

EXACTLY

Tanya Huff

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“ASSASSINS,” COMMANDER NEEGAN declared in the rough whisper that was all an enemy arrow had left of his voice, “do not take leave.”

“But it won't exactly be leave,” Marshal Chela reminded him.

“They will be away from the army but not on target.” A dark brow rose. “I fail to see the difference, Marshal.”

“They won't exactly be on target. There's the difference, Commander. Governor Delat is convinced she's got an Ilagian sorcerer pretending to be a carpet seller. She thinks he's the vanguard of an Astoblite invasion since Prince Aveon welcomes both Ilagians and sorcerors to his court.”

“Why would Prince Aveon invade the South Reaches?”

“I don't know. Maybe he's looking for vacation property. The point is, Governor Delat has demanded we do something about her problem—which may or may not be the result of an overactive imagination. Vree and Bannon will go to the South Reaches as if they were common soldiers on leave, and they'll use their unique skills to determine whether or not this Ilagian carpet seller is a sorcerer working for Prince Aveon. If he turns out to be what Delat fears,” the marshal continued, “they'll send a message back with one of her couriers, and I'll send them new orders. If not, they can come back to barracks having spent a pleasant few days in a nice little resort town on the emperor's coin. You have to admit, they deserve a bit of a break.”

Neegan's expression suggested he had to admit nothing of the sort.

“You know Shonna took leave in the South Reaches when she won all that money betting on that fight Oneball had with Keenin last year.”

“I know, Bannon.”

“She said it was the best five days of her life. Full body rubs with scent oils. All the food she could eat. All the wine she could drink. And the sex! She said South Reaches whores were more flexible than even you, sister-mine.”

Vree rolled her eyes and shot her younger brother a look it was just as well he didn't see. “We're on target.”

“Not exactly.” He threw an arm across her shoulders. “And that means there's no reason we can't

enjoy ourselves while we're finding out. Look at it, Vree." His voice brought her to the halt his arm hadn't—she'd walked right out of his careless embrace when he'd stopped. "The South Reaches. Isn't it pretty?"

They were standing on the Shore Road, on top of a hill looking down at the town.

"Pretty?" Vree repeated wondering if Bannon had gotten a little too much sun.

He grinned. "In a 'hey, look at all the colors' sort of way."

All the colors was no exaggeration. Even the expensive packed earth houses of the wealthy that fronted the white sand beaches stretching out on both sides of the small harbor were an astounding variety of pastel shades. The town itself had moved past astounding to unbelievable. Red, blue, yellow, orange, turquoise, and every shade of pink imaginable covered the wooden walls, the colors crammed close together and jostling for attention.

"There's a pair of Astoblite ships in the harbor. Maybe they've already invaded."

Vree frowned at the two vessels tied side by side at the north pier. "In those? They're probably small traders delivering exotic wines and..." Her frown deepened. Born in barracks and having spent her entire twenty years in the army, she was ill equipped to come up with another exotic example.

"Perfumed oils," Bannon offered when it became obvious she wasn't going to fill in the blank.

"You're fixating on those full body rubs, aren't you?"

"I hear they're very good for working knots out of stiff muscles," he said cheerfully as they started walking again. "We can't do our job if we're all knotted up."

"You can't do your job if you're lying naked on a slab."

"You'd be amazed at what I can do lying naked on a slab."

"I'm not that easily amazed," she snorted, hip checked him, and snickered when he had to dance to miss a pile of horse shit on the road.

The South Reaches had no walls and no gates, but at the edge of town the Shore Road passed between two pairs of heavily muscled young men in black uniform kilts and tunics. "The governor's guard," Vree murmured as they approached.

"Think they can use any of that hardware?" Bannon asked at the same volume.

All four carried short swords in black-and-silver sheaths and two daggers, one on their belts and one sheathed at the edge of their black greaves. Their collective size was impressive and drew many admiring glances from other, less discerning, travelers. They made Bannon, who was taller than Vree by almost a head, look scrawny.

Everyone else on the road had passed unchallenged, but a massive hand beckoned the siblings over to the east-side guard post. Since there was no easy way to tell what they were, Vree wondered if the guards were more perceptive than seemed possible and had realized they were a threat or if they were about to indulge in a little soldier baiting. She was betting on the latter and figured it was pretty much a sucker bet.

