

At the Sign of the Crow and Moon

Sorcery Ascendant Sequence, prequel

by Mitchell Hogan, ...

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Ten years before the events of the Sorcery Ascendant Sequence...

“We go in quickly,” Felicieenne Shyrise said.

She stood next to her three-tiered Dominion board, toying with one of the tiny pieces: her favorite, the Crow and Moon. It was fleet and hard to catch and, if moved strategically, cleverly, could execute a devastating closing move.

“I’ll post some of the street children to keep a watch for us, but we tell them to scatter before we go in. Larard will have a few of his perverted cronies with him, but if we can separate him from them, they’ll run. They know what they’ve done, and they don’t want to swing on the end of a rope.”

The murders along the canals had been particularly gruesome, and when the locals had become frustrated with the city watch’s inept inquiries and lack of progress, they’d turned to her. She’d looked into the odd murder or two before, but she’d built her reputation on finding missing goods and people, as well as sorting out disputes. A group made up of relatives of the deceased had passed a hat around and come to hire her. She’d almost said no, since it wasn’t her area of expertise, and it was far more dangerous territory. And what they’d scraped together didn’t come close to covering her expenses, but the despair on their faces made her reconsider. That, and the chance to give the city watch a poke in the eye.

Her assistant, Avigdor, had a pained expression on his face. He sat across the office from her while the mercenaries she’d hired a week ago, when she realized she might need some muscle for this job, lounged against a wall in between stacks of books that had overflowed from stuffed bookcases. Squall and Whisper, they called themselves. One short and lean and garrulous, one big and tall and quiet. False names, as you’d expect. Both shrewd, and too competent to be hiring themselves out to her, but she’d look into that later.

“Don’t worry,” she said to Avigdor. “You’re not coming along.” She paid him well, but not well enough to risk his life. She’d worked hard to build up her investigative business from nothing, and without him it would implode. Felice was the brains behind the outfit and its driving force, but Avigdor was the organizational genius. There was no one else offering similar services in The Capital, the first city of the Mahruse Empire. Well, at least no one not directly in the employ of the Emperor.

“I’m not... I prefer the paperwork,” he said, slightly embarrassed. “The research. And I’m still recovering.”

How he’d caught a case of the bloody flux, she’d never know, but he was always eating something. Perhaps he’d ingested some off meat from a street vendor.

“Sounds simple,” Squall said. He was the lean one, with a slender sword his hand was always near.

Whisper grunted.

Squall chuckled. “No, nothing ever is,” he said.

“They’re torturing and killing people,” Felice reminded them. “For their own amusement. The neighborhood is living in fear. If things get ugly, don’t hesitate to—”

“Run them through?” suggested Squall. “Stick them? Slice their—”

“Yes, I get it. Just”—she waved a hand—“do what you need to.” She wasn’t used to this type of job. Violence was a rarity in her line of work. The occasional cheating husband caught in the act might lash out, but most were contrite and ashamed.

Squall gave her a mocking grin and a half salute. She marked the gesture he made: it was similar to the one the soldiers in the city used. He'd made the motion with familiarity, which meant he was either an ex-soldier or mocking her or still one...

"I've made a copy of our investigation," Avigdor said. "So when you deliver Larard to the city watch, you can hand over the evidence we've gathered. It's more than enough to convince them of his guilt."

"And there should be more in his house," Felice said. "But we'll leave that to the watch. They shouldn't be able to stuff that up. Squall, Whisper, do you need anything else?"

Squall shook his head. "We're yours to command. At least until your coin dries up."

"Let's go, then." Felice replaced the Dominion piece, then tugged on her red coat and buckled her knife belt around her waist. She'd been training with them for a while, and felt confident her skill with the two blades was now an asset rather than a liability.

Following Squall and Whisper, she paused just outside her door. A sign sporting a full moon behind the silhouette of a crow was bolted above the doorway. Something easily recognizable to the mostly illiterate citizens. She'd purchased the building and opened the office in East Farewell three years ago, and she was still here.

Not for long, she vowed. A high-profile case like this, satisfactorily resolved, and she was going places.

The girl's temperature was dropping fast. Blood seeped from a deep gash in her side, soaking into Felice's lap. It was warm and sticky, and Felice didn't care if it ruined the trousers she'd bought only the other day. She applied more pressure to the wound and banged on the ceiling of the carriage with a fist. "Hurry up! There's another silver in it if she makes it there alive."

A silver for a life. How bleak.

Felice's seat rattled as the carriage sped along cobbled roads, bumping into and out of ruts worn in the stone by wheels over the years. Through the window, globes of light flashed past. The Sorcerers' Guild lit many of the main thoroughfares with their arcane spheres, though they did little to penetrate the thick early morning mist. The same mist that slowed their progress.

"I'm sorry, Mistress Shyrise, I really am." On the seat opposite, Squall had his sheathed sword clutched in one hand, and beside him sat the brawny Whisper, with only a dagger tucked into his belt.

"I paid her," Squall continued, "and told her to go. I didn't know she'd hang around."

"Her name's Flo," Felice snapped. "And I pay you to be aware. Not to miss details."

She knew she shouldn't be angry at Squall, but she couldn't help herself. Flo's brother was one of those Larard had killed, and the girl had wanted to help bring her brother's murderer to justice. Felice smoothed sweat-damp hair away from Flo's face. She hadn't wanted to use the urchins, hadn't wanted them involved

with Larard. But they'd helped her on previous cases, and with her limited resources, it had been the only way to track him down.

Felice had thought she'd covered all the angles, taken all the precautions. And this was the result. Larard had escaped, and a girl was dying. His cronies had run, as expected, but Larard had managed to gather up most of the evidence and torch the place on his way out. And in the process had run into Flo, who'd tried to stop him, and caught a foot of cold steel for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Felice had had to choose between saving the girl, getting the evidence, and catching Larard—she could only do two. She'd salvaged what evidence she could from the fire—scraps of scorched parchment—while Squall and Whisper had spirited Flo outside to safety.

Not for the first time, Felice wished she had more power, more resources, more connections. Then no one would have been hurt.

“Flo? Is that short for something?” Whisper said.

The carriage veered sharply to the left, and Felice held the girl tight. “What? I don't know. I didn't ask.” She should have. She took pride in knowing things. You never knew when a tidbit of information might come in handy.

“She'll recover,” Whisper said.

Squall glanced at him, then nodded.

And not for the first time, Felice wondered which of the two made the decisions. Whisper was probably right. But there was a lot of blood soaking Felice's pants. And there was always a chance something could go wrong. A nicked artery, or an infection of the wound.

She had plans in motion. Plans that would set her up to take advantage of the nobles' largesse. Plans that didn't involve being responsible for the death of a young girl.

Pignuts, she cursed to herself.

“I'll bloody take them all down,” she hissed. Sticking cold steel into a street urchin, a waif, and for what? Nothing.

Because the girl had seen Larard and tried to stop him.

Because Felice had placed her there.

Flo's blood was on her hands. It was her fault.

But if playing Dominion had taught her anything, it was that no cause was hopeless.

Felice tipped her purse and poured her remaining silver and copper ducats into the physiker's cupped hands.

“It's a single stab wound, Andzew,” she said. “Take care of her. I'll be back in the afternoon.”

Flo lay on a bed with clean sheets, which were already stained crimson. She let out low moans of distress.

Andzew, who they'd roused from his warm bed far earlier than he usually rose, stared at the coins with bleary eyes.

“Y-yes,” he stammered. “Of course. She needs assistance, but...this isn't enough.”

Felice had had occasion to use Andzew before. He could be trusted to keep her business secret. "I'm good for it." She held the physiker's gaze. Maybe she could sell one of her investments. She'd soon make it all back, and then some, at the Dominion tournament coming up.

Andzew pursed his lips, then broke eye contact. "Of course."

Felice looked at Squall and Whisper, expecting them to comment on the ducats she'd spent on Flo's welfare, which was far more than she'd paid them for this job. But Squall was merely poking around the physiker's workroom, and Whisper stared back blankly, as if he didn't have a thought in the head perched atop his seven-foot frame. Felice knew different, though. She was more and more certain Whisper was actually the brains of the outfit, and Squall the killer. She imagined they took quite a few people off guard.

Andzew dumped the coins unceremoniously onto a table and quickly washed his hands. He then examined the makeshift dressing they'd applied to the wound.

"You two." Felice pointed at the mercenaries. "We'll settle this today. You'll be paid, so don't worry on that score."

Whisper remained motionless. Squall glanced at the big man then turned to Felice and nodded.

Felice crouched beside the door of one of the houses Larard used as a bolt-hole. Squall had confirmed Larard was inside, along with a couple of thugs, as only a few minutes ago the murderer had come outside for more firewood. Since then, the place had been deathly quiet.

She nodded to Whisper.

Wood splintered and shrieked in protest as Whisper's shoulder hammered into the door, and it broke into pieces. Squall darted into the semidarkness inside, blade drawn, and Felice followed the pair.

Time to put an end to Larard and his depravations once and for all.

A dozen hard-looking men and women aimed crossbows at them. Soldiers, by their dark gray uniforms and black boots. Standard-issue weapons, mass manufactured and stamped with the Mahruse Empire's crest.

"By the ancestors," Felice said as both Squall and Whisper dropped their weapons and raised their hands.

The room was in disarray. Overturned chairs were strewn across the floor, along with broken glass. Two men she recognized as Larard's were kneeling, badly beaten, with their hands tied, and two more lay motionless in pools of blood. Larard himself, the degenerate hulking blacksmith, was tied to a chair and glaring venom at Felice and everyone around him.

Sorcery, realized Felice. *It has to be*. There was no other way to conceal the entrance of so many men and the subsequent commotion.

Sitting at a table, one hand holding a crystal glass containing wine, was a nondescript woman. Short brown hair, graying at the scalp. Brown eyes. Serviceable clothes of middling quality. She could have been anyone. If you passed her in the street, you wouldn't have looked at her twice.

Felice observed the woman's boots under the table: custom made from leather of the highest quality. There was a faint scent of jasmine and rose in the air, and an

even fainter ambergris—an expensive perfume and hard to obtain. Felice should know. She had a few ounces squirreled away for special occasions, procured in a not-so-legal manner. Why should the nobles keep all the good stuff?

“I’m sorry,” the woman said. “The early bird and all that.” She nodded to her men, and they dragged the bodies and the bound men outside, straight through the pools of blood, leaving wide smears across the floor. Tipping the chair Larard was tied to, they bundled him out as well. Its legs scraped jarringly.

Felice narrowed her eyes. To command these men, and sorcery along with them, this was no ordinary noble. Felice knew she was in trouble. A great deal of trouble.

“Who the hells are you?” she said. She realized she was tugging one of her earrings and willed herself to stop. The fact was, though, the power this woman commanded sent chills through her. In her haste to catch Larard and his men, Felice had broken two of her rules: Watch your back, and always have contingency plans.

“You’ve arrived a little later than we expected,” the woman said. “But you’ve done surprisingly well. Better than my men did, and they’re trained to do their job well. Congratulations are in order. I applaud you. But you’ve created problems for us, Felicieenne Shyrise.”

She knew her name. This was getting worse and worse. “In what way?” Felice snapped. “We tracked Larard and his perverted friends.”

The woman smiled. “Quite right. Larard is in my custody now, although, alas, his two surviving men will not see the next dawn.”

“My job’s done, then,” Felice gambled. “We’ll see ourselves out.” It was a feeble ploy, but it would give her time to think.

Both Squall and Whisper nodded eagerly, stopping when crossbows twitched in their direction.

The woman shook her head. “Oh, dear me, no. Please stay a moment. Indulge me.”

Felice drew a deep breath. They didn’t have many options unless they wanted to end up as pincushions. “What do you want?”

“I want you to repair the damage you’ve done.”

“What do you…” Oh… they were already onto Larard, but had been using him as bait for bigger fish.

“I see you’ve finally twigged what’s going on. You’ve just undermined a major criminal investigation, and a far more dangerous man than Larard will likely get away. I want you to tell me why I shouldn’t arrest you right now.”

“Arrest me?” Felice said. “At least a dozen people have been killed by Larard. He had to be stopped.”

“You’re a messy amateur. Go back to your missing cows and philandering husbands.”

Felice’s hands clenched into fists as she bit back a sharp retort. “I found Larard both times, when the city watch couldn’t.”

“The building was burned to the ground, and I understand a girl in your employ was badly wounded. Sloppy work.”

“I managed to salvage some evidence. Papers Larard tried to burn.”

The woman’s eyes glittered with interest. “Give them to me.” Her tone indicated she wouldn’t take no for an answer.

Felice didn't have much choice. She reached into her shirt, drew out the black-edged papers, and handed them over. "They could point to Larard's employer. At least, I assume that's who you're after."

The woman sniffed. "We'll see." She frowned at Felice, wrinkling her nose.

"Who are you tracking?" Felice asked. "I have information on Larard's movements. It could prove useful."

The woman leaned forward. "It's been brought to my attention that you're proficient at Dominion. How good are you?"

The question took Felice by surprise. "Ah... I'm good."

Squall snorted, and she gave him a rebuking stare.

"From what I've seen, she's better than good. Sorry, Miss Shyrise, but you are. And I want to get out of here with my skin intact."

"Excellent." The woman rubbed her hands together as if there were a chill in the air. "Please, Felice—may I call you that? Your friends do. I feel we're getting to know each other better. Don't be modest. It ill suits you. We need to track our target at the Middle Tier Winter Dominion Tournament. I already know you're enrolled to play, but I need to know if you expect to reach the finals."

That was Felice's plan. The prizes for this tournament were substantial, and people noticed who won, and who played well. People with power and resources.

Felice nodded. "Yes. I'll make them. And with luck, I'll win."

"Luck is for amateurs." The woman placed the wineglass on the table, and Felice noted she'd never taken a sip. "I have to admit," the woman continued, "you've done well, finding out who's been behind those awful, grisly murders along the canals."

Felice shrugged. "The clues were there; I only had to see them and draw the correct conclusions."

"Exactly! Most people seldom see what's in front of them. But you've made a business of it. A well-paying business at that."

"Get to the point."

The woman's face became hard, and Felice immediately regretted her tone and choice of words. This lady didn't just have wealth; she had power. But one thing puzzled Felice: she'd gathered extensive notes on the nobles and those who profited from them, and she'd never run across this woman before.

"Felicienne Shyrise, I know quite a bit about you. You make most of your ducats from Dominion tournaments, though you only fleece an occasional wealthy noble or merchant. You have six properties and a number of investments under different names. You keep yourself busy by doing odd jobs for people: finding things, unearthing affairs, and now, bringing murderers to justice."

"Aren't you well informed? Is there anything else about myself you think I should know?"

