

TAP AND DIE

LANCELOT SCHAUBERT



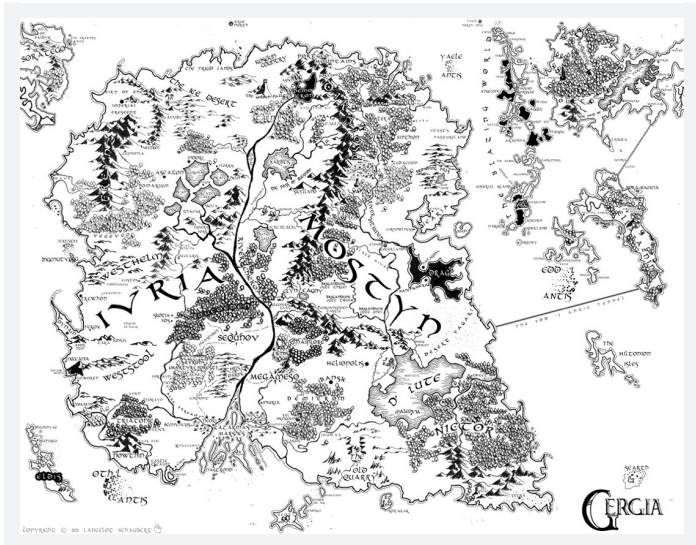
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# I

## HONORIFICS

**T**he driver looked cockeyed at Black Jack Dawes's half-frozen hands that held the other reins. The driver took kings and nobles all over the Ivrian side of the world, not crusty old tradesmen in khaki dusters, range hats, knee-high boots slathered in mud, and that black cloak with those unfixed stars on it. And no sword? But it was Black Jack's knuckles that drew the driver's focus. They were as frozen as two hands could get: white on a purple field.

"Renaud's," Jack explained. "No circulation in extremities. Plus I hate going—"

The team of horses sped over the downy green hillock and the many-wheeled carriage got air. Jack's knuckles went whiter. His feet slammed into the foothold and his back braced even deeper into the red velvet seat cushions. As wheels hit earth, the old range man grunted, "—fast."

"Oh, sorry, Your Excellence, I—"

"No ambassador. Nor emissary."

"Your wife is."

"So bill her, cut the titles."

The driver nodded.

"Honorifics," Jack said and spat. "Every horse breeder, every smith's apprentice, every cloth merchant from here to Tetra has some sort of gold salesman-of-the-month plaque, some jade crystal award for the same shit they do every day. Here's a cheap piece of metal that *looks* a little like the metal we named this plaque after in order to celebrate the thing you're already doing just to survive." He threw up a little in his mouth in a not-subtle way. "Fool's gold is still for fools even if you make a trophy out—"

The carriage caught air again, and Jack almost puked.

"I'll slow down a bit," said the driver.

"I'm not... I'm not queasy." Jack gagged again, audibly. "I'll be fine I just... *hnngh*... I just don't like feeling like I'm flying through the air, that's all."

"You fly often?" The driver chuckled.

"The boss has me do it far more often than I like."

"Here, for your hands." The driver took the reins in one hand and passed over a pair of gloves.

"I have gloves."

"These are entangled with lava. They're constantly warm, plus they'll help with the nerves."

Jack Dawes raised an eyebrow.

"Trust me. Once you get there—you're changing, right?"

Black Jack looked down at his outer wear, confused.

The driver chuckled. "I wouldn't go to an inaugural ball looking like that."

"I hate these things."

"Okay, so when you're all stripped down between outfits, put these gloves on and put them on the mirror."

"Why do I have to be naked?"

"Shhhh, trust the process."

Black Jack raised his eyebrow.

“Allow the mirror to fog and let the room steam up and you’ll feel completely warm. That’s why naked.”

“Wouldn’t I be warmer with clothes too?”

“No. Plus you’re naked so you realize it more, just trust the process! Only downside to these things is they attract lava and magma, but it’s not like you’re going to the surface of some star.”

