

HEAVY FIRE

CLOCKWORK  
SECRETS

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EDGE

EDGE SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY PUBLISHING  
AN IMPRINT OF HADES PUBLICATIONS, INC.

CALGARY

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# CHAPTER ONE

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**THE RIFLES' PERCUSSION** rang in Taya's ears and a cloud of acrid gunpowder drifted through the air. Blood trickled over the snow-powdered courtyard.

She wished she were home.

"There, Ambassador." *Il Re* Quintilio Agosti waved a hand toward the bodies. "I trust you will assure your decatur that Alzana has brought its traitorous officers to justice."

Cristof's silk-covered fingers tightened on Taya's arm.

A year ago, watching men being executed would have made Taya sick. Now what made her sick was its pointlessness. Nobody in the small prison courtyard believed that the dead men had masterminded the invasion, and nobody believed their deaths would prevent a war between Alzana and Ondinium. The two nations enacted their thousand-year-old script like creaking automata in a traveling stage show, each line and gesture predetermined.

"Are we finished here, Your Majesty?" she asked, her words tasting like ash.

A small smile played beneath Agosti's well-groomed beard. He knew she was disgusted, and he took pleasure from the knowledge. It was the only pleasure he'd get from their assembly. Cristof's emotions were unreadable beneath his ivory mask, and Lieutenant Amcathra and his lictors would be content to stand in the snow for hours if it meant watching more Alzanans die.

"Would the ambassador like to see more?" Agosti countered. "I could arrange to have other criminals brought before the firing squad, if it would amuse him."

Taya tensed. Cristof tapped her forearm.

*Enough.*

"The ambassador has seen enough," she said, her voice tight. "These executions *weren't* among our demands."

"But they were necessary, nevertheless." The king's expression remained complacent. "A lesson, if you will."

*For whom?* Taya wondered. She glanced past the king toward the sullen-looking group of aristocrats who'd accompanied them, her gaze inexorably drawn to the cold, hostile glare of Lady Fosca Mazzoletti.

Mazzoletti noted Taya's inspection and her lips pulled back in a grim, humorless smile. There was no way she could know that Lieutenant Amcathra had killed her twin brother, Gaio, to save Taya and Cristof, but she suspected something. Taya looked away, pulling her heavy fur cloak closer around her shoulders. The other nobles' cold, flat expressions offered no relief. Even the soldiers in the execution squad seemed resentful as they shouldered their rifles.

King Agosti's middle-aged daughter and adolescent granddaughter huddled a little apart from the rest of the group while his thirteen-year-old grandson studied the corpses with morbid fascination. The young *principe* was still in school, but the brass buttons and military cut of his coat indicated that he'd eventually follow his oldest sister into the army. Major Pietra Agosti hadn't attended the execution; she was away with her company, and the king's youngest grandson laid in bed with a cold.

*Il Re* Agosti glanced at the sky. "It's starting to snow again. If the ambassador doesn't wish to see more, we should return to the palace."

Cristof's fingers moved. *King meet me after.*

"Thank you, Your Majesty." Taya said. "The ambassador hopes to resume our talks this evening. We have much left to discuss."

"Yes, we do, but surely we wouldn't want to disturb our digestion with business." The king patted her arm with careless intimacy. "We'll resume our talks tomorrow."

*Say Council end talk soon.*

"As you wish," she said, hiding her distaste. "However, the ambassador wishes to remind you that the Council will grow impatient if we don't reach an agreement soon. The decaturus acquiesced to this truce at your request, Your Majesty, but their deadline is almost upon us."

"Indeed, indeed." The king laughed, but no amusement reached his eyes. He leaned closer. "Now that my enemies know where I stand, we should be able to proceed more expeditiously."

Taya reviewed his words twice before deciding that they weren't a threat. Not to her, anyway. She reassessed the hostile expressions on the Family leaders' faces.

*What?* Cristof inquired.

"The ambassador is pleased to hear that, Your Majesty," she said, shooting her husband a neutral look. "We look forward to discussing the situation with you tomorrow morning."

"Splendid." The king's expression collapsed into a sneer as he turned and regarded his entourage. "Sergeant! We are finished."

The sergeant barked orders. His men saluted the king and marched off, leaving the corpses behind.

"Ambassador." *Il Re* Agosti gestured to the line of towering steam-powered carriages waiting on the parkway before turning to his family.

Taya repeated the king's comment to Cristof as they began their slow walk across the snow-covered cobblestones. Lieutenant Amcathra remained beside them as his seven lictors ran ahead.

*You trust him?* Cristof tapped as they reached the carriages. The lictors were scrutinizing the steam engine's dials and checking their readouts against a chart. *Il Re* Agosti considered the tall, smoke-bellowing carriages standout symbols of Alzanan's modernity, but Amcathra monitored their operation with open suspicion.

"No, not really," Taya said, waiting for the lictors to let them enter. The Alzanans were already climbing ladders up to their Family carriages. The royal carriage was particularly tall and ornate, painted silver and sky-blue and surrounded by flamboyantly uniformed Alzanan soldiers standing at attention.

"Today's demonstration may have been intended to intimidate dissenters," Amcathra speculated, his rifle cradled in the crook of one arm. "Several of the executed officers belonged to Families in attendance."

Cristof's fingers moved. *Dangerous.*

"He says that sounds dangerous."