The woman smiled thinly. "The person we're looking for will be at the event, or so my sources tell me. And I think they're right. The tournament is quite the spectacle, and a prime opportunity for a statement of dissent. Or more disorder. You've shown me you're the right woman to help out with a little problem I have. I want you to play. You are to keep your eyes and ears open."

"And who might this person be? Oh... you don't know!"

“Someone was pulling Larard’s strings, stirring him up to create unrest. Larard is just a symptom, an indication of far worse to come. What we really want is the cause. I’m on their tail, but I need help. And I think you’ll help me.”

“Will I now?” She’d asked the question, but Felice already knew she’d go along with this woman’s plan. It fit her ambitions, after all, and she needed to atone for what had happened to Flo. If Larard was only one cog in a machine, then she wanted the mastermind.

The woman smirked, a hard glint in her eyes. “You will. I can open doors for you, and it always pays to have someone higher than you in your debt. You want money and influence? I can help you with that, introduce you to the right people. My people.”

“So I do what I planned to all along, and my career is made and you’re in my debt? Come now. Nothing is that easy. Why do I get the feeling I’m the goat tied to a stake?”

The woman stood and stretched her back. “Whether you are prey or the hunter depends on you, Felice. I have an initial task for you. Go to the tanner’s on Shoe Lane, in Aspic Bend. Ask for Sparrow. Tell him Constance sent you. He’ll outline what’s required of you.”

So that’s her name. Or the one she’s using at the moment. “Is that where you buy your boots?” It wasn’t, of course. Aspic Bend was a seedy district nestled in one of the bends of the river Sorbasi, which was one of three rivers meandering through The Capital. Constance’s boots had been made by Jorg Arwin, a leatherworker only the wealthy could afford. Felice recognized his mark pressed into the ankle of the boots.

“Ignorance pays, as they say,” continued Felice. “But in this case, I think I should know who you’re working for. I don’t want to inadvertently compromise a parallel investigation because I don’t know who our allies are.” Felice had a fair idea already. Some noble with far too many gold ducats and time on their hands.

“You would have put the pieces together soon enough. Not only have these murders started up, but there have been a number of thefts lately. From warlocks, no less. The Emperor has tasked me with the investigation. But it’s become somewhat... complex.”

Pignuts. Felice glanced at Squall and Whisper, but they both remained unmoved. Not the reaction she’d expected from them. Felice had heard of the thefts. The Emperor’s warlocks were livid. She was secretly pleased someone had the audacity to poke them in the eye.

“The culprit,” Constance continued, “has been spoiling my plans, making a nuisance of themselves. There’s a strategy of orchestrated chaos, but each time I try to close in on a part of it, I’m thwarted. And the mastermind has been taunting me, sending me gifts. I mean to stop them. And if you make yourself valuable, there’s a lot more in it for you than ducats. I can always use good help.”

“Couldn’t we all. So what’s this miscreant’s name?”

“He or she—who knows?—calls themselves Slake. Or so the cards that come with the gifts say.”

What kind of man would taunt someone like that? Perhaps he was deranged. “Maybe he’s thirsty.” But Felice knew that *slake* was also the name of a rare,

extremely poisonous fish, which was only found in the warmer oceans of the deep south.

The woman shrugged. "It's also a poisonous fish, so perhaps they have a proclivity for the dramatic."

Hmmm. "I didn't know that."

"My proposal to you is meet with Sparrow and see what he has to say. Then play in the Dominion tournament, but keep your eyes and ears open for anything untoward. I'll have a few of my people there, in case they're needed."

This wasn't what Felice desired. And she was sure it wasn't what the mercenaries wanted. When you became entangled in politics and the nobles' business, you were sure to be used and abused. The bloody Emperor, a powerful sorcerer who'd ruled over the Mahruse Empire for centuries. She'd studiously avoided entanglements with the top tier of nobility, along with sorcerers, and especially the Emperor's warlocks.

One job, she said to herself. A chance to prove herself, earn a few favors, bring Larard's employer to justice, and make things right.

"I'll do it," Felice said.

Five things were bothering Felice. For a start, there was the fact it was pouring rain, her feet inside her boots were soaking wet, and she looked as bedraggled as a... well, whatever animal was unwise enough to get caught in the rain. Then there was her walking through Aspic Bend in the late evening, where she couldn't see to avoid refuse, which, even worse, was tossed into the streets. Something stuck to the bottom of her boot, and she wasn't able to scrape it off. There were no sorcerous globes here to illuminate the night. Even bolted to walls, they lasted less than a day before they were stolen, but their steady light now brightened many a house in the district.

Thirdly, there was Constance, though it was unlikely that was her real name. Felice knew too much, and she was sure there wouldn't be an easy way out of this bind. Fourthly, who was Constance? Was she really in the Emperor's employ? She'd been remarkably obtuse. Of course, Felice reckoned she could put it all together, but why go to that trouble if the woman could have spelled it out? And lastly, if someone was pulling Larard's strings, and stealing from warlocks, it pointed to a mess among powerful players she might regret placing herself in the middle of.

Although Constance had said she'd been after the murderers herself, and arrested their leader, she'd left them to perpetrate their horrible crimes while they sought other leads. Something Felice couldn't have done. But it still showed Constance was an agent of... justice?

Felice rolled the word around in her mind. There wasn't much justice on the streets of The Capital. Was Constance crazy enough to think she could make a difference?

She snorted, eliciting a frown from a woman passing by. Felice winked at her, and the woman huffed off. She shouldn't be out at this time alone anyway. Not everyone had two mercenaries guarding them. Felice glanced around, but couldn't spot Squall or Whisper. She hoped they were protecting her...

The tanner's was up ahead, a dingy building, and it was still open. Sparrow was probably waiting to be contacted, decided Felice. She clamped her fingers over her nose. The air already stank of urine and shit and decaying flesh. She was surprised it was even allowed to operate within the city, but then again, this was an area most of the lawmakers avoided. She wanted this business over with quickly, and not just because of the stench. She had her first game of Dominion tomorrow in the Winter Tournament, and needed a good night's sleep if she was to play at her best.

Inside, a large room contained examples of the tanner's work on display. Leather and hides stretched between wooden frames. A stocky man wearing a thick apron stood behind a counter. When he saw her enter, he smiled and nodded and made his way to her.

"A pleasure!" he said insincerely. "A pleasure indeed! What are you looking to purchase tonight, young lady? Perhaps a—"

"Are you Sparrow? Constance sent me."

Blood suffused the tanner's face. "I, ah... Of course." He swallowed, enlarged larynx bobbing, and glanced furtively to either side, as if checking for an eavesdropper. "Tell Constance that I'll do as she says. My family... please."

Interesting. "She said you'd know what to tell me," prompted Felice.

"All I know is that there's a valuable shipment arriving in the next few days. Something from the far south. That's all my friend let slip. All he knows is it's valuable, and it's to be stored briefly in a warehouse before they move it somewhere else. If you're going to get a look at it, that's the place."

The far south... the Desolate Lands. Where hardened treasure hunters searched for sorcerous artifacts.

Sparrow wasn't exactly outlining what was required of her. Obtaining a peek at an unknown shipment didn't strike Felice as something that required this much subterfuge and deception, nor was it something worth threatening her over.

It was then the realization hit Felice. Constance hadn't known what news Sparrow had come across, only that it was important. And she'd left Felice to do what she wanted with the information. This was also a test.

On the face of it, it seemed crazy. Why leave her to make decisions for herself?

Felice tugged an earring and bit her bottom lip. What did Constance want her to do? Find out what was in the shipment? She doubted mere contraband would elicit this much subterfuge, and simple reconnaissance could be carried out by any half-competent mercenary.

Constance wanted to see what Felice would do. She'd said this was a test, but there was another reason she'd recruited Felice. Constance's soldiers couldn't move around undetected, which was why they'd taken so long to find Larard. But Felice knew these streets. She knew the urchins. She'd built up the kind of networks you couldn't buy with ducats.

A ghost of a smile flitted across her face. Under-promise and over-deliver, was the oft-repeated piece of terrible advice.

Outside, Felice paused as a rat scurried along the wall of the building opposite her, avoiding the arc of light seeping from a window. As it disappeared into the shadows, she noticed a group of three drunken men staggering up the street to her right. Two of them supported the third, head hanging limply, feet dragging

along the cobbles. Well-kept boots, clothes freshly splashed with liquid. No doubt to make them stink of ale or spirits. The two men on their feet carried a bottle each. Empty bottles, which a real drunk would have tossed.

Felice bolted to her left and saw two more men coming toward her.

By the ancestors! “Ambush!” she yelled, and skidded to a stop. She turned and ran back toward the tanner’s just as Squall and Whisper, alerted by her shout, emerged from a darkened side alley.

Whisper’s dagger looked like a toothpick in his massive fist. Squall brandished his slender sword as if he were performing warm-up exercises. Which he might well have been.

Felice had only begun fighting lessons a few months ago and felt she was fairly competent. But she wasn’t prepared to face five men sent to either kill or rough her up. At this point in time, she hoped it was the latter.

She slipped inside and slammed the door shut behind her. She thought about locking and barring it, then decided Whisper and Squall deserved better if they had to beat a hasty retreat. Steel clashed outside. Someone cried out and was abruptly silenced. There were shouts and squeals, then a gurgle.

Bloody hells.

Behind the counter, Sparrow stared at her.

“There’s a back way out, right? How many exits?” They might have them covered... “Is there a way to exit unseen?”

Sparrow remained silent. Felice stepped closer. “I asked if—”

His throat had been slit from ear to ear. Blood still bubbled from the cut, down the front of his apron—which, Felice realized, slightly hysterically, was doing its job of keeping his shirt clean.

She glanced around the room, half-expecting the killer to walk out from behind one of the hides on display. Felice shivered as guilt crept up on her. She’d probably sealed Sparrow’s death by talking to him. Constance was playing a far more dangerous game than she’d let on. And the method of the killing turned her legs to jelly. It was as if they’d said, “We could have killed you too, but we didn’t.”

But why?

Someone knocked on the front door, causing her to jump.

“Mistress Shyrise.”

Squall! *Thank goodness.* But to dispatch five men in such a short space of time? Felice had a niggling suspicion these were no ordinary mercenaries.

The two men entered the tanner’s. Their weapons were bloody, but apart from that, they didn’t look the worse for wear.

“Not much opposition.” Squall shrugged. “Low-level thugs.”

“One got away,” added Whisper. “And the city watch will likely be called.”

Felice read between his words. *We’d better clear off.*

Five dead, by her count, already. And she still had no idea what she was doing.

Constance expected to find out what was in this shipment? Well, with five corpses, at least, in her wake, Felice wasn’t about to do the minimum required.

She hadn't slept well, and ordered another coffee with salt and honey from the cafe's waiter, thought for a moment, then ordered two more.

The establishment was close by the hall where the Dominion tournament was to be held, and she was expecting Squall and Whisper to arrive at any minute. This business was a distraction when she didn't need one, and it was likely to affect her performance in the tournament.

As her three drinks arrived, Squall and Whisper sauntered up. Well, Squall sauntered; Whisper sort of lumbered.

She gestured to the mugs. "These two are for you. Sit, please."

It was early, and there was still a chill in the air. They both nodded thanks, sat at her table, and wrapped hands around mugs to warm them.

"What are we up to today, boss?" Squall said.

"Don't call me that," Felice said absently. She tossed a full purse onto the table, where it hit with a clank. "There's enough ducats for the both of you for another week, plus a bonus for last night." She tossed another purse next to the first. "That's for expenses. Someone has killed to keep this shipment a secret. They probably know we know of it now, which means it'll never appear at that warehouse. Unless we find it, we've failed."

"And you don't like failing," said Whisper.

He was a sharp one. "Not if I can avoid it. Ask around the trading caravans, the importers and exporters. If the shipment's come from the far south, then someone should know of it."

"And be careful," Whisper said.

Felice nodded. "Yes. Talk only to people you know, at this stage. I have a few leads I'll chase up, but my day is going to be busy as it is."

Whisper drained his mug and belched. Squall gave him a disapproving frown, but Felice knew this was part of their act. Squall was an expert swordsman, and big, dumb, crass Whisper was likely a sorcerer. She'd caught a glimpse of a rune-covered wristband and a chalk smudge on one of his pockets. Easy to write runes on the fly with, Felice had once been told by a sorcerer she'd had occasion to employ.

They both stood. "Good luck, boss," Squall said with a grin.

It took all of Felice's self-control not to growl at him as they walked away.

Halfway to the tournament, the streets became congested with wagons and carts and a crowd of gawking bystanders all blocking the way. Even side alleys were full, as people tried to maneuver around an obstruction ahead.

Felice cursed under her breath. It would take her just as long, perhaps longer, to try to go around. She pushed and elbowed her way to the cause of the chaos: a large wagon with a broken wheel. It was one of those newer types, with multiple bolts holding the wheels on rather than one large hub. A few red-faced men argued and gesticulated at each other, spittle flying, but nothing much was getting done. Which was strange, as there was a spare wheel on the back of the wagon, and they'd levered the broken wheel side up off the ground, where it was held in place using chunks of timber.

"Well, we can't get down there!" one man shouted.

“Then get your wagon off the road!” roared another.

“Get out of the way!” said someone in the crowd.

A piece of fruit landed with a splat on the wagon. It looked like an orange with green mold covering the skin.

Eyeing the disabled wagon, Felice drew herself up and put on her most imperious expression: eyes and mouth narrowed, shoulders back, head held high. “What’s the problem here? Clear the way! You’re creating a disturbance, and these people need to get about their business.”

“The wheel’s broke!” said a burly man with a beard—no doubt the wagon driver, as he had callouses on his hands where the reins rubbed, and he held onto a wrench.

“I can see that,” Felice snapped. “You have a spare wheel. Attach it and get going.”

“He’s lost the bolts!” said another man off to the side. There was a tinge of glee in his voice. Someone who relished the commotion, and the misfortune of others.

“I didn’t lose them!” growled the wagon driver. “Someone kicked them into the sewers. Down that grate there!” He pointed to the offending sewer grate a few steps away on the side of the road. “All four! I can’t attach the wheel now. Have to wait for replacements.”

Pignuts, cursed Felice. The solution was obvious. “Listen!” she said loudly, to catch their attention and head off another shouting match. “Take one bolt from the other three wheels, and use them to attach the spare wheel. That’ll be good enough to get you to where you need to be until you can replace them.”

The wagon driver and his arguing friends stopped their muttering, and one by one their expressions changed as they realized her plan would work.

“Thank you!” enthused the wagon driver. He grabbed Felice’s hand and shook it. “You’re a genius.”