"So, what have we here?" The guard who spoke had the smug, self-satisfied air of a bully who'd

aged easily into a brute. He waited until the other two guards crossed the road to join the huddle before continuing. “It seems we’ve stopped a couple of the Empire’s brave soldiers. Looks like they’re scraping the bottom of the barrel, don’t it?”

His crew laughed.

“You two do a little looting and then decide to grace the South Reaches with your ill-gotten gold?”

“Actually, we spent all our ill-gotten gold on a couple of magic beans that turned out to be total crap.” Bannon grinned at the glowering faces. “We’re just here on leave.”

“This is an expensive place. Let’s see your coin.” The leader poked a sausage-sized finger at Bannon’s shoulder and missed by a hair’s breadth. Which was exactly how far Bannon had moved.

“No coin,” he said, still grinning. “Just a letter of credit from our marshal.”

At Bannon’s gesture, Vree pulled the letter from her belt pouch and handed it over. She wasn’t worried about it being destroyed, since she had every confidence in being able to take it from the big man’s hand if he made the attempt. Of course, he wouldn’t survive the attempt, so she hoped he was smarter than he looked.

He scowled at the piece of vellum, lips moving as he puzzled out the larger words. “Why would you two skinny grunts rate a letter of credit?” he demanded when he finished.

“Services rendered. At the battle of Bonkeep the two of us were personally responsible for the deaths of the enemy commander and his entire staff.”

“Yeah. Right.” But his gaze kept dropping to the letter. “Reeno, search their bags.”

They were carrying the bare essentials, the sorts of things any soldier on leave would carry. When Reeno got a little rough with her kit, Vree murmured, “Gently,” at him and, when he looked up, she smiled.

She caught her bag before it hit the road and didn’t bother correcting him when he pretended he’d thrown it there on purpose. After all, from a distance “thrown there on purpose” looked very much like “dropped from nerveless fingers.”

“There’s nothing, Orin.” Reeno barely looked in Bannon’s bag before giving it back. “Just, you know, clothes and stuff.”

“No weapons?”

“Their daggers...”

“I can see that!” Orin glared at Reeno and then at them. “Letter of credit, eh? Maybe someone who deserves this ought to use it.”

“You’ll have to kill us to keep it,” Bannon pointed out.

“Orin!” Reeno nodded toward the traffic still passing by on the road. Toward witnesses.

Orin pretended to crumple the letter up, but when neither Vree nor Bannon reacted, he thrust it back at Bannon. Vree hid a grin at his expression when he crushed air instead of Bannon’s hand. “I’ll be watching you.”

“Not a problem.”

“Not a problem?” Vree repeated as they moved out of eavesdropping range.

“Hey, at least I didn’t threaten young Reeno’s manhood.”

“All I did was smile at him.”

“Yeah, that’s what I said.”

“You told them that we were here as a reward for taking out an entire command staff.”

“We did.”

“But that’s not why we’re here.”

He patted her fondly on the arm. “You really suck at this lying thing, don’t you?”

“Forget it, Bannon.” Vree wrapped her hand around her brother’s arm and dragged him to a stop as he started up the broad front steps of the Cyprus Garden Inn. “We are not staying here.”

“Too small?” He frowned up at the pale pink walls and wide louvered windows thrown open to catch the late afternoon breeze. “I was hoping for cozy, but—hey—elegant’s fine if that’s what you want.”

“Don’t be such a slaughtering smart-ass. This…” She jerked her head toward the two story building, conscious that they were under scrutiny from the inn’s atrium. “…is too expensive.”

Bannon touched his belt pouch where the letter of credit had ended up. “We’re on the emperor’s coin, sister-mine. And besides,” he added before she could respond, “this place is used to soldiers who’ve had a run of luck. It’s where Shonna stayed.”

“You asked her?”

“I did. Now if you really want to stay in some bug-infested dive with sweet piss all in the way of…”

“Here’s fine.” Releasing his arm, she started up the steps. If it was good enough for Shonna, it was nothing more than they deserved.

“Still angry about her trying to gamble away your coin?” Bannon asked as he caught up.

“Sod off.” Of course she was. And he knew it. And that was why he’d brought them to this inn. She’d be upset about how easily he could read her except there wasn’t much point; a lifetime of training had all but taught them to think with one mind.

They had a pair of adjoining rooms at the back of the building, small but clean. Included was unlimited access to the hotel’s bathhouse and one meal each day of their stay.

