony, guards appeared. Three of them. They saw her.

The first guard’s face went ashen. The second crossed himself. The third, an officer by his sash, gripped the balustrade until his knuckles turned white.

“Saints! She’s on the ledge!”

“Signora! Stop! You’ll fall!”

“Someone get below! Catch her if she drops!”

Beatrice did not look back. She moved faster, another step, another, another.

One guard climbed after her.

“Stop, you fool!” he shouted. “It’s death!”

He was heavier. The ledge groaned under his weight. Stone crumbled, raining down.

“Back!” the captain yelled. “It will not hold!”

The guard retreated to the balcony.

Beatrice kept moving.

Fifteen steps.

Twenty.

The ledge turned around the corner. The east wing began there.

The last stretch. The most dangerous. Here, the ledge was narrowest, barely a palm’s width.

Almost. Almost there.

Five more steps.

Four.

Stone cracked under her foot. Beatrice felt it give way.

No.

She pushed off, leaped forward.

A second of flight. Arms outstretched, she grabbed a wall projection.

Fingers caught hold. Holding. Nails dug into stone: pain, blood.

She hung by her hands, legs dangling over the void.

Below, the fallen piece of ledge shattered on the stones in a cloud of dust.

Pull up. Quickly!

She pulled up and found the ledge with her foot. Stood.

Turned.

The guards on the balcony stared at her. They couldn't believe their eyes.

Beatrice smirked. Wild, fierce. She raised her bloodied palm in a mocking salute.

Then she turned and ran along the ledge. Fast, reckless, on the edge of the possible.

Ten more steps, and she reached a window in the east wing.

The window stood open, shutters wide, light curtains fluttering in the breeze.

Beatrice grabbed the sill, pulled herself up, and rolled over the edge.

She fell to the floor inside on all fours. Hands shaking, torn palms leaving red prints on the stone. Dress in shreds.

But alive.

Goddesses. I'm alive.

She rose to her feet and looked around.

A narrow corridor. Tapestries on the walls. The east wing.

Emilia's quarters. There, around the corner. Third door.

Beatrice gripped her dagger tighter. Ran.

Corporal Olvio stood guard at Emilia's door, a short, wiry man in his thirties, his face weathered by sun and wind. Twenty years on galleys, at oars, and in boarding actions. Hands covered in scars. The eyes of an experienced soldier. They had seen death, seen blood; nothing could surprise them.

He heard footsteps, turned, and froze.

Down the corridor toward him ran... something.

Beatrice Feski. The spirited girl he'd enjoyed chatting with when he had stood watch. Later, a respected signora, a courtier he'd seen at the palace dozens of times in magnificent attire.

But not like this.

Not with disheveled hair falling over her shoulders in a golden waterfall. Not with a face smeared with dust, feverish eyes burning. Not with bloodied hands.

And certainly not dressed like this.

Her gown was torn almost to the point of indecency. The skirt, what remained of it, barely covered her thighs, revealing long, shapely legs in ripped silk stockings. The bodice had burst at the seam. The neckline was dangerously low, her chest threatening to escape with every breath. One shoulder was completely bare, velvet torn, skin visible through the thin lace of her chemise.

She ran straight at him like a fury, like a harpy from ancient legend. A dagger gleamed in her hand.

“Signorina Feski?” Olvio managed. His weathered face cycled through confusion, disbelief, and something that might have been concern. His hand reached for his sword, slow, uncertain. “What the... You... Your dress...”

He didn’t finish.

Beatrice was three steps away. Two. One.

The dagger flashed in an upward thrust, aimed at his throat.

Olvio snapped awake at the last moment. Instinct honed by years of combat. He twisted left, drew his sword in a single fluid motion. Blades met with a ring. He stood between her and the door now, sword extended, feet planted.

His sword was longer. Heavier. He was stronger, more experienced, and trained to fight.

But for a second. Just one damned second. He wasn’t focused.

Beatrice circled right, toward the wall. The dagger traced an arc toward his wrist. Olvio parried, steel scraping steel, but she’d already stepped sideways, putting her back to the tapestry.

He tried to attack with an overhand cut, pressing forward.

She leaped backward. Her shoulders slammed into the doorframe. The edge of her torn hem caught on the wood. *Rip*, another scrap of velvet tore away.

Olvio was distracted for an instant. His eyes slid down, then up. A purely male reflex, impossible to suppress. His sword point dipped.

There.

Beatrice stepped forward. Inside his guard, under his sword arm. Her left hand, dagger in grip, swept down. A feint, a distraction.

His sword followed the movement. Automatically, instinctively.

Her right hand shot up. The dagger’s pommel struck his temple.

A dull sound. Bone against metal.

Olvio swayed. He tried to stay upright, but his legs would not obey. The world swam before his eyes. His face slackened, the hardened soldier’s mask crumbling into something almost childlike. Bewildered.

A second blow, to the back of the head. Precise, professional, calculated force.

He sank to his knees. His sword clattered from his hand. Eyes rolled back.

He fell onto his side.

Beatrice stood over him, dagger in hand, ready to strike again if he moved. Her chest heaved. *One. Two. Three.* She counted heartbeats. Waiting.

But Olvio did not move. He was breathing. Chest rising, falling. Alive, though out cold for a while.

“Fool,” Beatrice breathed. “Never get distracted by a woman when she’s trying to kill you.”

Her hands shook. Not from fear. From something darker, older.

I could have killed him. I wanted to.

A lesson he’d remember. If he woke up.

Beatrice yanked the keys from his belt, a ring with three iron keys. Heavy. Cold. Her fingers trembled.

Which one?

First.

Into the lock. Did not fit.

Second.

Click.

The door swung open.

Emilia stood by the window, turning at the sound.

Her face was pale as linen. Eyes wide, dark circles beneath them, lips pressed into a thin line. Hands clenched into fists. She’d clearly been expecting something bad. But not this.

Not Beatrice, with torn hands, in a filthy, ruined dress, dagger in hand, and wild eyes.

Recognition flickered across Emilia’s face. Then shock. Then something almost like hope, quickly smothered by fear.

“Beatrice?” Emilia breathed. “How did you... What’s happening?”

“Questions later!” Beatrice snapped, grabbing her arm. “If there is a ‘later’! Run! Now!”

“But Cornaro, ”

“Knows everything!” Beatrice dragged her toward the door, glancing back.

“Guards on my tail. We have a minute, maybe less.”

Emilia saw Olvio lying on the floor and tried to pull free. “You killed him?!”

“No. Knocked out. Though right now it doesn’t matter.” Beatrice pulled her into the corridor. “I hope you didn’t seal the old passage... to the grotto?”

“No, but it goes through the cellars...”

“Lead! Quickly!”

They ran to an inconspicuous door at the corridor’s end, a service passage the servants used.

A narrow spiral staircase led down. Stone steps worn by countless footsteps over centuries. Walls are damp, hands sliding on stone slick with moss.

Darkness pressed in. Only a faint light seeped from somewhere below, the dim orange glow of torches. Beatrice led, dagger in one hand, the other trailing along the wall. Adrenaline hadn’t faded. Her face was damp, her heart pounding.

Emilia followed, gripping Beatrice’s shoulder, frightened.

“How did you... How did you know I was here?” she whispered.

“Not now—” Beatrice cut her off. “Later. If we survive.”

They descended for a long time. The staircase wound deeper underground. The temperature dropped. Cold crept beneath their clothing, biting at bare skin. Beatrice shivered; what remained of her dress offered no warmth.

Somewhere above, through the mass of stone, voices thundered. Guards were searching Emilia’s quarters. Probably found Olvio, shouts, curses, stampeding feet.

“Faster,” Beatrice whispered.

The stairs ended. They emerged into a cellar.

Low vaulted ceilings pressed down like a stone sky. Massive oak beams, blackened by time and smoke, crossed overhead. Between them hung cobwebs thick as a ship’s rope. Along the walls stood barrels: wine, oil, grain, the palace’s supplies in the event of a siege.

Faint light from torches in wall sconces glimmered. Dim orange flickering barely pushed back the darkness. Shadows pooled in corners, hiding whatever scuttled there.

The smell hit her: mold, dampness, old wood, rats. The cellar breathed decay.

How many times had I played here as a child? Hide-and-seek among the barrels.

Now she was prey, not player.

“Which way?” Beatrice asked, looking around.

“There,” Emilia pointed with a trembling hand. “Behind that wall. There’s a passage.”

They picked their way between barrels. Dust rose under their feet and settled on their clothing. Cobwebs clung to their faces. Beatrice spat and brushed them away. In the cellar's far corner stood an old wall. Uneven, ancient masonry, clearly older than the palace itself, probably a remnant of some more ancient building that had stood here before the Admiralty.

In the wall, a low arch. Blocked with stones, but loosely. Gaps visible.

"Here?" Beatrice approached, felt the stones.

"Yes. My husband showed me. Said it was an old smugglers' passage. From before the Council controlled the harbor. Led to the sea, to a secret pier."

"Help me."

They began pulling out stones. They came free easily. The masonry was held with clay, not mortar. First stone, second, third.

Behind the wall: darkness. Damp air struck their faces. Salty, oceanic. The gap was large enough to squeeze through. Above, a crash. Guards had descended to the cellars.

"They're here!" a shout.

"Search every passage!"

"Check every barrel!"

"Quick!" Beatrice grabbed Emilia's hand and pulled her through the gap.

They squeezed through the narrow opening. Stones scraped their backs, caught at their clothes. They emerged in a tunnel.

Narrow, low, carved straight into rock. Walls of bare stone, damp and moss-covered. Floor uneven, rising and falling, puddles of water, slippery rocks. Darkness absolute. Not a glimmer of light.

Beatrice lit a small lantern. She always carried one in her bag for emergencies. Its dim yellow glow showed the path ahead for only a few steps. "Hold onto me," she said. "Don't fall behind."

They moved into the darkness. The tunnel stretched on. One minute. Five. Ten. Time lost all meaning. In absolute darkness, it was impossible to tell how long had passed, maybe an hour, maybe eternity. Water squelched under their feet, cold and ankle-deep. Beatrice slipped, barely keeping her balance. Emilia yelped.

"Quiet!" Beatrice hissed.

They went on. The air grew more humid. The smell of the sea intensified: salt, seaweed, fish. Walls glistened with greenish slime. Somewhere, water dripped, a steady sound in the silence.

"How much farther, do you think?" Emilia whispered.

“Don’t know. By the smell, the sea is close.”

Another hundred steps. Two hundred. Ahead, a glimmer of light: the exit. They quickened their pace, almost running on the slippery stone.

The tunnel ended at an opening into a small cave, a natural grotto carved by waves into the rock. The floor was bare stones covered with seaweed. The smell of the sea was overwhelming.

The grotto.

Beatrice entered and stopped, looking around.

A natural cave at the base of the cliff. The vault rose to three times a man’s height, uneven, covered with limestone growths. Stalactites hung like stone icicles. Stalagmites reached up to meet them from below. Some had already joined into columns.

The floor was strewn with boulders, moss, and shells clinging to their surfaces. Between them, pools of seawater remained from the tide, gleaming as they reflected the light from the sea.

Light filtered through a fissure, creating a play of shadow. Stalactite shadows danced across the walls like living things.

The grotto’s exit: a wide crack in the rock. Through it, the sea stretched blue and boundless, sparkling in the sun. Waves broke against the stones, throwing up foam.

“There... a path leads to a cove. Tommaso should be waiting.”

They climbed out of the grotto and followed the path, narrow and slippery with spray. On one side, a cliff; on the other, a drop to the sea. They held onto the rocks.

Wind whipped their hair; salt spray lashed their faces.

A hundred steps later, the path led them to a quiet cove, small and sheltered from the waves by a headland.

And there: a fishing schooner, a “lagoon” type. Single-masted, with a fore-and-aft sail of hand-sewn canvas. Hull darkened by salt and time, but the wood was strong, northern oak that could weather storms. Sail furled, anchored in the calm cove.

On board, a lean figure in a faded doublet.

Tommaso.

The old fisherman spotted them on the shore and waved. His leathery face split into a grin, revealing gaps where teeth had been. He began lowering a rowboat over the side.

Beatrice and Emilia climbed down to the water. Tommaso rowed to shore and helped them into the boat. Then they rowed back to the schooner.

Tommaso leaned over the gunwale and extended a hand, helping first Emilia, then Beatrice, climb onto the deck.

"Signorina," he bowed. "As you ordered."

"Well done, Tommaso." Beatrice squeezed his shoulder, catching her breath. "We leave immediately. To the mainland. Hogberg."

The old man smirked, squinting. "Hogberg? Half of Cornaro's fleet is prowling there right now. But all right, signorina. Old Tommaso's sailed past death before." He began raising the sail. The canvas fluttered in the wind, then filled. The schooner rocked and moved forward.

Beatrice sank onto the deck and leaned her back against the gunwale. Surveyed herself. Palms torn, dried blood crusting her hands. A bruise on her ribs where she'd struck the railing. Dress ripped, filthy. Blood on the sleeve. Someone else's? Her own? She could not remember.

Emilia sat beside her, wrapped in the cloak Beatrice had taken off and given her. She was shivering, the adrenaline fading, her body demanding payment.

Beatrice turned.

The island was receding. Ragusa in daylight. The walls of the Upper City, the towers of Cornaro's palace on the cliffs. Around the schooner, dozens of fishing boats, small craft, schooners, and barges. Fishermen heading out to work. Easy to disappear among them.

On the roadstead, silhouettes of war galleys were visible. If they were preparing a pursuit, it would take time. Raise sails, gather crew, receive orders.

They had a head start. An hour, maybe two.

Emilia watched the receding island. Face pale, lips tight. "What happens now?" she asked quietly.

Beatrice gazed at the horizon, where a dark strip of mainland was barely visible in the haze. "Now we reach the mainland," she said. "And warn Alber Stone that the time for diplomacy is over."

Tommaso adjusted the sail. The boat heeled, gaining speed.

"Day and a half to the mainland," the old fisherman said. "If the wind holds."

"And if it changes?" Beatrice asked dryly.

"Two days. Or we drown." Tommaso shrugged. "What's the difference?"

Emilia said nothing. She sat wrapped in the cloak, watching the receding island. Beatrice could see that the girl was thinking of something heavy. What awaited on the mainland? Forgiveness, or the gallows? But aloud, Emilia said nothing.

"Alber will take care of things," Beatrice said, as if reading her thoughts. "We need you alive. You know more about Cornaro than anyone."

Night fell completely. The sea turned black as pitch. Only the foam on the wave crests gleamed in the darkness. The wind freshened. The sail stretched taut. Ropes creaked.

Tommaso held course by the stars. An old sailor, he could navigate blind, trusting instinct and experience.

Emilia dozed, wrapped in the cloak. Exhaustion had claimed her.

Beatrice did not sleep. She sat at the stern, watching the wake the boat left behind. Bioluminescent plankton flashed in the water, a scattering of green sparks. She remembered an old legend. The souls of the drowned became the sea's light. Or was it a sign from a goddess? One of the Twelve had once ruled the seas. Perhaps she was watching them now, from the depths.

Thoughts circled.

Mendoza was dead. Three more agents captured. Foscoli might be exposed too, if Cornaro had investigated thoroughly enough.

The network she'd woven for five years was unraveling, thread by thread. The web spun with patience and blood, and Cornaro was tearing out the strands one by one. With each break, she felt herself losing control of the island.

But Emilia was saved. And with her, priceless information. Cornaro was left without mercenaries. Alber's plan might work.

Might. If...

"Beatrice," Emilia called softly.

She'd woken, moved closer. Her face was pale in the moonlight.

"May I ask something?"

"Ask."

"Why did you risk it? Coming to the palace. You knew it was a trap."

Beatrice was silent. The question was honest. It deserved an honest answer.

"You knew almost the entire network," she said at last. "Under torture, you'd have given up names. Everyone would have been hanged by sunset."

"Just calculation?"

Beatrice looked at her. Was silent for a long time. Watched the water, where green sparks flashed. Then she turned away, to the sea.

"Because..." She paused. "I am tired of losing people."

She added nothing more. But Emilia understood.

Emilia nodded. In the darkness, her expression could not be seen, but her voice was warm. "Thank you."

They sat in silence, listening to the sound of the waves. Wind whipped their hair; salt spray settled on their faces.

Emilia looked down at the water. Nausea gripped her again. She leaned over the side.

"At least Cornaro won't execute me," she breathed. "The sea will do it first."

Beatrice smirked dryly. "You won't die. Tommaso sailed through worse storms."

* * *

Dawn caught them in open water.

The sun rose from the sea, huge and red, painting the clouds crimson and gold. The water shimmered, playing with color: blue, violet, orange.

Beneath the surface, like a legend, lay drowned cities. Before the Cataclysm, this had been land, ports, palaces, and temples to goddesses. Then the water rose and swallowed them. Now, at the bottom of the Jeweled Sea, rested the ruins of a civilization a thousand years old.

Sometimes, fishermen found statues, coins, and fragments of columns.

Sometimes, on stormy nights, sailors swore they saw light beneath the water, as if someone were lighting candles in the drowned temples.

Beatrice watched the sea. The depth here was hundreds of fathoms. What lay at the bottom? Were the goddesses sleeping in their flooded sanctuaries, or awakening?

Emilia woke and stretched. Her body ached from the awkward position, but she felt better. Fear had retreated, giving way to weariness and curiosity.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"Halfway," Tommaso answered. "By evening, we'll reach the mainland. If the wind holds."

Beatrice took dried meat and flatbread from a sack, supplies Tommaso kept on board. She shared them with Emilia. They ate in silence, washing it down with water from a skin.

Then Beatrice spoke. "I need to know everything. About Cornaro. About his forces. About his plans. Every detail matters."

Emilia nodded, gathering her thoughts. "You know Cornaro lost Valdés's mercenaries," she began. "He has four companies of local garrison. Maybe fewer, counting actual combat strength. Soldiers from the city garrison and younger sons

of noble houses who received officer patents from the admiral. But many have questionable loyalty. They serve out of fear, not devotion.”

“We know that. Continue.”

“He’s pulled forces into the Upper City, around the palace, and at the Diamant, the most important defensive positions. The rest...” She shrugged. “He effectively does not control the Lower City or the port. The city watch is loyal to him only formally. Only patrols remain, and few of those.”

Beatrice leaned forward. Her eyes flashed. “That confirms our plan,” she said. “Carracks disguised as merchants deliver the bombards to the city in the evening. At night, galleys with the landing force pass the Diamant, straight into port. Under the cover of the landing force, the gunners set up the siege guns on shore. First volley at the Upper City at dawn.” She clenched her fist.

“Bombards and mortars fire directly at the palace across the harbor. Cornaro cannot respond because his coastal batteries face the sea, with light guns set at low elevation. They cannot reach siege artillery in the Lower City. Then an ultimatum, and capitulation.”

Emilia nodded slowly. “Precisely because the Lower City is not controlled, you counted on success... Cornaro remembers how Akileia fell. Landing in an undefended port, siege guns brought ashore, three days of bombardment, and the city surrendered. He’s read the reports. Studied them.”

“And built a trap for himself,” Beatrice almost smiled. “His paranoia worked against him.”

Emilia fell silent. Her face grew serious, almost grim.

“What?” Beatrice asked, catching the change.

“That was true until yesterday morning,” Emilia said quietly.

Beatrice froze. “What do you mean?”

Emilia hesitated. Looked at Beatrice, then away. “Beatrice... I did not get a chance to report something.”

She paused.

Beatrice tensed. Her pulse quickened.

“Cornaro...” Emilia swallowed. “In a fit of paranoia, he ordered heavy bombards brought in and installed. Siege guns. On the eastern pier, facing the Lower City.”

“On the pier?” Beatrice frowned. “Why?”

Emilia swept her hand across the horizon, as if laying out a map. “The Diamant stands at the harbor entrance. The battery there faces the sea. The range is three leagues, but it cannot reach the Lower City, the cliff blocks it. The Upper City is on the heights. From there, you can see everything and fire in all directions. But

all the guns are light, falconets, demi-culverins. Designed for ships. Low elevation angle, small shot weight.” She looked Beatrice in the eyes. “Cornaro realized his vulnerability himself, or learned of your plans. He’s far from a fool, and he’s fought wars himself. He’s closed the only gap in his defense.”

“And installed bombards,” Beatrice said slowly.

“They will not be aimed at the sea,” Emilia confirmed, enunciating each word.

“But directly at the harbor and port quarter. At the landing zone.” She leaned forward, her voice low. “Four bombards, twelve-palm caliber. Each cast in bronze at the mainland foundries. Each weighs more than a dozen oxen can pull. They’re transported on special barges. They fire stone balls weighing two minas. Range, five hundred paces, enough to sweep the harbor from end to end.”

A pause.

“They’re mounted on stone platforms. Otherwise, the recoil would destroy wooden piers. Ten engineers and craftsmen per bombard, a full day’s work. Precise angle calculations. Cornaro hired the best bombardiers from the mainland. Paid them the bronze’s weight in gold.”

She paused.

“The guns have been delivered and are being installed right now.”

Silence fell.

Beatrice sat motionless. Her mind raced through the implications. The galleys are entering the harbor. The landing. Sebastian on the bow of the lead ship, because of course he would insist on leading...

I designed this plan. I gathered the intelligence. I...

Then a vision struck her like a wave of ice.

The harbor of Ragusa. Dawn mist drifted over the water. Galleys were entering between the breakwaters, rows of oars beating the surface. On the bow of the lead galley stood Sebastian. Wind whipped his hair. He looked at the piers, at the port warehouses. He did not see the danger.

Beatrice saw his face. Every feature, every line. Saw him turn to the bosun, say something. He smiled for the first time in weeks. Then, thunder.

Four bombards fired simultaneously. Smoke obscured the eastern pier. Stone balls flew over the water. Beatrice watched their trajectories, slow, inexorable, like falling stars.

The first ball struck the lead galley’s hull. Wood exploded into splinters. Oak planking, a palm thick, shattered like eggshell. The second ball took down the mainmast at its base. It fell, sails bursting into flame from powder sparks. The third and fourth tore into the other ships.

Sebastian turned. Confusion in his eyes. Then horror. He saw the fire, saw the falling mast. Tried to leap clear.

Too late.

The mast crashed down. Burning canvas engulfed him. He fell. Beatrice saw his body twist, saw his arms fling up. Heard a scream, though she knew it was impossible, that the vision was silent.

The deck was in flames. Bodies lay scattered: sailors, soldiers, bombardiers. Blood ran between the planks, dripping into the water. The water colored first pink, then crimson, then black.

Sebastian lay where he'd fallen. Burning canvas covered him, melting, eating into flesh. Hair charred. Facial skin blackened, cracked, and peeled away in strips. Mouth open in a soundless scream. Hands curled, fingers clenched into fists. Eyes clouded from heat, gone milky, boiled in their sockets.

Fire consumed the ship. Flames crawled up the rigging, licked the hull, climbed the masts. Smoke rose in a column, black and thick, like a shroud.

Beatrice saw it all. Every detail. Every face in the flames. Every drop of blood. The smell of burning flesh seared into memory, though the vision was silent and had no smell.

But imagination filled in the picture. The horror was complete.

Then the vision broke.

She doubled over the gunwale. Vomited. Bile and acid burned her throat. Hands clutched the wood, knuckles bone-pale. Second spasm. Third. Stomach empty, but her body kept turning itself inside out.

Emilia was frightened and touched her shoulder, but Beatrice did not feel the touch. Emilia cried out, "Beatrice!"

Beatrice wiped her mouth. Hands unsteady, voice ragged. "Goddess," she breathed, the word breaking to a rasp. "They'll all die..."

And I sent them there. I gave Alber the intelligence. I made this plan possible.

The obsidian composure that had held her all these years cracked.

Hands clenched on the boat's gunwale. Knuckle's bone-pale. Eyes wide.

"This upends everything!" Her voice trembled. "Galleys enter the harbor. Bombard's fire. Ships burn. They will not even get to land." She fell silent, thinking further. Fingers unclenched, then clenched again. "How many men can be on one galley?" she asked suddenly.

Emilia blinked. "They vary, but usually around two hundred or two hundred fifty."

"Multiply by three." Beatrice closed her eyes. Eight hundred forty men. "Into water and fire."

Pause. Silence. Only the splash of waves.

"Even if..." she breathed. "Even if we're not destroyed at landing and manage to set up the guns." She looked at Emilia, eyes blazing.

"What then? Bombard the fire down at the harbor from a higher position. Our guns and landing force are under fire." Her voice broke. "The Diamant and Upper City batteries keep the fleet at a distance. We're in a trap. A perfect trap."

Beatrice slammed her fist against the gunwale.

"His great-grandfather held Ragusa against the Republic's fleet for a hundred twenty days," Emilia said quietly. "Cornaro knows. One mistake and the city falls. The House falls. He won't allow it... He'll use Akileia's tactics against you."

"Then it's all useless," Beatrice whispered.

Tommaso, not looking up from the sail, smirked. "So I pulled you out for nothing? Could've stayed, shared wine with Cornaro. Watched the execution from a good seat."

Beatrice looked at him, then smirked too. Brief, bitter. "Next time I'll leave you to rot in the hold, old man."

"Won't live to see next time, signorina." Tommaso adjusted the sail. "Sea or Cornaro will take me first."

"We have to warn them immediately!" Beatrice grabbed Emilia's arm.

"Immediately!"

Emilia nodded. "How much time do we have?"

Beatrice calculated quickly in her head. Her fingers trembled. "If nothing major has happened, they haven't sailed yet. We have a day or two to warn them."

She fell silent, gazing at the horizon. "But if we don't make it," Beatrice whispered, "everything people died for these past weeks will have been for nothing. Mendoza. The agents. You're risking your life."

"But we will make it, won't we?" Emilia asked quietly.

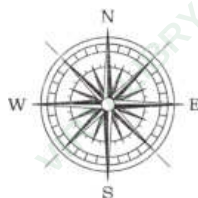
Beatrice clenched her fists, suppressing the trembling. "We have to."

She looked east, beyond the horizon where the mainland waited, where Alber Stone and the Scaliger brothers were preparing an operation, unaware that the war's fate was shifting at that very moment, on a small boat lost at sea.

Three people carried knowledge that could save thousands of lives.

Everything depended on wind, waves, and time.

Chapter 22: Meeting of Enemies



SEBASTIAN

Silence filled the room, the kind that precedes a verdict. Or an execution.

Mark Scaliger stood by the fireplace, gripping the marble mantel so hard his knuckles had turned white. His face was stone, but rage swirled in his eyes: cold, controlled, deadly. Sebastian sat in the armchair by the window, leaning back, fingers drumming on the armrest in a short, nervous rhythm, the only sign of tension. Emile stood by the bookcase, arms crossed over his chest, face unreadable, like a card player who knew the stakes were too high.