“No,” said Felice. “But I’m not stupid.” She gave him a pointed look. “Now, hurry up. You’ve caused enough trouble.” She glanced around at the chaos and caught sight of a woman with dark hair staring at her. Their eyes met for an instant before the woman turned away and hurried off into the crowd. Someone was watching Felice, maybe one of Constance’s people, to make sure she was onside and doing what she’d been ordered to.

She left the wagoner to fix the wheel and continued snaking through the press, eventually making her way to the great hall where the tournament was being held.

As always, the Dominion boards used were plain, unremarkable to the untrained eye, but Felice could see the craftsmanship in the joins of each board, in the detail of each playing piece. Merchants and nobles and those with plenty of ducats played on boards made from rare woods, with pieces carved from precious stones and ivory. Felice had heard there was a Dominion board in the eastern coastal city of Anasoma, one of the largest game boards in existence, where the knee-high game pieces were carved from onyx, amethyst, lapis lazuli, and other gemstones, along with some cast in silver and gold. The board, all three tiers, was rumored to be made from ironwood, blackwood, feathergrain, and burlwood. It was so large, viewing platforms had been erected for spectators to watch, and the players had to use ladders to ascend to the tiers. One day, she’d like to see it, even play on it.

For now, she had to work her way up in high society, however much she disliked most of the people in it.

She registered her arrival with the tournament organizers, under the false name Morgaine, and wandered around the spacious room until the first games started. She nodded to a few players she recognized from social games around the city: Gurly, a middle-aged merchant who played only for enjoyment; Benita, a sharp-witted matron who would give unwary players a run for their money; and Zandra, who ran an establishment that exclusively catered to Dominion and wagering on games. Felice had played there on occasion when she needed some extra ducats. She'd used other false names when playing them, as there was no point advertising her skill before it yielded maximum results. None of them were a threat to her, but as an unknown she had to come up through the first rounds of the tournament. Or...could one of them be the person Constance was looking for? Come to think of it, one of the servers was paying altogether too much attention to a young noblewoman spectator. Maybe it was her low-cut dress, though.

The problem was, Felice had so much to do. The lucky nobles and merchants and whoever else had prequalified had a few more days to relax and prepare themselves for the harder matches. Felice had planned to string out her victories, but it looked like she should get them over with as quickly as possible in order to focus on Constance's task. She was here incognito, there was a ruthless mastermind somewhere at the tournament, and she had to finish today as quickly as possible in order to check on the shipment.

Plans ran through her head, and she tried not to think about Flo and the botched missions. Her palms were damp, and she wiped them on her pants. She'd liked to have worn her daggers, but wearing weapons while you were supposed to be playing high-stakes Dominion would have looked out of place.

Bloody hells, Felice. Get your head in the game.

Constance was an enigma and someone who irked Felice. But Felice's own pride and ambition forced her to find out what Slake had planned.

"First round! First round!" shouted an attendant.

Felice walked to her Dominion board. These were larger than her personal set, with the third tier at chest height. Small enough the players could easily manipulate the pieces, but large enough to give the spectators a good view from a distance.

She examined her rival. Her first opponent was a thin young man with greasy, slicked-back hair, who smelled of candles and sweat and sausage. An older man in robes clasped his shoulders and whispered encouragements in his ear. The young man nervously licked his lips and nodded. They only scheduled one match per day for each player, as games could last anything from under an hour, to drawn-out all-day affairs.

Under the watchful eye of another attendant, Felice and the young man wrote their seven opening moves on scraps of paper. These were meant to mimic when a battle was first engaged and forces were committed. The "generals" on either side didn't have the luxury of instantaneous adjustments. She noticed the young man's hands trembled, likely with trepidation.

The fool made a small mistake early in the game, and Felice was onto him like a praying mantis. In her distracted state, she forgot to draw the game out to make herself seem less skilled.

An hour later, the greasy young man stared dejectedly at the board. His pieces were in disarray, what remained of them, and he was far behind in territory. He could only claim a small section of the lower tier as his.

“Do you concede?” Felice asked. She’d just used three of her spare moves to form an attack he couldn’t hope to survive.

To her dismay, the man’s eyes welled with tears. He’d been expecting to put on a good show, to impress his mentor, and pass on to the second round. Now, he’d been hammered out of the tournament, without ceremony, in an ignominious defeat.

She looked away, giving him time to gather himself.

“I... concede,” he said.

“Victory to Morgaine,” the attendant said tonelessly. He scratched something onto his board with a metal pen.

Well, at least the game was over, but had she drawn attention to herself? She’d have to be more careful in the future.

Footsteps hurried away across the wooden floor as the young man beat a dejected retreat. His mentor wasn’t around to console him, no doubt confident his charge would carry the day.

Someone cleared his throat behind her, and Felice turned to see Malko, a usual suspect around Dominion games whenever there was gambling. He ran a thriving trading business, though mostly in precious gemstones and artworks. Excellent. She’d make use of him.

“By all that’s holy, Felice,” said Malko. “You eviscerated him. You couldn’t have been a bit gentler, could you? Wait, are you going through another celibate phase?”

Felice couldn’t help but laugh. “Not again, Malko. Once was enough.” She gave a mock shudder. “But I have work to do, and the sooner I get out of here, the better.”

“Something more important than playing Dominion with style? How common.”

“Call me Morgaine during the tournament, please, Malko. I’m in disguise. Did you make any ducats on my game?”

Malko smiled, revealing small, even teeth. “Some. I didn’t want to lower the odds as you progressed.”

“Good,” Felice said. “Could you do me a favor, then?”

Malko bowed, a little too low for her liking. “Of course! I am at your command. I take it this has something to do with you being in disguise? Is someone after your head? A disgruntled cheating husband perhaps? You’ve brought a few of them to account.”

“No, nothing like that. I just need you to keep your eyes and ears open during the tournament. I’ve been, er... reliably informed something odd is going on.”

“Cheating? It’s not really possible, you know. The attendants are chosen for their sharp eyes, and unless you had someone who plays better than you constantly sending you messages...”

"I think not. Something to do with one of the players. They're up to no good. I'd also like you to find out about caravans returning from the southern wastes."

"The Desolate Lands? That won't be hard. Only an idiot or a lunatic would go there. Place is swarming with jukari. Filthy beasts." He looked around, as if to spit, but, to Felice's relief, didn't. "Any caravan in particular you're looking out for?" he continued.

She thought for a moment. A good question. "One with more than the usual number of guards. And possibly sorcerous defenses as well." She couldn't rule that out. If the object or objects were coming from the Desolate Lands, then they were likely sorcerous artifacts. Perhaps trinkets. Rare and extremely valuable.

"Ugh," Malko said. "Bloody sorcerers. They make my skin crawl."

"They do some good things. And not all of them are warlocks."

"A blessed few are, thank the ancestors."

"Well, I'd better get back to work," Felice said. "The ducats don't roll in through the door on their own! If you find out anything, you can reach me at my offices, or here when there's a game on."

"So, Morgaine—" Malko chuckled heartily "—after today's display, I take it you're likely to repeat the performance? In a bit of a rush, are you?"

What Malko was hinting at was whether she'd blow through her other opponents as well. Her odds would shorten if she did, quite considerably after this morning's display. He was asking for inside information so he could profit from it.

"Yes," she said simply. He'd win a little each game, and that should pay him for any information he gathered for her. In fact, he'd be in her debt. Just the way she liked things: tilted in her favor.

"Excellent!" Malko rubbed his hands together. "Well, I've some wagers to make. And I'm sure you'd like some time to rest before your next match this afternoon."

What was this? She thought there was only one round each day. If she was cooped up in here all day, she'd fall way behind with her investigations. Felice glanced around. Other matches were still being played and wouldn't likely see a result for some time.

"The organizers have decided to place time limits on the matches," said Malko after noticing her troubled expression. "And you'll be playing two games every day." He waved a hand in a dismissive gesture. "Something about the games taking too long. Can you believe it? To rush the beauty of Dominion is a travesty. I, for one, will be making a complaint."

"Er... quite."

"Well," said Malko, "I'll leave you to it. I've ducats to make." He hurried off.

Felice glanced at the attendants returning the pieces of her board to their starting positions. Both were hurrying and grinning. No doubt they'd expected a long morning, and now they could relax. Or was one of them the man Constance was after?

Finding a corner to herself out of the way of any cold drafts and the bustling crowd, Felice waited until her next match was due to begin. She used the time to come up with more and more outrageous plans on how to reveal who Constance was searching for, none of which would work in reality. It was a shame, really. She quite liked the one where all the doors were locked and exits sealed, and the Emperor's warlocks used sorcery to detain anyone with a weapon.

As her match started, against an old woman who used a walking cane to move about, Felice looked around for anyone suspicious. One of the tournament supervisors, a middle-aged man with blond hair and a darker beard, made his way between the boards. His bearing caught her eye: He scanned the crowd as if looking for threats. Like a soldier. Or an assassin. Was this the man they were after? Or one of Constance's people? Felice had no way to tell.

Bloody ancestors, she needed to finish here and get to work. Felice ramped up her attack and in short order routed her elderly opponent. As she conceded defeat, the woman gave her a scathing look, as if she expected some leniency because of her age. *Mad old bat*. There was no room for mercy in Dominion.

Then she noted the woman wore a jeweled brooch in the shape of a fish, which made her think of Slake. Bloody ancestors, would she wind up suspecting everyone?

Felice shrugged, shoved her hands into her pockets, and left the drafty building.

“Miss Shyrise! Miss Shyrise!”

Felice looked up to see a street urchin coming toward her. She quickly glanced around just in case they thought she was a mark and there were others converging. There weren't.

The scruffy little boy had ragged cuffs and boots a few sizes too big for him. But the dirt on his face was too artfully placed. A professional beggar, then.

To her surprise, when he reached her, he held out a hand clutching a few dandelions. As bad as weeds, the yellow flowers grew everywhere there was a speck of dirt. And Felice was allergic to them.

He shoved the flowers at her. “Here, Miss Shyrise. From Flo. She said she's all right.”

Felice looked warily at the flowers. *Bloody ancestors...* She took them from the boy and held them gingerly. “You visited her,” she surmised. Something Felice should have done already—if she'd had the time.

“Said she's eaten better than she has for years. Lucky girl.”

“I don't think she, or I, would consider getting stabbed lucky.”

The boy shrugged and began backing away. No doubt he'd fulfilled his promise to Flo and was eager to get back to begging.

She rummaged in her purse and brought out a silver ducat. His eyes locked onto it.

“I need some assistance.”

“Don't we all, miss.”

Felice paused. *Cheeky kid*. “What's your name?”

“Hedgehog.”

“Because you're prickly?”

“Nah. 'Cause I don't mind eating insects and mice. I bet you've never eaten a mouse.”

“I can't say I've had the pleasure, so that's a bet you'd win. Hedgehog, the warlocks have lost a few items recently, or so I've heard.”

Fear flicked across the urchin's face. He backed away a step. “We don't go near them.”

“Nor do I want you to. I’m looking for information about the thefts: who was involved; what was taken. Word has to have filtered down, and one of you must have seen something odd, somewhere.” *Hopefully*. “Can you spread the word? I’m offering silver ducats for solid information.”

“We don’t know nothin’ about the warlocks.” But he glanced at the coin again.

“I’m not asking you to go near them. Ask your friends, your acquaintances.”

“Acq—what’s that word mean?”

“Anyone you know who you think might be able to help. There’s coin in it. And I am looking after Flo.”

“Didn’t you get her stuck?”

Very cheeky boy. “A regrettable accident. Do you want the coin or not?”

“I guess.” He shuffled up and snatched the ducat.

“Time is of the essence.”

“What?”

“I need information quickly.”

“Oh. All right. Any chance of some more coin? I can grease a few palms.”

She handed the boy a few more silvers. She could hardly afford it, but she was running out of time. Tomorrow she’d be winning wagers on herself to be victorious in her Dominion game—if Avigdor remembered to place the bets. “That’s all you’re getting. And make sure you have a few decent meals.”

He gave her a mock salute and ran off.

Felice suppressed a sneeze and looked distastefully at the dandelions in her hand. She wanted to throw them away, but they’d been a heartfelt gift from Flo. She sighed. Perhaps Avigdor would like them.

Felice had trouble sleeping that night. Plans and contingencies ran through her head like a swarm of mice. There was the shipment, investigating Larard’s dealings further in case she’d missed anything, and Constance. She created a list of anyone who’d looked suspicious at the tournament. Earlier, she’d asked Avigdor to research some of them, including the blond bearded fellow. He’d reported his attempts to find out more on Constance had come up utterly empty, which was disturbing. He was a remarkably able researcher.

She also hated not being in control.

Felice turned in bed and adjusted the shutter around a sorcerous globe—which might or might not have been stolen—to bathe her room in its soft light. On her bedside table, her parents stared back at her. A small painting in a battered wooden frame, which she kept in memory of them, to remind her that even seemingly perfect families had their secrets, and that everyone was fighting battles you couldn’t see.

She turned away. Bloody Constance. Who was she? In her haste, distracted by all the balls she was juggling, Felice hadn’t put together a solid picture to determine the mettle of the woman. She said she worked for the Emperor, and that was likely true, since anyone who claimed this falsely would die a horrible death. But Felice had never heard of her before, and she liked to think she had her finger on the pulse of the nobles and politics. Or at least of the important players.

Players, bloody hells. She had another game in the morning, and they'd only get harder from here on out.

Felice flicked the shutter and pitched her room into darkness.

She let her mind drift, allowing it to examine her problems from all sides. She closed her eyes.

“Really good game, Morgaine. Well done!”

The man pumped her hand like it was a lever and she was a pump, and any moment water would gush forth from her mouth. Stryden, he said his name was, which, curiously, in the Old Language before the Shattering, meant mortuary. Mind you, she doubted he knew or cared.

She'd only just defeated her morning opponent when he accosted her. From his inane chatter, she learned he was a minor official within the Emperor's hierarchy, and a businessman on the side. He worked in a department responsible for foreign diplomacy or some such. Like the Mahruse Empire used diplomacy... It took what it wanted and killed anyone who disagreed. Though she had to admit it had brought a period of great stability, which had been maintained for centuries.

Extricating herself from Stryden's tight but damp grip, Felice tried to make her excuses and leave.

“I was lucky,” she said, an explanation she used often, usually to the crestfallen faces of men and women who'd lost both the game and a great deal of ducats.

“I don't think so. Now you have some time to relax.” He still beamed at her. He was dressed in finely woven clothes, with a vermillion coat done up at the front by buttons of cast silver. His fingers were unadorned, free of jewelry, which was rare for a noble.

“I must congratulate you,” he enthused. “You put that upstart in his place. And to think that insufferable bore Lord Adriano thought he would make it to the finals! Ha! He's lost a lot of face, I can tell you.”