“I like the sound of the bathhouse,” Vree admitted, going into her brother’s room. She’d already tested the strength of the balcony railing and noted all lines of sight to her window. “It’s hard to stay unnoticed when you stink of the road.”

Stripped down to his sling, Bannon stared up at her from his sprawl on the bed. “I stink of the road?”

“We stink of the road.”

“I just got comfortable.”

“There’ll be bath attendants.”

“Easy enough to get comfortable again.” He grinned as he stood and scooped up his kilt. “Lead the way, sister-mine. A bath, a meal, and visit to a carpet shop,” he continued as she led the way down the backstairs. “What more could a man want—except maybe a full body massage with scented oils.”

“We’re working.”

“Not exactly. Not yet.”

Her bath attendant was as taken with Bannon as his was.

“Your man is quite the flirt,” she sighed, absently passing Vree a soapy sponge.

“He’s not my man; he’s my brother and be my guest.”

She preferred to wash herself anyway. The possibility of being temporarily blinded by accidental soap in the eye by a distracted attendant was too dangerous to risk in her line of work. Their line of work. Not that Bannon seemed to be worried. But then again why should he when she was?

Well, slaughter that. This was not-exactly her leave, too.

She had the kid for supper and roasted peppers and a sherbet made with ice brought down from the mountains at—if the price was any indication—great expense. Bannon grinned and saluted her with a raw oyster.

According to Governor Delat, the Ilagian had opened his carpet shop in the jumble of tiny streets close to the harbor. Painted a pale green, it was fifth in from the corner Fat Alley shared with the Street of Knives. Washed and fed, Vree and Bannon wandered toward it past market stalls and shops crammed full of items designed to separate tourists from their money. Everything that could have some variation of “I bought this in the South Reaches” stamped on it, did.

“Bannon, look at this.”

This was a knife-seller’s stall. This specifically was a dagger with a broad curved brass blade etched with a rough map of the South Reaches and the legend Don’t cut me out of your life.

“What’s that mean?” Bannon muttered as they stared at the blade.

Vree shrugged. “No idea.”

The tang and the pommel were also brass, suggesting that the dagger had been made from one piece of metal while the weight suggested otherwise. The grip had been wrapped in leather strips dyed a virulent orange-red, small shells dangling from the half dozen tassels. The sheath was a slightly darker shade and a double row of the same shells had been glued along its length.

“Ah, yes, there is nothing like a beautiful woman who appreciates a good blade.” The stall’s owner hustled around and laid a pudgy arm around Vree’s shoulders. “That dagger is...” He paused. Swallowed. And started to sweat. “For a small woman, you have quite the grip.”

“I don’t like to be touched.”

His smile wobbled and he snatched his arm back. “I’ll remember that.”

“Probably.”

Bannon shook his head as they walked away, leaving the stall owner clutching his genitals and gasping like a landed fish. “I think you hurt his feelings.”

“At least I left them attached.”

Torches had been lit by the time they reached the carpet shop, but the narrow streets were still busy—probably because every second shop sold alcohol of some kind. Beer, wine, and the apparently popular something pink with a tiny spear stuck through a pineapple chunk. Although clothing ranged from kilts to sarongs to breeches, they were the only people in army blue.

“We may need to buy a change of clothes,” Bannon noted.

“Something in black wouldn’t hurt if we’re going to be climbing around at night,” Vree acknowledged.

“Do you see anyone in black?”

“That guard.”

Bannon leaned out and peered at the guard who was suddenly not looking their way. “Besides him?”

Up and down the street, the clothing was as bright as the buildings, many of the tunics printed with birds or flowers or cats. “There is no slaughtering way...”

“We could probably get something in silk.”

Silk. “Silk’s a good strong fabric,” Vree said slowly. “You can bend iron with it when it’s wet. Useful.”

Bannon grinned. “Very.”

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t help but overhear. You’re looking for a silk carpet?”

They turned together to face the middle-aged woman standing on the other side of the pile of rugs that nearly filled the front of the shop. She was pleasantly plump with dark hair and pale brown eyes and skin a little lighter than theirs.

“We’re looking for Ilagian carpets,” Vree told her.

She smiled broadly and spread her hands. “Excellent. We specialize in Ilagian carpets.” Hands still spread, she beckoned them into the shop. “In fact, my employer, Hy Sa’lacvi, is Ilagian himself and imports only the most beautiful carpets from his homeland. Although he isn’t here tonight, he has taught me everything he knows. Now, this beauty...”