Black Jack had done that before. He didn’t recommend it. “Know what I hate about inaugural balls?”

The driver waited, sipping his cocoa out of his copper longcup, which had long gone cold.

“There’s always some inauguration or convocation or launch of some new ship that needs christening for some maiden voyage. People start shit far more often than they finish shit. For once, I want a *terminal* ball. Celebrate the death of something. Or its culmination at least.”

The driver looked again at the black cloak, and it reminded him of the angel of death. Poking out of the vest pocket was a crowfoot attached to a long bone, sharpened to a point.

“The Crowfoot Mile?” he asked.

Jack grimaced. He hated that people only remembered that part of it.

“You’re a Storyweaver?”

“That’s what the cloak is for.”

The driver truly saw it for the first time, and his eyes widened. Then he focused on the road ahead. “Don’t you think the new military allegiance between the Common Realms puts guys like you out of work?”

“I wish it had.”

## 2

### THE HOLLOW NEEDLE

**T**he Hollow Needle did not rise above the horizon, but sank into the great peak of Weststool, steam and smoke heralding it in a great circular halo. One of five new taps in Gergia, the opposite of towers, it drilled down into a too-wide hole. Seven carriage bridges—long stone pathways lit by gas lamps—led from the ridge of the hole to a midair platform, and that platform formed the base of a great spire that sank down into the hot airy heart of an active volcano, the bubbling lava a mere sixty feet deeper than the tap's lowest basement, the observation deck. Gravity had been inverted around the outside of the tap building so that the heat close to the building's surface would first vent *down* toward the lava while heavier things went *up* toward the surface. But once outside that ring of gravity inversion, the steam would vent *up* once more, farther away from the tap. The result was a ring of steam and smoke around the outer rim, but a sort of a dead-air protective circle the closer you got to the tap's walls and entrance.

Inside the tap's combined fortieth, forty-first, and forty-

second floors, the various ambassadors from around Ivria and most of Mostyn (and isles and antics) had gathered. They banqueted a new year of new staff and new policy initiatives, but really it was an excuse for well-connected wealthy people to get together and celebrate whatever culinary and aesthetic discovery one of their member realms had drummed up. (That, and negotiate terms of various deals, both aboveboard and under the table and backhanded.)

This year, the new delicacy was a sort of bowl made of a star-shaped grain called *sfensü* (named after the local word *sfen* for "vintage" and the ablative case: something *extracted away from* the vintage). *Sfensü* grew on mile-long vines with leaves so massive you could build a house on them, vines that now draped down into the Old Quarry through the remnants of the Sicilian that had been mined out of the planet's heart. In addition to the *sfensü* base, the delicacy used wild Imperial Crescent skyhog for the protein, and the entire affair was garnished with shaved pomace from some off-world persimmon and then topped with a Blazing World molasses. Sort of a culinary incarnation of the principle of Common Realms.

That was why most of them had come.

That, and the backdoor deals.

Frey had brought her daughter, Dövä (named after the Aruöfian word for ocean as well as the earthbound term for a bird of peace, a compromise she'd made with Jack). Dövä attended her mother to the main table, but Frey soon retreated to her office overlooking the landing on the forty-third floor, which in turn overlooked the banquet. From here she could see the folks in great flamboyant headgear and the most spartan skin-colored suits you could imagine moving around the cosmopolitan panoply of ambassadors.



The main color present was a dark grey, but that only tended to offset the other colors all the more vibrantly, city sidewalk and holiday style.

A man rose from the table from where Frey had left Dövä and went up to Frey's office. "Why don't you come dance with me?" he asked Frey.

"Sføne." She blushed every time she was forced to say his name, but she hid it better each time. She refused to translate it for her colleagues. "No thank you."

"Ask again later," he said. "Got it." He returned to the table.

Dövä watched him descend one of the many open and white marble spiral staircases that connected some of the floors. She watched him descend the whole way.

When he returned to his seat, she said, "My dad's coming."

"Oh?" Sføne said.