Been following my matches, have we? “You know him?” The bald man hadn't played badly, really. Only been unfortunate to come up against her when she was in a bad mood and needed to have the game over with quickly.

“Oh, not really. But one hears things.”

She nodded. “One does. Well, if you'll excuse me, I have to...compose myself before my next match.”

“Of course, my dear Morgaine. If I may call you that?”

His obsequiousness was beginning to grate on her nerves. “Just Morgaine is fine. I'll see you around.”

“I'll be watching your matches in awe. And picking up tips for my own play, no doubt. I too managed a victory yesterday. But the stripling they had me against hardly knew what she was doing.”

So Stryden was also in the tournament. He was checking her out, assessing the opposition. She made her goodbyes and strode away as if she had somewhere to go. She didn't, she just wanted to get away from Stryden. Her next match began in half an hour.

A few vendors were set up against one wall, and the enticing aromas drew Felice over. She paid for a cup of hot eel with butter and parsley, and a mug of lasoop, a

drink made from ground roots flavored with milk and honey. Both were kept warm over a charcoal fire. While the vendor waited, she devoured the eel, handed the cup back, and sipped her lasoop. The vendor used the same cup to serve the next person, without washing it. Felice felt slightly ill.

Finishing her drink and feeling fortified, she made her way to the board where she'd be playing next. Her opponent was a young girl, which surprised Felice. She'd had to have won three matches already to make it this far, and from her flawless skin and pretty flower-printed dress, Felice wouldn't have thought she'd be old enough to be allowed out after dark without an escort. So... probably a nobleman's daughter mentored by stuffy tutors. The girl's game would be one of finesse, her opening moves bland and predictable. Felice knew how to deal with predictable. Her Crow and Moon piece would come in handy here.

An hour later, after staring at the board with a rueful expression for a good ten minutes, the girl resigned. She looked up at Felice, and gave her a cheeky smile and a short bow. Returning the grin with one of her own, Felice tilted her head in acknowledgement.

"Learn," she said, and the girl nodded.

Standing behind her defeated opponent, a barrel-chested man wearing expensive clothes and jewelry stared daggers at Felice. Her father, obviously, come to watch his daughter play. Behind him stood two well-muscled men, with scarred knuckles and broken noses. Bodyguards... maybe. Felice made a mental note to add them to her list of suspects. Avigdor could do what he did best and research them.

Felice left them and made her way to the competition scoreboards, which were behind a large raised dais. These unofficial rankings determined betting odds, but the competition was an elimination format. Above the area hung an elaborate chandelier of sorcerous globes and colored crystals. The dais itself was tiled in a black and white checkered motif, with the occasional red or green tile, mimicking a Dominion tier motif. Tradesmen of different types bustled about the dais, no doubt preparing it for the final game and the Emperor's appearance. It looked like a building site, with a hastily erected scaffold allowing workers access to the chandelier, which was being cleaned. Men were also repairing tiles on the dais, no doubt a hasty restoration job to replace cracked ones before the tournament started.

Felice was surprised to find herself second. She'd expected to be first, but that spot was taken by... Stryden. From the territory and piece scores, he'd absolutely demolished his opponents in very short order.

So he'd been sizing Felice up as his main competition.

Her next two matches took Felice longer than the previous day's, but she still didn't break a sweat. Six down, how many more to go? It couldn't be too many before she was in the last eight.

On her way out she looked around for Stryden, only to find his board deserted and reset and the attendants long gone.

Outside, she strode down the steps and, without breaking stride, hurried along the street toward the canals. Man-made, they fed from the rivers and were used to

transport goods, keeping the streets free of a great deal of wagon traffic. They were also filled with rubbish and flotsam, and they were a favorite congregation place for street children with time on their hands, who searched for anything they could sell, or use, amid the detritus.

At the canals, after half an hour of handing out copper ducats to the street children and waiting, Hedgehog appeared, looking as scruffy as he had before.

“Did you find out anything?” Felice asked without preamble.

“Maybe. Could be worth more to someone else to keep me mouth shut, though.”

The little scamp didn’t lack impudence, that was for sure. “Or if you’ve stumbled onto something they want unseen, you’ll get a yard of cold steel stuck through your gut.”

Hedgehog stared at her, obviously deciding the worth of her argument. “All right,” he said reluctantly. “Some heavies have been scaring us away from a warehouse down by the river. We was doing nothing, either. Just hanging around. Sometimes there’s jobs to do and we get paid a coin or two.”

“Down by the river” could be almost anywhere in the city. “Where’s this? And I take it you think they’re hiding something?”

Hedgehog shrugged. “It’s in Rat Town. I don’t know what they’re doing. You’d be surprised what some people get up to. That’s why we keep out of their way.”

She wouldn’t be surprised. Felice had heard of the grisly things that went on in the shadows of the city, and she’d seen a thing or two in her time. That meant the boy’s information could be a dead end. Rat Town was what the street children called the Red Tomb District in the far south of the city. The cemeteries and catacombs and sewerage works there ensured the rats didn’t lack for food or shelter. It was becoming quite a problem, and the city offered a bounty for dead rodents, which was one reason Hedgehog and his friends were probably there often.

Seeing she was unimpressed, Hedgehog said, “There’s more. If you can pay.”

Felice tossed him a silver ducat, which he snapped out of the air like a striking snake. It swiftly disappeared into the folds of his shirt.

“They chased us out of the sewers as well. Underneath the warehouse.”

Felice’s ears pricked up. This was something worth following. “Do you know why?”

A shake of his head. “Nah. But we always have the run of the sewers, apart from the cleaning crews. And the thieves. And killers. And—”

“I get it. This was out of the ordinary.” He wouldn’t know more than that.

“Is there more coin if I find out what they’re up to?”

Immediately, Felice shook her head. “Don’t do anything stupid. You don’t want to end up like Flo.”

“We’ll all end up like Flo one day, as long as dangerous men run the city.”

Bloody hells, she wasn’t going to be able to dissuade him. “I don’t want you injured. Pretend you’re hunting rats. Make sure you keep a few dead ones with you. That’s what you’re doing if anyone asks.” She handed him another silver coin. “Meet me here every day from now on—” with the Dominion tournament, she couldn’t be sure she’d make it here before evening “—at sunset.”

She had more work to do before she could rest tonight. She was supposed to meet Marius and wasn’t looking forward to it. He was always curt and easily

irritated. But it had to be done if she were to uncover the true motives of this Constance woman. Whatever web she was weaving, Felice wanted a way out. And preferably three or four.

With a sigh of relief, Felice placed her foot on the last stair and dragged her exhausted body up it. A light sheen of sweat painted her face, and her armpits were damp and slippery.

A long hot bath would be nice. And a glass of wine.

She knocked on the landing's only door and let herself in. The room was sparsely furnished, with only a few cushioned chairs and a large desk between her and a window. Papers covered the desk, and a teapot in a glazed holder sat warming over a small flame. The view was magnificent, she had to admit. But the climb up and down those stairs multiple times a day would probably kill her. She liked to keep healthy, but she also wanted her calves small enough to fit into her favorite boots—the ones with the hidden knife sheath, a present from an old flame.

“Sit down,” said a grouchy voice.

“Always lovely to see you, too, Marius,” she said.

He was kneeling on the floor under the window, sorting through piles of paper. Marius was a compact man, with a week's growth of stubble too patchy to be called a beard. No lamps or candles were lit, and the window provided the only light. He'd always been cheap, which he attributed to a poor upbringing. Since Felice knew he'd been born into a wealthy family, she attributed it to being miserly and the fact he spent a great deal of ducats on collecting trinkets. An excellent investment, he'd once told her.

She sat in one of the cushioned chairs and waited for Marius to finish. He could be churlish when interrupted.

After a time, he wiped his hands on his pants and stood. “What do you want?”

His gratitude was short-lived. Felice had tracked down a number of the ancient sorcerous artifacts for him previously, and you'd think he'd be appreciative. They were potentially powerful and dangerous in the wrong hands. What would happen if someone of Larard's nature got hold of illicit trinkets? Nothing good, that was for sure.

“I need information,” Felice said. “On a government official who doesn't appear to exist, at least on public records.” She realized it took more power and influence to stay anonymous. Which meant she was dealing with someone who operated on a whole different level to the regular officials, and was therefore far more dangerous.

Marius's eyes narrowed. “You interrupted me for this? Go ask around the taverns they frequent. I'm sure you'll find out more by—”

“She goes by the name Constance, but I'm sure that's false. She has a high enough position to order around a squad or two of the Emperor's soldiers, and said she works for the Emperor. I mean, technically, all the officials do, but...” She trailed off. Marius's face had gone as white as milk, and he blindly reached for a chair. Finding one, he sat down hard.

“Get out, Felice. Now. Whatever it takes. You don't want to get on her bad side.”

“Wouldn't crossing her get me on her bad side?”

“Well, yes. But even so—”

“I made her a promise.”

“Felicienne...”

“I don’t break my promises.”

Marius frowned.

“Unless I’m forced to,” she added. “She’s obviously known to you councilors, so who is she?”

“Constance is her real name. First Adjudicator Constance Norwick.”

Felice let out a slow whistle, but inside she was unsettled and trying not to show it. “One step below the Emperor and his councilors. His real councilors, I mean, not you and your cronies.” She couldn’t resist the jab.

Marius took the bait. He drew himself up, and his face went red. “Although I’m only on the third tier of councilors, we still do important work.”

Mundane, run-of-the-mill, boring bureaucratic work, Marius meant. It was his department that ran the city’s ducats-for-dead-rats program, and they’d come up with the name themselves. She’d save that bit of knowledge to spring on him another time. It was too good to waste.

“First Adjudicator Constance is a powerful woman,” continued Marius. “But if you cross her... well, let’s just say you’ll be dead.”

“That’s blunt.”

“But accurate. She is ruthlessly ambitious, and practically usurped her position from the previous incumbent. It was a sordid mess. What’s happened? How did you come across her?”

“She interfered with one of my jobs, and then gave me a task of her own.”

Marius shifted slightly as he settled back down into his chair. “She’s a cunning woman. And you wouldn’t want to get on her bad side.”

“I can always use friends in high places.” In fact, she needed them if she was to reach her goal of becoming the wealthiest woman in the Empire. Then, she wouldn’t have to be afraid anymore. No one could touch her.

A wave of laughter came from Marius. “Constance doesn’t have friends. She uses people.”

“I’d guessed that already,” Felice said wryly. “What does she do? What’s her bailiwick?”

“Information and spying. Probably more gruesome business as well, though that’s unconfirmed. She’s like a fat-bellied spider. I’m telling you, Felice, by the ancestors, steer clear of her if you can.”

Felice shook her head. “The best I can do is complete this task of hers and wave goodbye.”

Marius’s face grew grim. He wiped his hands on his pants, leaving damp patches. “Once you’re hers, there’s no going back. If she has her hooks into you, then you’re her tool.”

“We’ll see about that.” Felice rose. “Thanks for the tea.”

“I didn’t—”

“I know.”

Night was closing over the buildings, and shadows lay deep upon the streets and alleys that crisscrossed the city. Darkness swallowed the districts and the rivers, and only a few of the tallest structures and towers built upon the city's highest points were still bathed in sunset's orange glow.

Weaving rapidly through the streets, Felice arrived at her office. Avigdor glanced up at her from the papers he was reading. The room was cluttered but serviceable. Being located on a main thoroughfare was its only redeeming feature. On his desk, in a clay vase, were the dandelions Flo had given her. They drooped quite badly.

"Pastry?" he asked, brushing crumbs from his hand onto a napkin. A pile of what looked like blueberry and raspberry pastries sat on greased paper on his desk.

"If it stops you wolfing the whole lot, then yes." He'd put on weight over the last few months, which was a good sign he was over his illness. The fever and cramps had had him bedridden for weeks, and with the watery discharge, he'd lost weight rapidly.

"There's a pastry epidemic in the city. I'm just doing my part."

"What are you working on? And sorry I've been absent a bit over the last few days."

With a wave of his hand, Avigdor dismissed her apology. "We knew that would happen during the tournament. I only have a few trivial cases and can handle them on my own. A missing young woman, probably eloped. A wayward husband about to be thrown out of home. The usual."

Felice perched on the edge of his desk and chewed a pastry. It was good, with flaked almonds and crystalized sugar sprinkled on top. "I've forgotten to eat today," she mumbled through a mouthful.

"That happens a lot," chastised Avigdor.

"I'm through to the third round, by the way." She couldn't remember the last time she'd washed her hair and had it re-braided.

Avigdor only grunted. "Those two mercenaries were here earlier. Said they'd only talk to you. That smaller one's dangerous. A killer. But the big one...he's worse."

Perceptive of Avigdor, but then, that was why she'd hired him. "What's worse than a killer?"

"A smart killer?"

"Did you manage to place a few bets on me?" The Middle Tier Tournament was followed by avid Dominion enthusiasts all over the city. And that meant practically everyone. Every bookmaker in the city gave odds on the matches. The game was almost a way of life.

"I've made us a few ducats, which is good. And should make more unless you're knocked out, which would be bad. Is there anything I should know?"

"Someone I've never seen before is playing well, or came up against easier opponents. A man named Stryden. See what you can find out about him, will you?"

"I'll add it to my list," Avigdor said dryly.

Felice chewed the last of her pastry and licked her fingers. "Now, there's—"

The door opened to the dust and clamor of the street, and Squall and Whisper entered. The smaller man's eyes flicked around the office as if he expected trouble. Whisper's eyes locked onto the pastries. He looked at Avigdor and raised his

eyebrows. With a resigned sigh, Avigdor nodded. While Whisper helped himself to one, Felice did the same. Squall met her eyes and gave a nod, then leaned against a wall, where he could keep an eye on both the front and back doors, and the window opposite.

Someone must be after him, thought Felice. *Or else he's just extremely careful.* Her instincts told her it was probably both.

"I take it you've found something out?" she said.

Squall glanced at Whisper, but the big man had a mouthful of pastry and shrugged.

"Yeah," Squall said. "That valuable shipment from the south that's supposed to arrive in the next few days? Well, it's nothing valuable that I can see. It's lucky we worked out which one it was. A few too many guards for what the caravan carried. But the goods are just alchemicals, and that seemed suspicious to us."

Felice tugged an earring, processing this information. There were plenty of manufactories in The Capital that pumped out huge quantities of alchemicals. There was no reason to ship any into the city unless you didn't want anyone knowing about them.

"I need a sample," she said, almost before she finished the thought. "We can't trust the bills of lading. No doubt they've falsified the contents."

Squall took his time, but eventually he nodded. "We'll need more ducats."

"Hole in your purse?" Felice said.

"Bribes are expensive. Inflation, you know."

Avigdor cleared his throat. He held out a silver ducat. The Emperor's face stamped on one side seemed to glare at them.