At first, Vree was impressed by the woman's knowledge. As time passed and every attempt they made to leave was somehow twisted into another examination of another stack of carpet, she began to grow annoyed. Although a variety of merchants intent on separating soldiers from their money surrounded the barracks and most camps, assassins were usually left to choose as they pleased. This woman almost had them convinced they needed a carpet. Bannon had gone so far as to give her the measurements of the area beside his bunk. Vree had her hand on her dagger hilt and had planned her strike—up under the ribs, slice through the heart, wrap the body in a red wool rug—when customers obviously carrying more coin entered the shop and saved them.

“At least we found out Hy Sa' lacvi has the rooms upstairs.” Bannon picked up the pace as they reached the street.

“And that he isn't in them right now.” Vree effortlessly slipped through a group of laughing matrons all dressed in shades of purple and fell into step with her brother. “Safer to search them when he's home, though. A sorcerer would set up spells to protect his rooms when he's not in them.” A man, sorcerer or not, could be avoided. Spells were a different matter.

“Tomorrow, then.”

He was thinking about full body massages, she could tell. “Tonight.”

“We should wait until we're a little less obvious.”

“Until we're less obvious?” Vree snorted as a pair of heavysset men in very short kilts, sleeveless tunics, and shell necklaces sauntered past. Fortunately, it was now full dark and the torchlight hid as much as it revealed. “Or were you referring to the guard watching us from over by the wineskin seller?” she sighed, trying not to listen to the fading sound of bare thighs slapping.

“That, too.”

“Think he's going to follow us all night?”

“Seems likely.”

“People seem to be avoiding him,” she noted as they changed direction slightly. The pattern of the street eddied around the guard, even the very drunk maintaining a careful distance of more than an arm's length.

“Almost looks like they're scared of him,” Bannon agreed.

“Well, who isn't afraid of a great big guy dressed all in black and carrying a sword? Even if he's not likely to use it very well.”

A moment later they moved into the guard's personal space, the pattern of the street now ebbing around them as well.

“You were on the gate when we arrived,” Bannon said after sweeping a slow gaze up the guard's body from sandals to helm. “Didn't catch your name.”

“Keln.” He looked confused; prompted to answer by fear, unsure of what he should be afraid of.

“You were watching us, Keln,” Vree purred by his ear. By the time he turned to face her, she'd moved to the other ear and was asking, “Why?” He whirled around, but she was back beside Bannon when he stopped. “Why, Keln?” she repeated.

Keln jerked forward, then stopped when he realized they were suddenly flanking him. “Orin thinks you’re troublemakers,” he snarled.

“Us?” Bannon grinned. “We’re not troublemakers, Keln; we deal with troublemakers.”

“Not in this town.”

“Wherever we’re sent, Keln.”

“Stop saying my name!” The big man pushed past them, shoving the rack of wineskins out of the way as he plunged into the crowd. Someone cried out in pain, someone else swore, and Vree caught the rack before it fell.

“Can’t say we didn’t warn him,” Bannon sighed.

“It’s easier when they know we’re assassins.”

“People avoid us when they know we’re assassins.”

“And that’s easier.” She frowned at a wineskin. “There’s an image of a parrot burned onto this. Why would someone burn the image of a parrot into a wineskin?”

Bannon peered at the leather and shrugged. “I have no idea.”

Shops and stalls that didn’t sell alcohol closed up just before midnight. Hy Sa’lacvi returned just after. He was short, round, and wearing a long, bright orange sarong patterned with palm leaves. Half a dozen shell bracelets gleamed against one dark wrist. As a sorcerer, he made a believable carpet seller.

Staggering a little, like everyone else on the streets, Vree and Bannon started back toward their inn, lost the pair of guards watching them—Keln and the remaining unnamed of the four—and ended up a few moments later at the top of the stairs that led to Hy Sa’lacvi’s second-floor rooms.

Moving silently to the open window, Vree tossed the Nighthawk moth she’d snagged by one of the sputtering torches in over the sill. No lights. No whistles. No moth suddenly aflame. It seemed this access, at least, had not been protected by sorcery.