# 3

## DÖVĚ

**D**övě had been precocious from a very, very young age. By her eleventh month, she was speaking full sentences. By the fifteenth, two languages. By her second year, she could read by herself. By herself, alone in a room, two languages. An incredible mind for most children, though others might have beaten her.

By the age of four, she had read all of the children's books in her local library, the regional library, and the capital library—and she did it systematically so as not to overlook any cultures, any voices, any intellectual "foods" she didn't like. After that, she decided that the best of the adult world would be her oyster. So she moved on to the classics.

Her parents, however, ignored her. Both Jack and Frey. They seemed so preoccupied with themselves and their debate about... well, to Dövě it seemed like some complicated form of flirting. So she decided to pull pranks in order to get their attention. Once she glued her father's belt to his pant loops and buckle so that he couldn't pull them off. Jack struggled and struggled against it until he wet

his pants. She giggled in secret over that. Her dad's urine weaving skills could dry his pants quickly, but she had been delighted as a young girl to see him struggle and rage.

For her mom, Dövä hid a cockatiel in the oven, and the bird talked to her mother and drove her nuts in the kitchen. Days of that, days of laughing over that. Quite hilarious—until Frey lit the oven and murdered the poor bird.

That was what Dövä had come to this ball with: a slew of pranks.

She didn't hate her dad. She adored her dad. And seeing him descend the stairs made her love him even more, want to see him even more.

Her dad was coming.

Her dad was here.

# 4

## GYROCOMPASS

"What's that?" the carriage driver asked, pointing to the black stone gyroscope in Black Jack Dawes's hand. The wheels moved, wheels within wheels.

"Gyrocompass."

"Like on a ship?"

Jack Dawes raised an eyebrow. "How do you know about those?"

"My off-world grandfather works on ships."

"Something like that, only not on a world. It's attuned to the rotation and orbits of all planets, all times, all timelines to orient true to The Clockwork."

"The what?"

"It'll steer you where you need to be, when you need to be, what you need to be and whom and why and how and how much. If you let it. But it can't choose for you, let alone choose well. It's a pipeline to the archive."

The man said, "Archive of law reviews? Dissected insects?" He whipped the reins.

"Everything," Jack said. "Or at least most compasses

connect to the archive. This one's more of a local walkie-talkie."

"A what?"

"You know how when you're standing under one arch of the great dome in the Megameso capital building and your friend's standing at the other, you can hear each other whispering as if you're next to each other even if the place is full of busy, noisy folks?"

"Never been."

"Like that, but no building and no limit on the distance. This one won't connect to the archive."

"Why carry it?"

"So I can give it to drivers I like without worrying if they'll snoop around for dangerous info. Communication channels for events like these come in handy. I'm sure there's another onyx compass just like this inside."

# 5

## BRACER

Freya didn't think Jack would show. Jack hadn't shown for nine months now: she could have been pregnant and had a baby in this time. He was always helping everyone else but her and Dövë. Or it felt that way.

She saw the painting of the three of them surrounded by grandparents and cousins, and flanked by many, many in black world cloaks. Starlings. She took it off the wall and set it behind the bookshelf. It left an undusted, ungreased ghost spot on the wall. On her desk sat a stack of love letters he'd written her while on the road. She took that and tossed it into the top drawer.

Perhaps.

And... this was only a perhaps if Jack didn't show yet again.

Perhaps...

No. She couldn't dance with a man like Sföne.

But anyway, having the painting down and having the letters in a drawer felt like a nice little jab at her absent

husband. For good measure, she took the wedding ring off her right thumb and put it on top of the love letters.

Then she eyed the copper bracer on the desk. The one Sfòne had left her.

# 6

## EMERGENCY HAND CANNONS

The driver smiled at him. "Divorced?"  
Black Jack scoffed, grinning at the driver's wit.  
"Got sick of me helping everyone else but her and Dövä."

"Whom?"

"My daughter. *Our* daughter. She switched to embassy work down here to help herself."

"Her little quirk being a self-sufficient ambassador wasn't worth your time to help? You didn't want to move and help her?"