Liana sat on the edge of a chair near the table, her eyes too bright. A golden gleam flickered in them, flaring and fading, as if somewhere inside her a fire smoldered that had not yet decided whether to blaze or die. Her hands lay clenched in fists on her knees.

Beatrice stood by the door, apart from everyone else, watchful. Her cloak was damp from the night sea air, her dark hair disheveled, her face bearing the exhaustion of someone who had survived something beyond ordinary danger. She was not looking at the brothers. She was looking at the woman in the center of the room.

Emilia Tagliapietra. Francis Scaliger's widow. Luciano Cornaro's mistress. Traitor.

She stood before Alber's writing desk, straight and pale, shoulders thrown back as if bracing for a blow. Her face was haggard, with dark shadows beneath her eyes that no cosmetics could hide, shadows born of sleepless nights and fear. Her hands, clenched into fists, shook visibly. She gripped them tighter, but the trembling would not stop. Her dress, once magnificent, was wrinkled and smelled of sea salt and smoke, the scent of flight, the scent of desperation. Hair usually arranged impeccably was hastily pinned up, several strands escaping to frame a gaunt face.

But such determination burned in her expression that Sebastian felt involuntary respect.

She had come here knowing they might kill her.

This woman had courage.

An hour had passed in tense stillness while Emilia traveled from the port to the palazzo. And now she was here.

Alber stood behind his desk, hands clasped behind his back. He watched Emilia with an expression impossible to interpret. Neither anger nor sympathy, only cold assessment.

“So,” he said at last, his voice low but each word echoing in the study, “Emilia has given us a detailed account of Luciano’s plans.”

He did not repeat the information. Everyone already knew: Ragusa’s new defenses. Bombards on the heights. A brilliant trap based on the enemy’s tactics. A plan that could turn the Scaliger landing into mincemeat.

“Thanks to this information,” Alber continued, “we have an opportunity to change our strategy. Avoid the ambush. Perhaps even use Cornaro’s scheme against him.”

Mark turned sharply from the fireplace. “That information costs lives. Mendoza and all the others.”

Emilia flinched but didn’t look away.

“I know,” she whispered. “I know the price.”

“You know?” Mark’s voice was ice. “You stood beside our father’s murderer and basked in the warmth of his power while we fled from hired knives. You, ”

“Mark!” Alber spoke his nephew’s name, low but steel-edged. “Enough.”

Mark clenched his jaw but fell silent. His fingers dug into the mantel’s edge so hard that Sebastian heard a faint crack, either knuckles or stone.

Emilia stepped forward, unexpected resolve in her movement. Her hands trembled harder. She no longer tried to hide it. Her voice broke on some words, but she held herself together by sheer will.

“Master Stone,” she said, taking a breath mid-sentence, “I’ve done everything you required of me. Risked my life. Betrayed Cornaro. Lost everything. And now I demand what I was promised.”

Alber frowned. “Emilia...”

“Freedom—” she interrupted. “You promised me freedom. Documents for my family. Money for a new life. And I want it now.”

No one spoke.

Mark turned, menace in his look. “You demand?” he said, too soft. “After what you’ve done, you dare demand?”

“Yes,” Emilia answered, meeting his stare. “Because I have no choice left. I am either free or dead. There is no third option.”

Alber passed a hand over his face, and Sebastian saw how heavily that pause cost him. “Emilia,” he said at last, “I understand what you’ve been through. But now is not the time.”

“Now is exactly the time—” she interrupted. “Because tomorrow you sail. And if I do not get what was promised now, I never will.”

Mark stepped forward. “You’ll get nothing,” he said harshly. “You’ll stay and serve until the end. Until Ragusa is ours again.”

“No.” Emilia shook her head. “My duty is done.”

“Your duty will be done when I say so!”

Emile spoke from his place by the bookcase. “Mark is right, Alber. She’s too valuable to let go. We can find a use for her.”

“Emilia,” Alber said at last, “perhaps we really should wait.”

“No.” Sebastian’s voice cut through the room, and everyone turned to him. He rose from the armchair, contained power in his movement was impossible to miss. “Mark is wrong.”

His elder brother spun around. “Sebastian, ”

“No. Listen to me.” Sebastian stepped into the center of the room, positioning himself between Mark and Emilia. His face was calm, but something unyielding burned in his eyes. “I will never forgive her for Father’s death. Never.” He let the words hang in the air. “But she wasn’t the only one who betrayed him. The whole city did. Every noble house that bowed to Cornaro. Every merchant who chose profit over loyalty. Every guard who looked away.” He turned back to Mark. “This woman spent four weeks in hell. Risked her life every day. Lost everything, husband, position, safety. Watched people who helped her be executed. And the only thing that kept her going was the promise of freedom.”

“And she’ll get freedom,” Mark replied harshly. “After we take back Ragusa.”

“No.” Sebastian shook his head. “She gets freedom now. Because if we start breaking people for the sake of victory, Mark, what difference does it make whose head wears the crown? Cornaro’s or yours?”

Mark stepped closer, and the brothers stood face to face. Sebastian smelled wine on his brother’s breath, saw the vein pulsing at his temple. He didn’t back down. For a heartbeat, the air between them crackled with something older than this argument.

Brothers shouldn’t stand like enemies. Yet here they stand.

“You forget, brother, who she is,” Mark said, threat in his voice.

"No." Sebastian met his stare. "You forget who we are. We're Scaligers. We're taking back Ragusa not to repeat our father's mistakes. Not to build power on broken lives."

The stillness in the study was absolute.

Alber watched his nephews, his features giving nothing away.

"Thank you, Sebastian," Alber said. "I gave her my word, and I'll keep it."

Mark turned to his uncle, rage flashing across his face. "Uncle, you can't, "

"I can—" Alber interrupted. "And I shall. Emilia did everything required of her, risked her life. Betrayed Cornaro. Lost everything. She's earned her freedom."

Mark clenched his fists until his knuckles went white. "This is a mistake."

"Perhaps," Alber agreed. "But it's my mistake. And my decision."

Mark stared at his uncle for a long moment. Sebastian could not read what warred behind his brother's eyes. Rage, certainly. But something else too. Perhaps grudging respect for their uncle's firmness.

"You're defending a traitor," he finally said.

"We are defending our honor," Sebastian answered. "Our grandfather kept his word even to enemies, and that made him great. Either we give our word and keep it, or we're no better than Cornaro."

Emile spoke from his place by the bookcase. "I concede that Sebastian is right, Mark. Alber made her a promise. We cannot break it." He paused, irony touching his voice. "Otherwise, we're no different from Cornaro. Though, brother, lately you've grown increasingly like him."

Liana, who had been silent until now, spoke in a soft but clear voice. "Mark. Let her go."

The eldest brother turned to his cousin, surprise flickering across his face. Liana looked at him, with that amber light shimmering in her eyes.

"This is not revenge," she continued. "It's cruelty. And cruelty weakens us, not our enemies."

Mark stood motionless, and Sebastian could see how tense his neck muscles were, how clenched his fists. Then he exhaled. He turned and walked to the window, standing with his back to everyone. His shoulders were tight, rigid as a bowstring before release. The pause stretched, heavy and uncomfortable.

"Fine," he said at last, not turning around. "Do as you wish."

He strode to the door, yanked it open, and left without another word. The door slammed behind him, echoing through the study like a gunshot.

Alber inclined his head, reached into his desk drawer, and pulled out a leather folder. "Emilia," he said, holding it out to her, "here are the documents concerning your family, and also new identity papers for you. The name is different. No one will connect you to the Tagliapietra line, to us, or to Cornaro."

Emilia took the folder with trembling hands. She opened it and scanned the contents. Her composure crumbled, and tears finally broke through. Silent, filled with such relief that Sebastian looked away. There was something unbearably private in those tears.

Alber continued, "Also, here is a letter of credit for two thousand gold ducats, redeemable at any branch of the Conti bank." He paused. "That's enough to live comfortably for as long as you wish, wherever you wish. A small estate in the south. Or a trading shop in a good quarter of Silver Harbor. Or a peaceful life without want. The choice is yours. A letter of recommendation to the merchant Matteo Salvatori in Silver Harbor, he'll help you settle incognito. And a certificate of release confirming you're free of all obligations to our House."

Emilia wiped tears with the back of her hand and smiled for the first time since Sebastian had seen her. The smile was crooked, broken, but genuine. "Thank you," she whispered. "All-Mother, thank you..."

Alber approached her and placed a hand on her shoulder. "You're free, Emilia. Go and live the life you've earned."

She pressed the folder to her chest and gave a small nod. "May I..." she hesitated, "may I say goodbye to Beatrice? In private?"

Alber glanced at Beatrice. She dipped her chin. "Come," she said. "To the next room."

They went out. The door closed behind them.

Alber returned to the desk and sank heavily into his chair. Sebastian could see how much his uncle had aged in recent weeks: new lines around his eyes, gray in his beard, weariness in every movement.

"Mark won't forgive me for this decision," Alber said, almost to himself.

"Mark doesn't forgive anything," Sebastian answered in the same tone. "Neither himself nor others."

Alber gave his nephew a long look. "You acted nobly today, Sebastian. But nobility in war is dangerous. It can cost lives."

"Or save souls," Sebastian replied. "If we start breaking people for victory, what will be left of us when we win?"

Liana, who had sat silent all this time, suddenly spoke softly, "Mark is already broken. He hasn't realized it yet." Everyone turned to her. She was staring out the window, and the gold in her eyes had brightened.

"When Selene touched him in the temple... I saw. She didn't give him strength. She took something from him. Something vital."

"Liana." Alber frowned. "Don't speak in riddles."

"I'm not speaking in riddles, Father." She turned to him, pale. "I'm speaking the truth. Mark no longer belongs to himself. He belongs to the goddess. And with each passing day, there will be less of the man and more of... something else."

The quiet pressed down.

Emile asked, "Do you feel the same about yourself?"

Liana didn't answer. She turned back to the window.

BEATRICE

In the next room, a small sitting room with two armchairs by a dying fire, Emilia and Beatrice stood facing each other. Emilia still held the folder of documents, pressing it to her chest as if afraid it might be taken away.

Beatrice watched her, doubt flickering behind her eyes.

Why does this feel like more than losing an agent?

"Thank you," Emilia said softly. "For everything. For getting me out. For... protecting me."

Beatrice gave a slight smile. "I was following Alber's orders."

"No." Emilia shook her head. "You could have left me in Ragusa. Said you didn't make it in time. That Cornaro caught me first. But you risked yourself. And I know why."

Beatrice said nothing.

Emilia stepped closer. "You helped me understand who I am," she said, with such sincerity in her voice that Beatrice felt uncomfortable. "Before, I was always what others wanted me to be. Daughter. Wife. Mistress. But with you... with you, I felt for the first time that I could be myself."

Beatrice only watched her, inscrutable.

"I wish you happiness," Emilia added. "Real happiness. You deserve it more than any of us." She embraced Beatrice. Quickly, warmly, as a friend. Beatrice froze, not expecting it, then returned the embrace.

When did I last let anyone this close?

For a moment, she allowed herself to be human.

Then they stepped apart.

"Take care of yourself, Emilia," Beatrice said.

"And you, Beatrice." Emilia smiled. "And don't let them break you. You're too strong for that."

She left. Beatrice remained alone in the dim sitting room, watching the dying embers in the fireplace. Emilia's words echoed in her head:

You helped me understand who I am. What had she meant?

Beatrice didn't know, and didn't want to know. She returned to the study, where Alber was already unrolling a map on the table.

SEBASTIAN

"Emilia left?" Alber asked without looking up.

"She's leaving now. I gave her an escort to the inn. In four days, she heads for Silver Harbor."

Alber acknowledged it with a tilt of his head. "Good. Now to business."

Alber straightened, surveying those gathered. Mark had not returned yet. His absence hung in the air like an unhealed wound. But Alber did not wait.

"Everyone, sit," he said. "There's almost no time left to prepare."

Sebastian, Emile, Liana, and Beatrice arranged themselves around the table. On the map of Ragusa spread between them, new fortifications were marked in red ink, bombards on the hills, reinforced batteries, fields of fire. But what drew the most attention were the silhouettes chalked into the margins. Twenty ships in formation, like a pack of predators closing on their prey.

"Thanks to Emilia, we know about the trap," Alber began. "But knowledge is not victory. We need to change the entire operation plan. And we have until tomorrow to do it."

He took the wine cup from the table's edge and drained it in one gulp. His hand trembled slightly, barely noticeable, but Sebastian saw it. Even Alber, an experienced merchant and coordinator of complex operations, was nervous before such a roll of the dice.

"Why so little time?" Emile asked.

"Because Cornaro is finishing the bombard installation. But more importantly, we're about to lose the element of surprise, if we have not already." Alber ran his hand across the map, his fingers leaving a damp trail. Sweat. "After that, Ragusa will be untakeable. At all. We must strike now, while we still have a chance."

"Is the fleet ready?" Sebastian asked.

Alber inclined his head. "Four heavy carracks, six galleys, eight brigantines, two galleasses. Artillery loaded, culverins, bombards, field pieces. Powder, shot, chains. All disguised as a merchant convoy bound for southern ports."

Emile frowned. "Ships and guns are one thing. But without a reliable assault force, we're dead before we reach the walls. Gregorio's rabble will break at the first volley. And finding proper soldiers is not something you do in one night."

Alber's lips curved into a thin smile. "Which brings me to my next point."

The door opened, and Alber straightened. A satisfied smile crossed his lips, rare for a man accustomed to hiding his emotions.

"Gentlemen," he announced with unconcealed satisfaction, "as I told you, most captains are not willing to sign a condotta with us until the family's status with the Republic is clear. Everyone's waiting for Vitelli's decision, everyone's afraid to take risks."

He paused, savoring the moment. "But I've found an excellent solution to this problem."

He opened the door wider, admitting a tall, wiry man with the weathered face of a warrior who had spent half his life under southern suns. A long scar ran from his right temple to his chin, the mark of a saber blow that should have killed him, but had not. He moved soundlessly, like a predator, and wore a dark leather jacket beneath which hidden sheaths could be discerned. Many sheaths, more than an ordinary soldier would carry. At his belt hung a wheel-lock pistol, expensive weaponry, clearly a trophy from some important battlefield. Behind his back, a sword hilt was visible, long, functional, unadorned.

"Gentlemen, allow me to introduce our new condottiere," Alber announced with a theatrical gesture. "Captain Juan de Valdés. Until recently, the commander of a mercenary company in the service of Luciano Cornaro himself. A few days ago, our adversary committed an unforgivable blunder and terminated the contract with his men due to..." Alber smirked, "...financial disagreements."

Valdés gave a curt nod, a twisted grin touching his lips. The same smile with which he had dismissed Cornaro. In it was contempt for rulers who didn't know how to value loyal service.

"Cornaro is a fool. He let go of the four hundred best soldiers he had because he didn't want to pay them on time. And I'm not one to work without payment."

"And you are willing to fight against him?" asked Mark, who had returned and now stood by the fireplace.

"I am willing to fight for whoever pays," Valdés answered coldly. "And Master Stone has offered me a sum that satisfies me. My men are already preparing to sail."

“Four hundred men?” Emile asked.

“Two hundred,” Valdés corrected. “The rest decided to stay on the mainland. But these two hundred are the best. Veterans, disciplined, know how to fight. They are worth your galley slaves. And unlike them, they know Ragusa well.”

Sebastian smiled for the first time that evening, a wry, weary expression. “Finally, some good news. Those Lomeni stick-swingers...” He grimaced. “Their commander, one-eyed Gregorio, cracked one of his own men’s skulls with a club yesterday because the man was too slow to obey an order. Instead of an eye, he has a leather patch with a burned cross. Says it is his war trophy. From whom he skinned it, do not ask.”

Alber dipped his chin. “Valdés will command the strike force. His task is to punch through the defenses and hold the breach while the main force lands.”

Valdés inclined his head. “Understood. I’ll need schematics of the fortifications and artillery positions.”

“You’ll have them,” Alber promised. “Beatrice will give you all the information we have.”

Valdés’s gaze slid to Beatrice, and recognition flickered in his eyes. He smirked. “Signorina Feski. Long time no see.”

Beatrice met his stare. “Captain. I hope your men are more reliable than the ones I remember.”

“The ones you remember, signorina, are reliable,” Valdés replied coldly, “and will stay reliable as long as Master Stone keeps his word.”

“I keep my word, Captain,” Alber said firmly. “Unlike Cornaro.”

Valdés dipped his chin, satisfied.

Alber surveyed all those gathered. “So. The fleet consists of twenty ships. Artillery sufficient to suppress the coastal batteries. Men, approximately seven hundred, not counting sailors and gunners. Of these, four hundred combat-ready soldiers, Valdés’s company, two rabbles under Gregorio and the Hangman, and several dozen volunteers from among the refugees.”

“That’s not enough,” Emile said. “Cornaro has about four companies of local garrison left in Ragusa. Plus militia.”

Valdés snorted. Short. Dry.

“Four companies? Excellent. Means if my boys are lucky, each one gets two enemies. Fair distribution.” A wry smile. “The main thing is they do not scatter before time.”

“That’s why,” Alber said, looking at Beatrice, “we’re counting on internal work. Beatrice, despite all the risks, you must activate everything you have left in Ragusa.

Agents, sabotage, rumors, money. By the time our fleet enters the harbor, the Lower City garrison must be disorganized.”

Beatrice gave a curt nod, her expression grave.

“When do I sail?”

“Tonight. On a light brigantine under a merchant flag. You have less than a day to prepare the city.”

Sebastian looked at her, and his chest tightened. She was going back. Into the lion’s mouth. Tonight. And they might never see each other again.

I should say something. Anything.

Their eyes met, and again that electric charge took his breath away. Beatrice was the first to look away, but Sebastian saw her fingers tremble where they gripped the table’s edge.

Come back, he wanted to say. *Come back to me*. But the words died unspoken. Some things could not be said in a room full of people. Some things could not be said at all.

Coward. You’re a coward.

Mark observed the exchange, and a bitter smile appeared on his lips.

“Sebastian,” he said, mockery in his voice, “try not to fall in love before a battle. It’s distracting.”

Sebastian turned sharply to his brother.

“Mark.”

“What?” Mark’s smile widened. “Am I wrong? You look at her like a starving dog at a bone. Everyone can see it.”

“Enough—” Alber cut in coldly. “Mark, hold your tongue. We have important work.”

Mark fell silent, but the smile lingered. Sebastian clenched his fists beneath the table, nails biting into his palms. The old, familiar anger. But he said nothing.

Beatrice sat motionless, features blank. Only a slight flush on her cheeks betrayed her embarrassment. Sebastian wanted to look at her, wanted to speak, but forced his attention back to the map instead.

Alber continued as if nothing had happened. “The operation plan is as follows. The fleet sails tomorrow at dawn. We proceed under the guise of a merchant convoy all the way to Ragusa. We enter the harbor at night.”

He pointed at the map.

“Four carracks enter the harbor late in the evening and moor at the Lower

City docks for morning unloading. Standard practice, no one will look twice at merchantmen arriving before the port closes. Under the cover of darkness, five galleys land the assault force at the port and secure the area while crews offload the siege guns from the carracks. Mark and Valdés command this landing. Their task is to capture the port, get the bombards ashore, and set them up with direct fire on the palace.”

Mark inclined his head, studying the map.

“Simultaneously, Sebastian takes the sixth galley and lands at the Upper City pier.” Alber’s finger traced the route. “Your task is to disable the battery there before it can fire on our ships. Hold for one hour. That’s enough time for Mark to secure the port. It’s a suicide mission, but without it, the main landing dies under crossfire.”

One hour. Against Cornaro’s main forces. With what—fifty men?

Sebastian set his jaw. “Understood.”

“Emile commands the reserve flotilla,” Alber added. “Two galleasses and the brigantines, waiting in open water. Your task is to provide long-range fire on the Diamant, to distract it and cover our retreat if things go wrong. But keep your distance. Do not stray into the range of the Upper City pier battery. Sebastian will not reach the main fortifications. He does not have the men to storm the Admiral’s Palace and the shore guns. Those stay hot.”

Emile inclined his head.

“What happens if they spot us from the Diamant?” Sebastian asked. “Or any of the other batteries, before we land?”

“That’s where magic helps us,” Alber said, and turned to Liana. Everyone followed his look.

Their cousin raised her head, gold shimmering in her eyes.

“I can summon fog.” Her voice was calm, certain. “Dense, thick, enough to hide our ships from the coastal observers. They will not see us until we enter the harbor.”

“Is that possible?” Emile asked, skeptical.

Liana inclined her head.

“Goddesses granted me power over blood and fire. But also power over the elements. Fog is water and air. I can control them.”

“At what cost?” Sebastian leaned forward, concern sharpening his tone.

Liana looked at him, sorrow flickering in her eyes.

“The cost I’m willing to pay.”

The stillness was oppressive.

Alber broke it. "Liana will be on the flagship brigantine with me and Emile's reserve flotilla. When we approach Ragusa, she'll summon the fog. That gives us the advantage. The galleys enter unseen before Cornaro raises the alarm."

"What if the fog lifts?" Mark asked.

"It won't lift," Liana answered confidently. "I'll hold it as long as necessary."

Valdés smirked.

"Magic, gods, curses..." He shrugged. "I don't care where your fog comes from, as long as it works. My men will fight, fog or not."

"Good," Alber said. "Then it's settled. Tomorrow at dawn we sail. Mark coordinates the main landing and artillery. Sebastian takes the Upper City pier battery. Emile commands the reserve flotilla. Liana provides magical support. Beatrice sails tonight for the final preparation of the city."

He looked at everyone.

"Questions?"

Sebastian raised his hand.

"Yes?"

"What happens if we fail? If Cornaro's trap still works?"

Alber met his look. In his eyes was the cold determination of a man who had calculated every risk and accepted it.

"Then we die," he said. "All of us. But we die free. And Cornaro will remember that the Scaligers and Stones never surrendered."

The pause stretched, heavy and solemn.

Then Valdés laughed, a short, harsh bark.

"I like that," he said. "Better to die with honor than live in shame. Cornaro never understood that. That's why he'll lose."

Mark spoke. "He will not lose. He'll burn. Along with everyone who stood beside him."

Alber straightened. "Everyone knows their task. Dismissed. Rest while you can. Tomorrow, we go to war."

LIANA

When everyone had left, Liana remained in the study with her father. The fire in the hearth had burned low, leaving only red coals that pulsed like a living heart. Shadows danced along the walls, forming strange, flickering shapes.

Alber sat in his chair, head bowed, hands folded on the desk. He looked older than his years, tired, worn by the weight of decisions resting on his shoulders.

Liana approached and sat in the chair across from him.

"Father," she said softly, "we need to talk."

Alber lifted his head. Fear flickered in his eyes, not for himself, but for her.

"I know," he answered. "I've been waiting for this conversation."

Liana lowered her eyes, gathering courage, then looked at him again.

"You want to know about the magic," she said. It was not a question.

"I want to know about everything," Alber replied. "About what's happening to you. About what Selene did. About the price you mentioned."

Liana gave a small nod. She had known this conversation was inevitable, but that did not make it any easier.

"When Diadema's power touched me," she began, her voice barely above a whisper, "it was as if... as if a door opened. A door I never knew existed. And behind it was..."

She closed her eyes, searching for words.

"An ocean of fire, beating against the walls of my soul. I hear it, the whisper of flames, the call of blood, voices that weren't there before. They speak in a language I understand without words, as if all my life I had been deaf, and now suddenly I hear the music that was always playing around me."

Her voice trembled, not from fear, but from wonder, almost awe.

"When I close my eyes, I see it. Feel it. The fog I can create will hide an entire fleet. The fire I can kindle will burn walls. The blood I can spill in ritual will heal wounds once thought fatal. It's... It's more than I could have imagined."

Alber sat back in his chair, his expression grave.

"But you spoke of a price," he reminded her gently.

Liana lowered her eyes, fingers clenching on her knees. A long pause. Outside, wind howled in the chimneys, and somewhere below a door slammed.

"Yes," she said at last. "There is a price. And it will be high. Not necessarily right away, but it will come."

She raised her head, meeting her father's gaze.

"I don't know exactly what it will be. I don't know everything about this power. But I feel... each time I use the magic, something leaves. Not physical, no. More like... a part of myself. Part of the life I might have lived. Part of the future I dreamed of as a girl."

Her voice dropped to almost a whisper.

"Perhaps I'll never marry. Perhaps I'll never have children. Perhaps I won't be able to live an ordinary life. Go to market, laugh with friends, embroider by candlelight, and fall asleep peacefully, knowing tomorrow will be an ordinary day."

Alber closed his eyes for a moment, and Liana saw his lips tremble. When he opened them again, tears glistened.

"Liana..." His voice broke. "My girl. I wanted so much for you to have a different life."

She smiled, sadly but warmly.

"I know, *Papa*."

She hadn't called him that in a long time. Not since she had grown up and begun calling him "Father," as befitted the adult daughter of a noble house. But now, in this dim room, alone together, she felt like his little girl again.

Alber stood, came around the desk, and knelt before her chair so their faces were level. He took her hands in his, large, warm, calloused from many years of work.

"When you were born," he began, voice trembling, "I held you in my arms and thought: here she is, my daughter. My only one. I'll give her everything. She'll be happy. She'll marry a good man, have children, live in a fine house, and her greatest worry will be choosing fabric for a new dress."

He squeezed her hands tighter.

"I dreamed you would be... ordinary in the best sense of the word. That war, intrigue, blood, all of it would pass you by. That you would live a long, peaceful, happy life."

Tears rolled down his cheeks, but he didn't wipe them away.

"And instead, I dragged you into this. Into war. Into magic. Into sacrifice. I turned my daughter into a weapon."

"No." Liana freed one hand and gently touched his cheek, wiping away the tears.

"No, *Papa*. It wasn't you. It was me. My choice."

"But if not for me, if not for our plans, if not for, "

"Then I would have been nobody—" she interrupted firmly. "A merchant's daughter who would have married, had children, and died in obscurity. Perhaps that would have been happiness. Perhaps that would have been a good life. But..."

She paused, searching for words.

"But it wouldn't have been my life. Not the real one. I feel it, Father. My whole life, from childhood, led me to this moment. To Selene's temple. To the connection with Diadema. To this power that now lives within me. As if I'd finally found what I was born for."

Her eyes lit up, not with the gold of magic, but with human fire.

"Do you know what I've felt all my life? Emptiness. As if something was missing. I watched other girls. They dreamed of dresses, of balls, of suitors. And I dreamed of... I didn't even know what. Something greater. A purpose. A meaning. And when I felt Diadema's presence... that emptiness vanished."

She squeezed her father's hand.

"Now I know why I live. Yes, it's frightening. Yes, the price will be high. But for the first time in my life, I feel... so whole. So real. So alive."

Alber watched her for a long moment, shadows from the coals in the fireplace playing across his face. Then he dipped his chin.