"Indeed." Amcathra inspected the chart and allowed his lictors to lean a ladder against the coach's towering eight-foot-tall wheels. "Exalted."

Taya helped Cristof climb and slid into the coach beside him. Amcathra closed the door as his lictors secured the ladder beneath the vehicle.

Taya drew the carriage curtains and untied Cristof's blank-featured ivory mask. She smiled at her husband's thin, careworn features and pale gray eyes and brushed a wayward strand of black hair away from his forehead. When he wasn't wearing his glasses, the new scars around his left eye were clearly visible.

"How are you feeling?"

"Less pleased than I ought to be, considering there are five fewer Alzanan officers in the world." He rubbed his face against a silk-covered shoulder. The coach jerked into motion, shaking and rumbling over the cobblestones. "What about you?"

"I'm all right." Her smile faded. "I must be getting used to violence."

"I'm sorry."

"I hope the king is finally planning to settle down to our negotiations," she said, avoiding the compassion in her husband's eyes. "I'm ready to leave Alzana."

"One way or the other, we'll be gone soon." He rested a fabric-draped hand over his ivory mask as she set it in his lap. "It's late winter, and the Council will want to attack by spring. We need to be back in Ondinium before that."

"You're assuming we'll fail."

"Did you think we'd succeed?" His crooked smile was humorless. "These negotiations are just a delaying tactic, love. Alzana is rushing to outfit whatever other dirigibles it has in hiding and the Council is rushing to pull more... more *machines* out of storage. This war's inevitable; you and I are just the intermission entertainment."

"Well, our work wasn't entirely in vain," Taya said, trying to cheer them both up. "The other nations have agreed to remain neutral, and I don't think they would have if their ambassadors hadn't met you in Mareaux. Showing them a face instead of a mask made a difference; they aren't as intimidated by Ondinium as they used to be."

"No, nobody would call me intimidating," Cristof agreed. She made a face at him. "Anyway, you—"

The coach swayed as something struck the front panel with a sharp report.

"Ambush!" Amcathra roared.

Taya leaned over her husband and tore open the curtains, heedless of propriety. They were on the statue-lined Grand Avenue flanking the Capitoli River, which divided the civic sprawl from the wealthy Family estates. She didn't see anything suspicious, but Amcathra's heavy boots thudded on the roof as he barked commands to his lictors.

"Taya!"

She abandoned the windows to help Cristof pull off his incapacitating public robe. The heavy garment and his ivory mask dropped to the carriage floor. "Where are my glasses?"

"In my reticule."

He grabbed her velvet purse as she returned to the windows, lifting the pane and twisting her head out. A group of black-clad men on horseback was charging down the wide avenue toward them, shouting and brandishing pistols. Each man bore a black stripe running down the side of his face.

"Lictors!"

"What?" Cristof slid his glasses on. The carriage stopped as Amcathra's lictors fell in around its towering wheels, aiming their rifles at the horsemen.

"We're being attacked by lictors!"

"Impossible!" Cristof looked over her shoulder. "The C—"

He was interrupted by a barrage of gunfire. Taya flinched and Cristof pulled her down between the seats, wrapping his arms around her. Screams, shouts, and shots filled the air. Then Lieutenant Amcathra yanked the carriage door open, balancing on a tall wheel as he hooked the long ladder to its rings.

"Get down," he snapped.

Taya pushed Cristof in front of her. He stumbled over his crumpled robe and discarded mask, shot her a dark look, and clambered down the ladder. Taya grabbed his mask by its strings and followed.

"Other side," Amcathra ordered, stepping from the wheel to the ladder and sliding down its vertical rails. Cristof started to say something and the lictor grabbed him by the shoulder. "*Now!*"

Cristof pulled up his inner robes, revealing the black trousers he'd worn beneath for warmth, and ducked under the carriage. Taya hiked up her skirt, wishing *she* had trousers underneath instead of lace-trimmed drawers, and followed suit. She crouched beside the wheel, squinting through the gunpowder smoke. King Agosti's soldiers had run forward to meet the attackers. The

avenue looked like a battle zone where the riders and royal guards clashed, but Amcathra's lictors remained still, holding their fire.

"They can't be lictors," Cristof muttered next to her ear. "The Council would never do something so stupid."

"Exalted." Amcathra appeared from beneath the coach and handed Cristof a needle pistol, then pulled a bone-handled knife from his boot and held it out. "Icarus?"

Taya hesitated, then handed Cristof his mask.

"Don't lose that," she ordered, taking the knife. "You'll need it later."

"I think this diplomatic mission is over," he said tautly, tying the mask inside his robe. He raised his voice over another barrage of gunfire. "Are those really lictors, Janos?"

"It is unlikely. Few lictors ride."

"Don't you know for sure?" Taya demanded.

"The Council does not tell me all of its plans." The lieutenant turned to the nearest lictor. "Jager, find a safe route into the city."

"Yes, sir!" The woman saluted and tapped the three nearest lictors, jerking her head toward the river. They slung their rifles over their shoulders and jogged off.

Amcathra grabbed the carriage's towering wheel and pulled himself back up to the roof, laying flat. A horseman broke through the melee, aiming his pistol at the carriage. Amcathra fired and the attacker pitched over the back of his steed, but more assailants were approaching on foot and on horseback. Their lictors opened fire. Taya cringed as one of them jerked and crumpled, his rifle clattering on the stone road, but several of the attackers dropped, too, sliding out of their saddles as their horses bounded away from the fighting.

