No Mourners, No Funerals

by gluupor

Summary

In Ketterdam’s pleasure district you can find anyone. A wayward son trying to escape his past. A pampered noblewoman who chose a different life. A recovering addict who can’t turn down a bet. A stranded pirate in need of a boat. A deserter who is looking for a place to belong. A Grisha assassin who wants to be a better person. A convict looking to regain her life. A runaway who has become a killer. A survivor who has become something worse.

These fractured isolationists must cooperate and trust each other to achieve their goals. An impossible heist with a big payout. A revenge scheme years in the making. A high stakes con that could start a war if it goes wrong. They probably deserve better, but if they got what they deserved then they wouldn’t be Foxes.

A Six of Crows AU where the Foxes are a gang, Neil’s good at disappearing, and Andrew Minyard is the Bastard of the Barrel.

Notes

This story contains the All for the Game characters in the Six of Crows universe. There will be major spoilers for the Six of Crows duology as I am loosely following the plot of those
books. Dialogue and descriptions will be taken directly from both series. All canon warnings for both series apply, and I will try to tag chapter content warnings in the notes (let me know if I miss any tags). If you have any questions, you can leave a comment. I also have an empty tumblr (@gluupor) where I'm too lazy to add content, but I can be technically reached there if you want any clarification. So, without further ado, here is chapter 1.

See the end of the work for more notes.
In which we meet Neil, along with many other characters of various importance.

Andrew Minyard was soulless. This was a truth universally acknowledged, spoken in hushed whispers throughout the city of Ketterdam. For him there was no job too violent, no con too dirty, no scheme too underhanded according to the residents of the pleasure district known as the Barrel. The man they called Monster performed heinous acts of blackmail, violence, and murder without emotion, calmly watching the world around him through a blank mask. He didn’t need a reason, nor permission; he had no motivation, making him completely uncontrollable and unpredictable, a deadly investment for the gang known as the Foxes.

That was not precisely true, Neil reflected as he crossed a bridge over a black-watered canal heading towards the Exchange. Neil had always found Andrew fairly predictable; all of his actions were dictated by a strict moral code of his own devising. He had many motivations, although he excelled at hiding them from those who paid less attention than Neil. That did not mean that those motivations were altruistic or pleasant, and Neil was slightly worried about his current plans.

Neil heard the quarter chime and hurried his noiseless steps a little. As he entered the square in front of the Exchange, he checked his knives out of habit. Their presence still set off a sour curl of fear in his stomach as he thought of his father but he recited their names to calm himself. Sankta Mary, Sankt Andrew, Sankt David, Sankta Natalie, Sankt Matthew, the names of his knives reminded him of protection, not of harm. He felt more settled knowing that his knives were there to protect him and that he was ready for whatever the night may bring.

Andrew stood facing the rest of the Foxes under the eastern archway entrance of the Exchange. He looked tiny, even shorter than his five foot height, as he emotionlessly regarded the much taller gang members. The Foxes were a rowdy group, excited by the evening’s parley, even in the face of Andrew’s blank apathy. Neil stuck to the shadows and storefronts, as always more willing to observe than be observed. He took a quick head count; most of the Foxes’ high ranking members had come as well as a good number of their more junior members. He had a suspicion that the high turnout was a result of Andrew’s involvement; despite that fact that Andrew was one of the highest ranking members of the Foxes, second to only Wymack and Dan, he rarely involved himself in the gang’s operations. The last time he had called a parley it had been with the Ravens and he had used the opportunity to threaten and humiliate their captain, Riko, and to take out a Fox member who had been betraying them to the Ravens. He had blackmailed one of the two stadwatch rooftop guards into shooting Jack, the traitor, while Neil had incapacitated the other guard. It was now a story of legend among the Foxes and Neil was certain that many of the Foxes here tonight were expecting an equally exciting parley. He was fairly certain they would be disappointed when they realized that nothing so interesting was planned for tonight.

Neil soundlessly joined the outskirts of the group, drawing no attention from the people around him. Andrew’s eyes flicked almost imperceptibly in his direction, alerting Neil that Andrew was aware of
his presence. He then returned to staring blankly into the middle distance while Dan, Matt, Erik, and Allison badgered him with questions.