"I wish I could give you a choice," he said hoarsely. "A real choice. Not between magic and the death of our House, but between... different lives. Peaceful and turbulent. Safe and dangerous."

"But there is no such choice," Liana answered softly. "There never was. From the moment the goddesses began to awaken, from the moment magic returned to the world... fates were determined. Mine among them."

She leaned forward, pressing her forehead to his, as she had in childhood when she was scared or sad, and only her father could comfort her.

"But I ask one thing of you, *Papa*," she whispered. "Support me. Don't try to stop me. Don't try to protect me from this path. Be there. Remind me who I am. Don't let me forget I'm still your daughter, even when the power grows too great."

Alber embraced her, tightly, desperately, as if afraid she would vanish, dissolve into air if he let go. Liana hugged him back, burying her face in his shoulder, and they sat like that, as they hadn't in many years. Father and daughter. Two people who loved each other and feared losing one another.

"I'll support you," he whispered into her hair. "Always. In any choice you make. Even if it breaks my heart."

He pulled back, took her face in his palms, and looked into her eyes. Searching. Solemn.

"You're the most precious thing I have. More precious than Ragusa. More precious than the House. More precious than all the gold in the world. And if

ever this burden becomes too heavy to bear... promise me you'll say so. Promise we'll find a way to stop."

Liana wanted to promise. Wanted to say, "Yes, of course, I'll tell you." But she couldn't, because she wouldn't lie to her father. And the truth was that she could no longer stop. The path was chosen. The door was open. And there was no road back.

But she gave a small nod. Not a promise. An acknowledgment. Alber understood and accepted.

He kissed her forehead, long, tender, full of all the love he did not always know how to express in words.

"I'm so proud of you," he whispered. "And so afraid for you."

"I know, *Papa*," she answered in the same tone. "I'm afraid too. But this is right. I can feel it."

They sat for a long time in the dim study, listening to the wind howl outside and the last coals smolder in the fireplace. Her father stroked her hair, as he had when she was little and could not sleep from bad dreams.

But now the bad dreams had become reality. And no one could stop them.

Liana felt the coming fog somewhere at the edge of her consciousness, waiting, ready to come at her call.

She had never seen Diadema, not truly. In the temple, there had been light and fire and Selene's voice, but the artifact itself remained hidden. Yet she felt it, had felt it ever since the ritual. A presence at her back, like a burning gaze that never wavered. At first, it had been faint, a whisper at the edge of awareness. After the ritual, it grew stronger. And after Arcadia, after she had used the power in earnest, it had become a constant companion, watching, waiting, patient as stone, hungry as flame.

She pressed closer to her father, burying her face in his shoulder, and suddenly froze.

Behind his back, she sensed a presence. Not physical. More like... a watching. As if someone were looking at her. From somewhere far away. From a depth where there was no light.

Liana raised her head without pulling away from her father and saw.

On the wall behind Alber, in the study's gloom, eyes glimmered. Not a reflection. Not a trick of shadows. Eyes. Golden, like molten metal. Enormous. Inhuman. They looked directly at her, through her father, through space, through time.

And in that gaze was such ancientness, such power, that Liana felt the hair rise on the back of her neck. This wasn't evil. It was beyond good and evil, beyond

human understanding. It had existed long before humans, before cities, before the world in its present form.

The goddess was watching her and waiting.

Liana wanted to look away, but couldn't. The eyes drew her in, hypnotizing her. In their golden depths, flames danced. That same fire she felt within herself. The ocean of fire. The call of blood.

Are you ready, child? Not words, a knowing that the question had been asked.

Liana swallowed. Her hands tightened on her father's back. He felt nothing, continued stroking her hair, lost in his own thoughts.

I am ready.

The eyes flared brighter. For an instant, a fraction of a second. And went out. Vanished. As if they had never been.

Liana blinked. The wall was empty. An ordinary stone wall, with a tapestry depicting a naval battle. No eyes. No presence.

But the cold that had run down her spine remained, and the knowledge that this had not been a vision. It was reality.

The goddess had marked her. Accepted her. And was waiting for her hour.

Alber felt his daughter's body tense.

"Liana?" he asked. "What happened?"

She released her grip on his back and pulled away. Looked into his face and smiled, weakly, but sincerely.

"Nothing, *Papa*. I... I realized everything will be all right."

A lie. But the truth was too terrifying to speak aloud.

Alber didn't believe her. She saw it in his eyes. But he didn't press. He kissed her forehead again.

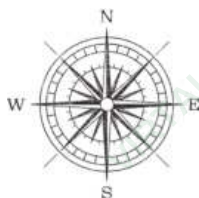
"Go. Get some rest. Tomorrow is a big day."

Liana gave a small nod and stood. At the door, she turned for a last look at her father, sitting in the dim study. The fire had nearly died, leaving only smoldering coals, and in their faint light, Alber's face seemed old, tired, and lined with wrinkles.

She went out, closing the door behind her.

Behind her, in the darkness of the empty corridor, a golden light flickered and was gone.

Chapter 23: Night of Fog



SEBASTIAN

The port of Hogberg stank of war. Rotting seaweed, tar, and the sweat of men about to die. Beneath it all lay the ever-present reek of fish guts and bilge water, of unwashed bodies and cheap wine gone sour. The wind carried gunpowder from the ships, sharp and sulfurous, mixing with the salt spray until every breath tasted of sea and death.

Piers of sea-blackened oak, aged and salt-worn, creaked under the weight of powder barrels and provision bales. The Salted Anchor tavern glowed through greasy windows, from which came the crash of a brawl and drunken shouts. On ship masts, flags snapped in the wind: trading guilds, Great Houses, mercenary companies. Red, blue, and black banners cracked like the wings of giant predatory birds.

Sixteen ships remained at the piers. The four carracks had sailed at midday, slipping out of the harbor under merchant flags while the sun was still high. Now only the war fleet waited: galleys with elongated prows stretched toward open sea, brigantines clustering at the docks like restless greyhounds, the two great galleasses riding heavy in the water with gun ports dark and hungry.

On their decks, final preparations seethed toward completion. Sailors hauled barrels of water and wine, sacks of hardtack, bundles of spears. Bombardiers carried powder crates with exquisite care, as if they were infants, black wooden boxes sheathed in copper, branded with skulls and crossbones.

Sebastian stood at the pier's edge, watching the chaos, feeling a tight knot twist in his stomach. Not fear. He knew fear: sharp, icy, making the heart beat faster. This was different. Heaviness. A premonition of something inevitable, as if a massive stone slab were slowly descending onto his chest.

By the second night, they would reach Ragusa. Then he would lead fifty men on a suicide mission: landing in the Upper City, right under Cornaro's battery guns, to disable the cannons. One hour. He only needed to hold for one hour. Then either death or retreat to Mark in the Lower City.

Beatrice was already there. She would be somewhere in the labyrinth of the Lower City's narrow streets now, in one of the safe houses she kept for emergencies.

Sebastian imagined her in a cramped room above a fishmonger's shop, the stink of salt and scales seeping through the floorboards, her face lit by a single candle as she wrote messages in invisible ink or counted coins for bribes. He imagined her wearing a servant's clothes, her hair hidden under a plain scarf, moving through the city like a ghost. Alone. Among enemies who would gut her in an alley and dump her body in the harbor if they discovered who she really was.

The thought made his stomach clench.

If I die tomorrow, I'll die without telling her. Without telling her what?

The thought cut like a blade. He couldn't name it. But it burned.

He clenched his fists, nails digging into his palms. *Don't think about her. Not now.* Now there was only the task. Only the plan. Only,

"Lost in thought, brother?"

Sebastian turned. Mark stood behind him, arms crossed over his chest. His elder brother's features were calm, almost serene, but his eyes were hard as iron on a winter morning. Sebastian knew that look. Mark withdrew into himself before battle, transformed into a machine of flesh and calculation.

"Just looking at our army," Sebastian answered, nodding toward the nearest galleass.

On its deck, men crowded. Warriors. If you could call this rabble that.

Near the bow stood the Lomeni stickmen: two dozen men in dirty leather jackets and trousers tucked into high boots. Each gripped his club, a thick, iron-banded stick capable of cracking a skull like an eggshell. Their commander's club, one-eyed Gregorio's, was special: banded with iron rings, the shaft branded with names, fourteen names. Fourteen slain enemies whose skulls he had crushed with his own hands.

They were loud, drunk, laughing, and shoving, playing some game. One tossed a coin in the air; another tried to swat it with his club mid-flight, missed, and struck a third man's shoulder. Laughter erupted. Then growling, a shove, a fight began.

Gregorio sat on a barrel apart from them, sharpening a knife, watching his men with lazy interest. Instead of his left eye, he wore a leather patch, black with a white cross burned into it. They said he'd taken it from a Hecate priest's face after the man refused to bless his weapons. A long scar ran from the patch across his entire face to his chin, the mark of a saber blow that should have killed him but hadn't. Gregorio was alive. The man who struck that blow had long since rotted in some nameless grave.

Farther back, by the mast, sat Alterna crossbowmen. A dozen men in threadbare doublets and breastplates with scratched-out heraldry: traces of former service they had betrayed or lost. They passed a wineskin around, and one had already

toppled sideways, snoring. Another tried to load his crossbow, hands shaking, the string slipping. A third cursed through his teeth while cleaning the trigger mechanism.

“Drunks,” someone said nearby.

Sebastian turned. Emile had approached silently, as always. The youngest brother surveyed the galleass with the same expression one might give a dead rat in the cellar.

“Drunks,” Emile repeated. “But they shoot straight, they say. When sober.”

“And when drunk?”

“Then they shoot at anything. Including their own.”

Mark’s smirk held no warmth. “Exactly why Valdés can’t stand them.”

Sebastian shifted his gaze to another ship, a galley standing apart. On its deck, order reigned. Valdés’s veterans: two hundred men in leather jackets with metal studs, swords at their belts, identical in bearing. They weren’t drinking, weren’t fighting, weren’t shouting. They were checking weapons, sharpening blades, packing gear into bundles. Movements were economical and precise. Each man knew his task.

Valdés’s himself stood at the helm, speaking with the galley’s captain. He wore a dark leather jacket, its folds concealing a dozen sheaths or more. At his belt hung a wheel-lock pistol, expensive weaponry, clearly a trophy. Behind his back, a sword hilt was visible: long, functional, unadorned.

“Professionals,” Mark said, his voice low. “That’s what we paid gold for. The rest is ballast.”

“Expensive ballast,” Emile noted. “Gregorio gets paid as much as twenty of his stickmen combined.”

“Because he keeps them in line,” Mark replied. “Without him, they’d kill each other before we even land.”

Sebastian turned to a third ship, crowded with urban cutthroats from Hogberg’s portside taverns. Harbor rats, thieves, murderers who’d been promised gold and forgiveness for past sins. They wore whatever they could find: rags, stolen doublets, armor stripped from the dead. Their weapons were equally mismatched: knives, cleavers, pikes. One carried a boarding cutlass with a notched blade, stained with salt and rust, a trophy from a pirate schooner, judging by the notches on the handle. Another swung a rusty two-handed sword he could barely control.

“Looters,” Sebastian breathed. “We’re leading looters into battle.”

“We’re leading what we could hire,” Mark said harshly. “Vitelli isn’t with us. The major condottieri aren’t either. Only these remain.”

He swept his hand across the fleet.

"Rabble, scum, galley slaves. But they're our rabble. And tomorrow they'll kill for us."

"Or die," Emile added, almost to himself.

"Or die," Mark agreed. "But not all. Valdés's will see his men through to the end. Gregorio too. He's too greedy to die before his time. The rest..." He shrugged. "Cannon fodder. But even cannon fodder is useful if you use it right."

Sebastian said nothing. The words stuck in his throat. He understood Mark's logic: cold, calculating, correct. Yet his chest still tightened when he looked at these men. They were going to die. For gold. For promises. For someone else's war.

What am I going for? For Ragusa? For Father? For revenge?

No. He knew the answer, even if he didn't want to admit it. He was going because he couldn't go, because Mark was going, and Emile was going, and Liana had already paid more than any of them. Because running away would mean living with the knowledge that he had abandoned his family when they needed him most, and that was a weight he couldn't bear.

"Where is she?" Sebastian asked.

Mark didn't ask who he meant. "On the flagship. With Alber. Preparing."

"For the ritual."

"Yes."

Emile's smirk was humorless. "Thirty hours from now, we'll be at Ragusa."

"Or at the bottom," Mark replied.

"Then at least I won't have to listen to you giving orders," Emile added with light mockery.

Mark turned to him, and a crooked smile flickered across his lips. "And you won't have to calculate how much all this costs."

Sebastian snorted, despite the heaviness in his chest. For a moment, the tension receded.

Then his gaze found the flagship: a swift brigantine with two masts, flying the Scaliger flag from the mainmast. A ship against a rising sun. On the stern, in the captain's cabin, light burned. That was where Liana was. And Alber.

"What price will she pay?" Sebastian's voice was barely above a whisper.

Mark didn't answer immediately. He stared at the flagship for a long time, expression unreadable. "I don't know," he said at last. "But she's prepared to pay it. Otherwise, she wouldn't have agreed."

"This is wrong."

"This is war—" Mark cut him off. "There's no right and wrong here. Only victory and defeat."

Emile placed a hand on Sebastian's shoulder, a light touch, almost weightless.

"She's stronger than we think," the youngest brother said. "Diadema wouldn't have chosen someone weak."

Sebastian wanted to object, but at that moment a shout rang out from the pier.

"Hey! Get your filthy paws off my wine, you one-eyed bastard!"

Gregorio raised his head. The knife in his hand gleamed in the sunset light.

"Repeat that," he said, his voice soft and deadly.

The harbor cutthroat, a huge brute with a pockmarked face, stepped forward. He held a club in his hand. "I said, get your paws off! That's my wine!"

Gregorio rose. Slowly. The knife vanished into its sheath so fast that Sebastian did not see the movement. In its place, a club appeared in the one-eyed man's hand: iron-banded, dark stains on the wood. Old blood.

"Your wine?" Gregorio asked. "Interesting."

He took a step forward. Then another. The cutthroat backed away.

"I... I just wanted to say..."

Gregorio struck. Once. The club whistled down onto the cutthroat's head. A crack sounded, wet and sickening. The brute dropped like he'd been cut down. Blood flowed from his ear, his nose, his mouth. He twitched once, twice, and went still.

Silence.

The Lomeni stickmen watched their commander with admiration. One barked a laugh.

"That's it! One blow!"

Gregorio looked down at the body, then at the crowd that had gathered around.

"Anyone else want my wine?" he asked calmly.

No one answered. People began backing away, dispersing.

Gregorio returned to his barrel, picked up his knife, and resumed sharpening, as if nothing had happened.

"We're leading this into battle," Sebastian said, not taking his eyes off the corpse.

Mark didn't answer. He simply watched the body being dragged toward the pier's edge to be thrown into the water. His features gave nothing away.

Emile sighed. "Let's go. Alber wanted to see us before we sail."

They walked along the pier toward the flagship. Sailors parted before them: some bowing, some simply turning away. Sebastian saw the looks: curious, wary, hostile. These men didn't like them. These men didn't believe in them. These men were going into battle for gold, not for the Scaligers.

So be it, as long as they fight when the time comes.

The flagship's gangway was flanked by torches. Two guards in Alber's armor, black breastplates set with a silver stone on the chest, stood on either side. They acknowledged the brothers with a glance, letting them pass.

The flagship's deck was clean and orderly. No drunkenness, no chaos. Sailors worked silently, efficiently. Bombardiers checked the guns: four heavy culverins positioned along the rails. Officers stood by the masts, studying charts and astrolabes.

At the stern, on the raised deck, stood Alber.

Alber Stone. Uncle. The man who had assembled this fleet, hired these men, paid this gold. The man who had staked everything, his fortune, his life, his daughter's life.

He wore a dark doublet without ornamentation, his cloak thrown back. Hair gray, cropped short. Face lined with wrinkles, not from age but from exhaustion. Eyes gray, unyielding as the stone for which he was named.

Beside him stood Liana.

Sebastian stopped when he saw his cousin. She was pale, almost translucent, with thin blue veins visible beneath her skin like rivers on a map of some foreign country. Her eyes burned with a golden gleam that pulsed in time with her heartbeat, brighter than candlelight, deeper than amber. Her hair was loose, falling over her shoulders in a dark waterfall that seemed to drink the light. She wore a simple black dress, without ornamentation, without a corset. A dress for ritual. A dress for sacrifice.

On her arms were cuts: fresh, shallow, but already numerous. The blood had clotted, but still showed as dark lines, a script written in pain. Sebastian counted seven on her left arm, five on her right. Each one a prayer. Each one is a payment.

"Liana," Sebastian began, his throat tight, but she raised a hand, stopping him.

"Don't." Her voice was soft but firm. "I know what you want to say, and the answer is no."

"You don't have to, "

"I do—" she interrupted. "I'm the only one who can. Diadema chose me, and I accepted her gift. And the gifts of goddesses are never free. Tonight, I will shed my blood."

Alber placed a hand on his daughter's shoulder. The gesture was tender, almost careful.

"She's ready," he said, addressing the brothers. "The ritual will begin when we reach open water. Fog will settle on the sea and cover us through the journey. By the second night, we'll be at Ragusa."

"And then?" Mark asked.

Alber looked at him for a long moment.

"Then, war."

He turned, addressing all three.

"You know the plan. Final review." Alber's voice was clipped, efficient. "Mark, first landing. Secure the Lower City pier, set up the bombards. By dawn, ready to fire on the palace."

Mark inclined his head.

"Sebastian, second landing. Fifty men. Disable the Upper City battery: spike the guns, burn the powder. Then make noise at the pier, draw their attention, pull defenders away from Mark's position. But when resistance stiffens, fall back to the harbor and link up with Mark. No heroics. No last stands."

Sebastian swallowed. "Understood."

"Emile, reserve flotilla. Shell the Diamant when the landings begin. Keep their guns off our men. An hour, maybe an hour and a half. Then we either move to the second phase or retreat."

Emile nodded.

He surveyed all three, and pride flickered in his eyes. Or grief.

"You are Scaligers," he said, his voice low and solemn. "Sons of Francis. Grandsons of Cosimo. The blood of ancient priests flows in your veins. Tomorrow you will reclaim what is rightfully yours. Or die trying."

Silence.

Then Mark stepped forward and came to attention.

"We will take back Ragusa, Uncle. I swear it."

Sebastian and Emile followed his lead.

Alber nodded. Once. Briefly. The candlelight caught the deep lines around his eyes, the gray in his beard that had not been there six months ago. He looked like a man who had aged a decade in weeks.

"Go. Rest. Tomorrow will be a long day."

The brothers rose, and Sebastian felt the weight of the moment pressing down on them all. The cabin smelled of melted wax and old maps, of salt, and the faint sourness of fear-sweat. No one said what they were all thinking: that this might be the last time they stood together, the last time they breathed the same air. Mark's jaw was tight, and Emile's fingers drummed against his thigh. Sebastian wanted to speak, to break the silence, but the words would not come.

The brothers turned to leave, but Liana called out.

"Sebastian. Stay. I need to speak with you."

Mark and Emile exchanged glances but said nothing. They left, leaving Sebastian alone with his cousin and Alber.

Alber looked at his daughter, then at his nephew. "I'll leave you," he said. "Five minutes."

He departed, and they were alone.

Liana walked to the rail, gazing at the dark sea. The sunset had faded, leaving only a strip of red on the horizon. Stars were already emerging in the sky, bright and distant.

"You're afraid," she said without turning.

Sebastian froze. "No. I..."

"Don't lie—" she interrupted gently, turning to face him. The golden gleam in her eyes pulsed brighter for a moment, and Sebastian felt a strange warmth wash over him, as if her gaze could see through flesh and bone to the trembling thing beneath.

She tilted her head, her voice soft but certain.

"You're afraid. For yourself. For Mark. For Emile. For me. For her."

Sebastian clenched his fists. "Beatrice can take care of herself."

"She can," Liana agreed. "But you're still afraid. Because she matters to you."

The words hung in the air.

Sebastian didn't answer. What could he say? Deny it? Pointless. Liana could feel his emotions as if they were written on his forehead in letters of fire.

"I'm not asking you to stop being afraid," Liana continued. "Fear is good. Fear keeps us alive. But don't let it control you tomorrow. When you're in the boat, when your men are rowing toward the pier, when the first shot thunders over your head, don't think about her. Think only about the task. Otherwise, you'll die. And if you die, she'll never forgive herself."

She finally turned. The golden gleam in her eyes had grown brighter.

"I see the future, Sebastian. Not clearly, not sharply. But I see."

She took a step toward him.

"Tomorrow, many will die. But you won't. Not tomorrow. You still have time. Use it."

"And you?" Sebastian asked hoarsely. "What do you see about yourself?"

Liana smiled, sadly, wearily.

"I see fog," she said. "Thick, dead fog. It will cover the sea, cover the ships, cover the city. And when it lifts..."

She fell silent.

"I don't know what comes after. Diadema doesn't show me my own fate. Only others."

Sebastian stepped toward her, wanting to embrace her, but she raised a hand to stop him.

"Don't," she whispered. "If living hands touch me now, I won't be able to do what I must. Please."

He froze, then inclined his head.

"Take care of yourself, Liana."

"You too."

He turned and walked away without looking back.

* * *

Evening came quickly. Final preparations ended. They threw the corpses overboard: the one Gregorio had killed and two more knifed in a drunken brawl between stickmen and cutthroats. The wounded were bandaged. They bound the drunk and stowed him in the hold to keep him out of the way.

By now, the carracks would be a third of the way to Ragusa, their holds full of hidden weapons and siege guns. The oldest trick in history.

Now it was time for the rest.

The fleet prepared to sail: six galleys, eight brigantines, two galleasses. The strike force. The blade that would cut Cornaro's throat while he slept.

Sebastian stood at the stern of his galley, light and fast, with a sharp prow and twenty oars per side. His fifty men sat on the benches, checking weapons: cutthroats, a few stickmen, and twenty of Valdés's veterans, whom the captain had assigned to the "suicide mission." Some prayed quietly, in whispers, addressing Hecate, the Twelve, ancestral spirits, whoever they were accustomed to.

One of the veterans, gray-haired, his features cross-hatched with wrinkles, sharpened a knife. Slowly, methodically. The sound of stone on steel was rhythmic, almost meditative.

"What's your name, soldier?" Sebastian asked.

The veteran looked up. His eyes were dark and empty.

"Paolo, my lord. Paolo of Alterna."

"How long have you been fighting, Paolo?"

"Twenty-five years, my lord. Since I turned fifteen."

"Many battles?"

"Enough to forget half of them." He smirked, the expression joyless. "And enough to remember the ones I wish I could forget."

"And tomorrow?" Sebastian asked. "Are you afraid?"

Paolo looked at him for a long moment, the whetstone pausing mid-stroke.

Firelight from a distant torch flickered across his weathered features, deepening the shadows in his wrinkles, making him look like a carved wooden saint in some forgotten church. Then he bent over his knife again, the rhythmic scraping resuming.

"Every morning before battle, I'm afraid, my lord," he said, his voice flat and matter-of-fact. "But then the slaughter starts, and the fear leaves. Only the work remains. Kill or be killed."

He tested the blade's edge against his thumb, nodded in satisfaction, and looked up again.

"Are you afraid?"

Sebastian wanted to lie, to say "no," as befitted a commander who should inspire confidence in his men. But something in Paolo's eyes stopped him. This man had seen death more often than Sebastian had seen sunrises. He deserved the truth.

"Yes," Sebastian said. "I'm afraid."

Paolo nodded, a slow dip of his grizzled head.

"Good," he said, sliding the knife into its sheath with practiced ease. "Means you're no fool. Fools aren't afraid. Fools die first."

He spat over the rail, watched the white foam disappear into the dark water, and turned back to Sebastian. A glint of respect flickered in his empty eyes.

"Stay close to me tomorrow, my lord. I'll teach you how to stay alive."

He settled back against the rail, pulled his cloak tighter against the night chill, and closed his eyes. The conversation was over.

Sebastian surveyed the others. Most were silent. Some dozed, slumped against the rails. Some drank furtively, taking small sips from flasks. One wept quietly, face buried in his knees.

Rabble. Looters. Drunks. Cowards. And yet they go. Tomorrow they'll row toward the pier, under the guns, knowing half of them won't return. And they'll row anyway. For gold? For fear? For desperation?

It didn't matter. What mattered was that they were going.

On the flagship, the bell rang. One stroke. Two. Three. The sound rolled across the water, deep and sonorous, vibrating in Sebastian's chest like a second heartbeat.

Signal to sail.

Sailors rushed to the ropes, their shouts carrying across the harbor in the still evening air. Sails fluttered, then snapped taut as they filled with wind. Oars dipped into the water: forty oars together, as one, churning the black sea white.

The fleet moved.

Sixteen ships left the port of Hogberg at sunset, gliding across the darkening water like ghosts. Six galleys, eight brigantines, two galleasses. The carracks were already far ahead, innocent merchantmen somewhere beyond the horizon. Now came the wolves.

Lights on the masts were extinguished. Sails were dark, not white, dyed with pitch and soot. Shadow ships, a shadow army, sailing to war under a sky thick with stars that seemed to watch in cold indifference.

Sebastian stood at the stern, watching the lights of Hogberg slowly disappear behind them. The city faded, dissolving into the darkness behind them. Ahead was only the sea, black, boundless, stretching to an invisible horizon.

And somewhere there, beyond that horizon, lay Ragusa.

Home.

Or grave.

* * *

The sea met them with unnatural calm.

Sebastian felt the wrongness in his bones, in the prickling of his skin. The air pressed against him, heavy and watchful. The water lay too smooth beneath them, a black mirror that might crack at a whisper. Stars reflected on the sea's surface so clearly that it seemed the fleet was sailing not through water but through sky.

They had been at sea for over a day. Long hours of monotonous movement: oars, sails, silence. Sailors worked without speaking, exchanging glances. They felt the same thing Sebastian did. Something was coming.

On his galley's deck, the stench was overwhelming: sweat, vomit, and shit from the hold barrels, all baked together by the close press of bodies and the lingering heat of the previous day. Sailors retched over the side, not from fear but from the swell and bad wine. One cutthroat had pissed himself from fear while still in port, and the smell had soaked into the planks, mixing with the tar and salt until it became part of the ship itself. Sebastian breathed through his mouth, trying not to inhale it, but it penetrated his lungs anyway, settled on his tongue like a film, and seeped into his clothes. He would smell of this ship for days, he knew, if he lived that long.

He stood peering into the darkness. Ahead, two cable-lengths away, loomed the flagship's silhouette: a dark mass against the starry sky. On its stern, a single lantern burned. Red. A signal.

Prepare.

Sebastian turned to his men.

"To the oars! Hold distance! Do not fall behind the flagship!"