Cristof ducked under the coach and knelt by one of the fallen riders, running his hand across the man's castemark. Black greasepaint smeared his fingers.

"They're not real!" he bellowed. "Janos, it's a frame!"

Amcathra didn't answer, but Taya saw the lictor next to her bare her teeth as she snapped off a shot. The lictate didn't appreciate imposters.

A high-pitched scream rose behind them. Attackers had swarmed the king's carriage, shattering the windows and tearing open the door. Taya grabbed Cristof's sleeve.

"Look!"

"Who cares?"

"Cris!" The king's daughter and grandchildren were pulled out of the carriage and thrown to the ground. Their royal guards were nowhere to be seen. Taya drew Amcathra's knife and ran toward them. "They're attacking the children!"

Her husband muttered under his breath, then grabbed the fake lictor's pistol and followed her, holding a firearm in each hand.

*Il Re Agosti* was hauled out of the carriage next, struggling and shouting. His disaffected aristocrats surrounded him, kicking him in the ribs and jeering. With a shriek, Agosti's middle-aged daughter threw herself at the nearest assailant, trying to pull him away from her father. The Alzanan aristocrat turned and shot her in the stomach.

Wails of horror arose from Agosti's grandchildren. Cristof skidded to a halt and fired.

Steel needles tore into the shooter's chest. He staggered back and collapsed, the mob parting in alarm. Cristof shot again, holding down the trigger and sweeping the needle gun from left to right. A spray of slender metal spikes drove the well-dressed attackers back. Several lost their nerve and ran. Taya sprinted for the king.

"Ambassador!" Lady Fosca Mazzoletti shoved herself forward, wielding a gold-chased, long-barreled pistol. She aimed it at Taya. "Put down your gun or I'll shoot her."

Without a moment's hesitation, Taya hurled her knife at the woman's face. Lady Mazzoletti's eyes widened as she twisted away from the blade only to find Taya grabbing her wrist and forcing her pistol upward.

"I am *not* going to be a hostage again!" Taya spat. The women grappled, their feet sliding over the snow-covered grass. Somebody grabbed Taya's shoulder, but a moment later she heard a loud bang and the attacker collapsed next to her. Lady Mazzoletti used the distraction to claw her face.

Jerking her head back, Taya kicked Lady Mazzoletti's knee, trying to break it. The taller woman shifted her weight, throwing Taya off-balance, and muscled her gun closer to Taya's face. Taya struggled to stay upright.

Suddenly the king's sixteen-year-old granddaughter landed on Lady Mazzoletti's back, screaming and pulling at the noblewoman's hair and collar. The gun went off and Taya jerked back, momentarily deafened. The young attacker's fist wrapped around a golden chain circling Mazzoletti's neck and pulled it tight. The



aristocrat dropped her gun, yanked her skirts up, and reached for the slender stiletto strapped to her leg.

The chain broke, leaving the king's grand-daughter holding a necklace and a handful of dark hair. Mazzoletti drew the stiletto and stabbed backward. The narrow blade buried itself harmlessly in *Principessa* Liliana's fur-lined coat. Taya swung her elbow against the side of Lady Mazzoletti's temple.

"Let's go!" a man shouted, grabbing the woman's shoulder. "Agosti's dead!"

"Kill her, too," Mazzoletti snapped, pointing at the *principessa*.

The Alzanan raised his pistol. Taya tackled Liliana, knocking the girl to the ground, just as Cristof's ivory mask struck the Alzanan's arm. The shot was deflected into the king's carriage, splintering its ornate gold moulding. A horse thundered past, its hooves throwing snow and mud over Taya's face as she huddled over the girl. She pressed the girl's head down next to hers, listening to gunfire.

"It's all right," she whispered in Alzanan. "It's all right." All she could see was the snow beneath her cheek and the bleeding bodies sprawled around her, and all she could feel was the girl's rapid breathing — or was it sobbing? — under her arm. At any moment she expected a bullet to tear into her as Fosca Mazzoletti took care of unfinished business.

"Icarus!" Someone was shouting in Ondinan. "Are you hurt?"

Taya looked up. A lictor, Helvi, was kneeling beside her. Cristof stood a few feet away, his concern melting into relief as he saw her move.

"Let's go." Helvi swung her rifle around as Taya pulled herself to her feet and held out a hand for the *principessa*. Blood spattered the girl's face and dress.

"You'd better come with us," she said in Alzanan.

"Pio..." *Principessa* Liliana's face was white with shock, her gaze fixed on something behind them. Taya turned.

Agosti's thirteen-year-old grandson had been shot in the head, his skull a bloody, shattered mess. Taya's stomach heaved. Not far away, the girl's mother lay in a huddled heap, her stomach soaked with blood. And behind her lay *Il Re* Quintilio Agosti himself, slashed and shot and beaten to death by his angry vassals.

"Oh, Lady." Taya grabbed the *principessa's* hand and drew her up, wrapping an arm around the girl's narrow shoulders. "Come on."

"No— please!"

"It's all right— we'll keep you safe. I promise."

"Taya, we need to go." Cristof had pulled a dead Alzanan's coat over his silk robes and scrounged new percussion pistols from the fallen. With his long black hair falling out of its ornate pins and clasps and his wave-shaped castemarks starkly visible on his naked cheekbones, he looked like the Oporphyr Council's worst protocol nightmare.