“I wish you would at least tell us why you decided to call a parley with the Trojans, of all people,” Dan was in the middle of saying while sighing dramatically. “If it were the Ravens or the Terrapins or the Bearcats I would understand because all of those jerks definitely need to be stabbed in the face, but I think the Trojans are the only gang we’re not currently in conflict with!”

Andrew did not react.

“I’m sorry,” said Allison, sarcastically. “Are we bothering you with our legitimate questions?”

Andrew continued to not react.

“Don’t be silly, Allison,” chided Matt. “Pestering him won’t get a reaction. Don’t you remember that nothing gets under Andrew’s skin?”

“Can you at least tell us who you’re planning on using as your seconds?” asked Erik.

“Neil,” replied Andrew easily, without missing a beat or making eye contact, “and Katelyn.”

The rest of the Foxes gaped at him. It really was ludicrous, mused Neil. Neil had never been chosen as anyone’s second during a parley; that wasn’t the protection he offered. His role was to scale the outer walls of the Exchange and watch the parley from the rooftops above. His vantage point allowed him to monitor the rival gang for plots, to subdue the _stadwatch_ guards if necessary, and to eliminate any other spies. He was very, very good at his job. Although it was now common knowledge in the Barrel that Neil would be watching from above, nobody had ever caught him or prevented him from giving an advantage to the Foxes. Andrew was willingly giving up his upper hand and showing the Trojans that he meant them no harm by bringing Neil into the parley with him.

Katelyn was also an odd choice for backup. She stood even shorter than Neil, but was quite a bit wider, with her plump curves that she showed off to her advantage. She was adept at sweet talking people out of their money; she worked the floor at the Court, convincing the wealthy to be loose with their coin, flirting outrageously and making them feel like the most powerful people in the city. Neil had always been a little in awe of her. She was a chameleon, able to change herself to please whoever she was speaking with, and she seemed to be enthusiastic about absolutely everything. He’d once overheard her enthusiastically and happily discussing the proper method of dismemberment with another Fox before switching to laughing about a play that she had recently seen. Neil found her vaguely terrifying. Cruel people he understood. Katelyn’s cheerful bubbliness and flirtatiousness baffled him. Add that to the fact that Andrew had not acknowledged her existence since she’d started dating his brother, and Neil could understand the Foxes’ confusion.

Dan was the first to recover. “Don’t start any trouble with them,” she warned. “We can’t afford another enemy right now. We’ve already antagonized everyone else in the Barrel.”

“We’re Foxes,” snorted Allison from beside her. “Antagonizing everyone is basically our manifesto.”

“If you don’t want to antagonize them, you shouldn’t let Andrew bring Neil anywhere near them,” advised Erik through a chuckle.

“You shouldn’t bring Neil into a meeting where Jean is present anyway!” said Matt, hotly. “Don’t you remember what he helped Riko do last year?”

Andrew gazed at Matt flatly. “Neil?” he prompted, without looking in Neil’s direction.
“I’m fine,” said Neil, making the girl beside him jump in surprise. He heard the murmur of startlement pass through the Foxes’ ranks; no-one had been aware of his presence. Matt reached over to ruffle his hair and pull him closer.

“You don’t have to do this if you don’t want to, buddy,” said Matt. “You don’t have to do whatever Andrew wants.”

Neil rolled his eyes. “I may be the approximate size and shape of a twelve year old, Matt, but must I remind you that I’m not actually a child?”

Allison laughed brightly. “Yeah, Matt,” she teased, “Neil’s a big boy now. He doesn’t need you to hold his hand while crossing streets anymore.”

“Fuck you,” said Neil, without heat.


“Fuck you, too.”

Andrew firmly rapped his cane twice on the ground to curtail the rapidly devolving conversation. “Let’s get on with this,” he said and then paused. “…Neil has to be home before his bedtime.”