As they crouched inside the room, waiting for their eyes to adjust, the moth fluttered toward them. It was almost back to the window when an enormous pair of white paws came out of the darkness and brought it to the floor. The paws were more impressive than the cat they were attached to as the long-haired calico whacking the struggling insect across the painted wood was distinctly short in the leg.

Vree caught Bannon’s eye and made a face. No one had mentioned Hy Sa’lacvi had a pet. In their business, pets were more trouble than guards and servants combined.

As the moth managed to get into the air and out of range, the cat bounded up onto the narrow table that ran down the center of the room. Vree heard glass containers chime. The cat whirled, leaped a stack of brass weights, raced past a row of bottles, and charged through a cluster of squat clay jugs.

Vree caught the weights.

Bannon caught the bottles.

Neither of them could get to the jugs in time.

The first one to topple hit the floor with a crack, spilling out a pile of yellow granules. The second hit the floor with more of a thud, the viscous fluid in it adding a soft splat. When the fluid hit the granules, there was a high-pitched whine, a loud bang, and a cloud of purple smoke.

As the two assassins slipped back out the window, they heard the cat sneeze and Hy Sa' lacvi yelling in his own language. From the roof across the courtyard, they watched the smoke billowing up into the sky.

"That's a lot of smoke without fire," Bannon murmured.

Vree nodded. "We can assume the sorcerer part is correct anyway." She grinned as the cat raced down the stairs to the courtyard and disappeared in the shadows. Glittering with purple highlights, Hy Sa' lacvi stumbled out onto the landing.

"Mirrin!" He had a thin blanket wrapped around his waist. "Mirrin! Get here! I not angry, I just need see if you all right!"

Below, in the darkness, the cat sneezed.

"Fine! You be hurt, cat, I no care. I sleep now!" Pivoting on one bare heel, he stomped back into his rooms.

"Definitely a sorcerer," Bannon snickered. "Any one else would've been told to shut his slaughtering hole." Pale faces had shown in a few of the other windows overlooking the courtyard, but no one had protested being so rudely awakened. "I wonder why he called for Mirrin in Imperial?"

"He probably got her here and figures that's what she understands. We're not going to find out anything else tonight," she added, leading the way down to the alley. "We might as well go back to the inn and get some sleep."

"You can go back to the inn, sister-mine. I've got other things to check out."

"You smell like..." Vree leaned closer and lifted her brother's arm to her nose. "Limes. And you're greasy."

"Oily." He pushed his wrist through her grip and back again, the motion blatantly suggestive. "Harder for an enemy to get a grip."

"I doubt it was enemies gripping you," she snorted, releasing him and stepping away from the bed. "I've done a bit of recon. Orin and his friends are lurking in front of the inn."

"So? If they do anything more than lurk, we'll take them out."

"Just like that?"

"We're on target and they got in the way."

"So now we're on target?"

Bannon grinned, rolled out of bed, and reached for his kilt. "Now, it's convenient. I'm starved, let's go eat."

"It's almost noon."

“Which is when things start happening in this town.”

“You think they’re going to arrest us?” Bannon wondered, as he worked his way along the inn’s buffet table, piling food on his plate.

Vree glanced out at the four guards in time to see Orin throwing a cup of liquid back in the face of a water seller. “No. I think they want that letter of credit.”

“You think they’ll take the first chance they get to jump us?”

“Yeah.”

“Idiots.”

“Do they think we haven’t noticed them?” Vree wondered as Orin and crew nearly knocked over a sausage cart trying to keep them in sight.

“I don’t think they think.” Bannon gestured at the nearest alley. “You want to lure them to their doom?”

“No, let’s see how long their attention span is.”

They lost the guards in a crowded ale house, slipping unseen out the back and up onto the roof. It was a simple matter to make their way to Hy Sa’lacvi’s carpet shop without ever returning to the ground.

“I can’t believe how close together everything is.” Bannon stepped from roof to roof past a line of disinterested pigeons dozing in the sun.

“And how much of it seems to be held together by paint,” Vree added, adjusting her stride as a board began to give underfoot. They had no fear of being heard, for those who slept on the upper floors were out serving or servicing the visitors to the South Reaches, and anyone still asleep wouldn’t be staying so close to the harbor.

Hy Sa’lacvi was sitting in the courtyard behind his shop; an abacus, stick of charcoal, and a pile of parchment seemed to indicate he was doing accounts. While they watched, Mirrin leaped up onto his lap desk and knocked a mug of steaming liquid over the pile.