Jack said nothing.

"Cause it wasn't part of the story you're helping to weave. You wanted to help her in your own way, not help her with the part she wanted the help on."

"Yeah," Black Jack said. And scoffed again and smirked. He was impressed.

"Now that it demands your help — now that you got to come down here — you have to stop and fix what she prefers." They pulled up to the carriage line, with the great steam and smoke rising in a ring around the base of the tap.



Black Jack pointed to a sign: *WATCH FOR FALLING ROCKS*. "What rocks?" he said. "Mountain's clear."

"They vent the lava flow beneath by reverse gravity around the walls of the tap."

"Why?"

"Protects the surface of the building."

A great stone shot up into the air on the far end of the tap, arcing through the air until gravity reasserted itself, and then it fell straight for the platform. It crashed down to the side.

"What in the name of the Byline..." Jack said. "Why don't they protect these people?"

"If security needs to move a rock midair, they will."

"What if they're gone?"

"Then you have much bigger problems than falling rocks. It's just a light show that *feels* dangerous. Our horses are fine."

Carriages poured out of the various spokes of the platform's wheel, but this last bridge was reserved for those now arriving. Black Jack hopped down, turned back to the driver, and nodded at the compass. "Didn't get your name?"

"Krif Chtäysū Hochtälyi."

"Klühman?" Jack asked. "What's Ktæsû mean? To disrupt..."

"Disrupt a result. Theorize an outcome. Disturb an ending. Normally just Retriever."

"Huh. I guess a getaway driver does disrupt a result. And if he's your get-*to* driver, he theorizes an outcome. Can I call you Fetch?"

"All my Ivrian friends do."

"Don't feel like a dog?"

"Everyone is a dog in my culture. Krif is an honorific that means *dog*. Foreigners like you are stray mutts." He

nodded to the muddy outfit. "But there's only one white wolf."

Black Jack thought. "Hang on to that compass."

"If it goes badly, dome-whisper and we can ride. I'll be reading." He held up a book. "Bizarre novel about creatures called *cowboys*. They wield small emergency hand cannons, but they use them *all the time*. Wasteful, that quantity of brimstone. Perhaps it's meant for only the very, very rich? Yet I enjoy the novel so."

The rich. Westerns. Black Jack shook his head and headed down the path.

His foot scuffed something, and he almost tripped headlong, but caught himself. Turning, he looked to see what it was. A jagged, yellow stone had barred his way. He bent down and picked it up, his heart stirring. It looked like a block of sulfur, and had it been, it would have been a very clever find indeed. But as fool's gold fools prospectors, so this yellow stone had fooled an old brimstone weaver like him. He put it in his hat, tucked into the little compartment he kept at the top. For luck.

# 7

## SOARING DOWN

**T**he main attendant scrolled through. And scrolled through. "No Dawes other than a young girl." Jack's daughter. And his wife?

"Try Frey Sfansòrsi?" The last sound came out as if someone had grabbed his throat and choked him halfway through. That was how Frey had taught him: choking off his airway with her nails while grinning.

"Miss Sfansòrsi? is right at the top."

"Missus," he said.

"Take the nib out of the well and write down the floor you need," said the attendant. "In this case, forty-first. It summons a carved limestone pod that will fall up toward us. Write the floor again inside to confirm, and the reverse gravity will release and you will fly down to your floor. Have you never seen a descender such as this?"

"They call them elevators where I spend most of my time. They work the opposite in every way."

"How odd, Good Sir Dawes. Enjoy."

Sir. Pfft.

Jack wrote down a calligraphic 41, and two stone doors

opened without a hint of a sound, revealing a hand-carved box large enough to stand in. He stepped inside, started to write 41, and then wrote 42 instead. Instantly he felt the sensation of dropping. Even going as slow as the thing went, he hated that feeling. That feeling of...

Soaring down...

Soaring down...

...into the belly of the planet Gergia.

"Floor forty-two. Enjoy your visit."