The rowers threw themselves at the wooden handles, muscles straining beneath sweat-soaked shirts. The oars bit into the black water with a rhythm like a heartbeat: creak, splash, creak, splash. The galley surged forward, timbers groaning in protest, the deck vibrating beneath Sebastian's boots. He gripped the rail, tasting salt on his lips, feeling the spray on his face. The flagship's red lantern burned ahead like a single bloody eye in the darkness.

Something was happening on the flagship.

Sebastian saw movement on deck, shadows flickering in the red lantern's light. He heard voices, quiet, muffled by distance. Then a single voice rose above the others: Liana's, but changed, deeper, resonant with power. She spoke words in a language Sebastian didn't recognize, syllables that seemed to twist in the air, making his ears ache and his teeth hurt. Ancient words. Dead words. The language of priests who had served the goddesses before the rise of Hecate.

Then, clear across the water, he heard her cry: "*Egeiro!*"

The word struck him like a physical blow. Awaken. A summons to a power that slumbered in the deep places of the world.

Silence.

And suddenly, light.

LIANA

The ritual began with blood.

Liana knelt on the flagship's deck, the planks hard and chill beneath her knees. Around her, sailors had retreated to the rails, pressing themselves against the wood as if distance could shield them from what was about to happen. Only her father remained close, standing three paces behind her, his face a mask of controlled anguish.

She did not look at him. Couldn't. If she met his eyes now, she might falter.

The knife lay in her palm: small, silver, ancient. It had belonged to her grandmother, and her grandmother's grandmother before that. A ritual blade, never used for anything but prayer. Tonight, it would open a door that had been closed for centuries.

Are you ready, child?

Diadema's voice echoed in her mind, warm and vast, like the sun breaking through clouds. Not words exactly, more like knowing, like suddenly remembering something she had always known.

Yes, Liana replied. *I am ready.*

Then begin.

She raised the knife. The silver caught the red lantern light, gleaming like a bloody tear.

The first cut was the hardest. Not because it hurt, though it did, a sharp, clean pain that sang through her arm, but because it was the first. The commitment. The point of no return.

Blood welled up, dark in the dim light. She watched it flow down her forearm, drip from her elbow onto the deck. Where it touched the wood, it did not soak in. It pooled, gathered, and began to move in patterns she did not control.

The second cut. The third.

Each one is easier than the last. Each one opening her further, letting something out that had been locked inside her since birth.

Good, Diadema whispered. *Now speak the words.*

Liana opened her mouth, and a language she had never learned poured out. Syllables that tasted like smoke and honey, like salt and thunder. Words that had been old when the first temples were built, when the goddesses still walked among mortals.

"Egeiro," she said, and the word was a key turning in a lock.

Awaken.

The power answered.

It came from everywhere and nowhere: from the sea beneath the ship, from the stars above, from the blood pooling on the deck. It came from inside her, from a place she had not known existed until Diadema had shown her. A vast, ancient thing, patient as mountains, deep as the ocean floor.

She felt it fill her, expand her, press against the boundaries of her skin until she thought she might burst.

And with it came the fog.

She did not create it. She *became* it.

One moment, she was Liana Stone, kneeling on a ship's deck with blood running down her arms. Next, she was everywhere: spreading across the water, rising into the air, curling around the ships like a mother's embrace.

She was the fog, and the fog was her.

Through a thousand invisible eyes, she saw the fleet: sixteen ships cutting through black water, oars rising and falling in unison. She saw Sebastian standing at his galley's stern, his face drawn in the starlight, his hand gripping the rail. She saw Mark on another ship, jaw set, eyes fixed forward. She saw Emile commanding the reserve flotilla, his usual irony replaced by something harder, more focused.

She saw her father still standing behind her body—so small, so pale, so far away - his lips moving in a silent prayer.

Don't lose yourself, Diadema warned, her voice distant now, muffled by the vastness Liana was becoming. *Remember who you are. Remember why you're doing this.*

But it was hard to remember. Hard to hold onto the small, fragile thing called Liana when she could be everything. When she could spread across the entire sea, she could swallow the stars themselves in her white embrace.

The fleet, Diadema insisted. *Focus on the fleet. Guide them. Protect them.*

Right. The fleet. Her family. Her purpose.

Liana gathered herself, a strange sensation, like trying to pour an ocean into a cup, and focused on the ships. She wrapped around them, thickened above them, hid them from any watching eyes. Where her fog touched the water, the sea grew still. Where it brushed the sails, the wind died.

She was their shield. Their shroud. Their path through the darkness.

But the price...

She felt it now. Each moment she held the fog, something was left for her. Not blood, that was just the key, the catalyst. Something deeper. Something she couldn't name but could feel draining away, like heat from a dying fire.

Memories, Diadema said softly. *You're paying in memories. In possibilities. In futures, you might have lived.*

Liana felt them go. A summer afternoon she'd spent reading in her father's garden, gone, fading like morning frost. A boy she'd danced with at a festival three years ago, whose name she'd never learned, gone, his face dissolving into white mist. A dream she'd had since childhood, of a house by the sea, of children playing in the waves, gone, erased as if it had never been.

Is this the price? she asked.

This is only the beginning, Diadema answered. *The more you use, the more you pay. Are you willing?*

Liana thought of Sebastian, rowing toward guns that could tear him apart. Of Mark, hard and driven, carrying the weight of their father's death. Of Emile, hiding his fear behind wit and calculation. Of her father, who had already lost so much.

Yes, she said. *I am willing.*

She pushed harder. The fog thickened, spread, and became a wall of white that stretched from horizon to horizon. Ships vanished into it, swallowed whole. Even the stars disappeared, hidden behind her embrace.

And in the heart of it all, in a body that felt increasingly distant and strange, Liana Stone bled and prayed and gave herself away, piece by piece, for the family she loved.

Time lost meaning in the fog.

Liana floated in a white void, neither here nor there, neither herself nor the mist that surrounded everything. She was aware of the ships moving through her, felt them like fish swimming through her bloodstream. She was aware of the sailors, their fear a bitter taste on her tongue. She was aware of the sea, vast and patient beneath her, waiting.

Mostly, she was aware of the drain.

It came in waves now. A memory would surface, a conversation with her father, a lesson with a tutor, the smell of bread baking in the kitchen, and then it would dissolve, pulled away into the fog like smoke sucked through a chimney.

She tried to hold onto them. Tried to grip each precious moment with mental fingers. But they slipped away, one after another, leaving only absence behind.

Almost there, Diadema said. *Almost.*

Through the fog, Liana sensed something. A presence. Large, dark, reeking of gunpowder and stone.

The Diamant.

Cornaro's fortress. Guardian of Ragusa's harbor.

She felt its guns like teeth in a massive jaw. Felt the soldiers on its walls, peering into the white void, seeing nothing. Felt the tension radiating from it, the readiness to kill.

Carefully now, Diadema warned. *Don't let them see.*

Liana gathered herself tighter around the fleet. Thickened. Solidified. The fog became almost solid, a wall of white cotton that swallowed sound and light.

The ships glided past the fortress. Silent. Invisible. Ghosts in the night.

One by one, they slipped into Ragusa's harbor.

You did it, Diadema said, and there was something like pride in her voice. *You brought them through.*

But Liana barely heard her. The drain was too strong now, pulling at the foundations of who she was. She felt herself dissolving, fragmenting, spreading too thin across the vast expanse of fog.

Hold on, Diadema urged. *Just a little longer. Hold on.*

She tried. Goddesses, how she tried.

But the fog was too big, and she was too small, and the price was too high.

The last thing she felt, before darkness took her, was her father's hands catching her as she fell.

SEBASTIAN

The fog thickened. Grew denser, more oppressive. It pressed against Sebastian like a living thing, heavy and wet, soaking through his clothes, seeping into his bones.

Each breath burned his lungs, icy air that tasted of salt and decay, ancient and wrong. His hands went numb despite his gloves. Frost covered his face, tiny crystals forming on his eyebrows and in his hair. When he wiped his lips, his fingers came away slick with moisture that might have been sea spray or might have been tears.

How long will this last? How long can Liana hold the ritual?

And as if in answer to his thought, pain.

Not his pain. Someone else's. He felt it in his whole body: sharp, burning, unbearable. A scream that wasn't a scream. Agony dissolved in the air.

Liana.

Sebastian gripped the galley's rail until his knuckles went white.

Hold on.

Please, hold on.

The fog churned. For an instant, just an instant, Sebastian saw stars. A small strip of black sky sprinkled with distant lights.

Then the fog closed again.

But that instant was enough. He knew the ritual was nearing its end. Liana was at her limit.

A little more.

Just a little more.

Around the galley, shadows churned in the white void, unclear, blurred. Sebastian saw them from the corner of his eye: forms moving in the fog, shapes that might have been ships or phantoms. A woman's silhouette drifted past. A child's hand reached. A face looked almost like his father's, mouth open in a silent scream.

Don't look. Don't look.

One of the rowers groaned, a sound of such longing that Sebastian's heart clenched.

"I see her," he whispered. "I see my mother. She's there, in the fog. She's calling me."

"Shut up!" Sebastian barked. "Don't look into the fog! Look at the oars!"

But the rower wasn't listening. He stood, releasing his oar, and stepped toward the rail.

"Mama..." he whispered. "I'm coming..."

Sebastian lunged forward, grabbed the rower's shoulder, and yanked him back. The man fell to the deck, shaking.

"Hold him!" Sebastian shouted. "Don't let him near the rail!"

Two veterans grabbed the rower, pinned him to the deck. He thrashed, snarled, tried to break free.

"She's there! She's calling! Let me go!"

"That's not your mother, fool!" one of the veterans barked. "It's the fog! It's muddling your head!"

Sebastian straightened, scanning the others. Many were staring into the fog. In their eyes, a glazed look, like sleepwalkers.

"Don't look into the fog!" he shouted. "That's an order! Look only at the oars! Only at the oars!"

Reluctantly, one by one, the men lowered their gazes.

The galley continued to glide forward.

The flagship ahead began to slow. Sebastian saw its silhouette sharpen, saw the fog around it begin to thin.

“Ship oars!” he commanded. “Prepare to land!”

The rowers froze.

“To land? But we’re still at sea...”

“Do as you’re told!”

Oars were shipped. The galley stopped, rocking on invisible waves.

The fog began to fade.

First, outlines appeared: dark, blurred. Then shapes grew sharper. Rocks. Tall, black, rising from the water. Walls. Towers. A fortress.

The Diamant.

Sebastian froze, staring at the fortress. It was closer than he’d thought. Too close. Massive walls of black stone rose from the water like cliffs, slick with spray and crusted with barnacles. The guns on its walls pointed straight at them: black muzzles, like the eyes of blind giants, ready to spew fire and death.

One shot. One shot and they’d be splinters and corpses, sinking into the black deep.

But the fog still held. Thinned, dispersed, yet enough to hide the ships from the watch. He could hear voices on the walls, distant and muffled, the footsteps of sentries who saw nothing, heard nothing, suspected nothing.

Somewhere inside the harbor, the four carracks waited, their crews ready, their hidden cargo of guns and steel prepared for the signal.

Thank you, Liana. Whatever this costs you, thank you.

The flagship and most of the fleet remained behind.

Sebastian watched the five galleys glide into the fog ahead, heading for the Lower City port where the carracks waited. Mark’s landing. Valdés’s and his veterans were ready to seize the docks the moment the gangplanks dropped.

His galley moved in another direction, right, toward the Upper City pier.

The fog wrapped around them again.

Sebastian heard men’s breathing: heavy, ragged. Someone prayed in a whisper. Someone wept silently.

“Prepare,” he said quietly. “It begins soon.”

The galley glided between rocks. To right and left, black cliffs rose, covered with sea grass. The water here was dark, almost black. Deep.

Ahead, the pier appeared. Wooden wharves, rotting and decrepit, slick with algae and sea slime. Stairs led up to the palace, disappearing into the fog like a path to the underworld. Lanterns on posts, extinguished. The only sound was the gentle lap of water against the hull and the distant cry of a gull, muffled and strange in the white silence.

Empty.

Sebastian frowned, his hand dropping to his rapier hilt.

Too empty. Where were the guards? Where was the watch?

The hair on the back of his neck prickled. Either Beatrice had done her work brilliantly, clearing the way with bribes and whispered lies, or this was a trap, and Cornaro's men were waiting in the darkness above, with loaded arquebuses and naked steel.

Only one way to find out.

ALBER

On the flagship, silence reigned.

Alber stood at the rail, watching the fog thin. The landings had departed: Mark to the Lower City, Sebastian to the Upper. Emile was forming the fleet in line, preparing to shell the Diamant.

Everything was going according to plan.

But the cost...

He turned.

Liana lay on the deck, motionless, ashen, like a marble statue. Her eyes were open, wide, unseeing. They stared at the sky but saw nothing.

Around her, blood had spread: a thin red web, no longer pulsing. It flowed from numerous fresh, shallow cuts on her arms. From her eyes, tears had streamed, not clear. Bloody.

Her lips still moved, forming words no one could hear. Names, perhaps. Or prayers to a goddess who had already taken her payment.

Beside her stood the physician and two sailors, silent and stricken. They did not know what to do. The physician held a small, bloodied dagger in his hands, looking as if he wanted to throw it overboard.

His daughter was dying.

Alber Stone had seen death before. Had ordered it, paid for it, watched it take men who owed him money and men who had betrayed his trust. Death was

a tool, like any other, a means to an end. He had learned to look at it without flinching, to calculate its cost and factor it into his ledgers like any other expense.

But this was different.

This was Liana.

He knelt beside her on the wet planks, and the world narrowed to the small, still figure before him. The sailors had retreated, forming a loose circle at the edge of his vision, drawn faces, shifting feet, the muted sounds of men who wanted to be anywhere else. The physician stood nearby, the bloodied ritual dagger trembling in his hands, lips moving in some prayer that would do no good.

None of it mattered. There was only Liana.

Her hand was ice in his grip. He held it tighter, as if he could warm her with his own failing heat, as if he could pour his life into her through skin and bone. Her face was the color of candle wax, her veins standing out like blue rivers beneath translucent flesh. The cuts on her arms had stopped bleeding, but the blood had pooled around her in strange patterns, spirals, and symbols that seemed to shift when he wasn't looking directly at them.

Magic. The gift he had asked her to use. The price he had asked her to pay.

I did this.

The thought was a knife, twisting in his chest.

I asked her to do this. I planned it. I calculated the risks and decided they were acceptable. I looked at my own daughter and saw a weapon.

"Liana," he called softly, his voice cracking on her name. "Liana, can you hear me?"

Her lips trembled. No sound.

He leaned closer, pressing his ear to her mouth, straining to hear. Her breath was a whisper, barely there, like the last flutter of a candle before it drowned in its own wax.

"I... hear." The words were so faint he felt them more than heard them. "*Papa...* I can't see."

Something broke inside him.

He had held himself together through the planning, through the hiring of mercenaries and the counting of gold, through the endless nights of strategy and the cold equations of war. He had been Alber Stone, the rock, the foundation, the man who never wavered. But now, kneeling on a blood-slicked deck with his daughter's hand growing colder in his grip, he felt the cracks spreading through him like ice on a spring pond.

"I know, child," he managed. "I know."

"The fog..." Her voice was a thread, fraying. "I held it... as long as I could... Did they get through?"

She's asking about the mission. She's blind, maybe dying, and she's asking if she completed the mission.

"They got through," he said, his voice steady even as his heart tore itself apart. "Mark and Sebastian. Both got through. You gave them time."

"Good." A breath. Almost a smile on her bloodless lips. "Then... it wasn't for nothing."

Her eyes, those beautiful eyes that had looked up at him from her cradle, that had sparkled with mischief when she was five, that had burned with determination when she accepted Diadema's gift, stared at the sky and saw nothing.

Her breathing became shallow, ragged. Each inhale a struggle, each exhale a small surrender.

Alber watched his daughter slip away, and he remembered.

He remembered her at three years old, toddling across the study floor to show him a flower she'd picked from the garden. He remembered her at seven, serious and focused, learning her letters at his desk while he worked on accounts. He remembered her at twelve, asking why her mother had died, and the way she accepted his halting answer with a gravity beyond her years. He remembered her at sixteen, dancing at the harvest festival, laughing in the torchlight, so alive it hurt to look at her.

He remembered yesterday—was it only yesterday?—when she pressed her forehead to his and whispered, "I'm ready, Papa."

And he had let her go.

What kind of father lets his daughter bleed herself dry for a war?

The answer came, brutal and unyielding: the kind who wants to win.

He had told himself it was necessary. That Liana was strong, that Diadema would protect her, that the goddess would not let her vessel be destroyed. He had told himself the cause was just, that Ragusa needed to be reclaimed, that the family's honor demanded it.

But here, now, with Liana's hand going slack in his grip, all those reasons felt like lies, comfortable lies that had let him sleep at night while he planned to sacrifice his only child.

I should have found another way. I should have waited. I should have—

"My lord." The physician's voice was hesitant. "We should move her. She needs warmth, rest—"

"She said not to stop..." The physician's words trailed off under Alber's glare.

“Carry her!” The command came as a bark, rough with grief. “Carefully. To my cabin. Now.”

The sailors moved quickly, lifting Liana with exaggerated gentleness, as if she were made of glass, or of something more precious, more fragile. Alber watched them carry her below, watched her dark hair trail over the arm of a sailor, watched the last glimpse of her wan face disappear into the darkness of the companionway.

Then he was alone.

The deck was hard beneath his knees. His hands were wet, with sea spray, with his daughter’s blood, he didn’t know. He stared at the stain where she had lain, at the patterns the blood had made, and he wondered if they meant something. If the goddess had left a message in the spirals and curves.

Or if it was just blood. Just the price of victory.

He rose slowly, his knees protesting, his body suddenly old. The fog still clung to Ragusa’s Bay, but it was thinning now, dissolving into the pre-dawn air. Soon it would lift entirely. Soon, the battle would begin.

Mark was in the Lower City by now, unloading siege guns, preparing to turn Cornaro’s own tactics against him. Sebastian was climbing toward the Upper City batteries with fifty men to disable the guns. Emile was forming the fleet in line, ready to shell the Diamant and cover the landing.

His nephews. His sister’s sons. He had sent them into battle, too.

How many of them will I bury before this is over?

He turned to the stern, where Emile stood on the captain’s bridge, giving orders with the calm efficiency that Alber had taught him. The youngest of the brothers, the one who hid his fear behind wit and numbers. Alber saw his sister in Emile’s profile, the same sharp chin, the same quick eyes.

Maria. I am sorry. I am using your sons like pieces on a game board. I am using all of them.

The fleet was forming into line. Two galleasses and eight brigantines. Guns polished, loaded, aimed at the Diamant. Bombardiers stood ready, fuses smoking in their hands, waiting for the order.

Emile raised his hand.

“Prepare to fire!”

The men froze at their stations. Silence fell over the deck, broken only by the creak of timber and the lap of waves against the hull.

Alber watched his nephew, watched the way Emile’s jaw tightened, the way his fingers curled around the rail. The boy was afraid. Of course, he was afraid. Only fools were not afraid before battle.

But he would do his duty. They all would.

Because that was what Scaligers did, they paid the price, whatever it cost.

The first rays of the sun broke through the white shroud. Dawn. The sky's edge colored pink, then gold, painting the fog with hues it had never known.

The fog began to fade. Faster now. White wisps rose upward, dissolving into the air, revealing the dark silhouette of the Diamant, revealing the harbor, revealing Ragusa.

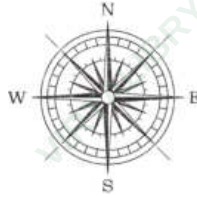
Alber stared at the city of his birth, the city his family had ruled for generations, the city he had just bought back with his daughter's blood.

Was it worth it?

He did not have an answer. He might never have an answer.

But it was a beginning.

Chapter 24: Blood on Native Stones



MARK

The fog was alive and hungry.

Mark felt it in his whole body, a dense white mass enveloping the galleys, seeping into his lungs, settling on his skin in a cold film that would not wipe away. It smelled of salt and something metallic, almost like copper, like blood before it's spilled. Visibility was twenty paces, no more. Beyond that stretched a white void where masts dissolved into ghosts, where sails became shrouds, where entire ships vanished as if swallowed by some vast and patient creature.

He stood at the lead galley's bow, one hand resting on his rapier's hilt, the other gripping the rail until his knuckles ached. The wood was slick with condensation, cold as a corpse. Behind him, the deck creaked under the weight of two hundred men who breathed in near-silence, their armor muffled with rags, their weapons wrapped in cloth.

Beside him, Valdés checked his pistol. The mercenary captain worked without looking up: powder, wadding, ball, ramrod. His movements were so practiced they seemed almost meditative. His face might have been carved from the same stone as the cliffs of Ragusa.

"See anything?" Valdés asked quietly.

"Fog. Only fog."

"Good." The captain's lips twitched, not quite a smile. "Means they can't see us either."

Mark nodded, though inside, everything clenched with tension. The plan was simple enough on paper. Four carracks had entered the harbor at dusk under merchant flags, their holds full of siege guns. Now, under the cover of Liana's fog, the galleys would land the assault force. Capture the pier. Unload the bombards from the carracks. Set them up by dawn. Then the ultimatum: Cornaro surrenders, or his palace becomes rubble.

Simple. Clean. The kind of plan that looked perfect in a war room and fell apart the moment steel met flesh.

A silhouette emerged from the white void. The pier materialized slowly, like a dream taking shape: wooden pilings blackened by decades of salt and tide, mooring posts worn smooth by countless ropes, iron rings crusted with rust and barnacles. The lanterns that should have lined the dock stood dark and cold. Several figures lounged near a stack of crates: guards in the blue uniforms of the city watch, halberds propped against barrels, one man yawning so wide Mark could see the pink of his throat.

They weren't expecting anything. The fog had worked.

"The pier," Mark whispered over his shoulder.

Valdés raised his hand. The gesture was short, precise: a language of fingers that his men read like scripture. Two hundred mercenaries froze mid-motion, and the silence that followed was so complete Mark could hear his own heartbeat thundering in his ears.

The lead galley glided toward the pier like a ghost ship from sailors' nightmares, with only the soft splash of water against the hull marking its passage. Ropes flew to the wooden pilings, landing with whispered thumps. The guards on shore continued their drowsy watch, oblivious.

Valdés nodded to three of his men, veterans with gray in their beards and nothing in their eyes. They slipped over the side and descended the ropes, quick and silent as cats stalking prey. Knives appeared in their hands: long, narrow blades that did not gleam in the fog-dimmed light.

Mark watched the shadows approach the guards. One mercenary came from behind, hand clamping over the guard's mouth, the knife sliding between ribs with the ease of a key turning in a lock. The guard jerked once, twice, then went limp. His body was dragged to the pier's edge and slipped into the black water with barely a splash.

The second guard turned at some half-heard sound, opened his mouth to cry out, and a knife buried itself in his throat. Blood sprayed across the pier planks in a dark arc. The third guard ran, boots hammering on wood, but he made it only ten paces before they brought him down, and the wet sounds that followed were mercifully brief.

Silence returned, thicker than before.

Valdés jumped onto the pier and scanned the darkness, head turning slowly, nostrils flaring like a hound testing the air. Then he nodded to Mark. "Clear."

Mark descended after him. The pier planks groaned under his weight, old wood, rotting from within, ready to betray a careless step. The smell hit him as his boots touched the dock: tar and rotten seaweed, fish guts and brine, the familiar stench of the harbor he'd known since childhood. For a moment, memory ambushed

him: running along these same planks as a boy, dodging fishermen's nets, stealing oranges from merchant crates while his tutor called his name in vain.

He pushed the memory down. Buried it.

The remaining galleys docked in the same silence. The mercenaries poured onto shore in a dark tide, quick but without chaos. Professionals. They spread out with practiced efficiency: some advancing toward the warehouses that loomed like sleeping giants along the waterfront, some taking positions to guard the pier, the rest forming chains to begin the unloading.

The bombards came first. Massive iron beasts, their black muzzles gaping like the mouths of hungry gods. Each one weighed enough to crush a man, and each could reduce a palace wall to rubble with a single shot. They were rolled down the gangways with exquisite care, the wood groaning in protest beneath their weight. Then came the mortars, loaded onto waiting carts with a clank of chains that echoed off the warehouse walls. Then the powder barrels: black wood branded with skulls and crossbones, death waiting to be unleashed.

Mark watched the unloading, feeling the knot in his chest loosen by degrees. It was working. Against all odds, the plan was working.

"How fast can we set up the guns?" he asked Valdés.

The mercenary captain surveyed the square that opened beyond the warehouses, a wide space paved with old stone, with a clear line of sight to the Upper City, where the palace perched like a vulture on its cliff.

Mark looked deeper into the Lower City. Narrow streets climbed upward toward the cliffs, crooked as broken fingers, their windows dark, doors closed, shutters latched against the night. The city slept, peaceful and defenseless, dreaming whatever dreams cities dream while enemies crept through their veins. The unease would not leave. It sat at the edge of his consciousness like a splinter working its way toward the bone.

Too easy—

He immediately wished he hadn't.

The alarm horns shattered the silence without warning.

A drawn-out, howling sound tore through the fog, echoed off stone walls, and ran through the narrow streets like a living thing. One horn, then a second, then a third, from different directions, converging on the harbor in a symphony of alarm. The sound was old, primal, the sound of a city waking to defend itself.

Mark froze.

People began emerging from the alleys.

First a dozen figures, then twenty, then thirty, the crowd swelling with every heartbeat until the mouth of the square bristled with weapons and hostile faces. An organized defense was forming before his eyes, materializing from the fog like a nightmare made flesh.

Something inside Mark went cold. This wasn't supposed to happen.

The townspeople themselves had risen to defend their city. Instead of hiding in their homes, instead of cowering behind locked doors as civilians should when soldiers came, they had armed themselves and marched out to fight. Fishermen with gutting knives and boat hooks. Blacksmiths with hammers and iron bars. Old soldiers who'd hung their swords above mantels and now held them again, with hands that remembered.

His people. Turned against him.

The port watch formed the defense's backbone: two dozen guards in blue uniforms with white sashes, their brass buttons catching what little light filtered through the fog. They carried halberds and spears, crossbows slung across their backs, real weapons gleaming with oil and care. Their formation was textbook: shields locked in front like a wall of painted wood and iron, pikemen bristling behind them, crossbowmen anchoring the flanks with bolts already nocked.

Their commander stood at the center, a broad-shouldered sergeant with a face that looked carved by enemy blades and healed badly every time. His voice rang out across the square:

"Hold the line! Archers to the rooftops! For Ragusa!"

The voice of a veteran. The voice of a man who had seen battle and learned its lessons in blood.

Behind the watch came the militia, and Mark's heart clenched as he recognized faces in the crowd.

An old fisherman, Mark, knew that face. The man who had caught tuna in the bay when Mark was a boy, who had let a young lordling help haul nets and never told his father. He wore a leather jacket now, old armor strapped over it, dented and scratched but solid. In his weathered hands, he gripped a fish-gutting axe, the kind used to split tuna skulls with a single blow. His face was a map of scars from old brawls, and his eyes burned with something that looked terribly like betrayal.