“I wish I understood Ilagian,” Bannon murmured as the sorcerer screamed at the departing cat. “That sounds like some impressive swearing.”

As soon as it became obvious he was going to start again with dry parchment, they dropped silently off the roof onto the landing and slipped into his rooms.

“A considerate person would have a note or something lying around,” Bannon grunted a short time later. “Yes, I am the vanguard of an Astoblite invasion. Kill me.” He stared at the purple stain on the floor. “And it’s no slaughtering fun going through a sorcerer’s things; you never know when something might bite you on the ass.”

“I didn’t find anything either,” Vree sighed. “We’re going to have to do this the hard way.”

“You mean the boring way,” Bannon protested as they climbed back onto the roof. The soft click,

click of the abacus drew his gaze down to the courtyard. “He’s not going anywhere for a while. Do we both have to stay?”

“For the love of Jiir, Bannon, you’re still greasy from your last body rub!”

“Oily. And I was just thinking that now would be the perfect time for me to pick us out some clothing that would help us blend in a little better. It’s what soldiers on leave do.”

Vree glanced down at the pile of blank parchment and compared it to the pile Hy Sa’lacvi had already covered with neat lines of tiny numbers. He was clearly going to be a while. “Fine.” She couldn’t understand why being on vacation suddenly made people wear clothing they wouldn’t be caught dead in otherwise, but it was what soldiers on leave did and that was what they were supposed to be. Shonna had returned to barracks wearing a bright yellow tunic printed with purple flowers. “Do not,” she warned her brother as he turned to leave, “bring me back anything printed with parrots, kittens, or palm trees. And don’t take on Orin and his crew without me.”

Moving into the only available bit of shade, she sat and watched their target do his accounting. Except he wasn’t exactly their target. Pity, she thought, fingers curled around the pommel of her dagger. We could have killed him last night and been on our way home by now.

Maybe he’s working out the numbers of Astoblite soldiers he needs for the invasion. If he is, I can kill him now.

Before she could move, the woman who’d tried so hard to sell them a carpet the night before emerged from the back of the shop and told him she’d sold the small red-and-gold rug. “Good. Good!” Hy Sa’lacvi added a note to one of the finished sheets and flashed a brilliant smile up at the woman. “Maybe this month we make enough to import more, yes?”

Maybe import more was a euphemism for more soldiers.

“Maybe you should import something that doesn’t unravel when you move it,” the woman snorted.

Or not, Vree sighed. She’d never spent this much time on a target she could have taken out within moments of first marking him. Boring, boring, bor...

Mirrin clambered into her lap and shoved her head under Vree’s hand.

Over the years, she’d had every type of insect imaginable climb over her while waiting to take out a target. There’d been half a dozen snakes, a few lizards, and on one memorable occasion a rat that’d had to be fatally discouraged from snacking on Bannon’s foot. Dogs were avoided and, as a rule, cats avoided them.

Mirrin demanded attention more insistently.

When Bannon returned, Mirrin was napping with her head on Vree’s dagger, and Hy Sa’lacvi was just filling his last piece of parchment. The breeches he brought her were dark green silk that hung low on her hips and flowed over her legs like water. The sleeveless tunic had been block printed with large pale green fish.

“You never said no fish,” he protested, blocking her blow.

He wore a similar style in dark red and gold—the vest lightly laced across his chest with gold cord, the whole thing fish free.

They ate in the ale house across the road from the carpet shop, Bannon having taken their letter of credit to a moneylender for some coin. As they ate, they watched Hy Sa'lacvi try to sell a carpet to a middle-aged couple dressed in matching sleeveless tunics and short breeches.

"Do they know how ridiculous they look?" Bannon wondered, eating a small onion off the point of his knife.

Vree shrugged and peeled another shrimp.

By the time they finished their meal—having switched their full tankards for the convenient empties of their neighbors, Hy Sa'lacvi had turned the shop over to his employee, pushed his way out into the milling crowds, and began walking toward the harbor.

Vree and Bannon followed, careful not to be seen by either their quarry or Orin's people. Given both crowds and darkness, it wasn't hard. Eventually, after a short stop at a bakery and a slightly longer one at a wine merchant's, they found themselves at the harbor watching Hy Sa'lacvi go into a warehouse near the North Pier.

"That's it. The Astoblite ships are tied up at the North Pier. We can kill him."