The Foxes laughed as Neil shot Andrew a dirty look and then began to divest himself of his knives so as to comply with the parley agreement that all participants must be unarmed. Parleys always took place in the Exchange, an unimpressive rectangular courtyard surrounded by warehouses and shipping offices with large entrance archways on the east and west sides. By day it was a bustling hive of economy, by night it was deserted and considered one of the true neutral locations for the Barrel gangs to meet. Two stadwatch guards were always stationed on the rooftops but would ignore the parley because of longstanding agreement and bribes.

Neil passed his knives carefully to Matt, trusting the taller man to keep his property safe. It had been a long time since he had been unarmed and he felt an uncomfortable itch begin between his shoulder blades. Andrew, who Neil knew liked being disarmed as much as Neil did, was similarly passing his many, many knives over to the waiting hands of Robin, a young recruit that Andrew favoured. Katelyn was less armed, but she wasn’t stupid enough to walk around Ketterdam without some sort of protection, and she was passing over her pearl-handled revolver and assortment of knives to Allison.

“What about that?” asked Erik, indicating Andrew’s fox-head walking stick.

“Who’d deny a cripple his cane?” asked Andrew, humorlessly.

“Considering how many people you’ve beaten with it, they’d be idiots not to,” argued Erik.

Andrew shrugged and conceded the point. “Good thing we’re meeting with soft-hearted, fair-minded Jeremy, then.”

“I thought you said you requested the parley with Jean?” asked Dan.

“His seconds will be Jeremy and Laila,” said Neil.

“Five krige says that you’re wrong,” said Matt.

Allison scoffed. “I’ll take your stupid bet. You know, this is why you’re so in debt. You do realize that you’re betting that our spy is wrong?”
“I still think Andrew and Neil shouldn’t be in close contact with Jean,” said Matt, grumpily ignoring Allison. “That’s a recipe for disaster. Someone’s going to end up dead.”

“Well it’s not going to be me,” said Neil, with false brightness. “I have plans this evening.”

“What plans?” demanded Dan at the same time that Allison spoke up, slyly. “Would you care to make a wager?”

“I’m not going to bet on my own death,” answered Neil, dryly.

“Oh, Neil,” sighed Andrew. “Why not? You do that every day that you continue to be a Fox.”

Just then the Church of Barter began to chime twelve bells, signalling the beginning of the parley. Andrew rapped his cane against the cobblestones again and started off through the archway into the Exchange. Neil watched him walk for a few moments and decided that Andrew seemed to be exaggerating his limp, likely to prevent the Trojans from protesting against his cane. He rolled his eyes and took off after him, giving a half-hearted wave back to Matt, who was still frowning in judgment.

“No mourners,” Katelyn called back to the assembled Foxes.

“No funerals,” was returned. To them, the words meant good luck.

Neil was beginning to feel incredibly jittery as they made their way towards the centre of the Exchange. He generally observed unseen, safe from anyone’s notice, but now he was presenting himself plainly and unarmed. Unlike Matt, he was not worried about Jean’s motives, but he couldn’t help but think of the trap in which he’d been caught. He noticed Andrew glancing at him periodically before he reached out and put his warm hand to the back of Neil’s neck.

“Relax, Neil,” Andrew murmured quietly. “You can go back to the shadows once this is over. I’m not going to let anyone hurt you.”

“I know,” replied Neil. “I’m fine.”

Andrew scoffed, but squeezed Neil’s neck once and let go. They came to a stop in the centre of the courtyard, facing off against the three Trojans who were waiting for them. Jean coolly regarded them and then did a double take when he spotted Neil. As Neil had predicted Jean had brought Jeremy and Laila with him. Jeremy stood tall, all bronze hair and good-natured friendliness. Neil eyed him suspiciously. He did not understand how someone who was a captain of one of the Barrel gangs could still pretend at optimism. All they dealt with was the dregs of society.

Andrew indicated for Katelyn to do a weapons check on the Trojans, while Laila stepped forwards to do a check of Andrew and Neil. She likely knew from their reputations that they were not the types of people to enjoy being touched by strangers so she kept her search quick and perfunctory before performing a mutual check with Katelyn.