"For the Admiral!" the fisherman shouted, his voice cracking with age and fury. "Hold the city!"

Beside him stood a blacksmith's apprentice, barely twenty, broad-shouldered, muscles built by years at the forge. He carried his father's hammer, heavy enough to crush a man's chest, and wore chainmail under his leather apron. His eyes held no fear. Only rage.

More came behind them: old soldiers, veterans of the naval wars, five or six men with gray in their beards and steel in their spines. They carried pikes and swords that had seen service decades ago, wore armor that had protected them through battles Mark had only read about. They remembered formation. They held the line. They called encouragement to the young, their voices roughened by sea salt and old wounds.

Archers scrambled onto the warehouse rooftops, moving with a confidence that spoke of practice. War bows and hunting bows. They began firing immediately, dense volleys, methodical, aimed with the patience of men who had brought down deer and wild boar and knew that rushing a shot meant wasting an arrow.

The defense was effective. Far too effective for a rabble of civilians.

“Fuck,” Valdés breathed beside him. “They were ready.”

“Beatrice,” Mark whispered. “She was supposed to keep the city quiet.”

Something had gone wrong. She had failed, or perhaps faltered. No, not betrayed. He knew it in his gut, in the instinct that had kept him alive through the flight from Ragusa, through the wilderness, through a hundred moments when trust meant death. Beatrice was no traitor. But something had happened, and now he was paying the price.

The watch held their line: shields locked like a wall, spears bristling like a steel forest. The commander’s voice cut through the din: “Hold positions! Don’t let them reach the warehouses!”

Valdés didn’t wait for orders. He barked at his men, “Attack! Break through!”

The mercenaries surged forward, a hundred and fifty men becoming a wave of steel and fury that crashed against the shield wall with a sound like thunder.

And broke.

Spears met the first wave with the inevitability of physics. Three mercenaries fell in the opening seconds, impaled through chest, gut, and throat. Shields turned sword blows aside with contemptuous ease. Crossbows sang from the rooftops, bolts whistling down through the fog and finding flesh with wet, meaty sounds. A mercenary beside Mark grabbed at his throat; a bolt protruded from his neck, the fletching dark with blood. He fell, gurgled, kicked once, and went still.

Valdés fought like a demon: halberd whirling, shield smashing, every movement precise and lethal. He broke a guard’s shield with a blow that numbed Mark’s teeth, finished the man with a second strike to the head, spun to parry a spear, and counterattacked with savage efficiency. But even as he killed, his men were falling back, step by grudging step.

The old fisherman fought with his axe, and Goddess help Mark, the old man was good. He knocked a mercenary down with a blow to the shield that sounded like

a thunderclap, then split his skull with the backswing. His voice rose above the chaos, roaring words Mark couldn't make out, only the fury behind them, the righteous rage of a man defending his home.

The blacksmith swung his hammer in great, sweeping arcs. A mercenary tried to dart inside his reach and took the hammer full in the chest. Armor crumpled inward like parchment. The mercenary collapsed, coughing blood that steamed in the cold air.

The archers kept firing from the rooftops, patient, deadly, picking off mercenaries one by one. Another fell with a bolt in the shoulder. A second took one in the thigh and screamed. A third caught a bolt through the chest, through and through, and died before he hit the ground.

My men are falling back.

The knowledge settled into him like ice water filling his veins.

Valdés hacked his way through the press to reach him, face slick with blood that wasn't his own. His voice was hoarse. "Commander. They're holding the line. Archers are cutting us down. We've lost ten men. Fifteen."

And then it got worse.

More figures poured from the side alleys, a dozen, two dozen, armed with whatever they could find. Dockhands with boat hooks. Fishwives with gutting knives. Boys too young to shave, carrying clubs and stones. The city was waking, and every heartbeat brought more defenders to the square.

"We need to hit them now!" Valdés snarled, grabbing Mark's arm. "Hard and fast, before the whole fucking city arrives. Cut through them, all of them, or we're dead!"

Mark forced himself to assess the situation with cold clarity. The defense wasn't just holding, it was growing. More citizens joined every moment. The watch was confident, their formation unbroken. The militia fought with the desperate courage of men protecting their homes. The coordination was too precise for chance.

If they didn't break through, all was lost. The artillery wouldn't be set up. Sebastian was somewhere in the Upper City with fifty men on a suicide mission. Emile was under the Diamant's guns. And all of it, all the planning, all the gold, all the blood already spilled, would be for nothing.

"Orders?" Valdés demanded.

Mark gripped his rapier until his knuckles went white.

Think. There must be a way.

Cavalry. A dozen horsemen charging from the flank would scatter a militia in seconds, the thunder of hooves, the terror of trampling, the instinct to flee that courage could not overcome. Civilians broke before cavalry. Always. But he had no horses. They had come by sea.

Magic. Liana's fog had brought them this far. Suppose she could conjure something else, a wall of fire, a phantom army, anything to make the defenders run without a blade being drawn. But Liana was on the ship, half a league out in the harbor, her power spent on the fog that was already thinning in the dawn light.

A show of force. The bombards. If they could set up even one cannon, aim it at the square, threaten to fire, the militia would scatter rather than be torn apart by grapeshot. But the guns were only now being positioned, the crews working frantically behind the warehouse line. An hour to set up. Maybe more. By then, Valdés's men would be dead.

Three options. Three ways to break civilian resistance without massacre.

None of them was possible.

Which left only one risky path—a hard, direct assault. Professional mercenaries in full armor against fishermen and craftsmen. Steel against courage. His men would break through eventually; they were better armed, better trained, better led. The militia would crack. They always did.

And the streets of Ragusa would run red.

The blood of his subjects. The people he had come to liberate.

There must be another way.

There was not.

His gaze swept across the defense, and he saw faces.

The old fisherman, still fighting, blood streaming from a cut on his forehead.

The blacksmith's son, hammer rising and falling.

The watch commander—Alfonso, Mark remembered suddenly—an honest man who had served under his father, and wept at the funeral.

These are my people. My subjects. They're defending the city.

From me.

His grandfather's voice rose from memory, stern but fair. *A ruler serves the people, Mark. Not the other way around. Remember that.*

I cannot order this.

The realization struck him with the force of a physical blow. If I give that order, if I send mercenaries to slaughter fishermen and blacksmiths defending their homes, I become a tyrant in the city's eyes. Forever. Even if I win, I lose.

But if he didn't.

His hand rose—the command gesture Valdés had taught him: *advance, no quarter*. His fingers began to form the shape.

The old fisherman's face flashed before him. Giovanni. The man had a name. He had let a young lordling help haul nets once, a lifetime ago.

Mark's hand fell to his side.

"Commander!" Valdés barked. "Decision!"

Mark opened his mouth. The word attack sat on his tongue like a stone. He could taste it, feel its weight.

He couldn't say it.

"I... I can't. Not like this."

Valdés grabbed his arm, fingers digging in hard enough to bruise. "Then give me command. I'll do it. You look away, you don't watch, and when it's done, you can tell yourself it wasn't your order."

Mark met the mercenary's eyes. For a moment—just a moment—he considered it. The easy way out. The coward's compromise.

"No."

"Goddess damn you." Valdés released him. He spat onto the bloody stones.

"Then we've lost, Commander. But at least your conscience is clean."

Mark said nothing. Then he raised his hand and ordered the attack.

BEATRICE

She watched the battle from the warehouse roof, and she watched it fail.

The position was good: three stories up, with a clear view of the harbor square and the streets that fed into it. She had watched the galleys glide to the pier like ghosts. Had watched Valdés's men kill the guards with quick, professional efficiency. Had felt something loosen in her chest as the bombards rolled down the gangways, massive black shapes that meant victory, that meant the end of Cornaro, that meant everything she had sacrificed might finally mean something.

The fog was thinning now, dawn bleeding through in pale gray light. She could see the harbor spread below her: four carracks at the piers, their hulls dark against the lighter water. Mercenaries swarmed the docks, forming chains to unload artillery. Everything according to plan.

One more hour. They'll set up the guns. Cornaro will capitulate. And all of this, the lies, the betrayals, the blood on my hands, will have been worth it.

Then the horns sounded.

The sound tore through the pre-dawn stillness like a blade through silk: one horn, then two, then three, from different quarters of the Lower City. Alarm horns. Warning horns. The sound of a city waking to defend itself.

Beatrice's hands clenched on the roof tiles.

No. This wasn't supposed to happen.

She had paid the bribes. Silenced the informants. Made sure the pier had half the guards it should have. The city should have slept through the assault, should have woken to find Scaliger guns pointed at the palace and no choice but surrender.

But now people were pouring into the square from every street and alley. The watch had formed a shield wall across the square's mouth: blue uniforms and light armor, spears bristling like a steel hedge. Behind them, a growing mob of armed citizens, more arriving with every passing moment.

She recognized faces in the crowd. Giovanni, who had smuggled her messages without asking questions. Marco, whose father had made the hidden blade in her boot and died for it. They didn't know they were fighting for the same side. They didn't know they were about to die for it.

They came out to defend their city. They came out to fight.

Something twisted in her chest. For Ragusa. Against us.

Below, the mercenaries were falling back. The shield wall held. From her height, Beatrice could see what the men in the square could not: more figures running through the streets, converging on the harbor from every direction. Dozens more. Hundreds.

Mark's force would be overwhelmed within the hour.

No one was coming to save them. No one except her.

The decision came like ice forming in her veins: not a choice so much as a recognition that the choice had already been made long ago, in a hundred smaller moments that had led inexorably to this one.

Her property. Her trained killers. Twenty-six gladiators locked in the barracks three streets away, waiting for a victory celebration that would never come.

If I unleash them. These are not soldiers. They're butchers, dragged here in chains. And they hate everyone who ever bet on their deaths in the arena. We made them this way. I made them this way. They will not just break the line; they'll slaughter everyone in their path.

Giovanni's face flashed in her mind. Marco's. The watchmen who were just doing their jobs, defending their city against invaders.

If I stop now, everything I've done was for nothing. Every lie. Every betrayal. Every life I've destroyed. Meaningless.

If I go further... at least there'll be meaning.

She dropped from the roof, caught a window ledge, then swung down to the alley below. Her boots hit the cobblestones, and she was running.

* * *

The arena barracks smelled of mold and human misery.

Beatrice descended the stone steps with a torch in one hand and the key ring in the other, her footsteps echoing off walls that wept with moisture. The air grew colder as she went deeper, thick with the stench of unwashed bodies, old blood, and fear that had seeped into the stones themselves over years of fighting and dying.

Her barracks. Her gladiators. Her property.

The cellar opened into a corridor with four iron doors. Heavy doors, built to hold men who could kill with their bare hands.

She stopped at the first cell. Through the grate, she could see shapes in the darkness, six men sitting against the walls, watching her approach with the stillness of predators.

Thor sat in the corner. The northerner raised his head as her torchlight fell through the bars. Even seated among the others, he dominated the space. His white hair hung in matted ropes around a face carved from weathered oak. The scar running from shoulder to hip gleamed pink and ugly in the flickering light.

She unlocked the door. It groaned open.

The second cell held eight more. Azim, among them, his dark eyes tracking her every movement. The third held the twelve candidates, men who had survived the arena's preliminary rounds, who had killed to earn their place among the professionals.

The fourth cell held only one person.

Karina. The only woman gladiator in Beatrice's stable. She stood in the center of her cell, arms crossed, face like a stone mask. Alone. Beatrice had ordered her separated from the others after she killed two guards who tried to touch her. Too dangerous to keep with the rest.

Beatrice unlocked her door last.

The gladiators gathered in the corridor. Twenty-six figures crowded the narrow space, blocking the torchlight, filling the air with the heat of their bodies and the weight of their silence.

They stared at her.

Not with hope. Not with gratitude. With the cold, measuring gaze of people who had learned that every kindness came with a price, that every promise was a lie waiting to reveal itself.

Thor stepped forward. The others parted for him like water around a stone.

“Mistress.” His voice was a rasp. “You open our cages. Why?”

“Because my lords are losing a war,” Beatrice said. Her voice rose, filling the stone corridor. “Tonight we came back to take what’s ours. But the watch holds the harbor. More militia arrive every moment. We need fighters. Real fighters.”

She looked at Thor. At Azim. At Karina’s stone face.

“I am not asking you to believe in our cause. I am asking you to fight for yourselves. Because there’s no middle ground anymore. If we lose tonight, I die. And you—” she swept her gaze across them, “you get sold to the next owner. Someone who does not know your value. Someone who’ll work you to death in the quarries or the mines. Or put you in cheap spectacles until you’re too slow and some fresh meat guts you for the crowd’s entertainment.”

She drew a breath. Let her voice ring off the walls.

“So here it is. The only choice that matters. Freedom or death. Not tomorrow. Tonight. Fight for me now, and you walk out of this city free. Papers. Gold. New lives. Or stay in these cells and wait to see who buys you next.”

She stopped. The torch crackled in the silence.

The gladiators looked at her.

Then at each other.

Thor scratched his jaw. Slowly. Deliberately.

“Pretty speech,” he said.

Azim’s lips twitched. “Very inspiring.”

“Freedom or death.” Karina’s voice was flat. “How much?”

Beatrice blinked. “What?”

“How much,” Karina repeated, “for our kind assistance?”

The other gladiators shifted. Watching. Waiting.

Thor crossed his arms. “The mistress speaks of choice. But choice without coin is just another cage.” His pale eyes held nothing, no warmth, no mockery. Just a calculation. “What do we get?”

Beatrice felt something shift inside her. This, she understood. This was a negotiation.

"Five ducats each," she said. "Gold. And papers of manumission, legal freedom, signed and sealed."

Azim laughed, a short, harsh sound. "Five? For charging a shield wall?"

"Ten," said one of the candidates.

"Ten," echoed another.

"Twenty," Thor said quietly. The others fell silent. "Twenty ducats. Each. For those who survive."

Beatrice did the sums. Twenty-six fighters. Twenty ducats each. Five hundred and twenty gold pieces if they all lived, which they wouldn't. But still. The younger Scaligers had no idea where money came from. And Alber was the most tight-fisted man in the Jeweled Sea. Famous for it. They were bankrupt, technically. Which meant this would come out of her pocket.

Her gladiators. Her gold. Everything she had built over five years was gone in one night.

To hell with it.

"Twelve," she countered. "And the papers. Non-negotiable."

"Eighteen."

"Fifteen. Final offer." She held Thor's gaze. "There's no time for this. Every moment we stand here, more militia reach the square. Fifteen ducats, freedom papers, and whatever you can loot from the bodies. That's the deal."

Silence.

Thor looked at Azim. Azim shrugged, a fluid motion that said *good enough*.

Karina uncrossed her arms. "If you lie, "

"I don't lie to people I need alive." Beatrice's voice was flat. "Ask anyone here. I lie to enemies. Not to assets."

A murmur ran through the gladiators. Some of them nodded slowly, reluctantly, but nodding.

Thor held out his hand. Massive. Scarred. The hand of a man who had killed more people than Beatrice could count.

She took it. His grip could have crushed her bones. He squeezed once, firm but not painful, and released.

"Deal."

He turned to the others.

"Weapons?"

Beatrice pointed to the chest at the corridor's end. "Everything's there."

The gladiators moved. No more hesitation, just the smooth, purposeful motion of professionals preparing for work. They armed themselves in silence. Swords, axes, spears, clubs, each fighter found their weapon and handled it with the familiarity of long use.

Thor hefted his two-handed sword and swung it once. The air sang.

Azim drew twin blades, spun them in his hands, and slid them home in their sheaths with a whisper of steel.

Karina took up her spear and tested the point against her thumb. Blood welled, dark in the torchlight.

They turned to Beatrice. Twenty-six killers, armed and ready.

"The harbor square," she said. "Three streets north. Break the line. Kill anyone who fights back."

Thor smiled. It was worse than his empty stare.

"That," he said, "we know how to do."

He started up the stairs. The others followed, a river of scarred flesh and gleaming steel flowing toward the surface.

Beatrice watched them go.

Fifteen ducats each. Cheap, for what I'm buying.

She reached the square's edge as the gladiators hit the watch's line.

They came out of the alley mouth like a nightmare given form: twenty-six figures moving with a predator's terrible grace. The defenders saw them and faltered, just for a moment, just long enough.

Thor reached them first.

His great sword rose in a slow arc that seemed to take forever, lazy and almost gentle. Then it fell, and a guardsman simply... came apart. The blade caught him at the junction of neck and shoulder, cleaved through collarbone, ribs, and spine, and continued downward as if the man's body were made of nothing more substantial than wet paper. The guard's head toppled one way, his arm another. Blood fountained from the ruin of his torso, painting the stones, painting the shields of the men beside him, painting Thor's white hair in streaks of crimson.

The northerner didn't pause. Pivot. Second blow, diagonal, shoulder to hip. A second guard was bisected before he could raise his shield, entrails spilling onto the cobblestones in a steaming pile. The stench hit Beatrice from across the square: opened bowels, blood, the copper reek of death.

A third guard thrust desperately with his spear. Thor parried with contemptuous ease, broke the shaft with a twist of his wrists, and brought his sword down on

the man's skull. The crack of bone was audible even over the chaos. Brains and fragments sprayed across the neighboring shields.

Thor walked forward through the gap he had made, and he was smiling.

Azim danced where Thor destroyed.

His twin blades flickered in the gray light, silver flashes almost too fast to follow. Right blade into a guard's throat: rip, withdraw, blood fountaining. Spin. Left blade across another's side, parting flesh and leather. Turn. Slash. Kill. He moved through the defenders like water through sand, men dying in his wake without ever seeing the blow that ended them.

Beatrice watched his face. It held nothing. He wasn't killing men. He was performing a task with the same detached efficiency another man might bring to cleaning fish.

Karina struck with her spear: precise, economical, cruel. The point punched through a guardsman's breastplate and emerged from his back in a spray of blood and lung tissue. She wrenched it free with a brutal twist, and the guard fell, clutching at the hole in his chest, fingers scrabbling at the wound as if he could hold his life inside. She was already turning, already thrusting, already killing the next man who stood between her and the freedom she had been promised.

The twelve candidates fought with less skill but more fury. Axes and clubs rose and fell, crushing bone, shattering shields. They struck with the savage abandon of men who had spent years in the arena, who had been forced to kill friends for the entertainment of crowds, who had nothing left to lose and everything to gain.

The watch's line began to buckle.

"Hold!" The commander's voice rang out, cracking with desperation. "Hold the line!"

But the gladiators were a force of nature, and nature cared nothing for orders.

Beatrice saw Giovanni.

The old fisherman had pushed to the front of the militia, his gutting axe raised high. He saw the commander fall. Thor's blade took the man's head clean off, and something in Giovanni's weathered face twisted with grief and fury.

"For Ragusa!" he roared. "Do not surrender!"

He charged Thor.

No. Don't.

The word was distant, muffled, as if it came from far away.

Thor turned to face him. The northerner's dead eyes showed nothing, no recognition of Giovanni's courage, no acknowledgment of his humanity. Just a cold assessment of threat and response.

Giovanni swung his axe with all the strength of a lifetime hauling nets. Thor parried with casual contempt, the blow barely moving his massive blade. Counterattack: a sword descending from above with terrible, inevitable force.

The old fisherman tried to dodge.

He was too slow. He had been too slow for years, but will and courage had kept him from admitting it.

The sword cleaved through his shoulder and into his chest, biting deep into bone and lung. Giovanni fell. Blood pooled around him, black in the gray light. He lay on the stones of the harbor he had fished since boyhood, gasping for air that wouldn't come, staring up at a sky he couldn't see through the fog.

Dying slowly. Alone. Three streets from the boat where he had taught his sons to mend nets.

Beatrice watched him die, and she felt... nothing.

The emptiness was complete. She had expected horror, guilt, the crushing weight of what she had done. Instead, there was only silence inside her, vast and cold, like the fog that still clung to the harbor.

I did this. I killed him. Not Thor. Me.

The thought passed through her mind like wind through an empty room.

Marco saw Giovanni fall.

The blacksmith's son bellowed with rage, a raw, animal sound, and swung his hammer at a candidate who got too close. The blow caught the man full in the face, crushing skull and jaw into ruin. Marco roared triumphantly, raised his hammer for another blow.

And Azim appeared behind him like a ghost.

Two swords. Side and back. Quick. Clean.

Marco collapsed. His hammer clanged against the stones and rolled away, red with blood and worse. His father's hammer. His grandfather's. Three generations of craft and labor, ending in a pool of gore.

His father died because I trusted the wrong man. Now his son dies because I opened the right cells.

She watched Marco fall and felt her hand rise to her own chest, checking, perhaps, whether her heart still beat.

The militia died one by one. They were brave, Goddess. They were brave.

Fishermen and craftsmen stood against trained killers, holding their ground even as their friends fell around them. But courage without skill was just another word for sacrifice, and against gladiators who had survived a hundred arena battles, they never had a chance.

From across the square, Valdés's voice cut through the chaos: "Forward! The breach is open!"

The mercenaries rallied. They poured through the gaps the gladiators had torn in the defense, attacking from two sides now, steel and fury, the watch caught between them like grain between millstones.

The defense crumbled.

Guards threw down their shields and fled into the alleys. Militia retreated into houses, into narrow streets. But many weren't fast enough. They were caught from behind, cut down, killed with the cold efficiency of men who had stopped seeing enemies and started seeing obstacles.

The slaughter spread through the Lower City like fire through dry wood.

Beatrice walked across the square.

Around her, the killing continued. Gladiators finished the wounded with methodical thrusts. Mercenaries pursued those fleeing into the alleys. Somewhere nearby, a woman screamed, high and sharp, the sound cutting off abruptly in a way that suggested nothing good.

She stepped over bodies: guards in their blue uniforms, blood pooling around them; militia in makeshift armor, their weapons fallen from slack hands; a boy, Goddess, he couldn't have been more than sixteen, lying face-down in a spreading red pool, a crossbow still clutched in his fingers.

Giovanni lay where he had fallen. His eyes were open, staring at nothing. His axe lay beside him, the blade dark with the blood of men he had killed before the gladiators cut him down.

Beatrice looked at his face for a long moment.

You helped me. You trusted me. And I repaid you with this.

She crouched beside him. Closed his eyes with two fingers. Rose. Walked on.

This is what it costs. This is the price of winning. Not gold. Not blood. This... hollowing out. Becoming someone who can watch friends die and feel nothing.

She had made her choice. Now she had to live with it.

The fighting spread through the narrow streets like oil on water. In an alley by the fish market, a group of guards made a last stand: shields locked, spears raised. They held for ten minutes. Thor hacked through them with patient, methodical brutality, and three men died without retreating a step.

At the Golden Fish tavern, an old veteran barricaded himself with his two sons. They fired crossbows from the window, killing two mercenaries before the rest set the building ablaze. The old man burst out with a sword in hand, only to be cut

down on the threshold. His sons burned inside, their screams echoing through the narrow street until they finally, mercifully, stopped.

In the market square, a dozen militia tried to organize a final defense. They held for five minutes. The gladiators tore through them like wolves through sheep.

Beatrice walked through it all. Past the bodies. Past the blood. Past the screams, the smoke, the ring of steel on steel.

Her boots left red prints on the cobblestones. She did not look down.

She had unleashed the gladiators. She had killed Giovanni and Marco and, Goddess knew, how many others, killed them as surely as if she had swung the blades herself.

Her hands were steady. Her breathing was even. Her eyes saw everything and registered none of it.

Then thunder split the sky.

The sound came from the Upper City: a deep, rolling boom that echoed off the cliffs and shook the stones beneath her feet. Beatrice looked up, toward the palace, toward the batteries that Sebastian had been sent to destroy.

Smoke was rising, black and thick, billowing up from the cliff face in great, churning clouds. The shockwave hit her a heartbeat later, staggering her backward and rattling windows in their frames.

Debris rained from above, stone fragments, burning wood, something that might have been part of a cannon barrel, spinning end over end before crashing into a warehouse roof.

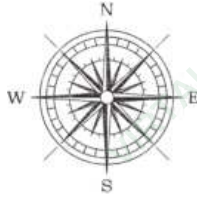
The carnage in the square froze. Gladiators and mercenaries alike turned toward the harbor.

Beatrice stared at the smoke.

Sebastian.

She was running before she knew she had decided to move, past the bodies, past the blood, past the gladiators who had stopped killing to stare at the fire above. Her boots hammered on cobblestones, her lungs burned, and she did not care.

Chapter 25: Lightning at Dawn



SEBASTIAN

Sebastian stood at the bow, rapier drawn. The hilt chilled his palm through the glove. Behind him, fifty men crowded the benches. Two dozen were Gregorio's Lomeni stickmen, their leather jackets stiff with old sweat and newer stains, boots laced high against the cold, each clutching an iron-banded club. The rest were volunteers from Valdés's company, men with nothing left to lose, who had stepped forward when the captain asked for souls willing to trade their lives for a chance at glory or gold. They carried swords and knives, wore whatever armor they'd scrounged, and stared at the fog with the hollow eyes of men who had already made peace with death.

The creak of oarlocks and the slap of waves were the only sounds in this white void besides the heavy, ragged breathing of men preparing to die. Somewhere behind him, a stickman murmured a prayer to Hecate the All-Mother, begging her protection. Sebastian almost laughed. *Interesting. Will the Three-Faced One help him, considering we're hidden by pagan sorcery she despises, fighting to awaken the goddesses she buried?* Someone else cursed quietly, the words swallowed by the fog before they traveled three paces.

One hour. He tried not to let his mind scatter into the fog alongside his breath.

Land. Spike the guns. Burn the powder magazines. Then retreat to Mark through the harbor. If I'm lucky, I'll survive. If not...

He couldn't finish the thought. Couldn't let himself. His hand gripped the hilt tighter, knuckles whitening beneath the leather gloves, the familiar pressure of the weapon grounding him in the present.

She's there. In the Lower City. With Mark. I have to get back.

The thought of Beatrice cut through the battle calculations like a blade through fog. He remembered her face in the temple courtyard, the way she'd looked at him as if memorizing something she expected to lose. At their last meeting, he hadn't told her, hadn't found the words, hadn't allowed himself to find them. And now he was rowing toward death with her name lodged like a splinter beneath his ribs.

A dark mass loomed in the fog, a stone wall damp with sea moisture, its surface slick with condensation. Lanterns glowed dimly through the milky haze, their light barely piercing the white shroud. The Admiral's Palace pier materialized from the void like a ghost ship taking form.

From here, Sebastian finally saw the guards: five men clustered by the lanterns, a sixth walking along the edge, peering into the fog with the lazy attention of men who expected nothing. Drowsy and relaxed, they had not seen the galley coming. The fog had hidden the approach perfectly, and they were not expecting a landing here, at the Admiral's own palace.

