

THE QUARRY

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Custodian

Shadows blew across the ground, gently caressing the streets of packed dirt. Ghostly echoes of the clouds that threatened to blot out the moon the shadows provided ever growing opportunities to be taken advantage of, if one wished to remain unseen. One did. Emme hovered in the meagre shadows cast by the piles of debris that were all that was left of the shipwright district. Misty clouds of wasted breath hung before her in the cold night air. She hugged her shawl tightly to her ribs as she waited for a brief break in the clouds to pass.

In... out – mist, in... out – mist; she narrated her breaths with a single minded concentration. Overhead the clouds thickened as rain began to spit down, adding a layer of damp to her freezing form. She jolted herself to movement once more. Darting from one dark shadow to the next. Always on the lookout. Always listening for a hint of activity. She swore her staccato heartbeat could be heard back through the city all the

way to the citadel proper itself. It mimicked the tramping of soldier's boots, and she shook her head at the thought. Not now. Not tonight.

She paused beside a blackened shell. Once a house, the roof was now gone – the walls dark with ash that would never wash off, no matter how hard it rained. These houses, this district, had once been the pride of the city. It had been the first thing the invaders destroyed. She shook her head again, harder this time. She had to keep her mind sharp. This was the most important part. All her care was for nothing if she was spotted now. Living on the streets she had been constantly on the wrong side of the law simply to survive. This was so much bigger than all of those times. She wouldn't be able to wriggle her way out if she they realised what she was caught up in. She'd be thrown in one of the dungeons in the cold and damp and dark to rot and –

Shrink back against the wall. Let your eyes lose focus. Watch for movement. Count three times to one hundred. The memory of the spoken words calmed the hammering of her heart for a moment as she forced her thoughts away from capture. She wasn't going to get caught. She ground her teeth together in frustration. She hadn't been so jumpy since she was a kid. The rain was growing harder, the smell of burnt wood filling her nostrils as the ground was slowly soaked. She wrinkled her nose and tried not to think about that either.

She reached her third one hundred, forcing herself to make the full count despite growing winds that tore at her, lifting her hair and thrusting the cold deeper into her bones. One last glance up the street and she was satisfied she was alone, pushing off the wall with sweaty palms. One, two, three steps... her heart began racing anew. She darted across the last laneway, each step propelling her faster. The pile of rotting wood on carefully disguised hinges protested at its abrupt opening as she thrust it into the air, the screeching sound caught by the wind to echo down the street. Emme jumped down through the trapdoor, almost landing on the figure that caught the timber before it could slam back down.

'Were you seen?' Nicolai's words were harsh, abrupt. She shook her head, the pounding in her ears subsiding now she was safely inside. He stood behind her as she secured the latch of the trapdoor. She could feel his glare on her as she tied the knots he

couldn't. The knots he should have re-tied after his own arrival. The reminder that she bested him, in this at least, once would have soothed her. Tonight, she hated it. 'Are you su –'

'I wasn't seen!' The words came out louder than she intended. Who was he to question her? To doubt her? The older boy's face tensed and his arm jerked halfway to her face. His glare deepened before he closed his eyes and relaxed with conscious effort, his hand returning to his side. He hated the situation even more than she did. She turned her back and started walking deeper into the makeshift shelter. Last week he would have hit her. The strain of their situation was forcing him to civility even as it was turning her into a cowering wreck.

She didn't make it two steps before he lunged forward to drag her back.

'You have to convince him to stay.' She could hear fear and anger in his voice, mingled with familiar disdain. What was he afraid of, anyway? He wasn't going to have what she was sure would be the entirety of the continent after him. 'He won't listen to me. Tell him tonight's no good.'

Emme yanked her arm out of his hand. 'What good do you think it'll do, huh?' She turned and started down the corridor again, pretending it didn't bother her even as she wrapped her arms around herself once again. The damp wool of her jacket smelt of wet ash. The entire district smelt of wet ash in the rain now. It used to smell like freshly sawn wood and drying varnish. Usually, she hated the new smell; yet another reminder of the war. Tonight she desperately wished she were back outside – anywhere but here. On the threshold of the old cellar she paused. *How did you get into this mess?* The sound of Nikolai's footsteps in the hall jolted her to action. She wouldn't let him see her moment of weakness. She hugged her ribs tighter, disgusted with herself for needing the extra comfort, and forced herself into the old cellar.