"Take this and wager on Felice's match tomorrow."

Although Squall reached out and took the coin, he appeared unimpressed. He looked at Felice. "Who are you playing?"

"I've no idea."

"Don't you check the boards to see who it is so you can prepare yourself or something?"

Felice shook her head. "No. Waste of time."

"That confident, are you?"

"Yes."

Her answer seemed to give both Squall and Whisper pause. The big man ceased munching on his pastry, his third, while Squall gave her an appraising look.

"And if you lose?"

"She won't," Avigdor said confidently.

"Not for a few rounds, anyway," added Felice. "Back to business, then. Where was this warehouse they've stored the alchemicals?"

"Red Tombs," Squall replied. "Close to the river there."

"Rat Town..." mused Felice. "This isn't the first time I've heard the district spoken of today."

Squall's hand fidgeted with the hilt of his sword. "The warehouse is owned by a business named the Company of One Hundred Associates. It has wide, wrought-iron gates for receiving and dispatching goods, a main entrance, and a side door for the workers and servants."

Felice decided it couldn't be a coincidence. The alchemical shipment arriving in the city when it shouldn't have been needed, plus Hedgehog and his friends getting scared away from the sewers underneath a warehouse in Rat Town. It had to be the same place.

Finally, she felt like she was getting somewhere. The answers would be within her grasp soon. Although, if Marius was correct, Felice might be caught in a web she wasn't expected to extricate herself from.

People have thought that before, and here I still am. Though a little the worse for wear.

Time. She needed more time. There were practice locks in her home she had to work on picking, as well as a compendium of rare herbs and poisons she wanted to memorize—she adored knowledge, and it was surprising how often obscure facts came in handy. Felice suppressed a groan of weariness and ran a hand over her tired eyes. She couldn't get out of her Dominion matches tomorrow without forfeiting, but if she turned up tired from a lack of sleep, she'd take longer to win, and she'd waste more time.

"All right," she said resignedly. "Here's what we'll do. We need a sample of the alchemicals. They might be poison, which is my best guess. I'll come along—"

Avigdor hissed a warning through his teeth, stopping when Felice held up a hand.

"That's too direct!" he said. "Don't put yourself in danger, Felice. Perhaps your contact Marius has access to records—"

"No," Felice said. She tugged on her red coat against the chill of the night and picked up her knives. "If he's found out, they might kill him. And he's not a bridge I can afford to burn. We'll make it a quick in-and-out job. I might be able to identify the goods without us taking anything from the shipment. That way, no one will be the wiser."

As it turned out, the warehouse was deserted. Through the iron gates was a lone watchman, a fat elderly man who sat on a stool and had one boot off, rubbing his foot. There was a rain barrel against a wall, next to a trough for watering horses.

There really should be more guards, Felice thought. But perhaps they have no idea they've aroused suspicions. No. Better to plan ahead than be taken unawares. She sent Squall and Whisper to surveil each side of the building, but they reported nothing untoward when they returned. It didn't allay her uneasiness, but there was nothing left to do but enter the warehouse through a little-used door.

Squall beckoned Felice to follow as he and Whisper sidled through the shadows. She almost lost them in the darkness, so stealthily did they move. A trick she should work on herself when she had time.

Whisper chalked something on the door, and the lock clicked open. Felice grunted, slightly annoyed she wouldn't be able to practice her lock-picking skills, but also glad she'd confirmed her suspicions about Whisper being a sorcerer.

He wiped the chalk away, removing any sign of his method.

Inside, she had them lead her to the place where the shipment had been stored. All the crates were gone, but there was a smell like vinegar, only much stronger

and biting. A virulent acid of some sort. The fumes made her nose itch, and she sneezed, muffling the sound in the crook of her arm.

It occurred to Felice that this had to be from the alchemicals in the shipment. But again, any acid could have been made here in the city, so they obviously didn't want anyone to stumble onto their plan. Whatever that was.

Acid could be used for many applications, such as cleaning and pickling, as well as manufacturing dyes and paints, and if her memory served, some swordsmiths used it to etch blades. She didn't think they'd be pickling any vegetables with it, of that she was certain.

Something pale caught her eye over by one wall. She investigated closer and found a white powdery substance on the floor. Felice rubbed some between her fingers and sniffed it. It was almost odorless, but there was a faint hint of garlic.

"Slake said some fool would come," said a reedy voice.

It came from somewhere above and to her right.

Felice scanned the darkness and spotted a thin man standing on a raised platform accessible by a wooden ladder. More of a boy than a man, his thinness was a gangly sort, and he didn't look old enough to shave.

Expendable, then, and didn't realize it. Probably thought he'd been given a test.

"Your master might as well give himself up," Felice said. "We're on his trail now, and we'll find him soon enough."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the glint of Squall drawing his blade before he and Whisper practically disappeared into the shadows.

The boy barked a laugh, more false bravado than amusement. "You have no idea who you're dealing with. Leave, and you might live!" He hefted something in one hand. A glass sphere of some sort. A sorcerous globe?

His arm jerked toward her, and the globe flew from his hand.

Pignuts. Acid.

Felice threw herself to the side, landing hard on the wooden floor. Pain shivered up her arms and legs, and her knife hilt dug into her side. She rolled and covered her head.

Glass cracked, and liquid splattered her pants and shirt. Immediately, fumes choked her nose, and her skin stung as the acid splattered her hands and ate through the cloth. Boots hammered on wood as Squall or Whisper pounded up the ladder to the boy.

Felice frantically tugged her arms from her coat and yanked her pants off. Sitting on the floor, she balled her pants up and scrubbed acid from her skin, trying to ignore the beginnings of pain through clenched teeth. Blood smeared across the cloth.

Felice lifted her gaze. "Stop!" she shouted, both at the boy and the two mercenaries. "Don't kill him—"

A thud sounded as something fell from a height onto the floor. Felice felt the vibration through the timbers. *Bloody ancestors.* She staggered to her feet.

A pile of clothes and twisted limbs lay at the bottom of the raised section. A number of stab wounds marked the boy's clothes. He must have been dead, or else he would have screamed as he fell. Squall was on the platform, looking down at his handiwork.

The situation had gone to shit faster than the drop of an apple.

Her skin still stung. Felice staggered outside into the warehouse's courtyard and splashed her arms and legs with water from the rain barrel.

A whistle sounded behind her. The fat guardsman summoning the city watch.

Felice ignored him and ran back inside. "Let's go!" she yelled. They wouldn't get much more out of this warehouse. If Slake had left a fool to mock them, then he would have also swept the place clean of clues. Better to cut their losses and run than spend the night, or longer, in a cell.

By the bloody ancestors, her skin hurt.

Her pants were covered with smudges of crimson, but they had at least stopped smoking, as had her coat. Felice realized she was standing in her underclothes and a shirt in front of two grown men. It didn't bother her; she wasn't the modest type, but it might make them uncomfortable. She quickly picked up her ruined coat and smoothed her hair down. A few long black strands came away in her fingers, from where the acid had corroded them. Luckily her face was untouched, though it was already pockmarked from a childhood illness.

Whisper and Squall approached, and the swordsman at least had the good grace to look embarrassed.

"Sorry," Squall said. "He had a few more of those spheres, so I had to run him through."

Felice had the feeling he would have run him through no matter what. "It's unlikely he would have known anything of value. However, I like to be thorough. If you want to continue in my employ, I suggest you remember that fact."

Squall opened his mouth to reply, but before he could utter a word, Whisper spoke.

"We understand, Mistress Shyrise." He gave the smaller swordsman a weighty look.

So Whisper does call the shots. And he's decided their best course is to stay with me.

"Mistress Shyrise... er..." Squall looked away, not able to meet her eyes. "Your skin..."

The acid no longer burned now that she'd washed it off, but the burn marks still stung cruelly.

"Not now," she said. "It'll heal." With not too many scars, hopefully. "We'll see a physiker on the way back. Let's go before the city watch arrives. Just let me grab a sample of this powder first."

She quickly brushed some of the powder onto a piece of paper from her pocket, then folded it multiple times so it wouldn't leak.

They darted out the side door and into the night.

Felice slid her key into the lock and let them into her office. "By the ancestors!" she cursed. It was as dark as a tomb inside.

She scratched around for a lamp, found one, and lit it. Her skin stung like she'd been bitten by a swarm of ants, and the ointment the physiker had given her did little to ease the pain. He said it was supposed to act quickly, but bloody ancestors, the acid spots hurt. She had another jar of ointment in her pocket to

assist with healing, this one for tomorrow and the day after, and probably for a lot longer.

Taking a deep breath, she tried to banish the pain from her mind, only partially succeeding. As she stood there trembling, Squall and Whisper checked the rooms and peeked out the windows for any signs they'd been followed or that trouble was brewing.

Pastry crumbs littered Avigdor's desk, but she was too rattled for the mess to annoy her.

Squall came over and, at Felice's inquiring look, shook his head.

"The young man was put there to taunt us," she said. "And to show us how little value this Slake places on human life."

"Perhaps," added Whisper, to her surprise, "it was also to show us how ruthless he is."

She nodded approvingly. The same thought had occurred to her. "Yes. But what could they make with so much acid? If, indeed, that was all that was in the shipment." Those were the questions she needed answers to. But as with an opponent's hidden strategies in Dominion, something niggled at her. If they didn't want someone to know about the acid, then it stood to reason they feared *someone* would guess their purpose if they knew about it. Perhaps an alchemist could shed some light.

A knock on the door echoed loudly around the room. Squall's blade appeared in his hand as if by sorcery. Whisper moved closer to the door, placing his back against the wall beside the lock.

Squall nodded to Whisper, and the big man threw the door open.

A disheveled boy stood there. He held an envelope in one hand while the other was deep in his pants pocket, scratching something Felice didn't care to think about. He stared at Squall's naked blade and backed up a step.

"Miss Shyrise?" he said in a querulous voice.

Felice stepped forward. "Maybe. Who are you?"

The boy held out the envelope. "This here's for you. The man said you'd pay me a silver ducat."

She raised her eyebrows. "I doubt it. Perhaps you meant a copper?"

A shrug of the boy's shoulders, and he sniffed and wiped his nose on the back of his sleeve. "All right. Worth a try. Ducat first."

She handed him a copper coin and took the envelope. He scurried off quickly, disappearing down a side street.

Felice closed the door and gently placed the envelope on her desk.

"Aren't you going to open it?" asked Squall.

She gave Whisper an inquiring look, and the big man shook his head. No sorcery, then. But the envelope had felt odd, slightly lumpy and too heavy to contain only paper. Moving to her desk drawers, she took out a letter opener and a spoon. Carefully, she used the spoon to hold the envelope down while she sliced it open, then inserted the spoon and twisted. With the two sides of the envelope separated, she peered inside.

There was a letter, but there were also a few gold ducats. Felice paused, then looked closer. The residue was faint, but the coins were dusted with a dark green

powder. More of the substance had collected at the bottom of the envelope. She snorted.

“Something wrong?” Squall said.

If they wanted to do away with her, they’d have to do better than that. “There are gold ducats inside that have been coated with a poison. At least, that’s my best guess.” Yet one more reason to visit an alchemist, and she knew just the fellow.

As carefully as she could, she slid another piece of paper under the envelope then wrapped it up, along with the spoon and letter opener. They were contaminated now as well. Just to be sure, she enclosed them in another layer.

Felice looked up to find Squall and Whisper still, as if frozen.

“It’s not going to kill anyone,” she said. “Come on. We’ve an alchemist to see.”

“Mistress Shyrise,” Squall said, “perhaps you should change?”

She looked down at her rumpled, holey, and bloodstained shirt, and her creased and perforated pants. “There’s no time. And perhaps I’ll start a fashion trend.”

“I’d like to keep some of the powder,” Felice told the alchemist, Columele.

“I don’t think that’s wise,” he said.

“Just to study. I have an interest in herbs and poisons.”

Columele gave her a disapproving look, but he carefully tipped some of the powder from the envelope into a glass vial, which he sealed with a cork.

Felice pocketed the vial, then watched as the alchemist placed the envelope into a glass container and poured in a yellow solution, which looked like urine. She hoped it wasn’t.

“Now,” Columele said brightly, “that shouldn’t take too long. Then the ducats are yours.”

“I wasn’t worried about the coins,” Felice said. “Only about getting poisoned.”

“Yes. Quite. Well, you can examine the letter, just don’t touch it.”

He’d placed the paper inside an open cupboard attached to the wall. A flue protruded from a hole in the top, which the alchemist said was supposed to draw up the foul vapors of his experiments. Four stones held down the letter’s corners, displaying penmanship in an elegant hand.

He kept glancing at Felice’s shirt, through which he could probably see her underclothes and some skin. *Really.*

“Acid burns?” Columele said. “Sting and itch a fair bit, don’t they. I can’t help but wonder—”

“That’s the other thing I need you to investigate. I want to know what type of acid did this.” She really wanted to read the letter, but first things first.

Columele cut around some of the holes in her shirt, then placed the material into a beaker. Taking a vial, he dripped a few drops of solution onto the cloth, then added a splash of another liquid. He swirled the container, and the solution turned a dull orange.

“Ah,” the alchemist said. “A simple acid made from salt and a leavening agent.”

“It doesn’t sound too dangerous,” Felice said. “But we know it is. What could it be used for?”

“It’s incredibly useful. It can remove rust from steel, in tanning leather, to produce other alchemical compounds—”

“But what could you do with a great deal of it? And I mean a lot.”

Columele rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Dissolve things? It scorched through your clothes fairly easily, and your flesh... er... you can see what happens if you get some on you. Those wounds will blister and scar. If you’d been drenched with it instead of just a few drops, then you probably would have died. You certainly wouldn’t be standing here talking to me. If it didn’t kill you, then your wounds would probably become infected.”

And then death wouldn’t be far away... “A weapon, then...” Felice said.

There was a sharp intake of breath from Whisper. “That’s no way to die,” he said.

“There are many ways to be killed,” Squall said. “This one just requires more pain.”

Columele’s face paled, and his hands clutched his stomach. “No one would do that,” he mumbled queasily. “Surely not.”

Felice rubbed her tired eyes. “With the amount they’ve hoarded, the Empire’s citizens will be in danger. They must be targeting a crowd. But not a random one. They’re after someone important. Multiple someones. And it’ll be messy.”

She needed more information, if she was to stop them. Perhaps the letter would offer more clues.

My dearest Felicienne,

If you are reading this, then you are not dead, and my faith in your abilities is justified. I have been observing you with keen interest, since the First Adjudicator saw fit to avail herself of your skills. It has been quite enjoyable watching you rather than my usual adversaries.

