

FORTUNE FAVORS THE BOLD. MAGIC FAVORS THE LIARS.

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THE MASK OF
MIRRORS

Prologue

The lodging house had many kinds of quiet. There was the quiet of sleep, children packed shoulder to shoulder on the threadbare carpets of the various rooms, with only an occasional snore or rustle to break the silence. There was the quiet of daytime, when the house was all but deserted; then they were not children but Fingers, sent out to pluck as many birds as they could, not coming home until they had purses and fans and handkerchiefs and more to show for their efforts.

Then there was the quiet of fear.

Everyone knew what had happened. Ondrakja had made sure of that: In case they'd somehow missed the screams, she'd dragged Sedge's body past them all, bloody and broken, with Simlin forcing an empty-eyed Ren along in Ondrakja's wake. When they came back a little while later, Ondrakja's stained hands were empty, and she stood in the mildewed front hall of the lodging house, with the rest of the Fingers watching from the doorways and the splintered railings of the stairs.

"Next time," Ondrakja said to Ren in that low, pleasant voice they all knew to dread, "I'll hit you somewhere softer." And her gaze went, with unerring malice, to Tess.

Simlin let go of Ren, Ondrakja went upstairs, and after that the lodging house was silent. Even the floorboards didn't creak, because the Fingers found places to huddle and stayed there.

Sedge wasn't the first. They said Ondrakja picked someone at random every so often, just to keep the rest in line. She was the leader of their knot; it was her right to cut someone out of it.

But everyone knew this time wasn't random. Ren had fucked up, and Sedge had paid the price.

Because Ren was too valuable to waste.

Three days like that. Three days of terror-quiet, of no one being sure if Ondrakja's temper had settled, of Ren and Tess clinging to each other while the others stayed clear.

On the third day, Ren got told to bring Ondrakja her tea.

She carried it up the stairs with careful hands and a grace most of the Fingers couldn't touch. Her steps were so smooth that when she knelt and offered the cup to Ondrakja, its inner walls were still dry, the tea as calm and unrippled as a mirror.

Ondrakja didn't take the cup right away. Her hand slid over the charm of knotted cord around Ren's wrist, then along her head, lacquered nails combing through the thick, dark hair like she was petting a cat. "Little Renyi," she murmured. "You're a clever one . . . but not clever enough. That is why you need me."

"Yes, Ondrakja," Ren whispered.

The room was empty, except for the two of them. No Fingers crouching on the carpet to play audience to Ondrakja's performance. Just Ren, and the stained floorboards in the corner where Sedge had died.

"Haven't I tried to teach you?" Ondrakja said. "I see such promise in you, in your pretty face. You're better than the others; you could be as good as me, someday. But only if you listen and obey—and stop trying to *hide things from me*."

Her fingernails dug in. Ren lifted her chin and met Ondrakja's gaze with dry eyes. "I understand. I will never try to hide anything from you again."

"Good girl." Ondrakja took the tea and drank.



The hours passed with excruciating slowness. Second earth. Third earth. Fourth. Most of the Fingers were asleep, except those out on night work.

Ren and Tess were not out, nor asleep. They sat tucked under the staircase, listening, Ren's hand clamped hard over the charm on her wrist. "Please," Tess begged, "we can just go—"

"No. Not yet."

Ren's voice didn't waver, but inside she shook like a pinkie on her first lift. *What if it didn't work?*

She knew they should run. If they didn't, they might miss their chance. When people found out what she'd done, there wouldn't be a street in Nadežra that would grant her refuge.

But she stayed for Sedge.

A creak in the hallway above made Tess squeak. Footsteps on the stairs became Simlin rounding the corner. He jerked to a halt when he saw them in the alcove. "There you are," he said, as if he'd been searching for an hour. "Upstairs. Ondrakja wants you."

Ren eased herself out, not taking her eyes from Simlin. At thirteen he wasn't as big as Sedge, but he was far more vicious. "Why?"

"Dunno. Didn't ask." Then, before Ren could start climbing the stairs: "She said both of you."

Next time, I'll hit you somewhere softer.

They should have run. But with Simlin standing just an arm's reach away, there wasn't any hope now. He dragged Tess out of the alcove, ignoring her whimper, and shoved them both up the stairs.

The fire in the parlour had burned low, and the shadows pressed in close from the ceiling and walls. Ondrakja's big chair was turned with its back to the door so they had to circle around to face her, Tess gripping Ren's hand so tight the bones ached.

Ondrakja was the picture of Lacewater elegance. Despite the late hour, she'd changed into a rich gown, a Liganti-style surcoat over a fine linen underdress—a dress Ren herself had stolen off a laundry line. Her hair was upswept and pinned, and with the high back of the chair rising behind her, she looked like one of the Cinquerat on their thrones.

A few hours ago she'd petted Ren and praised her skills. But Ren saw the murderous glitter in Ondrakja's eyes and knew that would never happen again.

“Treacherous little bitch,” Ondrakja hissed. “Was this your revenge for that piece of trash I threw out? Putting something in my tea? It should have been a knife in my back—but you don’t have the guts for that. The only thing worse than a traitor is a *spineless* one.”

Ren stood paralyzed, Tess cowering behind her. She’d put in as much extract of meadow saffron as she could afford, paying the apothecary with the coin that was supposed to help her and Tess and Sedge escape Ondrakja forever. It should have worked.

“I am going to make you pay,” Ondrakja promised, her voice cold with venom. “But this time it won’t be as quick. Everyone will know you betrayed your knot. They’ll hold you down while I go to work on your little sister there. I’ll keep her alive for days, and you’ll have to watch every—”

She was rising as she spoke, looming over Ren like some Primordial demon, but mid-threat she lurched. One hand went to her stomach—and then, without any more warning, she vomited onto the carpet.

As her head came up, Ren saw what the shadows of the chair had helped conceal. The glitter in Ondrakja’s eyes wasn’t just fury; it was fever. Her face was sickly sallow, her skin dewed with cold sweat.

The poison *had* taken effect. And its work wasn’t done.

Ren danced back as Ondrakja reached for her. The woman who’d knotted the Fingers into her fist stumbled, going down onto one knee. Quick as a snake, Ren kicked her in the face, and Ondrakja fell backward.