Sebastian raised his hand, the signal for silence. The galley docked at the pier soundlessly, with only a soft bump of wood against stone.

"Quiet," Sebastian mouthed, looking at Gregorio.

The one-eyed man nodded. A gesture with his hand, and three of his stickmen slipped into the water at the far edge of the pier, silent as otters. The water was ice-cold, but they made no sound.

Gregorio climbed over the galley's side, moving with the practiced silence of a man who had killed more times than he could count. The black patch over his empty eye socket bore a white cross of priest's leather, the men whispered, taken from a cleric who had refused him a blessing. The scar beneath it ran the length of his face, a pale ridge of tissue that pulled his mouth into a permanent sneer. His club was famous: iron rings at the grip, and fourteen names burned into the wood, one for each skull he had personally crushed.

He crept up behind the first guard. The movement was quick and precise. The club came down on the back of the skull with a dull crunch. The guard dropped without a sound.

The second turned, saw his comrade falling, and opened his mouth to cry out. Gregorio was already there: a blow to the jaw, iron bands driving the cry back down his throat along with fragments of teeth, a gurgle. The body slumped onto the stones.

The three stickmen who had emerged from the water took the rest, knives in backs, hands over mouths, quick movements. One guard jerked harder than the others: a splash as they shoved his body into the water, a gurgle, then silence.

In two minutes, the pier was cleared. Six corpses: five dragged into the shadows, the sixth floating face-down by the dock.

"Disembark," Sebastian ordered.

Fifty men climbed ashore swiftly but without chaos. Professionals. They checked their weapons as they moved.

“Forward,” Sebastian ordered, pointing to the stairs leading upward. “To the batteries.”

They advanced in a column. The steps underfoot were slick with moisture and seaweed. Someone slipped and cursed through his teeth. Gregorio turned: one look from his single eye, and everyone fell silent.

At the top of the stairs, a platform opened before them, where four heavy cannons jutted out to sea like iron sentinels. The gun crews, eight men in all, lay sleeping by their weapons, wrapped in cloaks against the night’s chill.

Sebastian nodded to Gregorio.

The stickmen moved forward, shadows in the fog. The first gunner never woke: the club caved in his skull with a soft crunch. The second opened his eyes, saw death, and parted his mouth to scream. Too late. The iron bands crushed his jaw before a sound escaped.

In a minute, all eight were dead, dispatched without ceremony or sound. Blood spread across the stone tiles, black and glistening in the light of extinguished lanterns.

“Work,” Sebastian ordered. Half his men pulled iron spikes from their sacks.

They set to it, driving spikes into the cannon barrels, breaking the firing mechanisms.

Then the horns wailed.

Not here. Not yet. From across the harbor, on the far side of the bay—long, mournful blasts carried through the fog. A second horn answered, then a third. The alarm was spreading across the Lower City.

“Mark,” Sebastian said quietly. He drove the next spike home and reached for another barrel.

No one stopped. They couldn’t—half the guns remained unspiked, the powder magazine untouched. Every second counted now. They knew the drill, but the work took far longer than it should have.

Then a deeper thunder rolled across the water. Heavy guns booming from the direction of the Diamant. Emile’s squadron had opened fire.

Minutes bled away. The horns kept sounding, closer now, multiplying. Sebastian’s hands moved faster, but iron and stone did not care about urgency. Each spike needed three blows. Four. Some barrels were corroded and the spikes wouldn’t seat. He hammered until his shoulders burned.

The harbor was waking. The Lower City was fighting. The sea below was burning. And Sebastian’s men were still on the battery, hammering spikes into iron, exposed on the open platform, with every horn in Ragusa screaming that the enemy had come.

“Faster,” Sebastian hissed through clenched teeth.

The sky was turning rose and blue at the edges. Fog thinning. Dawn was coming—sunlight already touched the sea and the rooftops of the Lower City, gilding the harbor in pale gold, but the Upper City still clung to the mountain’s shadow, sheltered by the last remnants of the saving dark.

At last—after what felt like an eternity of iron and sweat, the battle growing louder with every blow—they finished the last gun and moved to the powder magazine. From it they dragged out barrels and rolled them to the platform’s edge.

Sebastian nodded. “Into the sea. Quietly.”

They cut open the barrels with knives, hoisted them onto their shoulders, and carried them across the platform to the edge. Heavy work—each barrel took two men, and the stone was slick with dew and spilled powder. Trip after trip, staggering under the weight, boots scraping on wet rock. They poured the black powder directly into the water. It hissed on contact with the waves, spreading in dark clouds. Barrel after barrel. The pile in the magazine shrank with agonizing slowness while the battle below grew louder.

Without powder, the battery was useless. Even if they repaired the guns, there would be nothing to fire.

A torch flared at the top of the stairs. A shout—then another.

“They’ve spotted us,” Sebastian breathed.

Soldiers began emerging from the alleys, dozens of them, the Upper City garrison that Cornaro had kept ready for exactly this moment. They came out organized and in formation, carrying shields, spears, and crossbows with the discipline of men who had drilled for this night.

An officer in a blue cloak and breastplate bearing the city’s crest shouted commands, “Surround them! Don’t let them retreat to the water! These are Scaliger’s men!”

The soldiers moved quickly, professionally. They blocked streets, took positions on rooftops. The ring was closing, and the sky was growing lighter by the minute, dawn coming fast, burning away the fog that had been their only shield.

“To the sea!” Sebastian shouted. “Break through to the galley!”

His force ran, but Cornaro’s soldiers were ready. They pressed from three sides: pikemen on the left, shieldmen on the right, crossbowmen ahead.

Crossbow bolts whistled through the air. One of Valdés’s volunteers cried out, grabbing his shoulder where a bolt had punched through his breastplate. A second man fell, gurgling, clutching the wound in his throat.

“Run! Don’t stop!” Gregorio roared.

The stickmen covered the retreat with their clubs while Valdés’s men fought with swords and knives, but spears had a longer reach. One stickman staggered as a spear punched through his chest. He fell to his knees, then forward to his face. A volunteer took a sword to the neck, blood fountaining as he stumbled a few convulsive steps before collapsing.

Sebastian parried a spear thrust and slashed in return, but the soldier recoiled, and his shield caught the blow. Beside him, one of Valdés’s men hurled a knife, and a crossbowman on the roof jerked and tumbled to the cobblestones below.

They retreated, losing men with every step, back toward the pier where the galley waited, the only path to salvation. But between them and the ship stood a solid line of soldiers, shields locked and spears leveled. There was no way through.

Sebastian looked back and counted: fifteen men remained out of fifty.

“Circle!” he commanded. “Back to back!”

The remnants of his force closed into a desperate defensive circle. Cornaro’s soldiers surrounded them in a tight ring, slowly squeezing, like a python around its prey.

Sebastian fought by instinct, his body moving through patterns drilled into muscle and bone since childhood. Parry, slash, step back. Parry again. His muscles burned with exhaustion, but somewhere beneath the physical strain, a strange calm settled over him, the detachment of a man who had already accepted death.

Is this what Father felt at the end? This peace?

The thought came unbidden.

At some point, he missed a strike. A soldier attacked from the side, and Sebastian parried, but too slowly. The blade slid along his ribs with a sound like tearing silk, found the gap between chainmail plates, and bit deep.

Pain erupted, sharp, burning, clarifying. A deep cut between the ribs made the world snap back into focus with terrible clarity. Sebastian hissed through his teeth and pressed his left hand to the wound. Blood flowed between his fingers, warm and sticky, and with it came not fear but a strange grief, not for himself, for her, for the words he would never say.

“Shallow,” Gregorio grunted, appearing at his side. The one-eyed man glanced at the wound with the clinical assessment of someone who had seen a thousand injuries. “You’ll live. If we get out of here.” He cracked his club across a soldier’s helmet, then added with dark amusement, “Which we won’t.”

Sebastian smiled despite the pain. “Your optimism is inspiring.”

“I don’t do optimism, my lord. I do reality.” Gregorio positioned himself between

Sebastian and the nearest spears, his scarred face twisted into something that might have been affection on a less brutal man. "Stay behind me. Your brothers would have my other eye if I let you die here."

"Since when do you care about Scaliger's opinions?"

"Since your uncle pulled me out of a Vesperian prison twenty years ago." Another swing of the club, another crunch of bone. "Stupid bastard should have left me to rot. Would've saved us both a lot of trouble."

But he didn't move from Sebastian's side. And when the next attack came, it was Gregorio's club that deflected the spear meant for Sebastian's throat.

Cornaro's soldiers advanced methodically, shields forward, spears leveled. Their commander shouted, "Take them alive if you can! That's a Scaliger! The Admiral will pay gold!"

"Try and take me," Sebastian spat, blood-tinged saliva.

The wound in his side burned like fire. The bleeding would not stop. His hands trembled from blood loss and exhaustion. His breathing faltered.

Sebastian closed his eyes for a moment. Saw her face: Beatrice. Clear, vivid, as if she stood beside him. Dark hair, serious eyes, that half-smile she gave only to him.

Forgive me. I am not coming back.

I should have told her. Should have found the words. Now there were none left.

He opened his eyes. Enemies two paces away. He raised his sword one last time, prepared for the final attack that would be his end.

And then the whole world blazed with white light.

FLASH.

The light was blinding, white tinged with blue, as if it came from another world entirely. It illuminated everything around them, turning the fog transparent, banishing shadows, revealing men's faces as sharply as a daguerreotype captures a moment forever.

The light came from the harbor. For an instant, Sebastian saw the silhouettes of ships, the outlines of the Lower City, even the distant cliffs beyond the bay.

A second of silence. A second and a half.

Then came the sound.

THUNDER.

Rolling, deep, shaking the air. Not deafening at this distance, but powerful, primordial. The stones underfoot trembled. Windows in the palace rang. Somewhere, roof tiles fell.

And Cornaro's soldiers froze.

They stared at the harbor, at the column of fire rising above the water. Eyes wide. Mouths open. For a moment, discipline broke. Fear gripped them: ancient, primal, fear of divine wrath.

"The harbor!" someone shouted. "The Diamant! Something's happened to the Diamant!"

"It's a sign!" another wailed. "The goddess is punishing us!"

Confusion spread like fire through dry straw. Soldiers looked at one another, at their officers, at the sky. The ring around Sebastian's group wavered.

"Now!" Sebastian roared, lunging forward.

He struck the nearest soldier: the blade found the gap between helmet and gorget. Blood sprayed. Sebastian pushed the dying man aside and burst through the opening. Gregorio followed, his club crushing skulls. The survivors rushed after them.

They ran down toward the harbor, toward the Lower City. Cornaro's soldiers did not pursue. They were retreating to the palace, staring in panic at the burning sky.

Sebastian clutched his side. Blood flowed between his fingers, leaving a red trail across the stones. Every step echoed with pain. His vision darkened.

Survived. I need to find Mark. And her. Beatrice...

Ahead lay the unknown.

EMILE

Emile stood on the captain's bridge of the flagship Sea Queen and stared into the fog.

The white wall surrounded them, dense and impenetrable, as if the world beyond had simply ceased to exist. Liana had been holding it for over an hour, and Emile could feel the cost of every minute. Somewhere in the depths of the flagship, his cousin lay in a trance, bleeding from eyes and nose, sustaining the sorcery that hid ten ships from the Diamant's guns.

Two galleasses. Eight brigantines. All lying adrift in dangerous proximity to the fortress-battery. Too close. If the fog lifted too soon, they would be shot point-blank, like ducks on a pond.

"My lord," the bosun approached, clutching an oil-stained tricorn. "The men are nervous. How long do we wait?"

Old Tommaso. Thirty years at sea, twenty of them with the Scaligers. A face weathered to the color of old leather. Hands gnarled with rheumatism but still

strong. He had served Emile's father and remembered times when Ragusa's fleet was the terror of the Jeweled Sea.

Emile didn't answer. He listened to the silence.

Ten minutes had passed since the landing. Twenty. Thirty.

Mark. Sebastian. Where are you, damn it?

The Diamant was silent. A black fortress-cliff loomed somewhere ahead in the fog, bristling with cannons. Thirty guns pointed out to sea. One salvo could turn half the squadron into splinters and meat.

But the guns remained silent.

They can't see. The fog is holding. Liana is holding.

Emile gripped the railing until his knuckles went white. His hands trembled, not from fear, but from the effort of holding himself together. He was a diplomat, damn it. A negotiator. A man who wielded words, not weapons. Mark commanded the landing in the Lower City with the cold precision of a born strategist. Sebastian stormed the Upper City with the reckless courage that had always made Emile both envious and afraid for him. And he—Emile, the youngest of the brothers, cynic and wit—was leading ten ships to their deaths.

They think I'm clever. They think the jokes and the sharp tongue mean I don't feel it, that I don't lie awake wondering if Father would be ashamed of who I've become, if Mother would recognize the boy she held in her arms.

He remembered her funeral. He'd been thirteen, and Mark had stood beside him, seventeen and already trying to be the man their father needed, telling him not to cry. Sebastian had cried anyway, loud, honest tears that seemed to cleanse something. But Emile had held it in, made a joke about the rain, and had hated himself for it ever since.

"Forty minutes," Tommaso murmured. "They've passed. The goddesses are merciful."

"Goddesses?" Emile smirked crookedly. "We have only one goddess right now, Tommaso. And she's bleeding, so we don't die here and now. So save your prayers. They won't help her."

Tommaso shuddered, turned away, traced a protective sign in the air: three lines, the symbol of the Tripartite. Sailors didn't like talk of sorcery, superstitious folk.

Emile surveyed the deck. Gun crews stood frozen at their weapons, eight culverins lined along the broadside, long-barreled twelve-pounders with barrels twenty-two calibers long, cast from bronze in the foundries of Galtos three years ago. Fuses smoked in the bombardiers' hands, and cannonballs waited in baskets beside each gun, cast-iron spheres weighing six libbre each, capable of punching through oak planking a hand's breadth thick.

Sailors sat by the rigging, gripping knives and boarding hooks, just in case it came to hand-to-hand combat. Though everyone knew that if it did, there would be no chance.

“Quiet,” Emile said suddenly.

The bosun froze.

From somewhere toward the city came a drawn-out, alarming sound, the unmistakable wail of a warning horn. Then a second horn answered, and a third, the alarm spreading across the Lower City like ripples in dark water.

“Mark’s been spotted,” Emile breathed.

His heart beat faster. He strained to listen. The fog muffled sounds, but after a few seconds, new ones reached him: the clash of metal, shouts, the patter of running feet.

Battle. The Lower City was fighting.

“It’s begun,” Emile said. His voice sounded calmer than he felt. “Prepare. Dawn comes soon.”

He was right.

The first rays of the sun broke through the white shroud. The eastern horizon glowed pink, then gold. The edge of the sky blazed like molten copper.

The fog began to lift, slowly at first, rising in tatters like spirits departing the earth. White wisps dissolved into the brightening air as visibility grew from ten paces to twenty, then fifty.

And suddenly, the harbor opened.

Emile saw it all at once, like a painting made with a single brushstroke.

Ragusa. The city clung to the cliffs like a pearl set in stone, white walls rising above red-tiled roofs, towers, and temple spires reaching toward the brightening sky. The Admiral’s Palace at the summit: huge, majestic, with colonnades and arches. The Lower City at the foot: port, piers, warehouses. Smoke rose from there in columns. Mark was at work.

And ahead loomed the Diamant.

The fortress was a black mass carved from living rock, its walls three men thick, its towers crowned with battlements and bristling with cannon embrasures. Thirty barrels pointed out to sea, dark and menacing, a stone monster built to guard the harbor and kill ships.

“Good Goddess,” the bosun whispered. “We’re so close...”

Too close. Half a league. Less. Emile could see the flag on the Diamant’s tower: a black lion on a red field, the Cornaro crest. He could see figures on the walls: watchmen, bombardiers, officers.

They saw the fleet too.

A cry of alarm tore through the morning silence. A horn wailed. A bell tolled.

On the Diamant's walls, chaos erupted. Men ran, shouted, and pointed at the sea. Gun crews rushed to their weapons. An officer in a blue cloak waved his sword, screaming commands.

Emile raised his hand.

"Port tack! Form line!"

The flagship turned, catching the wind, and the others followed: two galleasses and eight brigantines forming into a column, one behind the other, their broadsides facing the Diamant in the classic formation that would bring maximum guns to bear.

"Prepare to fire!" Emile shouted.

Bombardiers froze at the guns, fuses smoking in their hands, while gunners turned screws to adjust the angle, and loaders stepped back, pressing against the walls.

The Diamant fired first.

A flash of light, a cloud of smoke, and thunder rolled across the water, deep and guttural. A cannonball howled through the air, tracing a black arc before splashing into the water twenty fathoms from the flagship. A column of water shot up and crashed back down.

A second shot followed, then a third. The Diamant had opened fire, but erratically; the crews weren't ready, and the aim was off. Cannonballs fell into the water all around them, churning white foam but hitting nothing.

Thirty years.

Emile remembered his uncle Alber's words. The Diamant had taken thirty years to forge an entire generation of engineers. The Republic's finest stonemasons had carved it from the cliff, fathom by fathom, year by year. Walls were three men thick. Invincible. Impregnable. Guardian of Ragusa.

Until gunpowder decided otherwise.

"Fire!" Emile barked, dropping his hand.

The flagship's eight culverins fired in salvo.

Thunder rolled deafeningly. The deck lurched under the recoil. Smoke enveloped the broadside, stinging eyes, nose, and throat. Emile coughed, wiping tears.

When the smoke cleared, he saw the result. Three hits. The Diamant's stone walls exploded into fragments. One tower shuddered as a cannonball punched through

an embrasure, knocking out a gun. A second cannon tore from its carriage and crashed down, crushing two bombardiers.

Behind the flagship, the others opened fire. Ten ships fired in sequence, methodically, as if on exercises. Thunder merged into a continuous roar. Smoke blanketed the sea.

The Diamant fired back. Its guns now worked in tighter coordination. Cannonballs whistled, tore sails, and shredded rigging. One brigantine, *Scarlet Falcon*, took a ball to the side: oak planking exploded in splinters. A second ball struck the mast, bringing it down across the deck and crushing three sailors. The ship listed and began to sink.

"Falcon is sinking!" the lookout shouted.

"Hold formation!" Emile didn't take his eyes off the Diamant. "Continue fire!"

Cruel, but necessary. *Scarlet Falcon* was lost; trying to save her meant exposing the other ships to fire. Emile watched men leap into the water, watched boats cast off. Some would swim to safety. Some would drown.

Such was war.

The brigantine *Silver Gull* caught three balls in quick succession. Her side split open. She sank fast, bow-first, taking her crew with her.

"My lord!" Tommaso grabbed his shoulder and shook him. "We're losing ships!"

Emile saw it. Of the ten ships, two were already on the bottom. *Scarlet Falcon* and *Silver Gull* had taken a hundred men with them. The galleasses bore their heavy construction against punishment that would have sunk brigantines, but even they showed damage: torn rigging, shattered rails, and blood on the decks.

His hands trembled, fingers white with tension, gripping the railing as if it were the only solid thing left in a world gone mad. A lump formed in his throat, and the smell of burned flesh, powder, and blood filled his lungs, soaked into his clothes, into his skin, into some part of himself he knew would never wash clean. Emile swallowed bile. Not now. Not in front of the men.

I'm a diplomat. Not a general. Not a butcher.

The word felt like a lie.

But war didn't ask who you were. War simply took what it wanted and left you to count the cost.

He heard screams from the sinking ships, high, desperate sounds that would visit him in nightmares. Saw men in the water, floundering, drowning, their arms reaching toward ships that couldn't stop to save them. He could give the order to retreat, save those who could still be saved, pick up the survivors, and sail away from this madness.

But then it would all be for nothing. Mark and Sebastian would die there, on shore. Ragusa would remain Cornaro's. And these dead men, for nothing.

The fleet wavered. Captains exchanged glances across the water. A moment more, and they would begin to withdraw. No amount of gold was worth this slaughter.

Emile gripped the railing. His hand found the hilt of his rapier, not for fighting, but for reassurance. He opened his mouth to order the retreat.

And froze.

A flash of light split the air, brilliant and blinding, silver-blue with a golden tinge that seemed to come from beyond the mortal world.

Light exploded before him on the captain's bridge, two paces away. Emile recoiled and squeezed his eyes shut. When he opened them, he saw her.

A woman stood before him.

She was tall, impossibly so, clad in armor that burned like liquid silver, not reflecting light but radiating it from within. Every plate shimmered with a life of its own, pulsing, breathing with living radiance. A helmet with a high crest crowned her head, adorned with a crescent moon that seemed to hold the night sky itself. Behind her, a cloak woven from pure light rippled in a wind that touched nothing else.

Her hair was silver-white and almost transparent, cascading like moonlight given form. And her eyes, her eyes were fathomless, the color of the night sky at its deepest, and within them burned real stars, cold, distant, and ancient beyond measure.

Emile couldn't breathe.

He knew this face. Had seen it a week ago, in a temple at the mountain pass. Had kissed this hand and had heard this voice.

"Selene," he breathed.

The goddess smiled. The smile was warm, almost tender, as if seeing an old friend after a long separation.

"Emile," she said, and her voice sounded simultaneously beside him and somewhere inside his skull. "How I adore you."

She stepped closer. The armor didn't clink; it moved silently, like water. Selene extended her hand and touched his cheek. The touch was warm. Alive. Real.

Emile trembled. Not from fear. From something deeper. He remembered the temple—her words, the promise: *We will see each other again.*

"Have you come to save us," he said hoarsely, "or to watch us die?"

Selene laughed brightly, like a silver bell.

“Both, darling. Isn’t that the charm?” The playfulness left her voice, and her eyes turned serious. “There’s no time. Listen carefully. You have one chance to end this battle. One.”

Emile nodded, finding no words.

The goddess turned toward the Diamant, extending her hand as if seeing through the fortress.

“I studied the blueprints. Found the weakness.” She looked at him over her shoulder. “The architects proposed building a powder tunnel from inside the harbor. The engineers refused. It was too complicated, so they decided to cut costs. Instead, powder is loaded from the northern pier, on the Upper City side. The magazine is carved into the rock: twenty fathoms deep, three men high. Right now, there are three hundred barrels of powder inside, each weighing eighty libbre. Fresh, corrosive powder, brought from the mainland a month ago.”

Emile frowned, trying to understand the battle geometry.

“The northern pier... I can’t see it from here. The rock is blocking it.”

“Exactly,” Selene nodded. “But if you change course. Suppose you pass through the crossfire of the Diamant and Upper City batteries. If you position yourself on a direct line between the palace and the fortress...”

She traced her hand through the air, drawing a trajectory.

“The triangle of death. On one side, the Diamant’s guns; on the other, the palace batteries. But only from this angle, only when the ship is exactly on the line connecting the Upper City and the northern wall. Only then will the magazine gates become visible to the gunners. The right angle. Concentrated fire. A ball will punch through the gates, ricochet inside, and strike the barrels. And...”

She didn’t finish. She didn’t need to.

Emile imagined it. The Diamant’s powder magazine. Dozens of barrels, hundreds. Each was packed with black powder. If one detonated...

“Explosion,” he whispered. “The whole fortress will blow sky-high.”

“The whole fortress,” Selene confirmed.

She stepped back. The light around her intensified, became almost unbearable. Emile understood: the entire crew could see her. Tommaso fell to his knees, tracing protective signs in the air. Bombardiers stood frozen, mouths open. Someone wept. Someone prayed in a whisper.

Across the neighboring ships, a wail spread. Not of terror, but of rapture, of religious ecstasy.

Selene. Goddess of boundaries, patron of sailors and seafarers. She had returned. First of the Twelve, after three centuries of sleep.

“Go, Emile,” the goddess said quietly, but he heard every word. “Lead them. They will follow you. Follow me. End this.”

She moved to stand at the bow, her silver armor blazing like a beacon. Every sailor on every ship could see her now, a pillar of light against the gray dawn, impossible to miss, impossible to deny.

Emile straightened. His hands stopped trembling. His voice grew firm.

“Tommaso!” he called. “Signal to the galleasses. They’re to hold position and continue the artillery duel. I’m transferring my uncle and cousin to Father of Seas.”

The old bosun stared at him with wild eyes, still on his knees.

“My lord?”

“Now, Tommaso. I need every fast ship we have. The brigantines will follow me through the crossfire. The galleasses cover us.”

Minutes later, a boat crossed the gap between *Sea Queen* and the great galleass *Father of Seas*. Alber Stone, pale but composed, helped Liana down into the boat. She was barely conscious, wrapped in blankets stained with blood, her blood, the price of the fog that had hidden them.

Captain Benedetto, the ancient mariner who had served three generations of Scaligers, received them on his deck. His arthritic hands steadied Liana as sailors carried her below.

“Keep her safe,” Emile called across the water. “And keep firing. Draw their attention.”

Benedetto raised a gnarled fist in salute. “For Selene, my lord. For Ragusa.”

Emile turned back to his own ship. The brigantines were forming up behind *Sea Queen*, their crews transformed. Where minutes ago there had been wavering, now there was fervor. Men who had been ready to flee now gripped ropes and stood by guns, the light of faith in their eyes.

The goddess stood with them. They would follow her into hell itself.

“All ships!” Emile shouted, his voice carrying across the water, amplified by some force. “Change course! Helm to starboard! We’re entering the harbor!”

The flagship turned. The bow swung toward the harbor, where the Diamant stood to the left and the Upper City batteries to the right, straight into the crossfire.

Suicide.

But the brigantines followed.

Behind them, the two galleasses held their positions, trading salvos with the Diamant. Their heavy guns boomed in a steady rhythm, drawing fire, buying time.

Father of Seas shuddered as a heavy ball struck her bow. Another tore through her rigging. But Benedetto held his course, his ancient ship absorbing punishment meant for the lighter vessels racing toward the harbor mouth.

Hell had begun.

At the bow, Selene stood motionless, her silver form untouched by the chaos around her. Cannonballs screamed past. Splinters flew. Men died. And still she stood, blazing like a lighthouse in a storm, her eyes fixed on the Diamant. Every sailor who glanced her way found new strength. Every man who faltered looked to her and remembered why he was here.

The first ball came from the Upper City.

A falconet—a light cannon. The iron ball slammed into the flagship's side, punched through the planking, and tore into the hold. One sailor screamed: a splinter of wood, long as a dagger, had pierced his leg below the knee. He fell, clutching his thigh, blood gushing between his fingers. Two comrades grabbed him by the arms and dragged him toward the hatch.

“Surgeon!” one shouted. “Now!”

The sailor writhed, screamed. Emile watched them drag him below, to the hold, where the old ship's barber was already sawing off another wounded man's leg, without rum. The rum was gone.