Taya swept up Amcathra's knife as she urged Liliana forward. Cristof took the girl's other arm as their lictors fell in around them, firing at anybody who came too close. The *principessa* went quietly, pale with shock.

Lieutenant Amcathra and another lictor were working on their steam carriage's boiler. Amcathra pointed a gloved hand toward the three-foot-high wall that divided the avenue from the snow-covered expanse that led to the Capitoli River. Two of the four lictors he'd sent out earlier stood at the top of the riverbank, their rifles at the ready.

"Follow them, Exalted."

"Agosti's dead," Cristof reported. "So's his daughter and grandson. We have *Principessa* Liliana with us."

"Who killed him?"

"The Families— I think Fosca Mazzoletti was in charge."

"Is she dead?"

"I missed."

"Too bad." Amcathra pointed again. "Go."

They climbed over the short wall and ran toward the river. Taya risked a glance over her shoulder and saw royal soldiers and fake lictors shooting each other while bloodstained aristocrats and frightened commoners fled. Wounded humans and horses screamed with pain in the middle of the chaos.

Then the Ondinium steam carriage lurched into motion, barreling into the carriage in front of it. Lieutenant Amcathra and the other lictor vaulted over the wall, holding their rifles in both hands, and charged toward them.

"Down!" Amcathra bellowed. "Get down!"

Taya threw herself and the *principessa* flat. Cristof and the lictors sprawled next to them.

Two heartbeats passed. Taya was about to look up when an explosion thundered around them. She only had a second to register fresh screams before a second explosion followed. Something

heavy and searing hit her calf. She shrieked and yanked her leg beneath her, reaching down to make sure her skirt wasn't on fire.

"Taya!" She looked up. Cristof was on his knees, reaching for her across the *principessa*. "Are you all right?"

"I think so." Her skirt was scorched and a steaming, twisted chunk of metal lay next to her, but her skin had only been scalded. "*Principessa?*"

The Alzanan girl mutely lifted herself to all fours, then to her knees. She seemed alive and unharmed. One of the lictors wasn't, though— Taya could tell that from Helvi's grim expression as she leaned over her castemate's body.

Behind them, fire crackled across Grand Avenue. The walls and statues close to the carriage had been blown into rubble and body parts lay scattered along the street.

Lieutenant Amcathra and the other lictor joined them.

"We must go."

"Cael's dead," Helvi reported. "Shot in the back."

"Bright, carry him," Amcathra ordered. Helvi took the man's rifle as Amcathra's companion grabbed the corpse and hoisted it over his shoulder.

"What did you do with Jordan and Hind?" Helvi asked, standing.

"Their bodies were inside the carriage."

Taya paled. If that was Amcathra's idea of a cremation....

"Go." Amcathra jerked his head toward the river. "*Run.*"

The lictors by the river led them away at a jog, backtracking to a narrow pedestrian access tunnel that ran below Grand Avenue. Jager and another lictor huddled inside, guarding each end.

"Sir, this leads into the city, but there are people all over," Jager reported, her eyes flickering to Cael's body and then back again. They heard another explosion in the distance; a third carriage had blown its boiler.

Amcathra turned. "*Principessa* Liliana Agosti."

The young Alzanan shrank against the wall.

"*Principessa*, the Families are in rebellion," Amcathra continued in Alzanan. "Do you have any allies whom you can trust to keep you safe?"

The girl shook her head, wide-eyed.

"Please think again. It is in our best interest to deliver you safely to Family Agosti loyalist— you are the only Agosti left who can attest that we did not kill the king."

Lady! He was right, Taya realized. The princess's testimony could salvage this diplomatic disaster. But tears filled the girl's eyes and spilled down her cheeks.

"She's in shock." Taya patted the girl's arm. "Let's find someplace to hide, and then we'll figure out what to do."

Amcathra looked displeased, but he turned and began giving orders. His lictors smudged mud and blood onto their faces to hide their stripes and opened their jackets and shirts to disguise their uniforms. Cristof wiped ash across the castemarks over his cheekbones. He wanted to remove his telltale robes and go bare-chested under his pilfered coat, but Taya and Amcathra both vetoed the idea, unwilling to risk his health in the middle of winter.

"You know that Mazzoletti — or whoever was behind this coup — has done a marvelous job of framing us," Cristof said as he buttoned his coat to his neck. "We're going to be shot on sight."

"Anybody who inspects the bodies will discover that they are not real lictors," Amcathra said.

"But what about — ah." Cristof nodded toward Cael's corpse. "That's why you're not letting them collect our fallen."

"Correct."

"It won't make a difference. Nobody will get a chance to touch the bodies, and most will believe whatever the rebels tell them."

"Cris." Taya touched his arm. "What about Jayce and the rest of our staff? They're still in the palace."

"I'm sorry, Taya." He clasped her hand between his palms.

She recoiled. "We can't just *leave* them!"

"There's nothing else we can do."

"But — but they'll be killed!" She stared at him with disbelief. They had come to the palace with a staff of six, including their tailor Jayce, who was her best friend Cassi's nephew and a friend in his own right. She and Jayce had survived poisoning and a train crash together, but now....