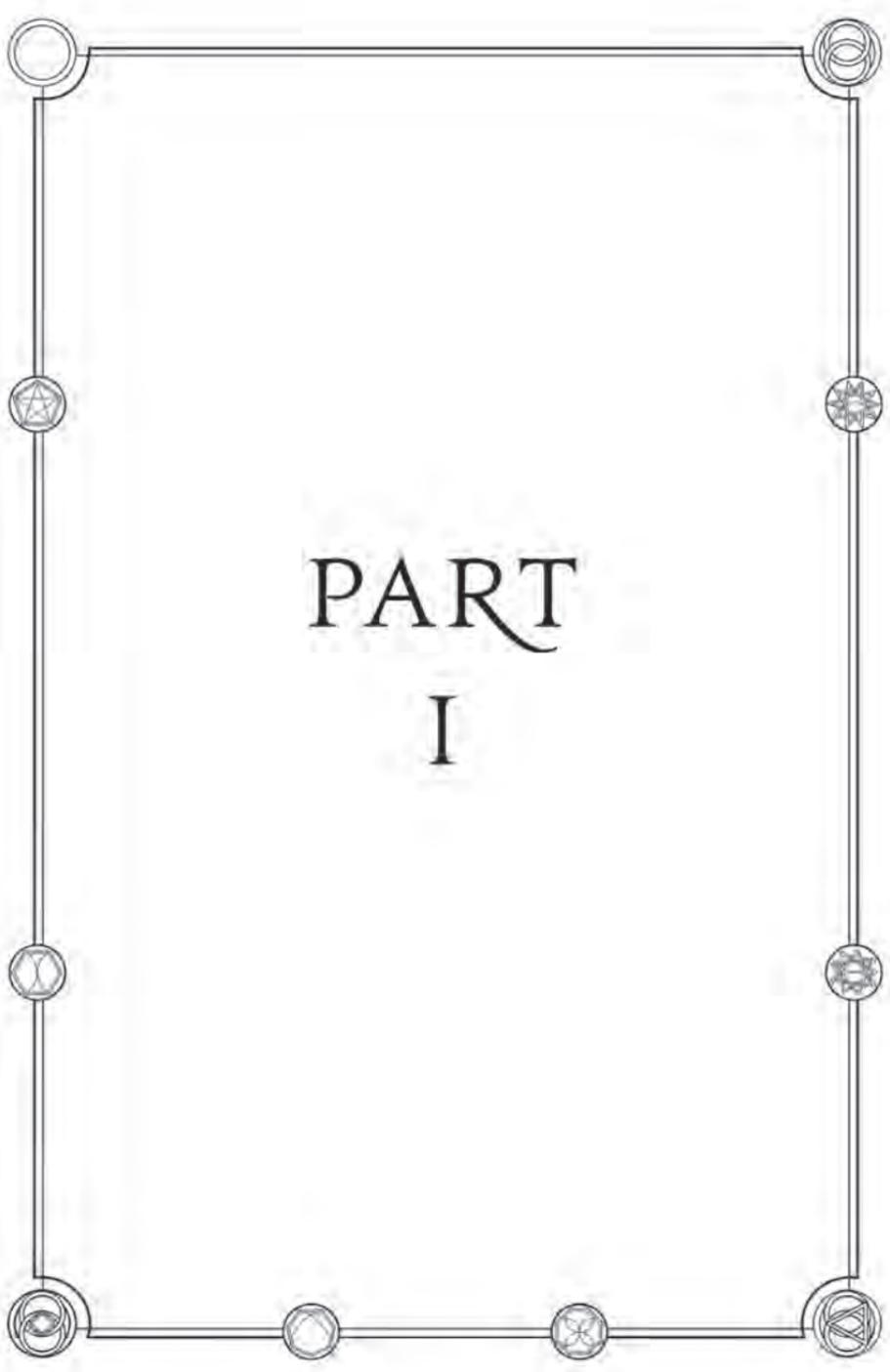
“That’s for Sedge,” Ren spat, darting in to stomp on Ondrakja’s tender stomach. The woman vomited again, but kept wit enough to grab at Ren’s leg. Ren twisted clear, and Ondrakja clutched her own throat, gasping.

A yank at the charm on Ren’s wrist broke the cord, and she hurled it into the woman’s spew. Tess followed an instant later. That swiftly, they weren’t Fingers anymore.

Ondrakja reached out again, and Ren stamped on her wrist, snapping bone. She would have kept going, but Tess seized Ren’s arm, dragging her toward the door. “She’s already dead. Come on, or we will be, too—”

“Come back here!” Ondrakja snarled, but her voice had withered to a hoarse gasp. “I will make you fucking *pay* . . .”

Her words dissolved into another fit of retching. Ren broke at last, tearing the door open and barreling into Simlin on the other side, knocking him down before he could react. Then down the stairs to the alcove, where a loose floorboard concealed two bags containing everything they owned in the world. Ren took one and threw the other at Tess, and they were out the door of the lodging house, into the narrow, stinking streets of Lacewater, leaving dying Ondrakja and the Fingers and the past behind them.

A decorative rectangular border surrounds the text. The border consists of thin lines forming the sides of a rectangle. At each of the four corners, there is a circular motif containing a complex geometric design. Along each side, there are additional circular motifs: the left and right sides each have two, and the bottom side has three. These motifs are smaller than the corner ones and also contain geometric patterns.

PART
I



The Mask of Mirrors

Isla Traementis, the Pearls: Suilun 1

After fifteen years of handling the Traementis house charters, Donaia Traementis knew that a deal which looked too good to be true probably was. The proposal currently on her desk stretched the boundaries of belief.

“He could at least try to make it look legitimate,” she muttered. Did Mettore Indestor think her an utter fool?

He thinks you desperate. And he’s right.

She burrowed her stockinged toes under the great lump of a hound sleeping beneath her desk and pressed cold fingers to her brow. She’d removed her gloves to avoid ink stains and left the hearth in her study unlit to save the cost of fuel. Besides Meatball, the only warmth was from the beeswax candles—an expense she couldn’t scrimp on unless she wanted to lose what eyesight she had left.

Adjusting her spectacles, she scanned the proposal again, scratching angry notes between the lines.

She remembered a time when House Traementis had been as powerful as the Indestor family. They had held a seat in the Cinquerat, the five-person council that ruled Nadežra, and charters that allowed them to conduct trade, contract mercenaries, control guilds. Every variety of wealth, power, and prestige in Nadežra had

been theirs. Now, despite Donaia's best efforts and her late husband's before her, it had come to this: scabbling at one Dusk Road trade charter as though she could milk enough blood from that stone to pay off all the Traementis debts.

Debts almost entirely owned by Mettore Indestor.