Felice stopped reading. So if she passed the “test” and avoided the poison, she’d be alive to read the letter? What an insane scheme. Whoever Slake was, he was extremely well informed and quite possibly deranged. He was now watching her since Constance had dragged her into this mess, and he’d implied he had someone keeping a close eye on Constance. Perhaps that was why she’d enlisted Felice: she couldn’t trust those around her.

She continued reading.

My organization is always keen to enlist people of exceptional ability, and I believe you are one such person. I am pleased to offer you employment in a junior position, terms and conditions to be decided later. Of course, there will be a probation period, but I believe you’ll survive, and our relationship will bear fruit in the forms of both wealth and power.

A bloody recruitment letter? A job offer?

To accept this offer, please go to the Emperor’s Mast tavern, located in... well, you’ll find it. Ask the proprietor for a glass of twenty-year-old Pepperbush Red, and tell her you’d like to see her naked. The ducats inside the envelope you can keep as your signing bonus.

Yours faithfully,

Slake.

Was this a joke? Pepperbush Red didn't last beyond five years, as the alchemicals added to the wine accelerated its decline. And at more than ten gold ducats a bottle, she wasn't likely to order it at some dubious tavern. This unconvincing attempt at skullduggery and secrecy smacked of a trap to her. With the resources Slake obviously had, and his intelligence, he could make contacting him much simpler. No, this was a setup. But did she dare spring the trap?

"Can you please dispose of this letter?" Felice asked Columele.

"Of course, Miss Shyrise. By the way, I'd wear some gloves if I were you. It'll help prevent your wounds from getting infected, and the marks will be less noticeable. And the gold ducats?"

She looked up to see the alchemist rinsing the coins in a solution and picking them out with a thin pair of copper tongs. He washed them in a dish containing another clear liquid before placing them on a cloth to dry.

Felice had a feeling that over the next few days she'd need all the loyalty and protection she could afford.

"Take one for yourself. I almost forgot..." She handed over the folded paper with the white powder sample from the warehouse inside. "I need this analyzed. Squall and Whisper, you can have the other coins. Get some rest; then I want you back at work when the sun comes up. I have another day at the Dominion tournament tomorrow, but after that I'll meet you back at my office."

Felice's wounds itched, though the ointment the physiker provided went somewhat to reducing her discomfort. It meant she couldn't concentrate properly and was irritable. This made her play edgy and inconsistent, but also more aggressive. She trounced her opponent in short order, trampling all over his carefully orchestrated moves. The man was well known in Dominion circles, a low-ranking member of the Emperor's household who obviously wanted to improve his lot by performing well in the tournament. But it wasn't to be. He left watery-eyed, consoled by a number of foppishly dressed nobles who flashed looks of ire Felice's way. She ignored them, tugging at the calfskin gloves she'd bought to cover the acid burns on her hands and keep them protected.

Felice was about to leave to get some air when Stryden accosted her again. He had to have completed his match as well. They would find themselves across from each other on the same board soon.

"You are an evil woman, Morgaine," he said, almost coquettishly. "Did you pull the wings off flies when you were a little girl? No matter. Everyone has things that should stay in the past. We should look to the future, don't you agree?"

"Yes," Felice replied absentmindedly. She really wasn't in the mood for this idiot's conversation. "If you'll excuse me, I've—"

"What happened to you? I don't mean to be rude, but I couldn't help notice you scratching throughout your game. A lovers' spat?"

She gave him a sharp look. Stryden wasn't a fool, to play Dominion with the skill he did. She wished he wouldn't affect the personality of one. It did him no justice, and there was no reason for it, with the crushing victories he'd had.

Everyone could see he wasn't a fool. Indeed, he was likely to place in the tournament or even win first prize and be presented to the Emperor himself. Felice paused, then casually looked at Stryden. His eyes remained focused on hers, and there was a false grin fixed upon his face. He had the charm and bearing of a stuffed crocodile.

"No lovers' argument," she said slowly. Was he attempting to find out if she was single? "The result of being outplayed. Whoever wounded me, well, I bow to his superior intellect." She spoke almost without thinking, giving her time to ponder the ideas materializing in her mind. When the Dominion tournament was over, the winner would be on the dais, with the Emperor and his entourage. There, they'd have the honor of meeting him and accepting their prize purse. After that, they'd be the toast of the city for the night. A great many important people would be assembled in one place...

"You'd bow to someone who injured you? My dear Morgaine, that sounds somewhat... unusual."

"If a few scars are the result of a valuable lesson and lead to the beginning of a fruitful relationship, then they're a small cost." She'd gut Slake if she ever saw him, but for now she needed time to think, and it looked like Stryden wouldn't let her disengage from their conversation easily. Bloody ancestors, she had too much work to do. If her hunch was correct, there would be an acid attack on the Emperor himself. An assassination attempt.

"I have to go," Felice said abruptly. "My wounds are paining me. I'm sure you understand."

She would have a message sent to Avigdor, as her next match would start soon. That was her best option. He could join her here, and they'd have to make do the best they could. "If you'll excuse me, I have a few tasks I need to take care of."

"No doubt I'll see you again soon. During our game, if not before. I'm looking forward to it. And to seeing the Emperor. If I may be so bold, though?"

What now? "Go on."

Stryden tugged his collar. "I was wondering if you'd like to dine with me? One evening soon, after the tournament."

Ancestors, he is interested in me! "I'm quite busy these days," Felice said. "But perhaps I could make some time."

"Excellent!" said Stryden with a relieved look. He handed something to Felice. "My card. So you know how to contact me."

Felice took it and thanked him, sliding the card into her pocket. She started slightly when she brushed against the glass vial of poison. She was getting tired and careless, but luckily she had the gloves on in case any powder ended up on the outside of the vial. "I will," she said. "Soon." She smiled and nodded then moved away.

Commandeering a piece of paper and a pen from the official scorers, she dashed off a letter to Avigdor. There were messengers waiting around, so she bribed one with a ducat and sent him on his way.

That done, she checked the classifications and found that of the hundreds of entrants, most had been whittled away. Felice was in the top eight. That meant she would be in the final game if she won her next two matches.

Then she saw that if she did manage to make it to the final game, her opponent would be Stryden. If he won his next two matches, which she had no doubt he would. His odds of winning the entire tournament had shortened to less than two to one, with hers at sixteen to one. She was expected to lose to him.

The tedium of the wait for Felice's next match was only interrupted by the appearance of Avigdor. He was chewing something as he entered the tournament hall, pausing to brush crumbs from his mouth. He looked around, saw Felice, and waved.

"I heard you won again," he said, slightly out of breath. "Word travels fast. The tournament is closely watched by those in power. They're always looking for new blood. When you win a few more games, the nobles will want to make you one of theirs."

"Don't count on it," Felice replied. "They have me at long odds to win my match with Stryden. You remember him? The man I told you to look into..."

Avigdor nodded, and a smile crept across his face. "You thought I'd forgotten. Have you no faith? I've dug into his affairs, and there isn't much to tell. Apparently, he manages a number of trading companies and a manufactory that makes roof tiles. I have a contact putting together a list of his holdings and business deals as we speak. It should only take a day or two."

"Good work. Squall and Whisper?"

"They've gone to find Hedgehog, like you asked."

It being the middle of the day, the street children would likely be holed up until the sun set. Except for the beggars. The two mercenaries might be successful, but it was more likely they'd come back empty-handed.

"Miss Morgaine?"

Felice turned to the attendant who'd spoken. "Yes?"

"Your next match will begin shortly. If you'd come with me."

She nodded and turned back to Avigdor. "You made sure they knew to meet you back here?"

He nodded.

"Good. Then can you find me something to eat? I'm starved. And put some ducats on me to win the next match, but when I'm up against Stryden, you should put our coin on him."

"Really, Felice, wager against my own employer? What would people say?"

"When you won, they'd say you were a genius. That, or I'd thrown the match."

She left Avigdor to his own devices and followed the attendant to her next match.

Eager to end the game quickly, Felice used her spare moves early. Normally, it was a risky maneuver, as if you didn't finish off your adversary or push them sufficiently off balance to guarantee victory, you were at a distinct disadvantage. Her opponent had locked in a conservative first seven moves, which played into her hands. She corralled his forces into a corner of the top tier, with a few other pieces running for their lives around the bottom two. He should have

conceded twenty moves ago, but he steadfastly refused to give up and was doing his reputation a disservice by making her chase around and mop up his stray pieces.

In the end, though, the outcome was inevitable. Felice subtly maneuvered him into a rash action, and the defensive walls he'd put up crumbled. He resigned.

She shook the man's hand. His eyes remained fixed on the mess of the Dominion board. "Better luck next year," she said, and cringed inwardly as she sounded like a bastard.

He barely glanced at her before striding off in a huff.

"Well," Avigdor said from behind her, "he didn't expect the whirlwind."

"He was a plodder. He had plenty of games memorized, but lacked imagination. He had no true understanding of Dominion." Despite her anxious state, a thrill coursed through her. She was in the semifinals, which itself ensured a hefty purse of prize money would be hers. But one more victory and she'd be playing in the final.

Avigdor rolled his eyes. "I get it. Dominion is life and all that. The music of the game. A beautiful—"

"Please stop. Did Squall and Whisper manage to locate Hedgehog?"

"They did. I sent them back out to check something."

Felice raised her eyebrows and gave Avigdor a withering look.

"All right. I get that you're irritable," continued Avigdor. "Hedgehog said the shipment wasn't moved in the wagons. They had a tunnel dug to the sewers and specialized boats made to transport the acid. Flat bottomed, much like you when you were—"

"I exercise now," Felice said. "And you could do to lose a few pounds. But Hedgehog?" She cursed under her breath. "I told him to stay away. If they followed too close, they might have been seen. I don't want another injury on my conscience."

"Be that as it may, we now know they used the sewers, and the information could prove crucial."

"Did the children follow them?" Felice said.

Avigdor nodded. "Can you guess where they ended up?"

Felice thought she could. The only place the Emperor and the officers of the court would gather out in the open, and soon.

"Here," she said, eliciting a hiss of astonishment from Avigdor. "Or hereabout."

"How did you..." He shook his head ruefully. "What should we do now?"

"The Emperor is in danger, obviously. So we have to tell Constance all we know. I doubt his sorcerous defenses could be breached; they've lasted centuries, after all. But there's always a chance. Let's go, then. We must find Constance. She has people watching us?"

"Yes. I've spotted a few."

"Good. Anyone will do."

They accosted a long-haired, disheveled woman with a low-cut bodice and an almost transparent skirt. The false prostitute, or scam artist, or whatever she was supposed to be passing herself off as, was quick to crumble when Felice

and Avigdor waylaid her. She took them to a fruit seller outside, who must have been her superior. This new woman had tanned skin and shrewd eyes and, from the way her hand remained under the top of her stall, a knife of some sort hidden within easy reach.

Felice didn't waste time with pleasantries. "We need to see Constance. Now. The Emperor's life may depend on it."

The fruit seller squinted at them, then nodded. "Go back to your office and wait," she said. "I can't promise anything, but she might visit tonight."

"She will if she values the Emperor," Felice said. "Make sure you tell her I said that."

Avigdor and Felice made their way back to the office, hardly exchanging words as they walked along bustling streets.

She'd stumbled onto something far more sinister than she'd anticipated, and far more dangerous than she could handle. Felice had done her part. Now, it all depended on Constance.

"Find Squall and Whisper," Felice said. "I need to check the tournament hall early tomorrow. Breaking in tonight could prove problematic, what with the guards they have stationed so the unfinished matches aren't tampered with."

After going over a few scenarios, Avigdor left, and Felice was alone. She collapsed into her chair and stretched across her desk to grab the jar of ointment for her wounds. She dabbed some of the contents on her acid burn marks and settled back to wait.

An hour before midnight, there was a knock on the door. Crossbow-wielding soldiers barged in, with Constance in their wake.

"Oh dear," the First Adjudicator said. "You look peeved. Is this all too hard for you?"

"Very funny," Felice said, not moving from her sprawled position on her chair. "But I'm guessing you know exactly what happened. After all, Squall and Whisper are in your pay." She didn't know for certain, but the small details were adding up...

Constance's eyes narrowed. "A most excellent deduction. But it was rather obvious once you knew I'd been watching you for some time."

"You can't trust anyone these days. I can't say they haven't proven useful, though. Can I hang onto them for a little longer?"

"Perhaps," Constance said. "Now, what's this about the Emperor's life being in danger?"

Felice debated saying something flippant or asking for a chest full of gold ducats in exchange for her information, but these people took the Emperor's welfare seriously. She'd probably find herself under the ministrations of a torturer so fast her head would spin.

Swiftly, she outlined what she'd learned, and summed up her reasoning behind an assassination attempt on the Emperor while the winner of the Dominion tournament was presented to him.

"Flimsy," Constance said.

"Maybe," agreed Felice. *It's not that implausible*, she thought. Surely Constance would want to cover every angle. Why wasn't she more interested? "It's not certain. But it's not a big intuitive leap to surmise all that acid would do untold damage to

whoever found themselves in the middle of it. Would it be able to penetrate the Emperor's sorcerous defenses?"

"It's possible, though unlikely. The fumes alone would be enough to incapacitate someone unshielded. And if the acid was mixed with another alchemical, which resulted in a vigorous reaction..." Constance looked thoughtful for a few moments. "One of the trinkets stolen from the warlocks might be able to disrupt sorcery."

"Might? Or is able to?" It was all very vague... Was Constance hoping the Emperor would be assassinated? Was Constance herself behind it? The thought sent a shiver of dread through Felice. It bore considering. Was she being groomed as the scapegoat? Squall and Whisper had dispatched the assailants outside of the tanner's without any trouble. Was the whole situation a setup?

"Is, then. Though it would have to be close. Within touching distance." Constance's eyes narrowed, and she cleared her throat. "If you tell anyone what I just told you, you won't live long enough to regret it. It's possible the trinket is in play as well."

More than possible, Felice thought. Constance bore watching carefully as well, she decided. These were dangerous waters Felice swam in, and there was no shortage of sharks.

"You must win your match tomorrow morning," Constance continued. "Which ensures you're on the dais to play the final game. You *have* to make sure you're on the dais with the Emperor. Come to think of it, since only the winner is presented to the Emperor, then you need to make sure you win. We could use someone of your ability looking out for anything untoward the whole time."

And she would be in the perfect place to take the fall...if that was what Constance's plan entailed. "That could be a problem. Even if I make the grand final, I don't think I'll win. There's a fellow named Stryden who's been playing better than I have."

"I'm confident you'll find a way," Constance said. "An enterprising woman like you should have no trouble. Do whatever you have to; just make sure you win. And don't look at me like that. Swallow your pride or your morals or whatever it is that's put the look of indignation on your face. This is more important than a game. The Emperor is the Empire. Without him, civilization could very well descend into chaos."

