

CITY OF BRIDGES

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The Messenger

Leonie waited silently, blending into the shadows, aided by her fine layer of glossy black fur and dark clothing. Her view encompassed the centuries-old palace, its walls rough quarried stone, the windows on the upper levels blocked up.

From her vantage point on the rooftop of a large warehouse in Portside, she looked north-east across the harbour over the sprawling island city of Delta. The wealthy and elite lived on this side, with the poor, the unclean, the crossbreeds and half-breeds shunned to the low-lying eastern sector where the swamp was most prominent. All other citizens lived in-between; their location dependent on their social standing.

It took a little time to get over here; bridges linked the many islands making up the bulk of the city. If you knew your way around like she did, you could avoid the guarded checkpoints.

She did not visit Portside often. It was too open, too clean and the streets too well-lit and patrolled. It was regarded as far too dangerous for most, unlike the shadowy backstreets of Dockside; her familiar grounds to the east. *But the pickings are much better over here*, she reminded herself. Any unauthorised crossbreeds found in the area were subject to severe penalty; branding was the initial punishment, fingers and toes went next.

The Grand Plaza, jutting into the harbour, was where the bulk of trading took place, and therefore deemed neutral territory, open to everyone. When strolling through the Plaza, Leonie often heard travellers comment on how picturesque the port was, some comparing it to the ancient and glorious city of Reenat, the capital of Athglenn.

Delta might look beautiful, but beneath the façade lay a cesspool of greed, intolerance and corruption. Religious sects constantly vied for dominance. Opportunists were there for whatever information they could sell. And half-bloods were less than nothing. As a crossbreed and thief raised in the slums, she knew the seedier side. Any tainted lineage was despised by the full-blooded, bringing disdain and ridicule mostly, or violence if they could get away with it.

The Eternal Gardens stood near the base of the palace outer wall closest to the water. They had been created as a remembrance for those who perished in the blaze which destroyed the city's most elegant structure, the Temple of Eternix.

Leonie shivered. Cold despair washed over her at the disturbing memory of children and women losing their lives in the smoke and flames; her mother one of them. Leaning against a chimney, she took a moment to calm herself and restore her poise. It was dangerous enough travelling the roofs at night. She didn't need any mental distractions.

A large obelisk stood at the end of the street. As Leonie watched, the crystal at its peak began to glow with a magical aura, as did other monuments scattered around the city.

Unexpected movement distracted Leonie's contemplation of the obelisk. Two shadowy human figures made their way along the tiled rooftops of the buildings to her left, heading towards the waterfront. Her uncanny balance enabled her to use the sloping rooftops with ease, but humans usually stuck to the gloom and shadows of the alleys below.

Over the years Jade, her mentor and boss, repeatedly warned her; curiosity was her biggest weakness. Leonie agreed. Who these two figures were and what they were up to consumed her. No other thief in the city matched her skills, but this pair showed remarkable speed and agility. *I need answers.*

Swiftly paralleling their course, she kept one lane between them, her bare paws making little noise on the slate tiles. *What are they doing?* The figures furtively moved with a clear purpose. *Who or what would call for such scrutiny from these two?*

Her attention snapped back to the Palace. Five armoured riders were exiting through the main gates.

"Interesting," she muttered, curious what could make guards leave the palace so early in the morning and in such a hurry. She rhythmically balled then flexed the fingers of her paws, claws extending and retracting reflexively as she gazed across the streets below. The guards were making their way down the road, turning at the junction, heading towards the docks.

Dropping lithely onto a balcony, Leonie gathered herself before the drop to street level. Once on the ground, she crossed the lane, silently melding with the shadows along the wall of the same building as the would-be burglars, using the eaves as cover.

A few strides in front of her, a door opened, casting a shaft of light across the cobblestones. Too close to evade, she passed the door in a flash, hoping she would be unnoticed in her dark, close-fitting attire. A noisome odour assailed her as she passed, her nose wrinkling in recognition.

Dogs!

No sooner had the thought formed when two small terriers darted out, setting up a constant yapping. The noise they made belied their pathetically small stature. These dogs were no physical threat but could alert others to Leonie's presence. Picking up speed, she sprinted down an alley, heading for the smelliest pile of refuse she could find hoping they'd lose her scent or at least their interest in her. Sure enough, within moments, the racket faded as the dogs found something more appealing. Now she could concentrate on determining the exact whereabouts of the strangers. She was concerned the dogs may have alerted them.