"I'm sure the Alzanans will keep them alive as bargaining chips," Cristof said, striving to sound confident. Taya looked away. Maybe so, but Ondinium's decaturus viewed their nation as a giant machine and its citizens easily replaceable cogs and springs. They would never pay ransom for a group of lower-caste diplomatic staff.

She didn't know what she was going to say to Cassi if she ever got back to Ondinium.

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## CHAPTER TWO

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**BY MIDNIGHT THE SMALL** band of refugees found itself in a narrow alley redolent of urine and rotting garbage. The capital was in an uproar, and they'd hidden in the narrow, winding back alleys of its poorest quarter all day.

*Principessa* Liliana remained with them, her eyes red and her face streaked with soot and tears. Two lictors kept watch on either side of the alley as the rest crouched in a circle of dim light cast from a small window overhead. Cael's corpse laid several feet away.

Taya counted out the handful of coins that they had between them. Nobody had expected to need money at the execution, and they couldn't pawn Liliana's or Cristof's jewelry while they were wanted.

"Well, we have enough for a day," she said. "I'll go buy us something to eat."

"You can't," Cristof protested. "You've been the face of Ondinium since we arrived— people will recognize you even without a castemark."

"I could disguise myself."

"How?"

Taya looked at her dirty skirts. "Well... I hate to say it, but right now I could probably pass as a prostitute."

Cristof gave her a disbelieving stare.

"That would be a reasonable disguise for a woman in this neighborhood at this time of night," Amcathra agreed.

"Janos, I am *not* sending my *wife* into the streets as a — a streetwalker!"

Taya crossed her arms and glowered at him.

"Well, it's not as if—"

"It wouldn't work." Liliana's voice startled them all. "Your accent would give you away."

Taya paused, crestfallen. "Is it that obvious?"

The girl nodded.

That was disappointing. Taya had thought her Alzanan was pretty good. She blew out an impatient breath and ran a mud-streaked hand through her hair. Castemarks, accents, clothing... for the first time, Ondinium's singularities struck her as more drawback than distinction.

"I know a place we could hide, if we can get there," Cristof said after a moment. "It's a little risky, and Janos, I'll have to ask you not to write it up in any report you may file...."

"Where is this place, Exalted?" His voice was laden with suspicion.

"Um..." Cristof pushed up his glasses and shot an apprehensive glance at his wife. "Well...."

Taya groaned. "You planned a meeting with *him*? *Here*?"

"We didn't *plan* it; we only discussed the possibility."

"Him'?" Amcathra's expression darkened. "Your brother is here, consorting with Alzanans?"

"He's not consorting. He publishes some books here, that's all."

Liliana looked up, interested in the conversation at last.

"The Council was under the impression that your brother lived in Mareaux," Amcathra growled. "That is where you set up his secret bank account."

"If it's so secret," Cristof muttered, "why does everybody know about it?"

The lictor waited.

"Al lives on the border and publishes his political rants here under a pseudonym. It's ridiculous stuff; completely unacceptable in Ondinium and probably not publishable in Mareaux, either — but Alzanans love radical free-thinkers, especially disaffected Ondiniums. Apparently he's developed a following. Anyway, he suggested we rendezvous at his publisher's, if I found the time while I was here."

"How were you going to find the time?" Taya asked, put out. "And when were you going to tell *me* about it?"

"If I had found the time, I would have told you before I went." Cristof took her hand. "Really. All he said was that he'd be in the capital while we were here and that I could contact him through his publisher. We didn't make any arrangements beyond that."

"This is a very bad plan," Amcathra declared.

"Well, what's *yours*? The last I heard, the Alzanan government had invested a lot of time and effort into expanding its telegraphic network. I'm sure the army's monitoring the roads and railroad tracks from here to the border. We'll need inside help if we want to escape."

"The Council and I anticipated the possibility of an emergency evacuation. I will get us out of Alzana."

"How?"

"By ship. However, we must meet it at the coast."

"We're on the opposite side of the city right now. But I'll bet Alister could get us to the coast."

"Your brother is a saboteur and a murderer."

"He wouldn't murder *me*."

"He's framed you for murder once already," Taya reminded him. "And he threw you off the Great Engine. *And* he tried to shoot you."

Cristof scowled. "He wasn't thinking straight."

"I will find him," Liliana volunteered. "The ambassador is right. We need *someplace* to hide before morning."

Taya hesitated and saw her reservations reflected in Cristof's and Amcathra's expressions.

"You are being hunted, *Principessa*," Lieutenant Amcathra demurred. "The rebels do not want you alive, either."

"I know." Liliana pushed her long, curling black hair out of her face, avoiding the lictor's eyes. "I *know*. I know I'm in danger. I know—" her voice broke. "I know my family is dead. I know I don't have any choice except to take my chances with you. I know all of that better than *any* of you."

"I'm sorry," Taya whispered, stricken.

"So let me find the ambassador's brother and talk to him. I'm not— I'm not very familiar with the city, but at least I *belong* here."

"Your accent is no more suitable to this neighborhood than ours," Amcathra objected. "It is that of an aristocrat."

The girl's shoulders hunched. "Then I'll say as little as possible."

"Do you understand what is happening out there, *Principessa*?" Cristof asked.

"It's a revolution," the girl said, softly. "Those Families killed Mama and Pio. They killed my grandfather, the king."

"And they're framing us for it."

She met his eyes. "I do not know how it is done in Ondinium, but in Alzana, they owe me a blood debt."