Felice thought that was a bit melodramatic, but she held her tongue. "I'll do my best," she said through clenched teeth.

"Felice!" Avigdor panted as he came bursting in. "Felice! Hedgehog is dead."

What remaining strength Felice had fled from her legs, and she staggered across the room to him. "What happened?" she demanded weakly. Constance had only left a short time ago, and now this.

"Squall and Whisper found him among a refuse pile in one of the canals. The other children he consorted with made themselves scarce, but Squall and Whisper managed to corner one and pry some information out of her."

"But Hedgehog... What did they do to him?"

Avigdor wouldn't meet her eye. "It wasn't pretty. They must have caught him spying on them and wanted to teach the children a lesson. He was badly bruised and cut up."

Felice's stomach twisted, and her heart ached in her chest. She'd killed Hedgehog. Her warning to him hadn't been firm enough, and she'd sealed his fate. Of course Slake would eliminate anyone who crossed him.

"I should have told him to lie low. As soon as I realized this plot was bigger than we thought. I should have."

"It's not your fault."

"It bloody well is! As for Squall and Whisper, don't tell them anything else, Avigdor. Do you hear me? They're in Constance's employ. Always have been. It was remiss of me not to see it earlier."

Avigdor moved closer to Felice. He placed a hand on her shoulder. "Do you want—"

"Leave me!" she shouted. She pushed his hand away and abruptly stood. She rummaged through her desk and, not finding what she wanted, moved to the side cupboards. There was a bottle of raw spirit around here somewhere, and a strong drink was what she needed.

Whoever this Slake was, he planned something big. Big enough he hadn't balked at casual murder.

"Felice—"

"I said leave me!"

Bloody ancestors. Her once stable life had been turned upside down. She was effectively working for Constance, First Adjudicator to the Emperor. And now an innocent boy was dead.

She should never have risked Hedgehog, or any of the street children, after what had happened to Flo. She'd made a mistake, and someone else had paid for it with their life.

Felice groaned. She pried one eye open and immediately squeezed it shut again.

She was on the floor of her office. The spirit bottle lay beside her, two-thirds full. She didn't usually drink much. It addled her thoughts, and that was unacceptable, so it hadn't taken more than a few mouthfuls to do its work.

At least she'd slept. Somewhat.

Bloody hells, her head ached abominably.

A glance at the window told her it was dawn. She was in no danger of missing her morning Dominion match today. Avigdor would have come to check on her, in any event. But she didn't want to see him.

Felice mixed a herbal remedy and downed the grainy mixture in a few swallows. She performed her morning ablutions in the back room, applied the healing ointment to her thinly scabbed spots, and tugged her gloves on. Changing into a spare set of clothes, she braved the streets.

From one of the many vendors who congregated on the street corners, Felice bought a warm, sweet bread roll filled with egg. It was salty and good. Closer to the tournament hall, she stopped for a hot tea served by an old woman whose

hands were almost crippled with arthritis. She sat next to the woman, exchanging small talk and sipping from her steaming mug. Felice let her mind wander in the silences. The woman served other customers, many of whom drank their tea as fast as possible, risking a scalded tongue, before hurrying off to their workplaces.

Felice drained her mug, thanked the woman as she returned it, and set off.

She barely noticed the thickening crowds on her walk. Hedgehog was dead. The boy had had a hard life, but a life it was. Now she'd taken that from him. It ate at her, gnawed at her conscience. The Dominion tournament no longer seemed as important to her as it once had. She'd done everything Constance had asked so far. That was good enough, wasn't it?

When she arrived at the tournament hall, she hesitated out front. What was she doing? Was all this worth it? She'd thought of nothing but making ducats and ensuring her investments flourished. But the casualties brought it all into perspective.

Larard's gang. Flo's wounding. Sparrow's callous death. The warehouse acid attack. The planned attack at the tournament.

She'd been wasting her life. Constance was...not a nice person. That, Felice could discern. But at least she seemed to stand for something greater than herself, and all her considerable energy and influence was directed toward it. *All I care about is money and my own objectives. What does that make me? Who am I to judge her?*

Felice realized that Hedgehog was right: no one was safe while dangerous people had free run of the city, and she alone wasn't enough to fight the injustice of it. She needed influence, power, resources.

She needed to be like Constance.

Felice romped through her semifinal match the next morning. Her opponent was a thin, pale woman with stringy brown hair, which always fell across her face. She seemed overawed to have reached the finals and made a number of hesitant moves that jeopardized her positions. They weren't bad moves, decided Felice. Just too...wishy-washy. It hadn't helped that, in the middle of the game, the Emperor and his retinue arrived. The pomp and trumpets and drums had distracted the woman, as had her closeness to the immortal sorcerer who ruled the Empire.

It was a fatal distraction. At this level there could be no dithering, no uncertainty. To hesitate was a sure way to lose. Hedgehog's death still weighed on Felice, but it also gave her resolve and a clarity of thought she'd never experienced before.

And now Felice was in the final. She didn't even have a chance for the fact to sink in, as no sooner had the woman conceded defeat than Avigdor rushed up to her, his face shiny with sweat.

"Felice! I mean Morgaine. I need to tell you what I've found. The reagent from the warehouse is a powdered form of an alchemical that, when combined with acid, releases toxic fumes. The alchemist Columele said the fumes are deadly."

"So now we're looking for acid and the powder? Somehow they're going to mix the two in here under the noses of Constance's people and with all these

spectators, or Constance's people are involved... How would they conceal and move gallons of acid without anyone knowing? And then somehow combine it with the powder close to the Emperor? It defies belief. And yet, I think that's their design. And if Constance was in on the assassination, then it would be much easier to pull off. Find Squall and Whisper. Go now! I have to get to the dais for the last match, and perhaps there's something I can do to stop this madness."

Avigdor rushed away just as Felice was bundled up by half a dozen attendants and escorted to a comfortable chair in an enclosed section beside the dais. It seemed that now the Emperor was here, they wanted the grand final to commence as soon as possible. It was, after all, what most of the nobles and merchants had come today to see. The hall was packed, with barely room to move, and the mezzanine gallery was standing room only.

Felice sat down to wait under the attendants' watchful eyes. An hour went by as she watched spectators moving around the hall, placing wagers and observing matches, chatting and eating and drinking. She kept a watch for anyone suspicious, but everyone seemed to catch her attention. The smallest move anyone made had her nervous and jumping out of her skin.

There was no sign of Constance, or Squall and Whisper. She still wasn't sure if Constance was guilty or innocent, and at this stage she couldn't take any chances. If anyone was going to succeed in toppling the Emperor, it would probably be someone in Constance's position after all.

A dark-haired attendant approached and cleared her throat. "Miss Morgaine? The other semifinal has been completed. You'll be playing Sir Stryden in the final. He has been allocated a brief rest period."

Felice nodded, and the attendant left her to her thoughts. How could she defeat Stryden? And while she was in the middle of a grueling game of Dominion, she was expected to watch for the assassination attempt and unmask Slake. Stratagems and plans ran through her mind, all examined and discarded.

Half an hour later, one of the attendants nodded, having received a signal from someone on the dais. He turned to Felice.

"It's time. I hope you're ready. If you happen to be defeated, you are required to leave the dais immediately. The Emperor's security demands it."

Felice swallowed and nodded. She barely had time to straighten her clothes and check her hair before stepping onto the dais and arriving at the board.

Nobles and merchants and anyone of note were already on the dais. At the far end, surrounded by ranks of attentive warlocks and guards, the Emperor was seated on an elaborate raised chair. Pale-skinned and platinum haired, he appeared almost ghostlike. His unique violet eyes burned with intelligence and power.

Stryden waved to Felice as she approached. Far above them, the impressive chandelier cast multicolored illumination over the proceedings. Sorcerous globes of various warm colors hung suspended amid decorative crystals as large as her head.

A roar went up from the crowd as an attendant signaled the game to start. He said something, but his words were lost in the din. Felice decided it was something like, "For the glory of the Emperor, may he live forever! Let the grand final begin!"

Felice looked around for Avigdor, for Squall and Whisper, but all she could see were strangers cheering and clapping, shouting and stamping their feet. She saw Malko in the crowd, next to a nobleman who looked to have a permanent sneer. Both Malko and the nobleman were engaged in a heated argument, ignoring the announcement of the attendant. Which was unlike Malko... He looked up and caught her eye. He grimaced at Felice, and she had the belated thought that Malko could be Slake. After all, his preoccupation with wagering on Dominion matches had him roaming around the hall at all times. A perfect cover.

She shook her head, took a deep breath, and wrote down her opening moves.

An hour later, she sat dejectedly in a chair, head held in her hands.

Bloody ancestors and pignuts. I'm going to lose.

Stryden had her strategy in disarray. No sooner had she plugged a hole or fixed a section of the board than two more came under attack. He seemed to know exactly what she'd do before she moved her pieces. In desperation, she'd used a few of her extra moves, but to no avail.

Was this how it felt to be on the receiving end of her victories? The dread, the sick feeling of knowing nothing you did would stop defeat? Oh, she'd lost matches before, but not when the stakes were so high. Ducats were one thing to lose, easily replaced. To get on the bad side of a First Adjudicator, and possibly fail at detecting the threat to the Emperor's life, was another. If she didn't win, she wouldn't be presented to the Emperor and would have failed. Constance could make sure she never had another client as long as she lived, if she wasn't thrown into prison and tortured.

What really worried her was the potential for injury and death. Not just with the crowd at the tournament, but if the Emperor was killed and destructive forces moved to topple the Empire, then thousands of people would die.

The thought sickened her.

As she played, Felice tried to keep an eye on the suspicious servers and the bearded supervisor. But she still didn't know who this mysterious mastermind was, or who were Constance's plants among the crowd and officials. By the ancestors, it could just as well be one of the spectators. She was searching for a needle in a haystack. Once, she saw Squall and Whisper walk by the dais, though they were focused on something else and failed to notice her.

It took Felice some time to figure out what Stryden was doing. But when she did, the sheer breadth of his strategy stunned her. Her own game seemed inadequate, her knowledge wanting. Her mouth went dry, and her hands trembled. In truth, she felt like resigning and offering herself to Stryden to be mentored.

Constance had told her she must win this match.

And Felice knew she could not.

There was an underlying current to Stryden's game. Where Felice would have surrounded and converted her opponent's pieces, Stryden simply overran and slaughtered them. He reveled in destruction. The heartlessness of the fight seemed to give him pleasure.

She moved some pieces: automatic alterations designed to give her time to think.

She was lost. She knew it. Stryden knew it. The attendants and spectators knew it.

But rather than resign herself to the fact, Felice pulled out every trick she knew and some she improvised on the fly. The Crow and Moon piece ranged swiftly across all three boards, forcing Stryden to counter its progress and block potential paths. Her Wayfarer piece prodded and jabbed at Stryden's defenses and almost forced him into a rash move. Felice fought with all her might, vowing not to lose, wanting Stryden to make that one mistake that would unravel his strategy and cause his undoing.

Felice needed to be the one presented to the Emperor, close enough to spot the danger when it came. Stryden wouldn't know he was in danger; he'd be a lamb to the slaughter if he were to triumph.

I need to win, she almost whispered to him. *It's more important than you could know. You'll be rewarded for your service to the Empire.* But even though she felt the fate of the Emperor and the spectators might depend on her winning, Felice's sense of decency and fair play held her back.

Some of her moves elicited a frown from Stryden, and once he sighed, as if he'd expected better.

Sorry to disappoint you.

Stryden must have decided to finish her off, as he signaled to the attendant his intention to use three extra moves. He moved his pieces on the board quickly, then stepped back, hands clasped behind his back.

Felice blinked. She shook her head, blinked again, and squinted at the Dominion board. No, her eyes were not deceiving her. Stryden had made a serious mistake. She'd forced him into an error, or perhaps it was his own overconfidence that had undone him.

His mouth opened, as if he'd also just realized what he'd done. He grimaced and met her eyes. A bead of sweat trickled from his hairline.

Felice considered her options, then used two of her remaining three extra moves. Summoning all the zeal and hope she could muster, she drove wedges between Stryden's forces, cutting groups of them off from each other.

Now she could see a path to victory. A slim one, but there nonetheless.

The match continued apace, both Felice and Stryden vying to tilt the balance in their favor. Perhaps the stress was getting to Stryden, as he made another tiny mistake. Then another. Felice pounced on both, consolidating her positions and weakening his.

But another thought niggled at her. Had Stryden thrown the match? Why would he? Fame and connections and a goodly sum of ducats had been his for the taking. It seemed an unlikely scenario, and yet... Had he been instructed to let her win? Was he in cahoots with Constance? After all, he had mentioned he was a diplomat in the Emperor's service when they'd first met... Perhaps Stryden was an ally.

Felice grunted. If she was being honest, she didn't care why he'd misstepped. All that mattered was that she'd won, as Constance had wanted. Now, Felice would be presented to the Emperor, when she assumed the assassination attempt would occur.

She allowed herself a relieved breath and rubbed her weary eyes. She looked at Stryden, hoping to convey her sympathy at his impending loss—and found him red-faced and glaring at her. His hands clenched into fists, and his neck was corded.

Stryden hadn't thrown the game. He was livid he'd lost.

Felice narrowed her eyes. What if Stryden wasn't on their side? What if...he was Slake? He wouldn't be presented to the Emperor now.

A shiver ran through her body.

Stryden was Slake. She knew it in her bones. The realization sent chills along her spine.

Felice examined the crowd and spotted furtive looks between people, the glint of steel. Slake's people. If she made one false move, said anything to reveal she was onto him, she'd be killed in an instant.

Felice picked up the Crow and Moon piece, to the disapproving looks of the attendants, and held it in her gloved hands. Everything hung in the balance, and what she needed to do was surprise everyone, to push Stryden off balance. She had to think and required time to gather her thoughts. What she needed was a distraction.

The attendant cleared his throat again. "Miss Morgaine? Your move, if you please."

It was the third time he'd asked. Her thoughts roiled. The specter of Hedgehog hung over Felice.

She sighed and shrugged. "I resign."

Around Felice, the crowd murmured astonishment at her words. As those further behind realized what she'd done, the noise rose to a crescendo of disbelieving shouts and curses. They knew she'd thrown the game on the brink of victory, and they weren't happy. Something hit Felice in the head, and a nut bounced to her feet. Guards and attendants formed a ring around the board, pushing back against the crowd, who'd become unruly and threatened to swamp her. Somewhere, a fight broke out and fists were thrown.

Stryden—Slake—grinning like a madman, was hurrying up to Felice while everyone was distracted. He looked pleased and relieved. As well he should be, since his plan had to include being presented to the Emperor.