Light flickered from a sputtering candle, illuminating a frail figure hunched over an old door balanced on piles of rubble. The makeshift desk had been buried in precarious stacks of moulding paper and rotting books for months now. Paper, Elias had told her, was precious, fragile. It was meant for palaces and libraries – not the damp air by the docks. It had been the first time she'd seen books up close, though she'd tried to

hide her interest. Palaces and libraries didn't welcome the likes of her. The papers and books that had covered the desk had been a fraction of Elias' collection. Yet they had been all the scholar could save when he fled from the citadel during the war.

Now the desk before the old man was almost empty – the books and papers burnt, though their musty smell still lingered. Emme hadn't seen the fire-blackened base of the door that had served as his makeshift desk since they first pulled it from the wreckage of the house the next street over. Being the closest to the docks these streets had borne the brunt of the destruction, though the invaders hadn't neglected to ruin the rest of the district. Setheyi's famous shipyards were now ruined, holding only the crude shelters the invaders had thrown together to hold their prisoners. The shipwright district itself had been abandoned, the jagged remains serving as a ghostly reminder of just how broken the city had become. It was, Elias had explained when she had first been roped into helping him, the perfect place to hide.

The candle flame flailed in an errant gust of wind from the building storm outside. Nicolai rushed to Elias' side as their shadows danced on the walls, fiddling with the shutters on the old lantern until the flame was strong once more. Elias remained still, his attention on the thing in front of him. Emme watched as Nicolai opened his mouth once, twice. Hovering.

'Are you sure there's no other way?' Nicolai's last ditch objection burst forth, breaking the old man's concentration.

Elias finally turned, his eyes meeting Nicolai's. 'It must leave the city. It must have the best chance. There is no other way.' His slow, careful way of talking infuriated her almost as much as Nicolai's general manner. Elias turned to her and her annoyance faltered; the lines etched across his face were deeper than she remembered from even yesterday, the mouth turned further down at the corners. 'Emme is its best chance.'

'But –'

'Alchemy is a feared art, Nicolai, you know this. Misunderstood, but its accomplishments must be saved. And my time has run short.'

Emme shivered. The thing still gave her the feeling of spiders crawling up her spine. Her brief annoyance seemed petty in the face of fear. It was suddenly so very real, what she was helping them do. She had been the one to learn the guard was getting close to locating Elias, the one that had pushed Elias' plan into motion. She and Nicolai had debated hard that night, on the same side for once, for him to simply move his hiding place, bide his time.

The alchemist had declined, caring more for *its* safety than his own. He repeated his words tonight, eyes unfocused, staring past the patched walls of the cellar into a past she had no part in. 'I am tired of hiding in the damp. I wish to see the citadel one last time.' If she'd known what his plan had been that night she would have argued harder. If she'd known from the beginning she would have abandoned them both long before she'd grown to care for the patient old man.

Now he moved away from the worktable, holding his hand out to Emme. She crept forwards, hesitant to the last; still wary of the trust he'd managed to steal from her. Nicolai couldn't come, for all the alchemist's apprentice had fought to be a part of saving his master's creation. He had even been willing to put up with her. But he was on the run as much as Elias was, though the price on his head was smaller, and the mannerisms of a privileged life made him too noticeable. Elias was too old, and he didn't want to go. The task fell to her, the street rat who'd made the mistake of trying to steal from an alchemist. She was the hateful thing's best chance, the one with the personality to adapt and the skills to hide in plain sight.

She stepped up to the bench. Propped up on the old vase filled with the ashes of Elias' precious books the manikin sat with its long spindly limbs splayed across the table – the old man's life work. She was to take it far from where it would surely be destroyed. Elias had been cast out of the citadel for daring to believe the thing possible even before the invasion, and both sides of the war had been earnestly looking for the old scholar before he could complete it. Once they learnt that he had... she would be pursued without restraint. Even in the midst of a war, the existence of such a thing was a blasphemy that must be destroyed. She was to take it out of the reach of all of them, to the place Elias had told her its protection would be ensured. Then it would no longer be her problem.

Pulling the rucksack off her back she placed it on the table beside the manikin and opened the flap. An army of spiders swarmed up her spine as the manikin picked itself up, dusted itself off, and stepped in.