"Does that mean you are declaring a vendetta, *Principessa*?" Amcathra pressed. Liliana nodded. The lictor turned to Cristof with an air of satisfaction. "Exalted, I recommend we support *Principessa* Agosti's vendetta."

"Does that mean we have to help her kill her enemies?"

"And re-establish her Family's presence on the throne."

Cristof slowly nodded. "We're not in any position to fight your enemies just now, *Principessa*, but as Ondinium's ambassador, I am willing to support your attempt to see justice done."

"I accept your support," Liliana replied, formally. "My allies are Family Agosti's allies."

Taya ran a hand through her short hair, wondering why everybody in the group but her seemed to think that killing people was a good idea.

"First things first," she said, turning their attention back to the problem at hand. "You can't go out into the streets wearing all that jewelry."

Liliana slipped off her necklace, rings, and bracelets, including the necklace she'd torn from Lady Mazzoletti's neck, and dropped them into Taya's reticule. Next they turned their attention to her dress, transforming it from a *principessa's* day gown to something more suitably ratty and hard-used. Liliana used one of the torn and muddy ribbons they'd removed from her skirt to tie back her thick hair.

"Her bodice should be lower," Amcathra said. Taya shot him a scandalized look. "It is a matter of disguise, Icarus. Prostitutes display more cleavage."

"Do they?" Taya scowled. "Maybe she's disguising herself as a chambermaid, not a prostitute."

"In this neighborhood?"

"It's all right." The young *principessa* blushed as she tugged down the top of her dress. Taya glared at Amcathra and Cristof, but the two men were taking great pains not to glance at the girl's chest.

Good.

"Do you have the address?" Liliana asked, sounding as nervous as she looked. Cristof slipped a hand into the pocket of his pilfered coat, then looked down at it with bemusement.



"Er, no. You'll need to find Muraro Press and tell the owner to contact Alessio Scordato. Tell him ... hmm ... tell him that Viridinon wants to see him."

"Too obvious," Taya objected. "Even if the publisher doesn't know his history, that name's clearly Ondinium. Here, give him this." She reached into her reticule and fished out the watch Cristof had made for her.

"Taya, no!"

"Alister will return it."

"No. Don't. Use mine."

"But..."

"Hide it well," Cristof said, handing his pocketwatch to Liliana. "Don't get pick-pocketed."

The girl slipped the watch into her bodice. Taya wasn't sure she liked that, but the young *principessa* looked more worried than coy.

"Muraro Press. Alessio Scordato," the girl repeated, standing. "All right."

Amcathra cleared his throat. Liliana flinched.

"If..." he gave Taya a sidelong look. "If you tied her outer skirt higher, you would enhance her disguise."

"Why do you know so much about prostitutes, Lieutenant?"

"I have supervised undercover agents before," he replied with a long-suffering air. "The *principessa* is more likely to be harassed if she appears to be a respectable woman lost in the wrong part of town than if she fits the local demographic."

"Give her one of your pistols," Taya said, turning to her husband. She was liking this plan less and less. Cristof's amusement at her interchange with Amcathra faded and he held out the weapon.

"Here, *Principessa*. Do you know how to use it?"

While Cristof taught Liliana how to use a gun, Taya tied the girl's skirt a few inches higher and looked at Amcathra, silently daring him to make any more suggestions. He remained silent.

"Do you have an address for Muraro Press?" Liliana asked, wrapping the pistol in a rag.

"No. I'm sorry. I had the address in my notebook, but it's back in the palace."

"I'll find it." Liliana clutched the bundled needler close to her chest. "Be careful."

"You, too," Taya said, worried.

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They retreated deeper into the alley. The lictors sat by the wall with their rifles on their knees, keeping watch. Taya and Cristof huddled together against the winter chill, unable to sleep.

"I guess we're really at war now," Taya said, quietly. Cristof pulled her closer.

Avoiding a war had been unlikely, anyway. Eight hundred and seventy-four Ondiniums had been killed in the Glasgar bombing. The decaturus had reacted swiftly and decisively— every Alzanan had been kicked out of the country, even those who'd lived there for years, and every immigrant and Ondinium of first- to third-generation Demican descent had been required to take a special loyalty test or leave. The Council had tightened its censorship of the press and its restrictions on free assembly, shutting down the nation's most radical publications and organizations. It had also called for an international summit on aerial warfare, a hypocritical move given that it was simultaneously readying its own top-secret fleet of ancient imperial ornithopters. Deep inside Ondinium Mountain, the Great Engine had ground away day and night, spitting out economic forecasts and military simulations.

Taya had hidden from the chaos. Her silence about what had happened in the skies beyond Glasgar had been required by the Official Secrets Act, but it had also been an easy way to avoid admitting the terrible things she'd done there.

"What are you thinking about?" she whispered, trying to avoid her own dark memories.

"What I'm going to say to Alister when we finally meet face-to-face."

"Oh."

"I've imagined it a hundred times, and what I've wanted to say has always changed with my mood." He forced a smile. "I never imagined I'd be asking him for help."

"He'll give it to you."

His smile faltered. "The way I helped him, maybe. Blinded, outcaste, and exiled."

Taya clasped his hand, feeling the scar tissue where a jagged piece of glass had pierced it in the train wreck.

"He wanted to live. You gave him that."

"I wonder how he feels about it now."

"He's doing well enough— a published author with a personal following."