The second shot. From the Diamant. Heavy. It struck the stern with a sound like the world cracking open and tore out the wheel. The helmsman, a young man whose name Emile had never learned, whose face he would never forget, collapsed. Where his head had been, a stump of neck remained, vertebrae protruding. Blood fountained, drenching the wreckage of the wheel, making the deck slippery with the last moments of a life cut short.

Emile stared. The body twitched once, twice, reflexes, nothing more, then went limp. The boy couldn't have been older than sixteen. Someone's son. Someone's brother. And Emile hadn't even known his name.

Remember this. Remember what the command costs.

A voice whispered in his mind.

“To the backup wheel!” Emile barked, forcing his eyes away from the corpse. His voice came out steady, a small miracle. “Hold course!”

Another sailor rushed to the wreckage, slipped in the blood, fell, cursed, and got up, hands red to the elbows.

Behind them, *Father of Seas* was taking terrible punishment. Ball after ball struck the old galleass. One smashed through her side, opening a hole the size of a barrel. Water poured in. Another took down her foremast. It crashed onto the deck, crushing men beneath ells of canvas and tangled rope.

Captain Benedetto stood at the ruined helm, blood running from a gash on his forehead, shouting orders. His crew worked the pumps desperately, but they were losing the battle against the sea.

"Signal from *Father of Seas*!" the lookout cried. "*She's taking on water!* Withdrawing from the line!"

Emile watched the great galleass begin to turn, listing heavily to port. She was out of the fight, but Alber and Liana were aboard. They would survive.

The other galleass, *Iron Crown*, maintained position, her guns still thundering defiance at the *Diamant*. But she was alone now, drawing fire meant for two ships.

The brigantine *Morning Star* took three balls at once, and her side split open like a wound that would never heal. Water rushed in with hungry speed.

Her captain—Marco, Emile suddenly remembered, a man with a daughter in Hogberg—stood by the mast, screaming orders with a voice cracking from desperation.

"Boats! Lower the boats! Now!"

Sailors ran, yanking at ropes with hands made clumsy by terror. One boat dropped into the water. A second jammed in its davits, refusing to lower no matter how they struggled.

The captain grabbed an axe and hacked at the ropes with the fury of a man fighting death itself. His face was red, veins bulging in his neck, and Emile could see his lips moving, counting, perhaps, the seconds his ship had left.

"Jump! Everyone into the water! I'll be last!"

Men jumped, some swimming toward neighboring ships, others simply floundering in the waves, unable to swim, their arms splashing uselessly as the sea claimed them.

But Captain Marco stayed on deck. *Morning Star* went down bow-first, tilting almost vertical as she slipped beneath the waves. He clung to the mast and stared at the sky, not at the ships, not at the men, but at the sky, and his lips moved in what might have been a prayer or might have been his daughter's name.

Then the sea closed over him, and he was gone.

Emile watched the waves smooth over the spot where the mast had been. Bubbles rose for a moment, then nothing. Forty men had joined the deep in less than a minute, and strangers would tell Marco's daughter how bravely her father had died.

He looked to the bow. Selene was still there, still blazing, still pointing the way. She had not flinched when the cannonballs flew past her. Had not turned away when men died screaming. Her presence was a promise and a demand: *Follow me. Do not falter.*

Three ships lost now: *Scarlet Falcon*, *Silver Gull*, and *Morning Star*. And *Father of Seas* was crippled, limping away from the battle with his uncle and cousin aboard.

And then the flagship reached its position.

Emile saw the northern pier through a gap in the smoke. The iron gates of the magazine. The target.

At the bow, Selene turned and extended her hand toward the gates. Her finger pointed like a blade, and where she pointed, light seemed to gather into a beam of silver illumination that cut through the smoke and haze, marking the target for every gunner on the ship.

"All guns!" Emile roared. "Fire on the gates! Now!"

Three culverins fired; the rest had been destroyed or dismounted.

The balls flew. Emile watched their trajectories, black lines against the gray sky. Two struck the wall above the gates. The stone exploded into fragments. The third went wide, splashing into the water.

Nothing.

"Reload!" Emile screamed. "Again!"

But *Sea Queen* had already passed the optimal angle. Behind her came the brigantine *Sea Wolf*, Captain Rodrigo at her bow, a grizzled veteran with a nose broken in three places, his voice hoarse from decades of command.

"For Selene, you bastards!" he roared across the water. "Show these sons of whores how sailors die!"

His crew bellowed in response, not fear, but fury.

Sea Wolf reached the line. Her guns opened fire. Four balls. All struck the wall, but the gates held, iron leaves sheathed in bronze plates.

"Damn," Emile breathed.

Third came the brigantine *Night Specter*. Captain Isabella, a woman with a pox-scarred face. Her ship was wounded: a mast shot away, her side holed, her deck slick with blood. She laughed loudly, hysterically.

"Haven't seen real fireworks yet!" she screamed at her gunners. "Give them hell!"

Five guns fired. Hits. The gates shuddered, and one leaf buckled inward. But they didn't break through.

"Good Goddess." Tommaso covered his face with his hands. "It's not enough."

"We'll all die here."

Fourth came the old brigantine *Last Watch*.

She was an ancient vessel, built forty years ago, when the grandfathers of today's sailors were still children. Her hull had been patched a dozen times. Her sails were like an old patchwork quilt. Her mast was held together with iron bands.

On the captain's bridge stood Captain Salvatore, a small, wizened old man with hands twisted by arthritis. He had served under Emile's grandfather, had sailed with the Scaliger fleet forty years past.

Last Watch could barely move. A ball had destroyed her rudder. Another had punched clean through her side, a hole the size of a barrel, water pouring in like a river. Sailors stood knee-deep, working the pumps uselessly, unable to keep pace. Others hauled cannonballs up from the hold, trying to lighten the ship. The vessel listed, her deck tilted. Men slipped and grabbed at rigging, at the mast. The planking groaned and cracked, old wood giving way.

But Salvatore drove her forward. Back straight, hands gripping the ruined wheel. He looked at the sinking deck, at his men, at the sea claiming his ship. He smiled a toothless, ancient smile.

"Forty years I sailed these seas," he said aloud, though no one could hear. "Not a bad way to end it."

The brigantine reached the line. Three guns remained, old culverins cast half a century ago, their barrels cracked with age.

The captain raised his hand.

"Fire."

The old man looked at Selene's light. His lips trembled. He whispered something, a prayer. Emile couldn't hear the words.

Three guns fired.

The balls flew, slowly, as if time itself had thickened. Emile saw every detail: the spinning iron, the lazy arcs, the trails of smoke.

The first struck the left gate leaf, driving the metal inward.

The second hit the right, tearing the leaf from its hinges.

The third ball flew through the opening and vanished into darkness.

One second of silence. Two.

Then the world ended.

A flash of blinding white erupted from inside the Diamant, from the depths of the rock where three hundred barrels of powder had waited for this moment.

Emile squeezed his eyes shut, but the light penetrated his eyelids, cut his eyes, burned his retinas. When he opened them, he saw a pillar of fire rising toward the heavens, immense and furious, orange flame shot through with black smoke, climbing hundreds of cubits into the sky. It grew and expanded, devouring everything around it as if the fortress were being swallowed by an angry goddess. The sky itself seemed to split, and for an instant, Emile thought he saw a crack form in the clouds, a black scar through which something ancient and indifferent stared down at the works of men.

The shockwave hit a heartbeat later. A wall of sound and force, rolling, deep, primordial. It slammed into Emile's chest, shoved him back a step. Warm wind followed, reeking of powder and burned stone. The deck bucked beneath his feet. Masts vibrated. Rigging sang high notes. Someone on deck fell. The sails flapped, filled by the sudden gust, nearly tearing from the yards. Out on the water, the blast spread in rings, knocking gulls from the air. Birds fell into the sea, dead.

When the wind died, Emile straightened.

The Diamant was gone.

Not entirely. A stump remained: the lower part of the rock, smoking, charred. The walls had collapsed. The towers had caved inward. Where the fortress-battery had stood, guardian of the harbor, killer of ships, now there was a cloud of smoke and fire.

Debris began to fall a minute later: stones and fragments of towers and walls, black and glowing hot from the explosion's heat. One chunk, the size of a human head, punched through the flagship's deck twenty paces from Emile, leaving a smoking hole that went straight through to the hold. Another fell on a neighboring brigantine, crushing a cabin boy's chest before anyone could shout a warning.

Emile wiped his face, and his hand came away red with blood, his own blood, trickling from his ear. He felt no pain, only a high ringing that drowned out all other sound. He looked around and saw half the crew clutching their heads, some with blood streaming from their noses. A shockwave that powerful could burst blood vessels and rupture eardrums.

But alive. They were alive.

We did it. We blew up the Diamant.

A hand touched his cheek, warm and tender as a lover's caress.

Emile turned.

Selene had come from the bow to stand beside him. Her armor no longer blazed as brightly; the light had dimmed, grown softer, more intimate. The goddess smiled. "Well done," she whispered. "I knew you could do it."

Emile opened his mouth, wanting to say something, but could not find the words. Selene leaned in. Kissed his forehead: a light touch of lips, like a blessing. "We'll see each other soon, darling," she said playfully. "I promise."

And then she began to fade.

It happened slowly, like a dream dissolving at dawn's first light. Her figure grew transparent, first the edges of the armor bleeding into the air, then the torso, then the arms. The silver glow dimmed, became translucent, became memory. But her face remained longest, as if she were unwilling to break the connection between them. That smile, warm, promising, knowing, lingered like an afterimage burned into his vision. And her eyes, those impossible eyes filled with stars, looked at Emile. Only at him. In that gaze, he saw the whole world, all eternity, every secret the universe had ever kept.

Then, even they went dark, and she was gone. The space where she had stood held nothing but salt air and the echo of her presence.

But Emile could still feel it. The warmth on his cheek where she had touched him. The blessing of her kiss on his forehead. The scent that had surrounded her, flowers and sea and something else, something that smelled like the space between stars.

She had been here. Real. Alive. And she had chosen him.

The thought should have filled him with pride. Instead, he felt only a vast, aching emptiness, the loss of something he hadn't known he needed until it vanished.

Emile turned to the crew.

With her gone, the spell broke. The sailors who had fought through fire with a goddess at their bow could finally let themselves feel. They fell to their knees, all of them, Tommaso, the bombardiers, the gunners, the cabin boys, weeping and praying, tracing protective signs in the air, kissing amulets, whispering her name.

One old sailor pulled out a knife and cut his palm, letting the blood flow freely. He raised his hand to the sky, clenched his fist, and let the crimson drops fall into the sea.

"Selene!" he screamed, his voice breaking with religious fervor. "Take my blood! Take me!"

Another sailor, young and wild-eyed, rushed toward the rail with his mouth open in a wordless cry.

"She's calling! The goddess is calling me! I'm coming to her!"

Tommaso grabbed him by the collar, yanked him back, and punched him square in the face. The man collapsed to the deck, whimpering, covering his face with his hands.

"Idiot," the old bosun barked. "The goddess doesn't want drowned men. She wants warriors."

But even as he spoke, tears streamed down his weathered cheeks and into his gray beard, and his hands shook with the force of what he had witnessed.

Selene. Patron of sailors. Guardian of dreams and prophecies.

She had returned.

Across the neighboring ships, the same was happening. They had all seen her, the goddess, standing at the flagship's bow through the entire battle, blazing like a beacon, untouched by fire and iron. And they had all seen her fade. Crews fell prostrate, sobbed, and offered prayers. On one brigantine, three sailors cut their chests, drawing the crescent symbol in blood. Captains stood with hats removed, eyes wet. Someone sang an old hymn to Selene that grandfathers still remembered.

Emile understood: soon everyone would know. In every port of the Jeweled Sea. In every city on the continent. The story would spread like fire through a dry forest.

Selene had awakened.

The goddesses were returning.

He turned to the harbor and looked at the burning wreckage of ships, at the bodies floating in the water, dozens of them, perhaps hundreds, at the smoking ruins of the Diamant, at the sea stained red with blood.

This was the price of victory.

Four ships lay on the bottom. *Father of Seas* was crippled and limping toward safety with his uncle and cousin aboard. The remaining brigantines were battered, their crews decimated. Two hundred men were dead, maybe more. Emile did not know the exact count. He did not want to know.

It had been a bloody sacrifice to the goddess, and she had accepted it.

Emile looked at his palms. They were clean. He hadn't fired the guns, hadn't killed personally. But blood was on them all the same. Invisible. Eternal. The blood of those he had sent to their deaths, the blood of boys whose names he hadn't known, the blood of captains who had followed him into fire because a goddess had smiled.

I'm a diplomat. Was a diplomat.

This time the word tasted like ash.

Now he was a commander. A butcher. The goddess's chosen instrument of destruction.

His hands would never feel clean again. No amount of water, no passage of time, would wash away what he had done today. He understood that now, understood it in his bones, in the hollow place where his innocence had been.

Damn it all.

“My lord,” the bosun crawled to him on his knees and grabbed Emile’s hand.

“My lord, did you see? Was she here? With us?”

“I saw,” Emile answered hoarsely.

“Blessed is our fleet,” the bosun whispered, kissing Emile’s hand. “Blessed is our commander. Chosen of the goddess.”

Emile pulled his hand away. Not from disgust. From embarrassment.

He was not chosen. He was a tool. Selene had used him to blow up the Diamant. To reveal herself to the world. To return.

And him?

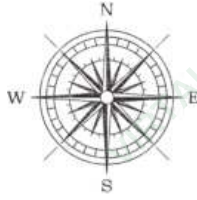
He had fallen in love with a goddess.

Emile surveyed the harbor. The smoke was clearing. Dawn gilded the water. Ragusa lay before them, open, defenseless.

The Diamant had fallen.

“Signal all ships,” Emile said, his voice steady. “Prepare to enter the harbor. We’re going home.”

Chapter 26: Ashes of Victory



CORNARO

Admiral Luciano Cornaro stood at the window in the upper chambers of the palace and watched his defeat. His hands wouldn't stop shaking.

The glass was cracked, a thin web of fractures radiating from the center where the shockwave from the Diamant's explosion had struck the frame. In those cracks, his face was reflected, shattered and broken into fragments, as if reality itself could no longer hold him whole.

Below, in the Lower City, columns of smoke rose toward the sky. Not just smoke, but black tentacles reaching upward, as if the city itself were bleeding into the night. A dozen houses burned, set alight in the fighting. Flames moved through the streets like a living thing, devouring everything in their path. Screams reached even here, not the roar of fire, but human voices. Women wailed, men cursed, and children cried out in terror. The Scaligers' mercenaries were looting the city. His city, which he had defended for a month, only a month, before losing it forever.

And in the middle of the harbor, an ugly, smoldering stump where the city's pride had stood, its invincible guardian, the island of Diamant. A monument to his failure.

Cornaro didn't move. His uniform hung open, the top buttons torn away during those desperate hours on the walls when he had personally commanded the battery. On his cheek was dried blood that wasn't his own, wounded Captain Gradenigo's, carried from the citadel an hour ago. His hands were blackened with soot from when he had touched the debris after one of the explosions, trying to save the wounded. The smell of smoke had soaked into his clothes so deeply that it seemed it would never fade.

His back was straight from habit. An officer must maintain his bearing, even when the world is collapsing. But his hands were clenched behind his back so tightly that his fingers had gone numb, and in his eyes swam an infinite exhaustion, the exhaustion of a man who had worked toward a goal for four decades and lost it in a single night.

I lost.

The thought was simple, like the blow of a hammer. Final. Cold as seawater in a winter storm.

He slowly turned his head, surveying the chambers. These chambers had been his for only a month. Before that, Francis Scaliger had lived here. On the walls still hung portraits of previous admirals, including two from the Scaliger line, stern faces in heavy frames looking down at him from the heights of their lived years. Cornaro hadn't removed them. Why? To remember whom he had overthrown? Or so they could watch as he repeated their fate?

His gaze lingered on one portrait, Francis's father, Admiral Cosimo Scaliger. The same man who, forty years ago, had overthrown Cornaro's grandfather and sent their line into exile. The old man in the portrait gazed back calmly, almost with irony.

The circle closes. We are all prisoners of others' dreams.

He thought of how it had all begun.

Years of wandering with his father through foreign cities, Forlenz, Galtmark, Korto, everywhere they were exiles, former admirals without an admiralty. Luciano's father, the Old Pretender, died slowly, not from illness but from heartbreak. Every evening, he would tell Luciano about their city. About white walls gleaming in the sun. About a harbor where ships from around the world moored. About a palace on the cliff where their ancestors had sat and ruled the sea lanes. About how they would return. How they would set things right. How would they restore justice?

Luciano had grown up on this dream. It became his bones, his blood, the air he breathed. He could have succeeded anywhere. He was intelligent, decisive, and talented in negotiation and war. He could have become a merchant and grown rich, or a condottiere and won fame, or a diplomat and entered the councils of princes. At various points in his life, he had conducted successful military campaigns under condotta contracts with maritime cities and carried out highly delicate assignments. He was known and valued in both capacities. But the ghost of his father's dream would not release him. Because in childhood, every evening, his father would place a hand on his shoulder and whisper, "Promise me, son. Promise you'll reclaim Ragusa."

And Luciano promised.

His father died in poverty, in a foreign city, in a cheap room above a tavern, never seeing their native walls. Luciano closed his eyes and swore over the cooling body to reclaim what was theirs by right, even if it cost everything.

And then he was summoned to Vespers.

A very powerful man. The meeting was brief, held in a dark study where candles cast long shadows. The man sat behind a desk, his face in half-darkness, but his eyes... Cornaro remembered them. One gold, one gray. Unnatural. Terrifying.

The offer was generous: money, ships, mercenaries, and most importantly, the collective support of Ragusa's nobility. Everything needed for a sudden, successful strike.

One condition: do not touch Francis Scaliger or his sons. They were to be delivered alive to the mainland.

"Why do you need them?" Cornaro asked then.

The man with the mismatched eyes smiled, cold as a snake before striking.

"I need the Scaligers alive. They're doing important work for me elsewhere. I would not want any of them distracted by your lovely little city."

Cornaro agreed. What did it matter to him whether Francis lived or died? The main thing was to reclaim Ragusa.

But then everything went wrong.

A monstrous accident. Francis refused to surrender quietly and, through his own foolishness, took a blade to the chest. Death was instantaneous. It was an accident, a miscalculation. No one had wanted him dead.

Then the sons' escape. And Luciano was left alone with his nearly realized dream, without the patron who had organized the entire enterprise.

And now that dream was burning below, in the harbor, lighting the sky with infernal light.

Cornaro closed his eyes. Tired. So tired it seemed that if he lay down now, he would never rise again.

The door behind him opened quietly.

"Luciano."

A voice.

Cornaro froze.

That voice. He knew that voice. He had heard it in dreams, in fantasies, in nightmares. The voice that had haunted him for years, since that very day in Forlenz.

But this was impossible. She had fled. Beatrice Feski had helped her escape to the mainland. He knew. Knew and had not pursued her, there were too many other problems. Let her go. Let her live. He had not wanted her dead, even after the betrayal.

So why was he hearing her voice?

Cornaro did not turn. He was afraid. Afraid to turn and see emptiness. Or worse, to see her and realize it was a hallucination, born of exhaustion and despair.

His hand on the windowsill clenched until the knuckles went white. His breath caught.

“Luciano,” she repeated, softer now, closer.

The sound of her steps on the marble floor, the light rustle of a dress, real and tangible.

Only then did he slowly turn his head.

Emilia Tagliapietra stood in the doorway, a silhouette backlit by the dim glow of torches in the corridor. Her face was in shadow. She wore a dark traveling dress, a cloak draped over her shoulders. Her hair was gathered hastily, and a few strands escaped to frame her pale face. She looked tired, with shadows beneath her eyes, lips pressed together, but alive. Real.

She took a step forward into the light from the window, and the orange reflection of the fires touched her face.

Cornaro exhaled. He hadn’t even noticed he’d been holding his breath.

“Emilia,” he said, and the name sounded like a prayer. Or a curse. He didn’t know which.

He was afraid to blink. What if she vanished? What if this were only a mirage, conjured by a tired mind?

But she did not vanish. She came closer. Stopped two paces away, also looking out the window at the fires, at the dying city. Alive, real, as desirable as ever.

Inside, a wave of emotions rose: anger, pain, and confusion. And beneath all of it, deeper, stronger, relief. So sharp it took his breath away. She was here. After everything. After the betrayal, after the escape. She had come to him when everything was collapsing.

“Have you come to say goodbye?” he asked, surprised at how steady his voice sounded. No anger. Only exhaustion.

She shook her head, not taking her eyes from the window.

“I came to talk. For the first time, honestly.”

“Honestly?” Cornaro smirked, but without humor. “That’s new. You betrayed me, didn’t you? Gave the Scaligers the defense plans.”

“Yes.”

A simple word. No excuses. No attempts to lie or evade.

Cornaro finally turned to her fully. Studied her face in the orange light of the fires. Expected to see triumph, or fear, or defiance. But in her eyes there was only sadness, deep and almost bottomless.

“Why?” he asked. Not angrily. Not demandingly. Wearily, as if asking about something unimportant. “Why did you do it?”

Emilia slowly raised her head and looked him in the eyes.

“Because I love you,” she said quietly.

Cornaro blinked. Of all the answers he had expected to hear, this was the last.

“A strange way to show love,” he said after a long pause. “Through betrayal.”

“I betrayed your obsession,” Emilia answered, pain cutting through her voice.

“Not you. Never you. I watched this war killing you, Luciano. Watched you become someone you never wanted to be. Cruel. Merciless. A prisoner of someone else’s dream.”

“I did what I had to do,” he objected, but the words sounded unconvincing even to himself.

“For whom?” Emilia stepped closer. “For your father? He’s dead, Luciano. Thirty years dead. You’re fighting for a ghost. When will it end? When will you let yourself live?”

Cornaro turned back to the window and looked at the burning city. She was right. He knew it. Had known it for a long time. He simply could not stop, did not know how.

“Every day,” Emilia continued quietly, “every day I betrayed you. From the first day. Passed along information. Sabotaged plans. Sowed distrust between you and the mercenaries. And every day I thought, maybe today he’ll stop on his own? Maybe he’ll see that the war is eating him from within? But you did not stop. And I decided to stop you by force. Because if I had not...” She faltered, her voice trembling. “...you would have become a monster. And I would have lost you forever.”

Cornaro stood, looking into the cracked glass. Saw his shattered reflection. Saw the city beyond the window. Saw the ashes of his hopes rising toward the sky.

“I love you too,” he said suddenly, and his voice broke on the last word.

Emilia froze.

“Always have,” he continued, the words coming with difficulty, as if each had to be dragged from the depths of his soul with pliers. “Since the day I first saw you in Forlenz.”

* * *

Forlenz. Three years ago.

The great hall in Prince Albizzi's palazzo. A reception honoring the alliance of trading cities. Luciano Cornaro, still an exile then, living on money earned from mercenary work, attended incognito as a representative of one of the condottieri companies.

Francis Scaliger was there. Admiral of Ragusa, wealthy, self-satisfied, laughing at someone's joke. Luciano watched him from across the room, gripping his wine glass so tightly his knuckles went white. *This man sits on my grandfather's throne. This man stole my city.*

And then he saw her.

She stood beside Francis, tall and slender, in a dress the color of a winter sky. Golden hair arranged in an elaborate coiffure, her neck adorned with pearls. Cold beauty, like a statue of white marble. She gazed at the guests with boredom, as if all this were a waste of time.

Luciano could not tear his eyes away.

The world around him blurred. Voices faded. Only she and he remained, and the space between them was charged with something inexplicable.

She turned her head, by chance, and their eyes met.

One second. Two.

Then she looked away, returning to her conversation with Francis. But Luciano saw something flicker in her eyes. Recognition? Interest? He could not tell.

That evening, he learned her name. Emilia Tagliapietra. Wife of Francis Scaliger. A recent wife, they had married less than a year ago.

She was unattainable. A Scaliger's wife. A symbol of everything that the family had taken from his line.

And Luciano could not stop thinking about her.

* * *

"You were my enemy's wife," Cornaro continued in the present, gazing out the window, "but I could not get you out of my head. Thought about you every day. Hated myself for it. When Francis died..." He paused, swallowed. "When Francis died, I thought: maybe now... Maybe fate is giving me a chance. Not just to reclaim the city, but also..." He did not finish.

Emilia came closer. Stopped right beside him, almost touching his shoulder.

"But I was with you only to spy," she finished quietly for him.

"Yes."

"At first, yes," she admitted, her voice trembling. "I came to you just to survive.

The coup was inevitable. I understood that when I saw the conspirators preparing. When I saw you walking freely through the city, staying as an honored guest in the wealthiest homes. Francis was doomed. And I... I chose the winning side so I would not end up among the dead. I came to you as the future master of the city. But then..." She sobbed. "Then I realized it was not a game. That's when I look at you, my heart aches. That's when you touch me, I forget why I am here. That I..."

Tears ran down her cheeks.

"...I love you. Always have. Even while betraying you."

"A paradox," Cornaro whispered.

"A curse," she corrected through her tears.

He turned to her. Raised his hands, they were trembling; he couldn't stop it, and touched her face, wiping the tears with his thumbs. Her skin was warm, alive, real. She hadn't evaporated, hadn't vanished. She was here, with him, in this room where his world was collapsing.

"Hush," he said softly, almost in a whisper. "Don't cry. It's over."

"Not everything." Emilia grabbed his hands, squeezed them tightly, desperately.

"Luciano, let's run. Right now."

He froze.

"What?"

She spoke quickly, words tumbling over each other. "A boat is waiting below. Beyond the breakwater, a brigantine. The Scaligers gave me a ship for passage to a new life. I simply found... arguments to convince the captain to extend the route a little. And just recently, I was shown a passage beneath the castle to the other side of the cliff. Very fortunate timing." A bitter smile touched her lips. "As for the treasury in times of interregnum, state treasures are guarded with remarkable negligence, gold, jewels, and documents. Enough to live like kings for the rest of our days. In the Overseas, in the Southern Kingdoms, wherever you want. We can start over. Together. Or I start without you."

Cornaro stared at her, not believing what he was hearing.

"You want me to run? Like a coward?"

"I want you to live!" She squeezed his hands until they hurt, desperation breaking through her voice. "Luciano, listen to me. You weren't even born here. You don't have to die for a dead dream. You don't have to repeat your father's fate. You have a right to your own life. To love. To happiness."

Cornaro was silent. In his eyes, emotions warred, duty and desire, honor and exhaustion, the ghost of his father and the living woman before him.

Emilia spoke without stopping, desperately trying to break through the wall of his silence. "All my life, I've been controlled. By my father, then by Francis, then by the Scaligers. Everyone decided for me where to live, whom to marry, whom to betray, and whom to love. But you've been controlled too, Luciano. By your father's ghost. By the will of that man from the mainland. By an oath sworn over a grave. We've never chosen for ourselves. We've been chosen for. So choose now. For the first time in your life. Not for your father. Not for the city. Not for honor. For yourself. Choose life. Choose me."