"Very well done, Miss Morgaine! I thought I had you for a while, but when I slipped up, you took full advantage. Not many people could have recovered from being so far behind. But then you resigned. Why?"

She needed to keep him off guard, at least for a little while. "You threw the game," Felice said bluntly.

"What? No, I can assure you I didn't. The pressure got to me." As if to emphasize his point, he drew out a brightly colored red kerchief and mopped his face.

A signal. Felice looked around, but couldn't see anything untoward.

"I'm not used to these big occasions," continued Stryden. "Why, the very thought of being presented to the Emperor has my heart palpitating."

He wasn't here alone; he'd have backup. If she shouted or tried to alert the guards, he'd retaliate, and people could be harmed.

Felice affected an air of nonchalance. Not hard, since she was bone weary. Her wounds ached after she'd been playing all day. And the weight of her revelation

was enough to bend her knees. She needed to get out of here to find Constance and tell her, or somehow get her word. Stryden—or Slake—would have people following her. She couldn't give the game away, if she was to have a chance of catching him.

Already some attendants were glaring at Felice, as the loser was expected to make a dignified retreat. She spotted Constance over near the Emperor, talking to a black-garbed man, but the First Adjudicator didn't look Felice's way.

"Say hello to the Emperor for me," Felice said.

"I must admit," said Stryden, "I didn't expect this turn of events."

He was standing so close to her, she could smell his breath. Garlic and pepper. Phew! What had he eaten for breakfast?

"I was bored," Felice said. She didn't owe him an explanation, and she'd better watch her step with the man. Only someone unhinged would plan to assassinate the Emperor. She glanced around, hoping to see Squall or Whisper and catch their eye, but no luck.

The unruly crowd was beginning to calm down somewhat. She didn't have much time before she had to get off the dais, and Stryden would be presented to the Emperor.

"Bored... yes, I sympathize. What is the meaning of all this?" He gestured to encompass the hall. "People playing a game, using hours of their intellect and time, for what? A few ducats and some nice words? What good could all these people have done if they'd used their time for other purposes? Could they have made our society better? Greater? Perhaps. There are street urchins dying out there."

That you killed. Perhaps Stryden was correct. No, she knew he was. But there was a purpose to playing Dominion: it helped hone her mind to razor sharpness. Her skill enabled her to see patterns, to conceptualize them.

"People die every day," she said dully. "If you find something you enjoy, then why not take advantage of that? There's enough misery in the world. Hold on to things that bring you happiness." A bright flash to her left caught her eye, and Felice flinched, but it wasn't a knife, only an old man adjusting his spectacles after they'd been knocked askew in the commotion.

"Do you think the dead street urchins would agree with you? What chance did they have? What happiness did they ever experience? Better to die fighting for something greater."

His words froze Felice's heart for a moment before it resumed hammering in her chest. *By the ancestors! He doesn't intend to survive. And if I spoil his plan, he's bound to have contingencies to escape.*

Felice closed her tired eyes and stood there, trembling. She was exhausted, her acid splash wounds itched, and she had a headache. Her options had narrowed to a meager few, and none of them good.

With one gloved hand, Felice placed the Crow and Moon in her pocket, fumbled with the poison vial, and dusted the piece.

"Sir Stryden," she said, "or should I say Slake?"

Stryden raised his eyebrows, but otherwise offered no other reaction. Around them, the crowd had almost returned to normal, and the attendants on the dais were readying a presentation area between the Emperor and the Dominion board.

She didn't have much time. As soon as they were ready, she would have to leave, and Slake was barely twenty yards from the Emperor.

"The ends do not justify the means," continued Felice, voice rising. "Why fight for something if it means causing innocent deaths? If we're also monsters, then what are we fighting for?" She found herself quaking. "You're not very good at hiding your megalomania."

A sizeable drinks cart filled with bottles and glass containers brimming with liquids was being wheeled onto the dais for everyone to partake of in celebration. *Ancestors, is that the acid?* Felice's sores itched at the sight. But it couldn't be: as it had passed, some of the nobles had taken full glasses and were sipping happily. Not acid. But it had to be. She was missing something important.

Slake offered a brief smile. "Only around you, my dear." He nodded to several men in the crowd close by.

Felice saw they bore scarred knuckles and the telltale bulges of concealed weapons in their coats. Assassins on Slake's payroll. If they got into a fight with Constance's people, it could be a bloodbath.

"Do you know how many innocents, how many children, have died at the hands of your thugs and assassins?"

Slake sneered. "And how many have died for the sake of the Emperor's pride and greed? There are always casualties in war, but at least I'm on the right side. And sometimes, one casualty can win the war." He clutched something in his hand. A small silver object.

A trinket. The one Constance told me about. Slake's way of disrupting the Emperor's sorcerous shield.

"The magistrates will determine whether you're in the right," Felice said. "Surrender now, peacefully, and you'll have your grievances heard."

"There's no justice in a corrupt empire. You should take a closer look at your so-called allies. You could try to have me arrested, but it will get quite violent. I hate to think of the casualties. Not to mention, there are an awful lot of people on this dais and in the crowd."

Colored patches of light from the chandelier spotted the floor around her. Felice frowned. At her feet and everywhere on the dais were the newly replaced tiles. What had Avigdor reported about Stryden's businesses? He owned a roof tile business. The powder from the warehouse could be compressed into tiles.

Bloody ancestors... the workmen... Slake has replaced the tiles.

Felice looked to the sky, pleading for inspiration.

And her gaze came to rest on the elaborate chandelier. Colored crystals as big as her head.

She had to make him think she hadn't figured out his endgame, and she needed to get close to him...

Felice grabbed Slake by the collar and pulled him near and slipped the Crow and Moon piece into his coat pocket. "Know this," she hissed. "I will hunt you down." She let go of his coat, tugged off her gloves and shoved them into her pocket. Her eyes wandered to the chandelier again. It was suspended from a thick rope, which looped through an iron ring bolted to the main roof beam. One of the attendants came up to them, gesturing for Felice to move off the dais.

“Goodbye, Felicie Shyrise. I hope you enjoy the presentation. I’m sure it will be one you never forget.”

Felice brushed off the hands of the attendant, who now looked angry. Her eyes followed the rope to where it was secured to a hook on a far wall—where a man was surreptitiously sawing through it. The bearded supervisor.

Pignuts.

“I don’t think there will be one,” Felice said.

Slake’s eyes widened just as she threw herself at him. She wrapped her arms around him in a hug and tangled her legs in his. They crashed to the tiled floor. Shouting erupted from her right.

“Clear the dais!” she yelled. Slake struggled to free himself. Felice was barely able to hold onto him.

“Protect the Emperor,” she heard Constance scream. “That’s all that matters.”

No, it’s not. Felice’s arm muscles protested as Slake thrashed wildly. Any second and he’d be free, and then dozens might die. She clung on for dear life and managed to glance toward the bearded man just as Squall and Whisper barreled into him, knocking his knife flying. They wrestled him to the ground, and Felice allowed herself a moment of relief. But even as she did, she could sense something was wrong.

Contingencies, she thought. Slake would have planned for almost anything.

A wavering shield sprang up around the Emperor, and his guards formed a defensive ring outside of it. One after another, warlocks threw up their own multicolored shields that covered them like protective skins.

There was an almighty crash as glass shattered and liquid spilled across the dais. The stubby attendant had pushed over the drinks trolley. Tiles bubbled and crumbled as the alcohol began to dissolve the compressed alchemical powder.

Hissing incandescent lines streaked from the warlocks toward Felice and Stryden, only to fizzle and dissipate into vapor. Mouths opened in shock, and Felice realized the stolen trinket must have neutralized their sorcery. They would have killed her along with Slake. It was only because he was close to her that she’d survived.

Warlocks positioned themselves in front of the Emperor while others hustled him away, barging through the crowd and trampling those who fell. Screams of panic sounded.

Slake’s forehead slammed into Felice’s, and she yelped in pain. Her grip loosened, and Slake broke free. As she stood, trying to grab hold of him again, he punched her in the face and she staggered, ears ringing, vision blurring. Guards brandishing blades rushed toward them.

Slake leaped from the dais and ran, shoving people aside. Felice screamed in frustration as he escaped. Now that the Emperor had been bundled away, there was no reason for Slake to sacrifice himself. He looked back and laughed, knowing she would try to save as many people as she could.

Something hissed through the air, and Felice only had time to see a crossbow bolt flash across the room—and slice through the rope securing the chandelier. The crescent-bladed bolt buried itself into a wooden beam.

The chandelier plummeted toward the dais.

Bloody ancestors.

Felice closed her eyes and hunched her shoulders against the coming wave of agony.

Her skin tingled, and she felt a pressure, as if she'd dived underwater. Crystals shattered all around her. Dehydrated acid meant to rehydrate in the alcohol, which was already mixed with the toxic powder.

But the harsh sting of acid didn't eventuate, nor did the lethal vapor. Felice still breathed. Screams sounded, agonizing wails of pain and torture.

Abruptly, the pressure subsided. Felice opened her eyes.

Acrid fumes assaulted her, and she coughed. She was standing in an island of calm, an exact circle of untouched dais, centered on the man standing close to her. The black-clad man Constance had been talking to. His shirt was closed with silver buttons in the shape of flowers. He was a warlock. The pressure she'd felt had been his sorcerous shield, which had protected her.

Toxic fumes overcame attendants, guards, and spectators. Men and women writhed on the ground, acid burns eating through clothes and skin and bone. A small boy wailed over the inert form of a woman.

"You might have saved the Emperor," the warlock said to Felice. "You have his attention now. Though some find his regard too much for them. Time will tell."

Felice's gaze traveled over the injured, the dead and dying.

Two guards grabbed her by the arms. She was dimly aware of Constance rushing over, along with her soldiers and a few dozen of the Emperor's guard, with swords drawn.

"Stop!" Felice shouted. "What are you doing?" They didn't know if she was friend or foe.

"Don't kill her!" Constance said firmly to the soldiers.

Pointed and sharp steel withdrew as the guards obeyed the First Adjudicator. They rushed Felice away, along with Constance and everyone else in the Emperor's entourage.

Behind them, the casualties remained.

"Well," Constance said, "that didn't end as well as I expected. You disappointed me, Felice."

"I disappointed you?" Felice said incredulously. "The warlocks would have killed me if it hadn't been for Slake's stolen trinket."

"You're alive. They reacted to a threat. There are always casualties in war."

Slake's exact words. Felice seethed inside. "I told you about the acid. I told you there could be an attempt on the Emperor's life."

"But you had no specifics. Specifics, my dear. And you should have obeyed my orders. The Emperor's life is paramount. Instead, you prioritized civilians."

They were in a warehouse close to the Dominion tournament hall. The Emperor's soldiers had broken in and were using it both as a safe house and as a base of operations. Of the Emperor there was no sign.

"I worked out Stryden was Slake," Felice said. She ticked off her points on her fingers. "His records had been falsified. His skill in Dominion was superb. He was interested in me from the first day of the tournament. He owns a roof tile business, which was where he made the tiles they replaced. The dehydrated acid

crystals rehydrating in the alcohol, well, I'll admit I didn't see that one until it was too late. I did better than you and your people. Who is Slake, really? Why does he want to kill the Emperor?"

Constance waved a hand, as if Slake was of no importance. "He's an extremist. Thinks the Empire would be better run by a council or some such nonsense. He's against dictators. Wants to wreak havoc and chaos in the hope the Empire will destabilize. As if thousands of years of stability could come undone with one death. Personally, I think his father must have been too strict on him. Anyway, in the end, he ran like a coward."

Felice doubted it was as simple as that. The last thing Slake would want was to die without purpose... or be captured and tortured, then executed. "So what happens now? I did everything you asked. The Emperor is alive."

"Yes, he is. You caught the Emperor's eye, and that of his warlocks, and I have a...proposal for you. Against my better judgement, I'm going to offer you a job. A position in my department. But you have to swear to follow my orders in future, and the priorities of the Adjudicators."

"I'll think about it. I'm willing to work with you if I get to do things my way. I'll get you results, but on my terms."

Constance paused, as if that was the last thing she thought she'd hear. "Don't think too long, Felicie Shyrise. Unless you want to spend the rest of your life chasing stray husbands and burying urchins. You could go far, with the proper training."

Hedgehog's death wasn't a trifle to be thrown in her face like that. He deserved better.

No doubt Felice would be supervised by Constance. Still, the idea had some merit. After what had happened, she felt a strong need to try to right some of the wrongs in the world, to make the cities safe for urchins like Hedgehog and Flo. She'd need resources greater than those she could command on her own, access to information, and to broaden her own abilities. And this job might give her what she needed.

"I accept, then," Felice said.

Constance beamed at her. "Then you're officially a Fifth Adjudicator, reporting directly to me. Squall and Whisper will be your aides. Do with them as you see fit."

"There's one other thing I think you should know," Felice said. "I slipped a poisoned Dominion piece into Slake's pocket. With any luck, he'll turn up dead."

Felice reached up to touch the sign of the Crow and Moon before entering her office. *For luck*, she told herself. But if she was honest, she didn't believe in luck.

She removed her boots at the door and managed to stub her toe on the corner of her desk before lighting a lamp. Rummaging around, she found a cleaning rag and gingerly removed her gloves from her pocket. She wrapped them in a few layers of paper and tucked them into the back of a drawer along with the vial of poison. They'd be safe there until tomorrow. She shucked off her coat and bundled it up for washing. A few washes.

Taking a bottle from a drawer, she poured herself a decent measure of Maidens-Tears, a strong spirit and expensive to boot, but she enjoyed a glass after each successful case.

Snuggling into her chair, she propped her feet on the desktop and settled back to relax and enjoy her drink. Then she noticed a small paper-wrapped box on her desk. Dried flowers had been pressed into the wrapping. A present. Perhaps it was from Constance? Or that warlock fellow?

Felice placed her glass on the table and shook the box. Something was loose inside. She unwrapped the present and examined it. Carved wood, some sort of aromatic timber. She smelled it. From the far south, likely cherry. Tiny brass hinges and a clasp were all that decorated the plain exterior.

Inside, there was a crystal bottle of green glass on top of another object wrapped in a red cloth. Oh! Was it... Felice removed the stopper and brought it to her nose, breathing in the delightful scent. Jasmine and rose and ambergris.

Her favorite.

She froze for an instant, heart hammering in her chest. She examined the bottle. Was there something inside?

A dead fish the length of her middle finger stared out at her. Its blank eyes were still shiny, and the colors of its orange and blue-striped spiny body hadn't faded. It was a slake, the poisonous fish.

Felice placed the bottle carefully on a sheet of paper, removed the other object, and unwrapped it. A chill ran through her blood, and she shook her head.

Slake was always one step ahead of the game.

It was her Crow and Moon piece.