Pausing at the alley's exit, she scanned the area carefully. The street ended at the wharf where a newly arrived ship had docked. Coming from the direction of the gangplank, a man swaggered down the centre of the street. He carried a heavy satchel over one shoulder, oblivious to the attention from the rooftop pair.

His dark clothing and small cape were of good quality, but the twin gryphon plumes jutting from his hat marked him a guild courier. Anyone who interfered with their passage would be liable for severe punishment, which no doubt resulted in his cock-sure attitude. He was still about twenty paces away but moving closer, walking down the centre of the road.

Leonie hugged the shadows. Judging from the occasional creaking above, the devious pair must be close. The man's lack of awareness appalled her. *Some people are so deaf.*

"Psst. You're in danger." Gaining the courier's attention, she pointed up.

The man tensed and looked around, his gaze locking onto her location. Stepping away, his hand rested on the pommel of his blade.

"Move to cover. Quickly!" she hissed.

At the same time, a dark shape slid down a rope four paces to Leonie's left. Except for the narrow slit around the eyes, a dark grey close-fitting suit covered the figure from head to foot.

In one fluid motion, the courier leapt back drawing his rapier. A faint hiss sounded, simultaneously. Something tiny struck the road near where he'd been standing.

Darts? Leonie's hackles raised. Assassins!

Silently, the assassin on the ground pulled a blowpipe from a slim arm pocket. Leonie crept up close behind him. He'd finished loading and was raising the pipe to his lips when a sudden yapping nearby caused him to hesitate.

The assassin turned towards the sound, noticing Leonie's presence. He raised an arm to fend off her claw-swipe, face showing his surprise. The impact of her strike knocked the blowpipe from his grasp and lacerated his right wrist. Recovering, he manoeuvred to give himself room, drew a blade with his left hand and flicked it at her with barely a glance.

Leonie saw its dull glow the moment he drew it. *Power!* She jumped straight up, twisting nimbly. The dagger embedded in her left calf. Hissing in pain, she spun in mid-air, kicked off the wall, and flung herself at him. Clawed rage descended.

Fear etched the assassin's face; his eyes widened and mouth opened in shock. He uttered a cry in a foreign language. Swift on his feet, he dove to the side, tripping on the uneven flagstones. The yapping dogs were quick to move in with the excitement.

The courier stepped in and thrust his rapier between the writhing frenzy of dogs. The assassin groaned as the blade deeply penetrated the light armour and ribs.

Leonie landed gingerly beside the dead man. She gritted her teeth as she swiftly pulled the assassin's dagger from her calf. "Too bad you missed those mutts."

Before he could reply, the courier stiffened and fell to the cobbles at her feet.

Ignoring the blood running down her leg, Leonie dragged him under an awning. From his reaction to the dart, it was a fast-acting poison.

The courier convulsed. He tried to say something, but his lungs were almost paralysed. He feebly attempted to pass his satchel to her. A message entered her head.

Take to Qelay. Styx. Hrolta— The thought hit her mind as his body spasmed one final time. He gave a last gasp. Leonie froze at the sight of his bleeding eyes and frothy mouth. His hand tightened on her arm one last time before he died.

The dogs grew silent; one of them distracted by something behind her. With the dagger still in her paw, she reacted purely on reflex, spinning and hurling the dagger from the hip at the approaching shadow. Snagging the satchel with a claw, she leapt away without a backward glance. She landed a few paces further than the average human could. The injured leg failed her, turning her exit into an untidy sprawl. Rolling awkwardly, she came up hard against a wall. She was about to get up to bolt away but realised there was no follow-up attack. Three dark lifeless figures lay in the street.

The dogs sensed something unusual in the night; maybe the smell of death affected them. They started howling a short distance away. Yapping was one thing, but this din would draw a curious crowd. Picking up a stone, she hurled it at them, scoring a glancing blow. One dog yelped and ran off; its companion followed, taking their noise with them.

Slinging the satchel over her shoulders, she limped closer to the bodies.