Vree stopped her brother's forward movement with a well placed elbow. "He could be seeing another trader about a carpet. We need to be sure."

"Fine." He rolled his eyes. "We'll sneak into the warehouse, get close enough to find out exactly what Hy Sa'lacvi is up to, and when we find out he's helping the Astoblites invade, then we kill him."

"That works."

There were four men and two women sprawled on cushions around a low table in an empty corner of the warehouse. One of the men and one of the women were definitely Astoblites. Three of the other four were South Reaches locals, and the last was wearing the distinctive orange-on-blue parrot tunic of a visitor. When Hy Sa'lacvi joined them, money changed hands and tiles were slapped down on the table.

Catching Bannon's eye, Vree signed, No kill.

He nodded and signed, Stay?

She signed back, Maybe kill later, mostly just to cheer him up, and they settled in to watch and wait for the tile game to become strategy and tactics. It never did.

"So tomorrow we tell the governor she was imagining things and head home," Bannon sighed as they headed back toward their inn. "Hy Sa'lacvi is no more planning a slaughtering invasion than I am. And he sucks at tiles."

Impossible to argue the latter point as the Ilagian had, indeed, lost steadily all night. They'd followed him home, watched him climb into bed, discouraged Mirrin from following them, in turn, away across the roof, and were now calling it a night.

“I suspect the governor will want us to observe him for a little longer,” Vree pointed out. “He can’t spend all his time planning an invasion. Maybe this was his night off.”

“So we’re staying?”

“For a while.” She grabbed his arm as he started to turn away. “Where are you going?”

“Big Eylla’s place is still open. I can see the torches from here.”

Since she couldn’t think of a good reason to hang on to him, she let him go.

“You should come with me.”

“No, thank you.”

“Your loss.” Walking backward, gracefully avoiding the other people still wandering the streets looking for entertainment, he winked. “You need to get laid more, sister-mine.”

“Sod off. You, too,” she added before the elderly man leering cheerfully at her could make the obvious suggestion.

Just before dawn, someone heavy heaved himself up onto her balcony. It sounded very much like he took out two or three other people on the way down.

Their second day in the South Reaches was very much like their first—except Bannon smelled faintly of cinnamon instead of limes. That night Hy Sa’lacvi had dinner with friends, ate sixteen crabs, drank half a barrel of pale beer, and threw up three times on the way home.

On day three, Orin attempted to shove Bannon into a cup-seller’s cart, inexplicably missed, and somehow ended up crashing through it himself. The resulting shouting match was made funnier by the minor wounds Orin had taken. That night, they watched from the roof as Hy Sa’lacvi mixed powders and potions in his back room. After the first small explosion, Mirrin joined them.

When Vree returned alone to the Cyprus Gardens, heavy breathing and the creak of leather told her she had company in her room. She thought about taking care of it herself but figured Bannon would never forgive her for blowing their cover without him. Noting where each man stood, she backed away from the door, returned to the atrium, gave the information to the large young woman on duty, and let the inn’s security handle it.

The intruders had swords out, but they weren’t expecting crossbows.

“Who says assassins have no sense of humor,” she murmured to herself as Orin and his crew were tossed down the front stairs loudly protesting that they were the governor’s guard. Orin seemed to be bleeding slightly again.

“We need to deal with them,” Vree muttered the next morning as she watched Orin shove that same poor water seller out of his way with a bandaged arm. Keln and the still nameless fourth kicked the man on the way by. “They’re starting to annoy me.”

Bannon glanced behind him. The four guards were barely three or four body lengths behind, shadowing them obviously, scowling, hands on their weapons, the noon crowds scrambling clear. “They look a little bruised.”

“They’ve had a rough couple of nights. Come on.” She led the way into a narrow alley between a candler’s and yet another ale house.

Rubbing at a bit of sandalwood-scented oil in the crease of his elbow, Bannon shrugged and followed.

From the look on his face when he joined them, Orin had not been expecting an ultimatum.

“Sod off, and we won’t kill you.”

His mouth opened and closed. Two of his men laughed. Reeno didn’t.

Vree reached into her belt pouch and pulled out a square of leather stamped with a black sunburst. “This is your last warning,” she sighed and tossed it onto the packed dirt between them.

Reeno whimpered.

“I’m guessing he served,” Bannon noted from where he was leaning against the candler’s wall. “And these three got deferments for being in the governor’s guard.”