"And you expect me to trust my caravan to guards you provide?" she growled at the proposal, her pen nib digging in hard enough to tear the paper. "Ha! Who's going to protect it from them? Will they even wait for bandits, or just sack the wagons themselves?"

Leaving Donaia with the loss, a pack of angry investors, and debts she could no longer cover. Then Mettore would swoop in like one of his thrice-damned hawks to swallow whole what remained of House Traementis.

Try as she might, though, she couldn't see another option. She couldn't send the caravan out unguarded—Vraszenian bandits were a legitimate concern—but the Indestor family held the Caerulet seat in the Cinquerat, which gave Mettore authority over military and mercenary affairs. Nobody would risk working with a house Indestor had a grudge against—not when it would mean losing a charter, or worse.

Meatball's head rose with a sudden whine. A moment later a knock came at the study door, followed by Donaia's majordomo. Colbrin knew better than to interrupt her when she was wrestling with business, which meant he judged this interruption important.

He bowed and handed her a card. "Alta Renata Viraudax?" Donaia asked, shoving Meatball's wet snout out of her lap when he sniffed at the card. She flipped it as if the back would provide some clue to the visitor's purpose. Viraudax wasn't a local noble house. Some traveler to Nadežra?

"A young woman, Era Traementis," her majordomo said. "Well-mannered. Well-dressed. She said it concerned an important private matter."

The card fluttered to the floor. Donaia's duties as head of House Traementis kept her from having much of a social life, but the same could not be said for her son, and lately Leato had been behaving

more and more like his father. Ninat take him—if her son had racked up some gambling debt with a foreign visitor. . .

Colbrin retrieved the card before the dog could eat it, and handed it back to her. “Should I tell her you are not at home?”

“No. Show her in.” If her son’s dive into the seedier side of Nadežra had resulted in trouble, she would at least rectify his errors before stringing him up.

Somehow. With money she didn’t have.

She could start by not conducting the meeting in a freezing study. “Wait,” she said before Colbrin could leave. “Show her to the salon. And bring tea.”

Donaia cleaned the ink from her pen and made a futile attempt to brush away the brindled dog hairs matting her surcoat. Giving that up as a lost cause, she tugged on her gloves and straightened the papers on her desk, collecting herself by collecting her surroundings. Looking down at her clothing—the faded blue surcoat over trousers and house scuffs—she weighed the value of changing over the cost of making a potential problem wait.

Everything is a tallied cost these days, she thought grimly.

“Meatball. Stay,” she commanded when the hound would have followed, and headed directly to the salon.

The young woman waiting there could not have fit the setting more perfectly if she had planned it. Her rose-gold underdress and cream surcoat harmonized beautifully with the gold-shot peach silk of the couch and chairs, and the thick curl trailing from her upswept hair echoed the rich wood of the wall paneling. The curl should have looked like an accident, an errant strand slipping loose—but everything else about the visitor was so elegant it was clearly a deliberate touch of style.

She was studying the row of books on their glass-fronted shelf. When Donaia closed the door, she turned and dipped low. “Era Traementis. Thank you for seeing me.”

Her curtsy was as Seterin as her clipped accent, one hand sweeping elegantly up to the opposite shoulder. Donaia’s misgivings deepened at the sight of her. Close to her son’s age, and beautiful as a

portrait by Creciasto, with fine-boned features and flawless skin. Easy to imagine Leato losing his head over a hand of cards with such a girl. And her ensemble did nothing to comfort Donaia's fears—the richly embroidered brocade, the sleeves an elegant fall of sheer silk. Here was someone who could afford to bet and lose a fortune.

That sort was more likely to forgive or forget a debt than come collecting...unless the debt was meant as leverage for something else.

“Alta Renata. I hope you will forgive my informality.” She brushed a hand down her simple attire. “I did not expect visitors, but it sounded like your matter was of some urgency. Please, do be seated.”

The young woman lowered herself into the chair as lightly as mist on the river. Seeing her, it was easy to understand why the people of Nadežra looked to Seteris as the source of all that was stylish and elegant. Fashion was born in Seteris. By the time it traveled south to Seteris's protectorate, Seste Ligante, then farther south still, across the sea to Nadežra, it was old and stale, and Seteris had moved on.

Most Seterin visitors behaved as though Nadežra was nothing more than Seste Ligante's backwater colonial foothold on the Vraszenian continent and merely setting foot on the streets would foul them with the mud of the River Dežera. But Renata's delicacy looked like hesitation, not condescension. She said, “Not urgent, no—I do apologize if I gave that impression. I confess, I'm not certain how to even begin this conversation.”

She paused, hazel eyes searching Donaia's face. “You don't recognize my family name, do you?”

That had an ominous sound. Seteris might be on the other side of the sea, but the truly powerful families could influence trade anywhere in the known world. If House Traementis had somehow crossed one of them...

Donaia kept her fear from her face and her voice. “I am afraid I haven't had many dealings with the great houses of Seteris.”

A soft breath flowed out of the girl. “As I suspected. I thought she

might have written to you at least once, but apparently not. I . . . am Letilia's daughter."

She could have announced she was descended from the Vrasze-nian goddess Ažerais herself, and it wouldn't have taken Donaia more by surprise.

Disbelief clashed with relief and apprehension both: not a credi-tor, not an offended daughter of some foreign power. Family—after a fashion.

Lost for words, Donaia reassessed the young woman sitting across from her. Straight back, straight shoulders, straight neck, and the same fine, narrow nose that made everyone in Nadežra hail Letilia Traementis as the great beauty of her day.

Yes, she could be Letilia's daughter. Donaia's niece by marriage.

"Letilia never wrote after she left." It was the only consider-ation the spoiled brat had ever shown her family. The first sev-eral years, every day they'd expected a letter telling them she was stranded in Seteris, begging for funds. Instead they never heard from her again.

Dread sank into Donaia's bones. "Is Letilia here?"

The door swung open, and for one dreadful instant Donaia expected a familiar squall of petulance and privilege to sweep inside. But it was only Colbrin, bearing a tray. To her dismay, Donaia saw two pots on it, one short and rounded for tea, the other taller. Of course: He'd heard their guest's Seterin accent, and naturally assumed Donaia would also want to serve coffee.

We haven't yet fallen so far that I can't afford proper hospitality. But Donaia's voice was still sharp as he set the tray between the two of them. "Thank you, Colbrin. That will be all."

"No," Renata said as the majordomo bowed and departed. "No, Mother is happily ensconced in Seteris."