He exited into much color and noise. The curved and floating shapes of people filled the landings above and below in silks and linens and wools and armor made of papier-mâché and chains topped with asymmetrical hats and other metal headgear. None would ride well on a horse, disguise well in the wild, or protect well from lightning or spear. No weaponry other than the collective armed force from the best troops of each nation of the Common Realms: trained as one, polyglots all, and defenders all of their homeland of all lands. Or all *participating* lands.

Something in Jack's poorer upbringing made him think of how he was dressed. He didn't like thinking of his Pit-damned outfit.

He scanned the crowd—and locked eyes with his little girl.

*Dövë*, he mouthed.

"*Dad!*" she screamed over her table's guests.

The guests looked at her and looked at where she was looking and saw Jack, looking down not on them, but his girl. But his eyes had moved, and when they turned to follow his gaze, *Dövë* had moved as well, sprinting up the closest ramp from the forty-first landing to the forty-second.

Jack didn't sprint, but he did hustle his long bow-legged strides.

They collided on the second step. She always hugged him tighter than anything. He felt the swelling of twenty-one bows on twenty-one heartstrings, a swell that vibrated his tear ducts. A great cathedral opened in him, one he could not quite shut the door upon, one that spoke of his bit role in this passion play.

## 8

### TO THRIVE

At five and a half, Dövä had gone off to school in The Tap at the request of her mother. Both the daycare and babysitters like Sföne had watched over Dövä, and Sföne in particular, astonished by Dövä's prowess in all things—though he ascribed it only to the mother and not to the father— had taken an interest in getting the girl tutors, and in finding her a mentor for her mind and powers.

Frey wanted nothing to do with this. She didn't want the tutors. She didn't want the mentor.

Dövä had thought this was because Frey didn't want her to thrive, to succeed. She told her as much.

Sföne, half wringing his hands, had fed this fire in hopes of ingratiating himself with the girl.

Frey didn't notice. But in the end, she didn't care about the ends so much as the means. She didn't know if she wanted Sföne getting that close to her daughter, both on account of Jack—her still-husband in her mind—and on account of Dövä's safety. Who knew what kind of man Sföne was, deep down?

Sfòne wanted to find the right mentor. He told Dövä as much.

Dövä thought she had to thrive. She had to. She felt as if she'd burst otherwise.

That was all before Dövä ran up to hug her father, Jack Dawes.

# 9

## SEX RITUALS

"Jack?" a woman said behind him.

He turned, his girl in hand, and barrel-carried her, flailing and giggling, up the two steps to meet his wife.

"Frey," he said. "You clean up good, young lady."

She smiled curtly. "The job."

She looked at his boots.

He expected scorn.

What he got was, "I would sooner accompany you on the trails than these others."

"Why don't you?" he asked.

"Because, Jackson Daweson, on the trail it grows difficult to notice when your wife and daughter have need of your help more than some stranded traveler."

He winced.

An elder statesman walked up with skin tinged green.

Frey said, "Jack Dawes, my boss, Krif Hemē Kraswa."

"Good to meet you, you dog," Jack said.

Frey blushed. "Jack!"

But Hemē smiled. "You know Klühman culture better than your wife?"



Frey looked between them both.

"Nah, I just ask different questions," Jack said. "What's the name mean?"

Frey looked between the two of them again, out of her depth.

"Kraswa is a season. Hemē is warm."

"Summer?" Jack asked.

"Yes, but as a name—"

"A Great Fien. Hot weather dog. Big dog," Jack said. "Stately and great for hunting. Good to meet you, Great Fien."

Hemē grinned and looked at the muddy wear of Black Jack Dawes. "That wisdom for a foreigner... yes, I sense that would make you not Krif, but Trulas U. Wolf of the Sun."

Jack felt a mild shock. "But there's only one?"

"One *white* wolf. But to be a dog of Sister Wild is a great honor. To be *born* a dog outside the city, with a pack, and to see other dogs for who they are. This is to be a wolf of honor. And you are hunter of men and hunter of deep ideas and of the lightweaver. I will file the forms to make you Wolf of the Sun. Trulas U."