"I suppose." Cristof closed his eyes and leaned his head against the dirty brick wall. "I don't think the Council is going to help us, Taya."

"Since when has it *ever* helped us?" She studied his face, saddened by the scars around his left eye and the new lines that furrowed his forehead and bracketed his mouth. Working as Ondinium's only exalted ambassador had thrust him from one peril to another, and the strain had visibly aged him. "We'll be all right. As long as we're together, we'll be all right."

His lips quirked up as he opened his eyes again.

"Have I told you recently that I love you?"

"Not recently, no."

"I need to work on that."

"Yes, you do." She kissed him. "And the feeling's mutual."

Dawn was approaching when a canvas-covered wagon came to a noisy halt at the mouth of the alley. Amcathra raised his rifle, then lowered it when Liliana appeared, looking around fearfully.

"Hello? Are you still there?" she whispered in Ondinan. "We're here to take you to Muraro Press."



A scent of machine oil and ink greeted the small group as it entered the Muraro publishing house. A small, thin Alzanan with a rat-tail mustache greeted them, his eyes widening as he took in the lictors' stern faces and ready weapons.

"No, no, say nothing," he burst out in Alzanan before anyone could speak. "I see nothing, I hear nothing — I demand complete deniability, *complete*, do you understand?"

"We understand," Taya assured him. "We're here to see..." she frowned. What was Alister calling himself, again?

"Alessio Scordato, yes, I have sent for him. He — You — I was never *told* about any of this, I never *knew* about any of this, and I am leaving as soon as he comes and forgetting this entire morning."

"Thank you, sir."

"Here. Follow me. Sit here. Right here." He led them through the large room, which held several steam-powered presses, to a circle of uncomfortable-looking chairs drawn together around a desk. "*Stay.*"

"You seem a little nervous for a man who publishes radical political tracts," Cristof remarked. Amcathra nodded to his lictors

and they spread out, pacing through the rest of the printing press floor with their rifles held at the ready.

"I am a *publisher*, not a *traitor*. Scordato never told me he was associating with *assassins*!"

"Nobody here is an assassin," Liliana objected. "The Ondiniums haven't done anything wrong!"

"I didn't hear that! Mister Scordato told me nothing about any of this, *nothing*. I am *very* unhappy with him, I assure you, *very* unhappy." The small man hurried after the lieutenant.

"He's very jumpy," Cristof observed. "*Very* jumpy."

"Stop that," Taya chided, taking one of the chairs. She looked at Liliana. "You didn't tell him who you were, did you?"

"Of course not. I don't know which Family he serves."

"The room appears secure," Lieutenant Amcathra reported, rejoining them. Liliana self-consciously tugged up her bodice. "The publisher has gone to his office and closed the door. Bright is watching him. The rest of us will guard the windows and doors."

"Thank you," Cristof said. The lictor nodded and left.

"Did you have any trouble getting here?" Taya asked the girl. "Did anyone bother you?"

Liliana shook her head. "I ignored the men who whistled and walked as fast as I could. A street sweeper told me that Muraro Press was on this street."

"I'm glad you're safe."

The girl nodded, looking away and biting her lip.

About an hour later, the workyard door opened again. Cristof shifted the pistol in his lap, flicking off the safety.

*Tap, tap, tap.*

Alister came into sight, his hand on the arm of a pretty young woman in a Mareaux dress. Taya drew in a sharp breath, more disturbed at seeing him again than she had expected.

Her brother-in-law was tall and well-built, with smooth copper skin and a strong, handsome face. His long black hair was braided back and he wore clean but simple garments covered by a knee-length, rust-colored overcoat. A neatly folded black blindfold covered the scarred ruin of his eyes but left bare the jagged slashes tattooed across his castemarks. He carried a leather satchel slung over one shoulder and a slender chestnut cane in one hand.

His guide stopped, studying the three of them with wary eyes.

"We are here," she said in accented Ondinan. "Lictors guard the door. Your brother and the icarus are present. I do not know who the third woman is. She's young and wearing a torn dress."

"Al..." Cristof stood, swallowing hard as he set his pistol down.

"Cris." Alister's lips turned up in a wry smile. "Are you what smells so bad in here?"

"Quite possibly. I spent the night in an alley." Cristof's feet seemed frozen in place. "It's good to see you again."

"I wish I could say the same."

Cristof closed his eyes. "I'm sorry."

"I think this is yours?" Alister held out his brother's golden pocketwatch. Cristof took it from him, opening his mouth to say something, but the blind exalted had already shifted. "Taya? My silver-winged hawk? Are you there?"

Taya stood.

"I'm here, Alister. How are you?"

"As you see." He smiled, his blind face turning toward her. "How is your leg?"

"All healed. Thank you for the information you sent in Mareaux. If we hadn't gotten it—" she stopped. It might not be a good idea to let Liliana know that Alister had been instrumental in uncovering the Alzanan invasion. "Things would have been much different."

Alister cocked his head, registering her shift in tone.

"Who else is here with us, Taya?"

"*Principessa* Liliana, *Il Re Agosti's* granddaughter."

"Ah..." Alister made a formal Alzanan bow. "I am honored, *Principessa*."

The gesture startled Taya; Alister had been so casually authoritative as a decaur that she had never imagined him deferring to foreign royalty. Then again, he had always been excessively polite toward women of any rank.

"Mister... Scordato." Liliana hesitated over the name. "Do you have any news about my Family?"