“Orin!” Reeno grabbed the big man’s arm. “They’re…”

“…not armed with nothing but knives, and they’re runty,” Orin grunted. “Soldiers die on leave all the time, accidental like.”

Vree smiled at Reeno who whimpered again and ran.

That night, Hy Sa’lacvi went to another tile game, and Bannon came back to the room smelling faintly of cloves.

“We can’t keep this up indefinitely,” Vree sighed as they followed Hy Sa’lacvi while he shopped.

“We could kill him.”

“No,” she flicked an apricot pit at a street performer. He shrieked and grabbed his crotch. The crowd applauded. “Our orders say we have to be sure.”

“So?”

“So we force his hand.”

They laid a black sunburst on the sarong he wore out in the evening. Mirrin looked up at them, yawned, and went back to sleep.

“He probably doesn’t know what it is,” Bannon reminded Vree when Hy Sa’lacvi returned to the shop in his sarong, apparently unaffected by the square of leather he carried in one hand. “He’s a foreigner, remember? Don’t worry,” he added as the square was passed to the woman in his shop. “She’ll...”

Her shriek could be heard clearly across the street in the ale house.

“...know.”

They got to their regular place on the roof in time to see Hy Sa’lacvi carefully stack the contents of his worktable into one covered basket and frantically shove a fistful of clothes and Mirrin into another. The calico kept up a steady protest as he pounded back down the stairs, through the shop, and into the street.

“Sounds like he’s got a demon in there,” Bannon snickered as they followed.

“Looks like he’s heading straight for the docks,” Vree pointed out.

“The Astoblite ships.”

“He ran right to his co-conspirators.”

“So we can kill him now?”

“Works for me.”

Hy Sa’lacvi was in the cabin of the farther ship with the Astbolite woman he played tiles with. His baskets on the floor at his feet, he was clutching her arm and speaking so quickly in Astbolite it sounded like one long, hysterical word.

“Speak Imperial!” she snapped at last. “Your accent is terrible at the best of times!”

Tucked in the shadows outside the louvered window, Vree doubted his Imperial was any better. Although she could hear separate words, hysteria gave them unintelligible inflections.

“Why are assassins trying to kill you?” the woman demanded at last.

“My carpets.”

“What about them?”

“I sell cheap because pay no duty!”

“You’re smuggling carpets into the South Reaches?” she asked as Bannon mouthed, He’s smuggling carpets? at Vree.

“Hide them with sorcery!”

“Oh, give it a rest, you’re no more a sorcerer than I am.”

Which was when Mirrin finally got the lid of the basket open. Yowling indignantly, she leaped up onto the table, scrambled through the piles of paper, knocked over the lantern, and threw herself out the window.

The lantern landed on the second basket.

Clutching the furious cat who'd landed in her arms, Vree danced along the railings, leaped to the other ship, skipped past an astounded group of sailors, and was on the dock before the purple flames had reached the top of the first mast.

Bannon was a heartbeat behind her.

"At least there's no invasion," he said as they slid into an alley while bells tolled and people yelled and Hy Sa'lacvi and the Astbolite captain's voice could be heard screaming contradictory orders as the purple fire spread. "I think it's time we left."

"Past time," Vree agreed, wiping her bleeding cheek on her shoulder as Mirrin settled in her arms and began to purr.

"You going to take her back to the shop?"

She glanced at the burning ships. The purple fire had chased both crews onto the docks and seemed to be following them. "No, I think I'd better take her with us."

"What are we going to do with a cat?"

"Give it to Marshal Chela."

"Well, if we're bringing her something, we'd better get something for Commander Neegan, too."

"So the Ilagian sorcerer was not the vanguard of an Astoblite invasion although he might have precipitated one since Prince Aveon is likely to be more than a little annoyed about losing those two ships. Half of the South Reaches has been reduced to purple ash and rubble, three of the governor's personal security force are dead, someone named Big Eylla has sent me a bill for half a dozen full-body rubs..." Marshal Chela grabbed Mirrin just in time to keep the inkwell from going off the edge of her desk. "...and I seem to have acquired a cat. Did you have anything to add, Commander Neegan?"

"Just that this," he told her, holding the souvenir dagger between thumb and forefinger, and staring down at the dangling shells in disbelief, "is exactly why assassins do not take leave."