The first assassin lay in a pool of his own blood; the courier *and* the second assassin had blood and froth covering their faces. The dagger which she'd thrown was the same dagger that hit her. Her instinctive throw did not hit a vital area, but he was just as dead. Stunned by the realisation, she tried to quell a rising panic. She'd been poisoned too! *Why aren't I dead now? How much time have I got?*

Finding nothing more than another glowing dagger, two blowpipes, and a small wallet of darts, she stowed what she could in the satchel. Perhaps these items could reveal information; maybe the type of poison used, or the particular clan of assassins involved.

Slashing a length from the courier's cape, Leonie bandaged her leg wound to staunch the bleeding. Tempting as it was to examine the bag's contents, the clatter of approaching hooves gave her notice to be on her way.

"Time to go," she muttered, plucking the plumes from the courier's hat as an afterthought. Whatever house the courier represented, they'd want to know what happened. Sliding the courier's rapier through her belt, she melted into the shadows as the palace guards trotted into sight.

After almost stumbling into a patrol of guardsmen a few blocks later, she slowed down. The bag's contents bounced, the weight bruising her shoulder and back as she moved awkwardly. *What's so important to assassinate a courier?* she wondered repeatedly. Curiosity burned within her to check out the satchel's contents, but not as much as the fire in her leg. *Jart'lekk assassins don't come cheap.*

Leonie pushed on before she became another victim. She recalled the horrible deaths of the others; their contorted faces of froth and blood.

Tightening the straps so the heavy satchel wouldn't bounce, she returned to Dockside, fighting the strong urge to curl up in a corner and sleep. Returning proved difficult. Her left leg refused to cooperate; her whole side began to numb. It wasn't until she felt the coarse planks of Dockside beneath her paws, she realised she was well within the Taker's guild territory. Staggering, Leonie leaned heavily against a rough wooden wall. She noticed the spotter sitting in the shadows. *Asleep*, her mind vaguely registered. *He's earned a rude awakening.* When she moved, her leg buckled, turning her step into a full collapse.

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Opening her eyes, Leonie groaned. Jagged agony knifed through her head. She turned away from the sunlight streaming in through the window. After a short pause allowing her nausea to subside, she slowly cracked her eyes open again.

She found herself in a vaguely familiar room. Her fuzzy mind refused to work. Motes of dust swirled gently, rising and falling as they passed through the fingers of light clawing their way to the back of her eyes.

Averting her eyes from the harsh light, she saw a jug and cup on a table by the bed. Her fingers fumbled, spilling half the contents over her and the sheets. It was all she could do to

raise the cup to her lips and drain it before slumping into the pillows. Darkness engulfed her again, dragging her back into unconsciousness. With a rattle, the dropped cup hit the floor and rolled away.

She heard a door open and close. Soft footsteps approached. Her eyes fluttered open.

“Morning,” Jade greeted her.

Leonie’s attempted reply was a mere grunt.

“Cat got your tongue?” Jade placed the satchel at the end of the bed. “I’m glad you returned to the land of the living.” She poured water, then helped Leonie sit up. “Your continued existence with us wasn’t cheap. Luckily you had the foresight to bring samples. It’s capable of killing a man in thirty seconds.”

“I counted twenty,” Leonie croaked.

“Ah, we can speak. Good. The herb lore to counteract the poisons of the Jart’lekk isn’t well-known. Your resilience to the poison is astounding.” Jade placed the jug and glass on the table. “The apothecary didn’t think you’d make it. I’ll have to pay him extra. I don’t like assassins wandering my streets, or trying to kill you.” Jade pulled up a chair beside the bed and lifted the flap of the bag. “I can only assume curiosity got the better of you, and you got a tad too close. Again.” She crossed her long legs and sat back, fingering the plumes in her hands. “Enlighten me. What happened?”

With frequent pauses to drink and catch her strength, Leonie related all she could. By the end, it had exhausted her.

Jade stood up with a nod. “You need more rest. I’ll get the boys out to dig up what they can. If the Jart’lekk know who you are, you’re not safe. They hate loose ends, and with the death of two of them, they will seek vengeance.” She was through the door before Leonie could reply.

Leonie lay back, frustrated at the weakness that assailed her. *Why assassins? What was so important?* She succumbed to a sleep filled with disturbing images of running down dark alleys, footsteps all around, yet with no one in sight.

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