She released his hands and took a step back. Then another. Toward the door.

"I'm leaving, Luciano," she said firmly, though tears still ran down her cheeks. "With you or without you. Decide quickly."

She turned and walked toward the exit. Steps measured, back straight. She didn't look back.

Cornaro stood at the window. Watched her go. Then looked out at the burning city. At the smoke rising to the sky. At the orange glow of the Diamant. At a dream turned to ash.

Waited forty years. Held it for a month.

Emilia reached the door and put her hand on the handle.

"Emilia," he called.

She froze. Didn't turn.

"Wait for me."

SEBASTIAN

Sebastian didn't remember how they reached the galley.

He remembered running down stone steps, slippery with blood and strewn with debris, remembered Gregorio dragging him by the arm when his legs began to buckle. Remembered shouts behind them, Cornaro's soldiers shouting something, but not pursuing. They were retreating to the palace, demoralized, broken by the Diamant's explosion.

Remembered the pillar of fire lighting the sky, orange and furious, like the wrath of the gods. Ash fell from the sky like black snow.

Fifteen men. Out of fifty. The rest were dead.

They reached the Upper City pier. The galley waited where they had left it, rocking on the waves, as if nothing had happened.

"Row," Sebastian commanded hoarsely. His voice wouldn't obey. The stab wound between the fifth and sixth rib burned like fire. The blade had gone in shallow, two centimeters at most, but had caught muscle. "To the Lower City. Move."

The oarsmen took to the oars and ferried them across the harbor. Wounded, bloodied, but alive.

The harbor was full of smoke. The Diamant's wreckage still burned in the middle of the bay, a massive bonfire on the water, illuminating everything around in flickering orange light. The water reflected the flames, turning the harbor into a lake of molten copper.

Sebastian sat at the bow of the galley, holding the gunwale with one hand, pressing the wound with the other. Blood seeped between his fingers, slow and viscous. His linen shirt clung to his body, soaked with blood and sweat, heavy as chainmail. His breath came ragged. His vision swam.

Not now. A little longer. Hold on until shore.

Gregorio sat beside him, grim and silent. One eye tracked their path through the smoke. His club lay at his feet, streaked with blood, a dent in the handle where it had struck bone.

"My lord," he said without turning. "You alive?"

"For now," Sebastian breathed.

"Good. A little more. See the soldiers on the pier?"

Sebastian raised his head, squinting through the smoke.

Yes. There, ahead, through the haze, lights. Still-lit lanterns on the pier. Figures of people. Many people.

Theirs? Or enemies?

He gripped his sword hilt, ready to fight. One last time. One last battle, if it came to that.

The galley drew closer. The figures on the pier became clearer.

Soldiers in armor, armed but not in formation. They stood scattered, gazing at the harbor, at the burning Diamant. Someone sat on the stones, head bowed. Someone bandaged wounds. Someone simply stared at nothing.

Valdés's and Alber's mercenaries. Theirs.

And among them, at the very edge of the dock, a figure in dark clothing.

A woman.

She stood motionless, hands clasped before her. A dark dress of wool serge, simple and practical, merchant-class rather than a lady's, wet at the hem from the spray. Her pale face turned toward the harbor, searching. Even from here, Sebastian could see the tension in her shoulders, the way she held herself like someone who had waited for hours, afraid to hope, refusing to leave.

Looking for someone.

Sebastian recognized her before the boat touched the dock.

“Beatrice,” he breathed.

His sword slipped from his hands and clanged against the boat’s bottom. Sebastian tried to stand, but his legs buckled. Gregorio grabbed his shoulder and held him.

“Sit, my lord. I’ll help.”

The ship bumped against the wooden pier, softly, almost silently. Someone among the soldiers threw them a rope. Gregorio caught it and secured it.

Sebastian stood slowly, holding onto the gunwale. The world swayed. His ears rang. The wound between his ribs burned, but he did not feel the pain. He felt only one thing.

She was here. Beatrice was here.

He stepped onto the pier and stumbled, but kept his balance. He raised his head.

Beatrice stood three paces away. Her dark eyes were wide, glistening in the torchlight. Her lips trembled. Her hands unclenched.

They looked at each other across a space of three paces, through smoke and ash, through all the hell of this night.

Then she ran to him.

Sebastian managed to open his arms. She struck his chest with such force that he staggered. His arms closed around her instinctively, tightly, desperately. The wound exploded with pain, but he did not care. He held her, pressed her to him, breathed in the scent of her hair, salt, smoke, something else, elusively familiar, like home.

She was trembling. All of her. Her fingers clutched his linen shirt, wet with blood, dirty, heavy. Her face was buried in his shoulder.

“You’re alive,” she whispered, brokenly. “Goddess, you’re alive. I saw the explosion. I thought... I thought...”

Words broke off. Her shoulders shook. She was crying silently, convulsively, like someone who had forgotten how.

Sebastian held her tighter, one hand on her back, the other cupping the back of her head, gently, protectively. He closed his eyes. The world narrowed to the size of her body in his arms. Somewhere behind them, men screamed, and fires roared. He did not hear them.

“I’m here,” he whispered into her hair. “I came back. Promised, did not I?”

She raised her head, looked at him with eyes red and wet, but alive. So alive it took his breath away.

"You're bleeding," she said, panic breaking through her voice. Her hand flew to his side and touched the wet fabric. Her fingers came away red. "Goddess, Sebastian..."

"Shallow," he lied. "I'll survive."

"Don't you dare." Her voice broke. "Don't you dare die. Not after... not when you've just come back."

Sebastian looked at her, at the face contorted with fear for him, at the eyes full of tears, at the lips trembling with unspoken words.

And suddenly everything became simple, incredibly, crystalline simple.

"I love you," he said.

Beatrice froze, her eyes widening.

"What?"

"I love you," he repeated, and the words flowed easily, naturally, as if he had been saying them all his life. "Since the day I first saw you. When you stood in the temple and watched the ritual as if it were an ordinary thing. When you fixed me with that gaze of yours, cold and appraising, but beneath it was something else. A spark. Interest. I fell in love then. And I haven't stopped for a moment since."

Tears ran down her cheeks, slowly, heavily, catching the firelight like drops of molten copper.

"Sebastian..."

"I thought about it there," he continued, not letting her interrupt. "When I was dying. When the soldiers surrounded us, I realized I wasn't coming back. The last thing I thought about was you. About not having said these words. About you never knowing."

He raised his hand, trembling, dirty, covered in others' blood, and touched her cheek. Wiped a tear with his thumb.

"Now you know."

Beatrice looked at him. Said nothing. Just looked, long and intently, as if seeing him for the first time. Then she rose on tiptoe and kissed him.

The world vanished.

Only this remained. Her lips on his, warm and salty from tears, tasting of smoke and survival. Her hands on his face, her body pressed to his, her breath mingling with his.

Sebastian forgot the wound. Forgot the pain. Forgot everything, the war, the dead, the smoke and blood around them. There was only her. And him. And this.

They kissed for a long time, not passionately, not hotly, but desperately, like people who feared they might never see each other again.

When she pulled back, her forehead stayed pressed to his. Breathing ragged, eyes closed.

"And I love you," she whispered. "Goddess, how I love you."

Sebastian smiled weakly, but genuinely for the first time that night.

And in that moment, the world tilted. His vision darkened. His legs buckled suddenly, without warning. The wound flared in a new wave of sharp, piercing pain. The ground slipped away beneath his feet.

Beatrice caught him. Her arms wrapped around his waist and held him. Sebastian sagged against her, heavily, barely standing.

"Sebastian!" Panic broke through her voice.

"It's... It's fine," he forced out through clenched teeth. "Just... got dizzy."

She held him tighter, taking his weight. Small, fragile, but she held. Wouldn't let go.

"You can't walk," she said firmly. "You need a surgeon. Right now."

"I can," he objected stubbornly, though his voice shook. "Just give me... a minute."

Somewhere nearby came a cough. Gregorio stood by the boat, turned away, arms crossed, but his shoulders shook with silent laughter.

"My lord," he said without turning, "you're bleeding out. But if the lady doesn't object, who am I to interfere?"

Beatrice started, as if waking. She looked around the pier, still holding Sebastian by the waist, not letting him fall. He leaned on her shoulder, breathing heavily. Gradually, the world stopped spinning. Sebastian straightened slowly, carefully. He followed her gaze.

Chaos.

Soldiers sat on the stones, wounded, exhausted, demoralized. Some groaned. Some drank from flasks. Some simply lay there, staring at the sky with empty eyes.

Valdés stood in the middle of the square before the pier, giving orders. His voice was hoarse from shouting, but firm. Officers bustled around him.

"Put out the fires! Move! Stop standing around!" he shouted. "You! Gather ten men and patrol the port quarter! Stop the looting! Anyone caught with stolen goods goes in irons!"

Some listened. Some ignored him. Mercenaries dragged silver, cloth, anything they could carry, from houses. Women screamed from windows. Children cried.

Bodies lay in the streets, many bodies. Guards in blue, militia, and random townspeople caught in the crossfire. Blood ran over the stones, black in the light of the fires.

Smoke rose from a dozen places: houses burning, set alight in the fighting. Tongues of flame licked walls and climbed onto roofs.

Ragusa was drowning in blood and fire.

“Look!” shouted one of the soldiers. “Look at the palace!”

Sebastian turned, looking across the harbor.

A white flag was slowly rising over the tower. Someone there, in the palace, was pulling a rope. The flag climbed higher and higher until it unfurled fully, catching the wind.

Capitulation.

Silence rolled across the pier like a wave, washing over everyone at once. Soldiers froze, stopped shouting, fighting, and looting. Stared at the white flag.

Then, a cry. “Victory!” someone yelled. “We won!”

Others took it up. A roar rose, triumphant, wild, primal. Soldiers threw weapons into the air, embraced, wept, and laughed.

“Ragusa is ours!” they shouted. “The Scaligers have returned!”

Beatrice stood beside Sebastian, staring at the white flag. Her face was empty.

“We won,” she said quietly.

Sebastian looked at her. Then at the square. At the bodies, the blood, the smoke. At the soldiers roaring with joy amid the slaughter. At the burning houses. At the dead children in the alley, he could see them, three of them, huddled together beneath the ruins of a wall.

“Yes,” he said just as quietly. “We won.”

There was no triumph in his voice.

Beatrice turned to him, taking his hand carefully, gently. Her other arm wrapped around his waist, supporting him.

“Come,” she said. “I want to show you something.”

“Where?”

She smiled weakly, but there was something private in the smile, something intimate.

“To my place. I have a magnificent wine collection in the warehouse here.”

Sebastian understood. Blood rushed to his face even now, even after everything. An hour ago, he had prepared to die. Now she was taking him home. Finally.

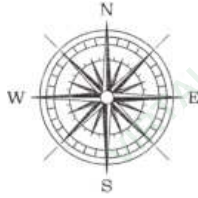
He squeezed her hand in return and leaned on her.

“Lead the way.”

They walked slowly through the burning city, stepping over bodies and broken dreams, holding hands as if nothing else in the world mattered.

Perhaps nothing did.

Epilogue



MARK

The balcony atop the Admiral's Palace had been built by Mark's grandfather, old Cosimo, who had loved to begin his day contemplating the city under his rule. Mark understood why. From this height, one could almost believe he controlled something.

Ragusa lay open like a map: the curve of the harbor, the water under the midday sun gleaming like molten silver; the peaked roofs of the Upper City descending in terraces toward the sea; and beyond the harbor, the scorched patches of the Lower Quarter, black wounds on the city's body.

Mark leaned against the stone parapet, half-listening to Alber's monotonous voice. Three weeks. Three weeks since that night when Ragusa had returned to the Scaligers in fire and blood. The city was healing its wounds faster than anyone could have expected.

"...we managed to mobilize sufficient liquidity," Alber continued, leafing through a leather folio of calculations. His face looked haggard, with dark circles under his eyes and temples streaked gray over these weeks. "But with difficulty. Very great difficulty."

He ran his finger down the columns of figures.

"Your father's secret vaults... only twelve thousand ducats remained. Francis had eaten through almost everything in fifteen years of rule." Alber grimaced. "We had to gather money from across the world. Our houses in the Jeweled Sea issued bills of exchange for forty-five thousand. The trading posts on the Isthmus: letters of credit for fifteen. Loans secured against plantations and mines: another forty thousand, at ten percent annual interest. The family's personal funds, what we managed to evacuate before the sequestration: twenty-three. Sale of family jewels: fifteen."

He raised his eyes, and in them was the weight of it all.

"One hundred fifty thousand ducats in total."

Alber closed the folio.

“Of which forty thousand has already been spent. Compensation to families of the dead: ten. Fleet repairs: fifteen, and that’s only the beginning. We need at least that much again. Reconstruction of the Lower City: eight. Operating expenses for three weeks: seven thousand.” He paused. “That leaves one hundred ten thousand. Enough for a year of intensive work. Maybe a year and a half, if we economize, and if trade begins to recover.”

Mark turned his gaze to the harbor. Ships rocked at anchor, two dozen, perhaps a few more. There used to be three times as many. Scaffolding wrapped around warehouse walls like spiderwebs; repairs proceeded slowly, and there wasn’t enough money. Ahead, blocking the harbor entrance, the broken rock of the Diamant jutted from the water, what remained of the fort after the explosion: black teeth of stone, like a tombstone over the hundreds of dead defenders. Beside it, a pair of construction barges bobbed on the water, creating the appearance that the battery could be rebuilt.

“Revenue?” he asked without turning.

Alber sighed heavily.

“Catastrophic. Under Cornaro, the treasury was draining rapidly. Tribute to allies: eight thousand per month. Valdés’s mercenaries: over three. Maintenance of the garrison, the palace, fortification repairs...” Alber shook his head. “Meanwhile, the city’s monthly income fell from twelve thousand to eleven, then to eight. In the last six months, no less than a hundred thousand ducats left the city.” He paused. “Cornaro ate through reserves in one month that your grandfather had accumulated over twenty years. We’ll never know the exact figures. He took that secret with him.”

“Not just the secret,” Adriana interjected dryly.

The woman sat in a deep armchair by the wall, leaning back with the air of someone who couldn’t care less about the heat. She wore a dark gray dress of severe cut, her hair gathered in a tight knot, her hands heavy with rings resting on the head of her cane: a chased hawk’s head, the ancestral symbol of the Scaligers. There was nothing elderly in her posture, only weary contempt for the world in general and this conversation in particular.

“The entire city treasury,” she continued with a caustic smirk. “Four chests of gold, seals, property documents. Cornaro proved more foresighted than we thought. The bitch crawled out of her hole before we took the palace.”

“With Emilia,” Alber added grimly.

Adriana laughed quietly, the sound unexpectedly young and vicious at once.

“A pretty blonde everyone thought was a stupid little doll, and in the end, she outplayed everyone. Amusing, isn’t it? Men are so predictable. Show them a pair

of tits, bat your eyelashes, and suddenly they're ready to hand you the keys to the treasury." She shook her head. "Emilia Tagliapietra was always smarter than she seemed. I underestimated that girl, which, damn it, annoys me."

Mark turned. Behind Alber, on the balustrade, a pair of gulls had settled. The white birds eyed the humans warily but did not fly away.

"Where could they have fled?"

"Options?" Alber shrugged. "East, to the Confederation. South, to the Albanian principalities. Maybe across the ocean entirely, to Rajpur or the Southern Continent. With that kind of money, Cornaro can buy himself protection anywhere."

"Or a kingdom," Adriana added thoughtfully. "Emilia has connections in Sirmion. Her mother was from there, if I recall. But anyway, fuck it. Cornaro is no longer a threat. A fugitive with a bag of gold is merely a wealthy exile. But the Republic..."

Alber nodded, bending again over his notes.

"The Republic is the real problem. Two-thirds of all our wealth is frozen there. About a million ducats, Mark." He gripped the folio in his hands, knuckles white. "Trading houses in Porto-Vesto, in Bastion-Monte, in the City of Vespers itself. Warehouses, shipyards, bank deposits, ships under the Republic's flag, debt obligations from patrician families... all inaccessible. The Senate issued a decree sequestering the property of 'conspirators against the interests of the Republic.' Officially, we haven't been declared traitors yet, but in practice..."

"In practice, we've already been condemned," Mark finished.

"Worse. An official investigation has begun." Alber raised his eyes, and in them was weary resignation. "The Senate Commission on State Security. Headed by..."

"Olivia Vitelli," Adriana's voice sounded cold as winter wind. "Of course. Who the fuck else?"

Mark saw her fingers tighten on the cane. The woman stared into space, and in her gaze was fury: not hot, not explosive, but freezing and ancient.

"That bitch made a deal with the others," Adriana continued quietly, though her voice rang with steel. "Fabiano, Orsini, Doria, Castelli... that whole nest of vipers. They decided the Scaligers had become too dangerous. Too strong. Too independent." She smirked. "And they're right, of course. We are dangerous. But they chose the worst possible time for their games."

Alber cleared his throat, returning attention to his notes.

"We still have a third of the empire," he said. "Houses in the Jeweled Sea, trading posts on the Isthmus, plantations and mines in distant lands, about three hundred

thirty thousand in assets. But these are long-term investments; they can't be quickly converted to gold. You can't sell spice plantations in a week. Mine requires time for assessment. And Ragusa needs money now. We're living on remnants and loans. If trade doesn't recover within a year... we'll have to start selling capital assets. What the family built over generations."

In the harbor below, a long whistle sounded: workers on one of the ships were finishing their shift. Mark watched a group of craftsmen descend a rope ladder from a galley's deck. The city lived, worked, healed its wounds, though dark stains still marred the Lower Quarter's cobblestones, stains the rain hadn't washed away. From the narrow streets came mournful lamentations: families still burying those they had found under the rubble.

"Trade routes," Alber reminded him. "Many merchants are rerouting, bypassing Ragusa entirely. The Vespers houses have begun using Port Ankara as a transit point instead of us. We're losing transit duties, warehouse fees, port taxes... Last month, revenues fell by thirty percent. This month: forty."

"Can you control the process?" Mark asked.

"Barely. I've convinced some to stay through promises, discounts, and personal connections. But..." Alber shook his head. "The trend can't be reversed yet. Ragusa must prove its stability, political, military, and economic. And for that..."

"For that, you need symbolism," Adriana finished. "People need symbols, boy. They need to know there's a strong hand ruling the city. That the Scaligers have returned not merely as temporary masters, but as the legitimate authority."

Mark was silent, looking at the city. He knew where the conversation was heading.

"The enthronement," Alber said. "Official assumption of the Admiral's office. A ceremony in Heroes of the Sea Square, an oath before the Great Council, the traditional reception at the palace..."

"This isn't the time for celebrations—" Mark cut him off. "The city is still smoldering. In the Lower Quarter, seventy-two houses and sixteen warehouses burned. Four hundred sixty-eight people died, including twenty-three children, not counting soldiers on both sides. Half the noble families split: some were for Cornaro, others for us, and still others just trying to survive. And you want me to throw a parade?"

"I want you to give people hope," Alber answered firmly. "They see the reconstruction work. They see the city hasn't fallen. But they need more. They need a ruler who accepts power not as a temporary conqueror, but as the rightful heir."

"Alber is right." Adriana tapped her cane on the stone tiles. "You're a ghost right now, Mark. You hide in this palace, give orders through intermediaries, and avoid public appearances. This creates an impression of weakness. Or worse, fear."

"I'm not afraid," Mark said sharply.

"I know. But they don't." The woman tilted her head, studying him with a caustic smirk. "You've changed, boy. All of you have changed. After that night. After what Selene granted you. But people only see the surface. They don't understand what's happening inside you. They see a young man hiding from his city."

Mark clenched his teeth. She was right, as always.

Behind him came the light click of heels on stone. Mark turned and saw Beatrice. The girl carried a tray with a wine pitcher and three goblets. Her dark hair was gathered in a simple braid, her gray dress accentuating her slender figure. In these weeks, she had grown thinner, more drawn, but her movements retained a confident grace.

"Forgive me for interrupting," she said, setting the tray on the wide parapet. "I thought you might need refreshment, my lords."

Mark couldn't help but smirk.

Cup-bearer. Not long ago, Beatrice had played this very role at Francis's feasts, then at Luciano's. Now she did the same for him. No longer as a spy or hostage, but as... what? A member of the family? An ally? His brother's beloved?

"Thank you, dear." Adriana took a goblet and sipped. "Not bad. From the southern cellars?"

"From those that survived," Beatrice replied with a faint smile. "Half the wine warehouses were looted by your soldiers during the unrest."

Alber also took a goblet, nodding gratefully. Mark followed their example. The wine was tart, slightly sour, not the best vintage, but under the present circumstances, one took what one could get.

"Beatrice," Alber said with a slight smirk, "where is our young warrior? Has Sebastian vanished somewhere again?"

The girl blushed slightly, but her gaze remained calm.

"Sebastian is in the Lower City, coordinating the reconstruction work. Again."

"Again," Adriana repeated with irony. "That boy spends more time there with you than here. Can't bear to see the palace that's become a symbol of victory bought with his own citizens' blood? Or the brother who's about to become Admiral?"

Beatrice said nothing, but Mark noticed her lips tremble. She knew the truth of those words.

"Sebastian is atoning for sins," Mark said quietly. "Every house he helps rebuild, every family he comforts... that's his way of coping with what we did."

"And your way?" Adriana tilted her head, studying him.

"I haven't figured that out yet."

An awkward silence fell. Beatrice shifted from foot to foot, watching Mark with concern but not daring to intervene.

"If that's all, my lords, I'll go," she said.

"Go, dear." Adriana waved her hand. "And tell Sebastian we expect him for dinner. No excuses."

Beatrice nodded, lifted the tray, and headed for the door. Mark watched her leave. When the door closed, he turned to Adriana.

"A question, grandmother."

The woman raised an eyebrow.

"Selene appeared," Mark said slowly, choosing his words. "Appeared at just the right moment, granted us strength, helped us take the city. Everyone now considers us the goddess's chosen. That gives us an advantage." He paused. "But the Scaligers have another patron. More ancient. More... significant for the bloodline."

Adriana watched him motionlessly. Alber froze, a goblet in his hand.

"Wouldn't it make sense," Mark continued, "for the second goddess to reveal herself as well? Since the first has already broken the taboo?"

Silence fell. Even the gulls on the balustrade went quiet, as if sensing the tension.

Adriana smiled slowly, very slowly.

"You were always the smartest of all of them," she said quietly. "The most observant. The most... dangerous, if I'm being honest."

Alber paled. He looked at the woman, then at Mark, and understanding flickered in his eyes.

"Liana," Adriana said suddenly, addressing Alber. "You asked about Liana."

He started, as if called from a reverie.

"I care for her every day," Adriana continued. Her voice warmed, became almost tender. "Liana is special. She did for me..." The woman faltered, searching for words, "...more than could be expected of a mortal. More than I had a right to ask."

She rose from the chair, leaning on the cane, and approached the parapet. Her silhouette against the bright sky was straight, full of hidden power.

"She will be fine," Adriana said. "Her sight will fully recover. Her hands will heal, though small scars will remain. I'm using every means to help her recover as quickly as possible." The woman turned to them, and in her gaze was something almost human. "I value what this girl did for me. Value it greatly. Her sacrifice was great, and I accept it."

And then Mark saw it.

For a moment, just a brief moment, Adriana's eyes flared. Not metaphorically. Literally. Golden light, bright and cold as stars on a winter night, splashed from her pupils and instantly faded. The air around her seemed to shiver, to distort, like the air above heated stone in a desert.

Alber recoiled, dropping his goblet. Wine spilled across the stones in a red pool.

"Diadema," Mark said calmly. The word tasted strange on his tongue: a name he had known all his life, suddenly meaning something entirely different. "Goddess of war, strategy, and royal power. Patron of the Scaliger line. She's been among us all this time."

Adriana, or whatever she truly was, smirked.

"Among you?" Her voice grew colder, as if coming from the depths of ages where empires rose and fell. "Dear boy, I raised you. I was there when you took your first steps, when you learned to hold a sword. When you buried your father. I never left my bloodline."

She tapped her cane.

"Though I had to play the role of a cantankerous grandmother. A tiresome mask, I'll admit."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Alber's voice trembled. "Why did you hide?"

"Because I did not see the need," Diadema answered, and in her words rang an implacability before which mortal will paled. "And I do not need advice from pups about how to live my life. I am older than your city, Alber. Older than the Republic. Older than all the nations you know. I have watched empires rise and crumble while you were all still sparks in the loins of your ancestors."

Mark stepped forward.

"And what now?" he asked sharply. "Will you do to me what you did to Giuliano? Set me against the Republic, then watch me die in glory and blood? Or rot from poison?"

Diadema measured him with a long look. On her face was neither anger nor surprise, only ancient, weary wisdom.

"Giuliano was brave," she said slowly. "Bold, charismatic, a brilliant leader. But shortsighted. He could not think beyond the next battle. Could not plan, scheme, sacrifice the small for the great. And in the end, he rushed and lost the most important game of his life."

She tilted her head.

"You're smarter, Mark. Much smarter. And more talented. You'll take care of yourself."

"And you'll help me," he said bitterly.

"Of course. I always helped my children." Diadema smiled again, and in that smile was no warmth. "But don't delude yourself, boy. I'm not a mother hen who will wipe your nose or shield you from every danger. I am the goddess of war. And war demands sacrifices."

Alber sank back into the chair, as if his legs had refused to hold him. He stared at Diadema, and in his gaze was a mix of reverence and horror.

Mark was silent. He felt something rearranging inside him. The last illusions about safety, about someone caring for them simply because, without ulterior motives, all of it was slowly crumbling.

Diadema turned back to the parapet, studying the city below. Her fingers stroked the cane's head, the chased hawk, symbol of the bloodline she had protected for centuries.

"Sometimes I think," she said thoughtfully, gazing at the harbor, "of sending Sebastian and that girl somewhere far away. To Sirmion. To Corsaro. Even to Rajpur. So that at least some of you survive what's coming."

Mark tensed.

"What's coming?"

Diadema turned. Her eyes were ordinary again, dark, tired, but full of steel will. But Mark now knew what hid behind that mask.

"What I raised all of you for," she said, her voice quieter but no less ominous. "But no. I can't afford to scatter heirs."

She gripped the cane a little tighter.

"I'll need all of you. And remember this, Mark: when I finally awoke, truly awakened, she awoke as well. The one from the Other World. Hecate. She saw you that night, when you watched the Council of Senators. She knows about you. She doesn't forgive those who dare look into Her light."

Diadema paused, and in that pause, a threat old as time rang. "And she will come. Sooner or later. And when she does..."

Diadema didn't finish. She didn't need to.

Silence reigned.

The wind from the sea strengthened, bringing the smell of salt, smoke, and fresh timber. The city below lived, breathed, and rebuilt. It didn't know what was coming. Neither did Mark.

But he would learn.