It seemed luck hadn't *entirely* abandoned House Traementis. "Tea?" Donaia said, a little too bright with relief. "Or would you prefer coffee?"

"Coffee, thank you." Renata accepted the cup and saucer with a graceful hand. Everything about her was graceful—but not the

artificial, forced elegance Donaia remembered Letilia practicing so assiduously.

Renata sipped the coffee and made a small, appreciative noise. “I must admit, I was wondering if I would even be able to find coffee here.”

Ah. *There* was the echo of Letilia, the little sneer that took what should be a compliment and transformed it into an insult.

We have wooden floors and chairs with backs, too. Donaia swallowed down the snappish response. But the bitter taste in her mouth nudged her into pouring coffee for herself, even though she disliked it. She wouldn’t let this girl make her feel like a delta rustic simply because Donaia had lived all her life in Nadežra.

“So you are here, but Letilia is not. May I ask why?”

The girl’s chin dropped, and she rotated her coffee cup as though its precise alignment against the saucer were vitally important. “I’ve spent days imagining how best to approach you, but—well.” There was a ripple of nervousness in her laugh. “There’s no way to say this without first admitting I’m Letilia’s daughter... and yet by admitting that, I know I’ve already gotten off on the wrong foot. Still, there’s nothing for it.”

Renata inhaled like someone preparing for battle, then met Donaia’s gaze. “I’m here to see if I can possibly reconcile my mother with her family.”

It took all Donaia’s self-control not to laugh. Reconcile? She would sooner reconcile with the drugs that had overtaken her husband Gianco’s good sense in his final years. If Gianco’s darker comments were to be believed, Letilia had done as much to destroy House Traementis as aža had.

Fortunately, custom and law offered her a more dispassionate response. “Letilia is no part of this family. My husband’s father struck her name from our register after she left.”

At least Renata was smart enough not to be surprised. “I can hardly blame my gra—your father-in-law,” she said. “I’ve only my mother’s version of the tale, but I also know *her*. I can guess the part she played in that estrangement.”

Donaia could just imagine what poison Letilia's version had contained. "It is more than estrangement," she said brusquely, rising to her feet. "I am sorry you crossed the sea for nothing, but I'm afraid that what you're asking for is impossible. Even if I believed that your mother wanted to reconcile—which I do not—I have no interest in doing so."

A treacherous worm within her whispered, *Even if that might offer a new business opportunity? Some way out of Indestor's trap?*

Even then. Donaia would burn Traementis Manor to the ground before she accepted help from Letilia's hand.

The salon door opened again. But this time, the interruption wasn't her majordomo.

"Mother, Egliadas has invited me to go sailing on the river." Leato was tugging on his gloves, as if he couldn't be bothered to finish dressing before leaving his rooms. But he stopped, one hand still caught in the tight cuff, when he saw their visitor.

Renata rose like a flower bud unfurling, and Donaia cursed silently. Why, today of all days, had Leato chosen to wake early? Not that fourth sun was early by most people's standards, but for him midmorning might as well be dawn.

Reflex forced the courtesies out of her mouth, even though she wanted nothing more than to hurry the girl away. "Leato, you recall stories of your aunt Letilia? This is her daughter, Alta Renata Viraudax of Seteris. Alta Renata, my son and heir, Leato Traementis."

Leato captured Renata's hand before she could touch it to her shoulder again and kissed her gloved fingertips. When she saw them together, Donaia's heart sank like a stone. She was used to thinking of her son as an adolescent scamp, or an intermittent source of headaches. But he was a man grown, with beauty to match Renata's: his hair like antique gold, fashionably mussed on top; his ivory skin and finely carved features, the hallmark of House Traementis; the elegant cut of his waistcoat and fitted tailoring of the full-skirted coat over it in the platinum shimmer of delta grasses in autumn.

And the two of them were smiling at one another like the sun had just risen in the salon.

“Letilia’s daughter?” Leato said, releasing Renata’s hand before the touch could grow awkward. “I thought she hated us.”

Donaia bit down the impulse to chide him. It would sound like she was defending Renata, which was the last thing she wanted to do.

The girl’s smile was brief and rueful. “I may have inherited her nose, but I’ve tried not to inherit *everything* else.”

“You mean, not her personality? I’ll offer thanks to Katus.” Leato winced. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t insult your mother—”

“No insult taken,” Renata said dryly. “I’m sure the stories you know of her are dreadful, and with good cause.”

They had the river’s current beneath them and were flowing onward; Donaia had to stop it before they went too far. When Leato asked what brought Renata to the city, Donaia lunged in, social grace be damned. “She just—”

But Renata spoke over her, as smooth as silk. “I was hoping to meet your grandfather and father. Foolish of me, really; since Mother hasn’t been in contact, I didn’t know they’d both passed away until I arrived. And now I understand she’s no longer in the register, so there’s no bond between us—I’m just a stranger, intruding.”

“Oh, not at all!” Leato turned to his mother for confirmation.

For the first time, Donaia felt a touch of gratitude toward Renata. Leato had never known Letilia; he hadn’t even been born when she ran away. He’d heard the tales, but no doubt he marked at least some of them as exaggeration. If Renata had mentioned a reconciliation outright, he probably would have supported her.

“We’re touched by your visit,” Donaia said, offering the girl a courteous nod. “I’m only sorry the others never had a chance to meet you.”

“Your visit?” Leato scoffed. “No, this can’t be all. You’re my cousin, after all—oh, not under the law, I know. But blood counts for a lot here.”

“We’re Nadežran, Leato, not Vraszenian,” Donaia said reprovingly, lest Renata think they’d been completely swallowed by delta ways.

He went on as though he hadn't heard her. "My long-lost cousin shows up from across the sea, greets us for a few minutes, then vanishes? Unacceptable. Giuna hasn't even met you—she's my younger sister. Why don't you stay with us for a few days?"

Donaia couldn't stop a muffled sound from escaping her. However much he seemed determined to ignore them, Leato knew about House Traementis's financial troubles. A houseguest was the last thing they could afford.

But Renata demurred with a light shake of her head. "No, no—I couldn't impose like that. I'll be in Nadežra for some time, though. Perhaps you'll allow me the chance to show I'm not my mother."

Preparatory to pushing for reconciliation, no doubt. But although Renata was older and more self-possessed, something about her downcast gaze reminded Donaia of Giuna. She could all too easily imagine Giuna seeking Letilia out in Seteris with the same impossible dream.