"Trul... Trul like music?" Frey asked, desperate to get a handhold in the sea of diplomacy she had been thrown into by her husband.

"Trul means music, yes. As for the best..." The music of the ball almost overwhelmed Hemē's words, and he grimaced at it. "The best music is a wolf—U—Trulas U—in the wild on the hunt, patter of paw on the plain in search of sweeter prey. Shall we go somewhere we might hear better?"

They walked the river-shaped walkway on the forty-second floor, the long ramp-shaped walkway that carved a white arc across the back of the ballroom—one step up, five steps forward, one step up. The bank of

administrative offices overlooked the pageantry and meetings and tables.

Hème opened the door to Frey's office, revealing Sfòne. He was seated in her office chair, his open palm on fire, his eyes rolled back in his head.

Frey gasped.

Hème cleared his throat.

Sfòne snapped to attention and threw the fistful of what remained of the methaqualoin into the galvanized steel trashcan.

Frey and Hème had already entered the office, but Jack stood in the doorway and kept Dövä at his back to spare her the sight.

Sfòne stood and extended his still-smoking black palm to Jack. "Sfòne. Nice to meet you."

Frey blushed at his name.

Jack never used honorifics. Never. But something boiled in his chest. "Captain Black Jack Dawes, first division of Storyweaver Private Council, tier one Archive, privy counsel to Nerari."

He did not take the proffered hand, but glared at it instead.

Sfòne turned to Frey. "Did you show your husband the bracer I—we, the office—gave you?"

"No," Frey said.

"Show him."

"No."

"You'll love it, Jack. Golden inlay. Made for this tap. An anti-gravity bracer, good as any collar. Keeps you from falling up to your death on the surface if you find yourself outside the wall or stuck in a shaft." He nodded toward the floor and the lift shafts outside the office.

"I'll talk with you later," Hème said to Sfòne, pointing with his pinky out the door.

Sfòne left, tail tucked.

"Apologies," Hème said. "Wonderful negotiator and salesman. Terrible at tending himself. I presume you have extra dignitary clothes that will fit your husband?"

Jack pursed his upper lip so as to block his nostrils.

"Of course," Frey said, grinning.

With a nod, her boss departed, closing the door behind him after waving Dövë inside.

"Sfansòrsi?" Jack said.

Frey didn't move.

"You put Sfansòrsi? as your surname on the manifest in the atrium."

Frey said, "Can you stay with me? The kids would love that."

"Please, dad?" Dövë begged.

Jack grimaced at his daughter and turned back to Frey. "One second. When did Sfansòrsi? become a thing?"

"It's an Aruöfian office. I needed an Aruöfian name."

"And an Aruöfian boyfriend?"

Frey didn't answer that.

Jack noticed the edge of the old commissioned painting poking out from behind the bookshelf. He looked for, but could not find, the love letters he'd painstakingly composed for her. His lettering wasn't too good, so writing them took forever.

Frey's sleeve fell to her elbow to expose the bracer the addict had given her.

Jack scoffed at it.

"Daddy..." Dövë said, looking between the two.

"Change into something presentable," Frey said.

Black Jack grumbled. "For Dövë. For tonight."

"I must give my policy speech," Frey said. "Dövä, come."

"Can't I stay?" she pleaded.

"Daddy must change. Then join you at table."

"Oh, good."

"On what?" Jack asked.

"Brimstone shortages," Frey said. "And water rights for Forayn."

"They don't dig on off years?"

She smiled. "Not everything comes down to sex rituals, Jack."

He glanced at his daughter.

Who seemed none the wiser.

Jack looked at his wife while pointing at his daughter. "Kay." He watched them pass through the smoked glass door and, in blurry silhouettes, walk down the walkway in front of the big bay window. The shadow of his daughter's hand waved as the rest of her form was pulled ahead.

Jack then turned to the doom his bride had deemed: a closet full of fabulous men's wear in every shape and size and color.

"Save me. Save from this hell," he prayed to the Author in whom he most certainly did not believe.