"Yes," Cristof jumped in, "what do you know about the rebellion? Er, do you want to sit down?"

The Mareaux girl led Alister to a chair.

"Thank you. This is Florianne, my landlady's daughter. She's been kind enough to serve as my assistant since I moved to Mareaux."

Florianne murmured an inaudible greeting and took the last chair. She was clean and pleasant-looking; not beautiful, Taya thought, but Alister had always valued utility over looks. That's why he'd dated her, once.

"My Family...." Liliana insisted, still standing. Alister slid his satchel onto his lap and pulled out a folded paper.

"Florianne bought this on our way over." He held it out. "The news hawks were shouting that Ondinium's ambassador had slaughtered the royal family and attacked the palace. I must say, Cris, that was rather enterprising of you."

"We were framed, of course," Cristof said, irritably. Liliana took the broadsheet. The print was poorly set and the headline took up half the front page. "The rebels painted black stripes on their faces."

"Florianne made me hide my castemarks on the way over." Alister laid a hand on the scarf that hung loosely around his neck. "I'll have to cut my visit to Alzana short unless I can convince the authorities that I'm a traitor. I don't suppose you know who's behind the coup?"

"I was hoping you might."

"Have you met Fosca Mazzoletti?"

"Yes." Taya leaned forward. "She was giving orders by the king's carriage."

"If she isn't behind the uprising, you can be sure she's close to those who are."

"How do you know her?" Amcathra demanded, materializing behind them. Alister twitched, one hand tightening on his cane.

"Hello, Lieutenant Amcathra."

"How do you know Fosca Mazzoletti?"

"She's chatted with me a few times. She wanted to know how much I resented the nation that had mutilated and exiled me. I thought she might be a useful contact someday, so I let her believe I was extremely bitter about it. I suppose it's time to renew our acquaintance."

"How do we know you are not working for her now?"

Alister's smile held a tightness that hadn't been there before his blinding.

"Because you are still here, Lieutenant."

"Janos...." Cristof shook his head. Amcathra took a reluctant step backward. "I trust you, Al. He's just doing his job."

"As he was when he escorted me to my blinding," Alister said, his voice strained. "Forgive me if I bear some resentment toward your guard dog, Cris."

"I was there, too, you know. Both times."

"You didn't have a rifle trained on me."

"Please..." Taya intervened. "Alister, we need your help."

He made a visible effort to lower his shoulders and raise his head. "To escape Alzana, I assume."

"We need to get out of the capital," Cristof said. "And a few miles north up the coast, if we can. Will you help?"

"How many of you are there?"

"Ten. Eleven, with the corpse." Cristof hesitated. "Twelve or thirteen if you want to join us."

Alister gave another thin, humorless smile. "I don't think the Council would welcome me back."

"We could drop you off in Mareaux."

"No. We'll manage." Alister tapped his fingers on the top of his cane. "I think I can get you out. It will take some time to arrange, though. Gilberto will keep you safe until I return. By the way, have you heard any news about Allied Metals & Extraction?"

"The company was recently forced to halt production," Cristof said.

"I certainly hope so. It seems that some of their personnel are now working for Alzanan employers willing to pay for Ondinium expertise."

"The Council will find that interesting. Patrice Corundel?"

"She's found herself an Alzanan patron. Are you wearing your wings, Taya?"

"No." Taya was confused by the sudden change of subject. "The Council wouldn't let me bring them to Alzana."

"What a pity." Alister stood, slinging his satchel over his shoulder and touching the tip of his cane to the floor. "I'll return as soon as I can. Florianne?"

"I'm here." The girl guided Alister's hand to her forearm and led him away. Taya listened to Alister's cane gently tap the presses as they left. When the door closed behind them, she turned to her husband.

"He seems well. All things considered."

"I— I couldn't talk to him." Cristof raked a hand through his hair, looking shaken. "I couldn't say anything that mattered."

"You'll see him again. Talk to him then."

He shook his head, frustrated.

Liliana looked up from the newspaper.

"My brother escaped," she said, softly. "Silvio."

Silvio... Taya placed the name. The young prince with the cold.  
"How?" she asked.

"The paper says that he heard the shots and ran away. He hid for hours until some guards found him."

"They must have been loyalists," Amcathra observed. "Your brother was fortunate. It will be more difficult for the rebels to kill him now and blame his death on us."

"Can we get him out of the palace?" the *principessa* asked. Taya shot the lictor a hopeful look. If they rescued Silvio, they could rescue Jayce and the rest of their staff, too.

"No. He is safer with Agosti loyalists, and we are safer out of Alzana."

"But I can't just leave him there!" Liliana's wail was echoed in Taya's heart.

"What does the paper say about your sister?"

"Pietra? Nothing. Do you think she's in danger, too?"

"Has she ever expressed any interest in taking the throne?"

Taya recoiled and Cristof's eyebrows shot up. Liliana needed a moment longer to grasp the lictor's meaning, and then she shot to her feet, the newspaper falling to the floor.

"No! Never! She would *never* do something like this!"

"You are certain?"

"Of course I'm certain!"

"Then yes, she is in danger, too."

Liliana sank back into her chair. "We have to warn her."

"Do you know where she is stationed?"

"No..."

Amcathra waited. She looked away.

"I think it would be best for all of you to get some sleep," he said at last. "We may be waiting here for some time."