If House Traementis could afford the sea passage, which they could not. And if Donaia would allow her to go, which she would not. But if that impossible situation happened...she bristled at the thought of Letilia rebuffing Giuna entirely, treating her with such cold hostility that she refused to see the girl at all.

So Donaia said, as warmly as she could, "Of course we know you aren't your mother. And you shouldn't be forced to carry the burden of her past." She let a smile crack her mask. "I'm certain from the caterpillars dancing on my son's brow that he'd like to know more about you, and I imagine Giuna would feel the same."

"Thank you," Renata said with a curtsy. "But not now, I think. My apologies, Altan Leato." Her words silenced his protest before he could voice it, and with faultless formality. "My maid intends to fit me for a new dress this afternoon, and she'll stick me with pins if I'm late."

That was as unlike Letilia as it was possible to be. Not the concern for her clothing—Letilia was the same, only with less tasteful results—but the graceful withdrawal, cooperating with Donaia's wish to get her out of the house.

Leato did manage to get one more question out, though. “Where can we reach you?”

“On the *Isla Prišta*, Via *Brelkoja*, number four,” Renata said. Donaia’s lips tightened. For a stay of a few weeks, even a month or two, a hotel would have sufficed. Renting a house suggested the girl intended to remain for quite some time.

But that was a matter for later. Donaia reached for the bell. “Colbrin will see you out.”

“No need,” Leato said, offering Renata his hand. When she glanced at Donaia instead of taking it, Leato said, “Mother, you won’t begrudge me a few moments of gossip with my new cousin?”

That was Leato, always asking for forgiveness rather than permission. But Renata’s minute smile silently promised not to encourage him. At Donaia’s forbearing nod, she accepted his escort from the room.

Once they were gone, Donaia rang for Colbrin. “I’ll be in my study. No more interruptions barring flood or fire, please.”

Colbrin’s acknowledgment trailed after her as she went upstairs. When she entered the room, Meatball roused with a whine-snap of a yawn and a hopeful look, but settled again once he realized no treats were forthcoming.

The space seemed chillier than when she’d left it, and darker. She thought of Alta Renata’s fine manners and finer clothes. Of course Letilia’s daughter would be dressed in designs so new they hadn’t yet made their way from *Seteris* to *Nadežra*. Of course she would have enough wealth to rent a house in *Westbridge* for herself alone and think nothing of it. Hadn’t *Gianco* always said that Letilia took *House Traementis*’s luck with her when she left?

In a fit of pique, Donaia lit the hearthfire, and damn the cost. Once its warmth was blazing through the study, she returned to her desk. She buried her toes under the dog again, mentally composing her message as she sharpened her nib and filled her ink tray.

House Traementis might be neck-deep in debt and sinking, but they still had the rights granted by their ennoblement charter. And Donaia wasn’t such a fool that she would bite a hook before examining it from all sides first.

Bending her head, Donaia began penning a letter to Commander Cercel of the Vigil.



Upper and Lower Bank: Suilun 1

Renata expected Leato Traementis to see her out the front door, but he escorted her all the way to the bottom of the steps, and kept her hand even when they stopped. “I hope you’re not too offended by Mother’s reserve,” he said. A breeze ruffled his burnished hair and carried the scent of caramel and almonds to her nose. A rich scent, matching his clothes and his carriage, and the thin lines of gold paint limning his eyelashes. “A lot of dead branches have been pruned from the Traementis register since my father—and your mother—were children. Now there’s only Mother, Giuna, and myself. She gets protective.”

“I take no offense at all,” Renata said, smiling up at him. “I’m not so much of a fool that I expect to be welcomed with open arms. And I’m willing to be patient.”

The breeze sharpened, and she shivered. Leato stepped between her and the wind. “You’d think Nadežra would be warmer than Seteris, wouldn’t you?” he said with a sympathetic grimace. “It’s all the water. We almost never get snow here, but the winters are so damp, the cold cuts right to your bones.”

“I should have thought to wear a cloak. But since I can’t pluck one from thin air, I hope you won’t take offense if I hurry home.”

“Of course not. Let me get you a sedan chair.” Leato raised a hand to catch the eye of some men idling on the far side of the square and paid the bearers before Renata could even reach for her purse. “To soothe any lingering sting,” he said with a smile.

She thanked him with another curtsy. “I hope I’ll see you soon.”

“As do I.” Leato helped her into the sedan chair and closed the door once her skirts were safely out of the way.

As the bearers headed for the narrow exit from the square,

Renata drew the curtains shut. Traementis Manor was in the Pearls, a cluster of islets strung along the Upper Bank of the River Dežera. The river here ran pure and clear thanks to the numinat that protected the East Channel, and the narrow streets and bridges were clean; whichever families held the charters to keep the streets clear of refuse wouldn't dream of letting it accumulate near the houses of the rich and powerful.

But the rocky wedge that broke the Dežera into east and west channels was a different matter. For all that it held two of Nadežra's major institutions—the Charterhouse in Dawngate, which was the seat of government, and the Aerie in Duskgate, home to the Vigil, which maintained order—the Old Island was also crowded with the poor and the shabby-genteel. Anyone riding in a sedan chair was just asking for beggars to crowd at their windows.

Which still made it better than half of the Lower Bank, where a sedan chair risked being knocked to the ground and the passenger robbed.

Luckily, her rented house was on Isla Prišta in Westbridge—technically on the Lower Bank, and far from a fashionable district, but it was a respectable neighborhood on the rise. In fact, the buildings on the Via Brelkoja were so newly renovated the mortar hadn't had time to moss over in the damp air. The freshly painted door to number four opened just as Renata's foot touched the first step.

Tess made a severe-looking sight in the crisp grey-and-white surcoat and underskirt of a Nadežran housemaid, but her copper Ganllechyn curls and freckles were a warm beacon welcoming Renata home. She bobbed a curtsy and murmured a lilting “*alta*” as Renata passed across the threshold, accepting the gloves and purse Renata held out.

“Downstairs,” Ren murmured as the door snicked shut, sinking them into the dimness of the front hall.

Tess nodded, swallowing her question before she could speak it. Together they headed into the half-sunken chambers of the cellar, which held the service rooms. Only once they were safely in the kitchen did Tess say, “Well? How did it go?”

Ren let her posture drop and her voice relax into the throaty tones of her natural accent. “For me, as well as I could hope. Donaia refused reconciliation out of hand—”

“Thank the Mother,” Tess breathed. If Donaia contacted Letilia, their entire plan would fall apart before it started.