# IO

## SEWING KIT

Upstairs—or down, depending—the man at the front desk in the lobby looked up. A group of men dressed in outfits identical to himself and the rest of security were approaching, but he did not recognize a single one of them. For a group so large, this could not be a shift change. Something at the back of his mind stirred.

"Good evening, sirs," he said.

"Good evening, officer. I wonder if you could help me with something."

The desk guard cocked his head.

The man in the blue uniform and double-breasted brass buttons pulled out a long, slender stylet—what had once, it seemed, been a skewer for holding slabs of meat. His lips moved to some unknowable tongue, and a great static yellow thread snaked up from his backpack, attached to the handle of the meat skewer, and *shot forth from the tip as lightning*.

It blew a smoking hole clean through the desk guard's chest.

The storm of new arrivals pulled swords and ran to meet the suddenly onrushing crowd. Bolt after bolt was sent

at them by the guards of the Common Realm's tap, and a couple of the newcomers found themselves cut down before they could get off any lightning. But others among them called up full sheets of that yellow stuff in a great warp.

One called up water from a wineskin at his side. A web string attached to the end of a three-hole punch (though most there had no idea what the purpose of the three-hole punch was). He used the hole punch as a needle and wove the weft of water into the warp of the yellowness. Then he poured liquid electricity into the cracks in the floor, and all the lights not run by gas or other fuel began shuddering.

A second man, an oily-haired type they called Oily Oscar, wove oil into lightning and gathered it up into buckets, then painted the innermost walls with the stuff, creating a sort of makeshift electric fencing on the things they didn't want anyone to touch.

Still others met blade for blade. The captain of the Common Realm's guard—who towered seven feet, three hundred pounds of brawn and bastard sword—charged at a newcomer with red hair pouring from his crown like a waterfall of blood. Steel met steel—one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight—and on the ninth the redcrown gutted the captain in a flash of red.

The redcrown giggled.

The captain died.

A comrade of the redcrown finished off the captain with a flash of lightning.

The bell from the descenders rang just as the oilweaver finished painting the floor. An entire platoon of reinforcements emerged from all eight doors to defend the tap—a truly massive quantity of Common Realm guards.

They stepped onto the oil-lightning weave...

And lit up like smoking, lightning-struck evergreen trees.

They dropped to the floor. Dead.

"Sewing kit?" the redcrown asked the now-calm brimstone weavers. "I seem to have nicked my nips."

"Propriety, Krif Luwof. This is a house of diplomacy," said a man in black while rifling through the pockets of a smoking corpse, searching for spare change.

## II

### FETCH

Fetch, the driver, was deep in his novel. He heard shouts outside his carriage, but why would that concern him? Tons of men were moving around. The stables had closed so that carriages couldn't get out. Someone had blocked off the exits so that none could leave.

That must be awful for those drivers.

But not for Fetch, who went back to reading on the clock.



## 12

### CRESCENT SOLDIERS

The redcrown, Luwof, and his boss, the man in black—both disguised as Crescent soldiers, like the rest of their contingent—had taken control of the lobby, and now they descended to the lower floors. They de-enchanted and re-enchanted the descenders so that they wouldn't bring people to the surface, but would work only between the fortieth floor and the viewing window down near the end tip of the tap, in the belly of the volcano. On the way, they dimmed or extinguished the lights in the windows that could be seen from the seven bridges and the edge of the crater.

# I3

## THAT MUCH BRIMSTONE

**B**lack Jack Dawes put on the lava gloves Fetch had given him. Apart from the gloves—and his hat, the rock still inside—he stood as naked as a jayber crow. Renaud's is a shitty disease if it's bad, especially for contractors and blue-collar men who like to work outside. Keeps all the toes and fingers on the verge of frostbite and necrotic rot even in cool weather, but the belly fiery and ready to go. The gloves... they did kind of make up for it.