Ren nodded. “Faced with the prospect of talking to her former sister-in-law, she barely even noticed me getting my foot in the door.”

“That’s a start, then. Here, off with this, and wrap up before you take a chill.” Tess passed Ren a thick cloak of rough-spun wool lined with raw fleece, then turned her around like a dressmaker’s doll so she could remove the beautifully embroidered surcoat.

“I saw the sedan chair,” Tess said as she tugged at the side ties. “You didn’t take that all the way from Isla Traementis, did you? If you’re going to be riding about in chairs, I’ll have to revise the budget. And here I’d had my eye on a lovely bit of lace at the remnants stall.” Tess sighed mournfully, like she was saying farewell to a sweetheart. “I’ll just have to tat some myself.”

“In your endless spare time?” Ren said sardonically. The surcoat came loose, and she swung the cloak around her shoulders in its place. “Anyway, the son paid for the chair.” She dropped onto the kitchen bench and eased her shoes off with a silent curse. Fashionable shoes were *not* comfortable. The hardest part of this con was going to be pretending her feet didn’t hurt all day long.

Although choking down coffee ran a close second.

“Did he, now?” Tess settled on the bench next to Ren, close enough that they could share warmth beneath the cloak. Apart from the kitchen and the front salon, protective sheets still covered the furniture in every other room. The hearths were cold, their meals were simple, and they slept together on a kitchen floor pallet so they would only have to heat one room of the house.

Because she was not Alta Renata Viraudax, daughter of Letilia Traementis. She was Arenza Lenskaya, half-Vraszenian river rat, and even with a forged letter of credit to help, pretending to be a Seterin noblewoman wasn’t cheap.

Pulling out a thumbnail blade, Tess began ripping the seams of Ren's beautiful surcoat, preparatory to alteration. "Was it just idle flirtation?"

The speculative uptick in Tess's question said she didn't believe any flirtation Ren encountered was idle. But whether Leato's flirtation had been idle or not, Ren had lines she would not cross, and whoring herself out was one of them.

It would have been the easier route. Dress herself up fine enough to catch the eye of some delta gentry son, or even a noble, and marry her way into money. She wouldn't be the first person in Nadežra to do it.

But she'd spent five years in Ganllech—five years as a maid under Letilia's thumb, listening to her complain about her dreadful family and how much she dreamed of life in Seteris, the promised land she'd never managed to reach. So when Ren and Tess found themselves back in Nadežra, Ren had been resolved. No whoring, and no killing. Instead she set her sights on a higher target: use what she'd learned to gain acceptance into House Traementis as their long-lost kin... with all the wealth and social benefit that brought.

"Leato is friendly," she allowed, picking up the far end of the dress and starting on the seam with her own knife. Tess didn't trust her to sew anything more complicated than a hem, but ripping stitches? That, she was qualified for. "And he helped shame Donaia into agreeing to see me again. But *she* is every bit as bad as Letilia claimed. You should have seen what she wore. Ratty old clothes, covered in dog hair. Like it's a moral flaw to let a single centira slip through her fingers."

"But the son isn't so bad?" Tess rocked on the bench, nudging Ren's hip with her own. "Maybe he's a bastard."

Ren snorted. "Not likely. Donaia would give him the moon if he asked, and he looks as Traementis as I." Only he didn't need makeup to achieve the effect.

Her hands trembled as she worked. Those five years in Ganllech were also five years out of practice. And all her previous cons had

been short touches—never anything on this scale. When she got caught before, the hawks slung her in jail for a few days.

If she got caught now, impersonating a noblewoman . . .

Tess laid a hand over Ren's, stopping her before she could nick herself with the knife. "It's never too late to do something else."

Ren managed a smile. "Buy piles of fabric, then run away and set up as dressmakers? You, anyway. I would be your tailor's dummy."

"You'd model and sell them," Tess said stoutly. "If you want."

Tess would be happy in that life. But Ren wanted more.

This city *owed* her more. It had taken everything: her mother, her childhood, Sedge. The rich cuffs of Nadežra got whatever they wanted, then squabbled over what their rivals had, grinding everyone else underfoot. In all her days among the Fingers, Ren had never been able to take more than the smallest shreds from the hems of their cloaks.

But now, thanks to Letilia, she was in a position to take more.

The Traementis made the perfect target. Small enough these days that only Donaia stood any chance of spotting Renata as an imposter, and isolated enough that they would be grateful for any addition to their register. In the glory days of their power and graft, they'd been notorious for their insular ways, refusing to aid their fellow nobles in times of need. Since they lost their seat in the Cinquerat, everyone else had gladly returned the favor.

Ren put down the knife and squeezed Tess's hand. "No. It is nerves only, and they will pass. We go forward."

"Forward it is." Tess squeezed back, then returned to work. "Next we're to make a splash somewhere public, yes? I'll need to know where and when if I'm to outfit you proper." The sides of the surcoat parted, and she started on the bandeau at the top of the bodice. "The sleeves are the key, have you noticed? Everyone is so on about their sleeves. But I've a thought for that . . . if you're ready for Alta Renata to set fashion instead of following."

Ren glanced sideways, her wariness only half-feigned. "What have you in mind?"

"Hmm. Stand up, and off with the rest of it." Once she had Ren

stripped to her chemise, Tess played with different gathers and drapes until Ren's arms started to ache from being held out for so long. But she didn't complain. Tess's eye for fashion, her knack for imbuing, and her ability to rework the pieces of three outfits into nine were as vital to this con as Ren's skill at manipulation.

She closed her eyes and cast her thoughts over what she knew about the city. Where could she go, what could she do, to attract the kind of admiration that would help her gain the foothold she needed?

A slow smile spread across her face.

"Tess," she said, "I have the perfect idea. And you will love it."



The Aerie and Isla Traementis: Suilun 1

"Serrado! Get in here. I have a job for you."

Commander Cercel's voice cut sharply through the din of the Aerie. Waving at his constables to take their prisoner to the stockade, Captain Grey Serrado turned and threaded his way through the chaos to his commander's office. He ignored the sidelong smirks and snide whispers of his fellow officers: Unlike them, he didn't have the luxury of lounging about drinking coffee, managing his constables from the comfort of the Aerie.

"Commander Cercel?" He snapped the heels of his boots together and gave her his crispest salute—a salute he'd perfected during hours of standing at attention in the sun, the rain, the wind, while other lieutenants were at mess or in the barracks. Cercel wasn't the stickler for discipline his previous superiors had been, but she was the reason he wore a captain's double-lined hexagram pin, and he didn't want to reflect badly on her.

She was studying a letter, but when she brought her head up to reply, her eyes widened. "What does the *other* guy look like?"

Taking the casual question as permission to drop into rest, Grey spared a glance for his uniform. His patrol slops were spattered with

muck from heel to shoulder, and blood was drying on the knuckles of his leather gloves. Some of the canal mud on his boots had flaked off when he saluted, powdering Cercel's carpet with the filth of the Kingfisher slums.

"Dazed but breathing. Ranieri's taking him to the stockade now." Her question invited banter, but the door to her office was open, and it wouldn't do him any good to be marked as a smart-ass.

She responded to his businesslike answer with an equally brisk nod. "Well, get cleaned up. I've received a letter from one of the noble houses, requesting Vigil assistance. I'm sending you."

Grey's jaw tensed as he waited for several gut responses to subside. It was possible the request was a legitimate call for aid. "What crime has been committed?"

Cercel's level gaze said, *You know better than that.* "One of the noble houses has requested Vigil assistance," she repeated, enunciating each word with cut-glass clarity. "I'm sure they wouldn't do that without good cause."

No doubt whoever sent the letter thought the cause was good. People from the great houses always did.

But Grey had a desk full of real problems. "More children have gone missing. That's eleven verified this month."

They'd had this conversation several times over the past few weeks. Cercel sighed. "We haven't had any reports—"

"Because they're all river rats so far. Who's going to care enough to report that? But the man I just brought in might know something about it; he's been promising Kingfisher kids good pay for an unspecified job. I got him on defacing public property, but he'll be free again by tonight." Pissing in public wasn't an offense the Vigil usually cracked down on, unless it suited them. "Am I to assume this noble's 'good cause' takes precedence over finding out what's happening to those kids?"

Cercel breathed out hard through her nose, and he tensed. Had he pushed her patience too far?

No. "Your man is on his way to the stockade," she said. "Have Kaineto process him—you're always complaining he's as slow as

river mud. By the time you get back, he'll be ready to talk. Meanwhile, send Ranieri to ask questions around Kingfisher, see if he can find any of the man's associates." She set the letter aside and drew another from her stack, a clear prelude to dismissing him. "You know the deal, Serrado."

The first few times, he'd played dense to make her spell it out in unambiguous terms. The last thing he could afford back then was to mistake a senior officer's meaning.

But they were past those games now. As long as he knuckled under and did whatever this noble wanted of him, Cercel wouldn't question him using Vigil time and resources for his own investigations.

"Yes, Commander." He saluted and heel-knocked another layer of delta silt onto her carpet. "Which house has called for aid?"

"Traementis."

If he'd been less careful of his manners, he would have thrown her a dirty look. *She could have led with that.* But Cercel wanted him to understand that answering these calls was part of his duty, and made him bend his neck before she revealed the silver lining. "Understood. I'll head to the Pearls at once."

Her final command followed him out of the office. "Don't you dare show up at Era Traementis's door looking like that!"

Groaning, Grey changed his path. He snagged a pitcher of water and a messenger, sending the latter to Ranieri with the new orders.

There was a bathing room in the Aerie, but he didn't want to waste time on that. A sniff test sent every piece of his patrol uniform into the laundry bag; aside from the coffee, that was one of the few perks of his rank he didn't mind taking shameless advantage of. If he was wading through canals for the job, the least the Vigil could do was ensure he didn't smell like one. A quick pitcher bath in his tiny office took care of the scents still clinging to his skin and hair before he shrugged into his dress vigils.

He had to admit the force's tailors were good. The tan breeches were Liganti-cut, snug as they could be around his thighs and hips without impeding movement. Both the brocade waistcoat and the

coat of sapphire wool were tailored like a second skin, before the latter flared to full skirts that kissed the tops of his polished, knee-high boots. On his patrol slops, the diving hawk across the back of his shoulders was mere patchwork; here it was embroidered in golds and browns.

Grey didn't have much use for vanity, but he did love his dress vigils. They were an inarguable reminder that he'd climbed to a place few Vraszenians could even imagine reaching. His brother, Kolya, had been so proud the day Grey came home in them.

The sudden trembling of his hands stabbed his collar pin into his thumb. Grey swallowed a curse and sucked the blood from the puncture, using a tiny hand mirror to make sure he hadn't gotten any on his collar. Luckily, it was clean, and he managed to finish dressing himself without further injury.

Once outside, he set off east from Duskgate with long, ground-eating strides. He could have taken a sedan chair and told the bearers to bill the Vigil; other officers did, knowing all the while that no such bill would ever be paid. But along with stiffing the bearers, that meant they didn't see the city around them the way Grey did.

Not that most of them would. They were Liganti, or mixed enough in ancestry that they could claim the name; to them, Nadežra was an outpost of Seste Ligante, half tamed by the Liganti general Kaius Sifigno, who restyled himself Kaius Rex after conquering Vraszan two centuries past. Others called him the Tyrant, and when he died, the Vraszenian clans took back the rest of their conquered land. But every push to reclaim their holy city failed, until exhaustion on both sides led to the signing of the Accords. Those established Nadežra as an independent city-state—under the rule of its Liganti elite.

It was an uneasy balance at best, made less easy still by Vraszenian radical groups like the Stadnem Anduske, who wouldn't settle for anything less than the city back in Vraszenian hands. And every time they pushed, the Cinquerat pushed back even harder.

The busy markets of Suncross at the heart of the Old Island parted for Grey's bright blue coat and the tawny embroidered hawk,

but not without glares. To the high and mighty, the Vigil was a tool; to the common Nadežran, the Vigil was the tool of the high and mighty. Not all of them—Grey wasn't the only hawk who cared about common folk—but enough that he couldn't blame people for their hostility. And some of the worst glares came from Vraszenians, who looked at him and saw a slip-knot: a man who had betrayed his people, siding with the invaders' descendants.

Grey was used to the glares. He kept an eye out for trouble as he passed market stalls on the stoops of decaying townhouses, and a bawdy puppet show where the only children in the crowd were the pickpockets. They trickled away like water before he could mark their faces. A few beggars eyed him warily, but Grey had no grudge against them; the more dangerous elements wouldn't come out until evening, when the feckless sons and daughters of the delta gentry prowled the streets in search of amusement. A pattern-reader had set up on a corner near the Charterhouse, ready to bilk people in exchange for a pretty lie. He gave her a wide berth, leather glove creaking into a fist as he resisted the urge to drag her back to the Aerie for graft.