He placed them on the mirror as Fetch had told him. The mirror fogged. He looked at the seven outfits laid out across the offensively large vanity, closed the bathroom door, and felt like drowning. And he *had* drowned many times, Overmorrow and otherwise. He looked to the black gyroscopic compass on the edge of the sink and thought to call the driver and thank him for the gloves, the outfits still haunting his periphery.

A crack of thunder, followed by a flash of lightning, deafened him. Thunder *indoors*. Jack didn't have time to put on clothes, but he saw his Crowfoot on the counter and snagged it, hat on, leaving the compass behind.

He touched the knob of the door. It was cold. No fire. He cracked the door, peeking. The room lay empty but for couches, the various hand-carved behemoth desks, the odd trinkets from odd diplomatic missions he'd never quite understood. Frey negotiated with people while Jack smoked with them. Of course, Frey would have said soldiers smoked and diplomats wined and dined, and only one of those got people killed. Jack would have said it was the whining done while wining and dining that got people killed, that those who whine ended up sending younger and better men to fight in their stead. And they would have argued for an hour. Hell, he was already arguing in his head, and she wasn't even there. Love was—

Thunder cracked again.

He moved past the leathern sofas and dimmed the lights so they wouldn't backlight him against the smoked-glass windows. He went to the next door and cracked it ever so slightly, the wind pressure *whoooooing* through the open space. The building had filled up with men who looked like guards—were it not for the large amount of lightning they sent forth to kill others in the same dress. Many people screamed, and the air smelled of sulfur and static charge and barbecue, a rain-canceled grillout without the rain. The only difference he could see on any of the new guards—other than stylets wielded by these folks dead-set on blowing holes through their opponents—were small backpacks from which they drew their brimstone.

That much brimstone...

Fetch might have pointed out it was the operating budget of any one of the countries in the room.

They swarmed both the forty-first landing and the forty-second, and were already sweeping through the rooms. Jack looked for an exit through the little crack, but

saw none. Didn't they have some sort of fire escape in these rooms? Some sort of hatch?

Still naked but for the hat and the warming gloves, Jack went right instead of left, away from the bathroom and deeper into the ambassador's offices, hoping for some sign of... something. He called up a warp of air with his Crowfoot. He wasn't a proper windweaver by any stretch, but any high-ratio warp and low-ratio catalyst could be done by an expert. He wove a tiny weft of the wood of the ambassador's desk into the warp of the wind he'd called up. A sheet of smoke sank to the floor and spread through the room.

He could hear crashing in the offices adjacent to him, and glanced over his shoulder. *Come on*, he mouthed at the weave.

The smoke seemed to find an outlet and went beneath the crack in a wall beside a minibar shaped like a globe of Gergia (the incorrect map). There was a secret door there—if only he could find out how to open it.

Jack yanked on bottles, but nothing worked. He started pulling on cups, and nothing worked. He opened and closed the hatch, and eventually found himself staring at the map.

Someone crashed through the door in the room just behind him.

Jack remembered the nationality of Hême and looked to Fain. He touched both potential sites of Hême's hometown—depending on the year of the mating ritual—and felt two invisible little buttons depress beneath his fingers.

A door in the wall swung wide, revealing the main stairwell. Jack stepped inside and closed the door quietly behind him.

# 14

## A LITTLE PLUNGE

"Good evening, fellow dogs," the Klühman man in black said to the screaming guests. It calmed some down, but increased the volume and pitch of others. Folks ran around, great ribbons and streamers of colors trailing behind them.

"*Chea!*" he shouted.

The room stilled.

"Fellow mongrels, we shall be done here shortly. Your party shall resume tomorrow morning."

A very short, very fat, very red-faced dignitary said, "Kidnapping? A ransom for us from our nations? Because I can tell you if that is the case we take a solemn—"

"Oath to die, yes, dear mutt, I am aware."

"Then what?"

"Assassinate you if you keep asking questions. I'll put you down like the rabid dog you are."

Screeches sounded around the room.

The Klühman man in black frowned. "Stiller and stiller be, and I may yet let you leave with your lives and posts. Be good little pups on their first prowl."