Once he'd passed under the decaying bulk of the Dawngate and across the Sunrise Bridge, he turned north into the narrow islets of the Pearls, clogged with sedan chairs. Two elderly ladies impressed with their own importance blocked the Becchia Bridge entirely, squabbling like gulls over which one should yield. Grey marked the house sigil painted onto each chair's door in case complaints came to the Aerie later.

His shoulders itched as he crossed the lines of the complex mosaic in the center of Traementis Plaza. It was no mere tilework, but a numinat: geometric Liganti magic meant to keep the ground dry and solid, against the river's determination to sink everything into the mud. Useful...but the Tyrant had twisted numinatia into a weapon during his conquest, and mosaics like this one amounted to emblems of ongoing Liganti control.

On the steps of Traementis Manor, Grey gave his uniform a final smoothing and sounded the bell. Within moments, Colbrin opened the door and favored Grey with a rare smile.

“Young Master Serrado. How pleasant to see you; it’s been far too long. I’m afraid Altan Leato is not here to receive you—”

“It’s ‘Captain’ now,” Grey said, touching the hexagram pin at his throat. The smile he dredged up felt tired from disuse. “And I’m not here for Leato. Era Traementis requested assistance from the Vigil.”

“Ah, yes.” Colbrin bowed him inside. “If you’ll wait in the salon, I’ll inform Era Traementis that you’re here.”

Grey wasn’t surprised when Colbrin returned in a few moments and summoned him to the study. Whatever Donaia had written to the Vigil for, it was business, not a social call.

That room was much darker, with little in the way of bright silks to warm the space—but warmth came in many shapes. Donaia’s grizzled wolfhound scrambled up from his place by her desk, claws ticking on wood as he trotted over for a greeting. “Hello, old man,” Grey said, giving him a good tousling and a few barrel thumps on the side.

“Meatball. Heel.” The dog returned to Donaia’s side, looking up as she crossed the room to greet Grey.

“Era Traementis,” Grey said, bowing over her hand. “I’m told you have need of assistance.”

The silver threads lacing through her hair were gaining ground against the auburn, and she looked tired. “Yes. I need you to look into someone—a visitor to the city, recently arrived from Seteris. Renata Viraudax.”

“Has she committed some crime against House Traementis?”

“No,” Donaia said. “*She* hasn’t.”

Her words piqued his curiosity. “Era?”

A muscle tightened in Donaia’s jaw. “My husband once had a sister named Letilia—Lecilla, really, but she was obsessed with Seteris and their high culture, so she badgered their father into changing it in the register. Twenty-three years ago, she decided she would rather be in Seteris than here . . . so she stole some money and jewelry and ran away.”

Donaia gestured Grey to a chair in front of the hearth. The warmth of the fire enveloped him as he sat down. “Renata Viraudax is Letilia’s

daughter. She claims to be trying to mend bridges, but I have my doubts. I want you to find out what she's really doing in Nadežra."

As much as Grey loathed the right of the nobility to commandeer the Vigil for private use, he couldn't help feeling sympathy. When he was younger and less aware of the differences that made it impossible, he'd sometimes wished Donaia Traementis was his mother. She was stern, but fair. She loved her children, and was fiercely protective of her family. Unlike some, she never gave Leato and Giuna reason to doubt her love for them.

This Viraudax woman's mother had hurt her family, and the Traementis had a well-earned reputation for avenging their own.

"What can you tell me about her?" he asked. "Has she given you any reason to doubt her sincerity? Apart from being her mother's daughter?"

Donaia's fingers drummed briefly against the arm of the chair, and her gaze settled on a corner of the fireplace and stayed there long enough that Grey knew she was struggling with some thought. He kept his silence.

Finally she said, "You and my son are friends, and moreover you aren't a fool. It can't have escaped your notice that House Traementis is not what it once was, in wealth, power, or numbers. We have many enemies eager to see us fall. Now this young woman shows up and tries to insinuate herself among us? Perhaps I'm jumping at shadows... but I must consider the possibility that this is a gambit intended to destroy us entirely." She gave a bitter laugh. "I can't even be certain this girl *is* Letilia's daughter."

She must be worried, if she was admitting so much. Yes, Grey had suspected—would have suspected even if Vigil gossip didn't sometimes speculate—that House Traementis was struggling more than they let on. But he never joined in the gossip, and he never asked Leato.

Leato... who was always in fashion, and according to that same gossip spent half his time frequenting aža parlours and gambling dens. *Does Leato know?* Grey swallowed the question. It wasn't his business, and it wasn't the business Donaia had called him for.

"That last shouldn't be too hard to determine," he said. "I assume you know where she's staying?" He paused when Donaia's

lips flattened, but she only nodded. “Then talk to her. If she’s truly Letilia’s daughter, she should know details an imposter wouldn’t easily be able to discover. If she gives you vague answers or takes offense, then you’ll know something is wrong.”

Grey paused again, wondering how much Donaia would let him pry. “You said you had enemies she might be working for. It would help me to know who they are and what they might want.” At her sharply indrawn breath, he raised a hand in pledge. “I promise I’ll say nothing of it—not even to Leato.”

In a tone so dry it burned, Donaia began ticking possibilities off on her fingers. “Quientis took our seat in the Cinquerat. Kaineto are only delta gentry, but have made a point of blocking our attempts to contract out our charters. Essunta, likewise. Simendis, Destaelio, Novrus, Cleoter—Indestor—I’m afraid it’s a crowded field.”

That was the entire Cinquerat and others besides...but she’d only stumbled over one name.

“Indestor,” Grey said. The house that held Caerulet, the military seat in the Cinquerat. The house in charge of the Vigil.

The house that would not look kindly upon being investigated by one of its own.

“Era Traementis...did you ask for any officer, or did you specifically request me?”

“You’re Leato’s friend,” Donaia said, holding his gaze. “Far better to ask a friend for help than to confess our troubles to an enemy.”

That startled a chuckle from Grey. At Donaia’s furrowed brow, he said, “My brother was fond of a Vraszenian saying. ‘A family covered in the same dirt washes in the same water.’”

And Kolya would have given Grey a good scolding for not jumping to help Donaia right away. She might not be kin, but she’d hired a young Vraszenian carpenter with a scrawny kid brother when nobody else would, and paid him the same as a Nadežran.

He stood and bowed with a fist to his shoulder. “I’ll see what I can discover for you. Tell me where to find this Renata Viraudax.”