Once that was dealt with, Jeremy surveyed them with a smile. “Well, Minyard,” he said, “I wasn’t expecting you to bring your Shadow with you. At least not where we could see him.”

That was Neil’s nickname among the gangs. The Shadow, Andrew’s greatest weapon, the spy who kept him rich in secrets and information, a currency that could often get more than coin.

“I don’t believe that I called this little meeting to speak with you, Knox,” drawled Andrew.

“I’m the captain of the Trojans. If you want to talk to one of them you have to go through me.”
“His membership in the Trojans means nothing to me. What I want is his past.”

Jean blanched and Jeremy sent a worried glance in his direction before redirecting his attention back to Andrew. The expression he wore was noticeably less friendly now. “If you’re still upset about what Riko had him do before he joined us, I suggest you let it go. Take it up with the Ravens if you still need retribution.”

“Oh, believe me, I have,” said Andrew. “And I think that Jean knows better than to try to touch my things again. But, hey, Jean, Jean, hey, look at me-” Andrew began tapping his left cheekbone, directly in the spot that Jean wore a small tattoo “-this is the past I am interested in.”

Jean paled even further and began shaking his head as Andrew continued. “I’ve been offered a job, you see. An extremely well-paying job. I need to perform a heist, of sorts. And I need someone who is familiar with my target.”

“You’re insane!” Jean broke in. “You cannot break into Evermore! It’s a fortress.”

“Now, see, Jean, I know you don’t know me that well, but I really do not like being told what I can’t do,” said Andrew, blandly.

“It’s a suicide mission!” argued Jean. “And for what? There’s no treasure in Evermore! How could this possibly be a lucrative job?”

“Oh, well, the payment is not coming from Evermore. You see, someone is willing to pay me a lot of kruge to kidnap Kevin Day.”

All three of the Trojans’ faces slackened in shock. Neil glanced at Katelyn who was able to very quickly cover her surprise. She really was a terrific actress, he considered, and she had so far proven loyal. She could probably handle more responsibility and more sensitive information for the Foxes in the future.

Jeremy started laughing. “You,” he choked out eventually. “You are going to kidnap the most famous Grisha in the world?”

“Yes,” said Andrew simply. Jeremy stopped laughing in the face of Andrew’s calm certainty. Andrew turned back to face Jean. “Although I prefer to call it rescuing rather than kidnapping. There’s five million kruge in it for you if you agree to be a member of my team.”

“I can’t,” spit out Jean.

“Can’t or won’t?” challenged Andrew.

“I promised myself I would never return there,” said Jean miserably.

“And that promise is worth more to you than saving your friend? Someone who you once promised to protect?” asked Andrew, angry judgment entering his voice. Neil knew how Andrew felt about broken promises.

“I can’t,” Jean repeated numbly.

“Well, I guess that’s that,” stated Andrew, turning towards Neil. “Neil here thought that if I appealed to your better nature that you may remember your friendship. He still believes in the overall goodness of human beings. I’ve tried to explain that you can only depend on greed and cowardice.”

As Neil had never believed anything of the sort, he simply gazed calmly at Andrew and then turned
to follow him out of the courtyard.

“Wait!” called Jean. “Wait! I can’t help you, but… but Thea will.”

Andrew paused as if he hadn’t been expecting exactly this. He turned back and tilted his head thoughtfully. “Thea Muldani is not in any position to help me,” he said slowly.

“I know,” agreed Jean. He sent a pleading look at Jeremy, who reluctantly nodded. “But we have a contact at Hellgate that we will give you. You can break her out.”

Andrew waved a hand dismissively. “Your offer is for us to do all the work to get her and then shelter her from authorities when she’s out of prison? Not to mention that she has good reason to be extremely angry at a member of the Foxes. This is not a very generous offer.”

“You’re the one who needs her for your insane Evermore break-in,” argued Jeremy. “We’re offering to pay the price demanded by our Hellgate contact. In exchange, we simply ask that you leave Jean out of this.”

“She’ll forgive Renee,” added Jean. “It’s me she’s most angry with. She’ll do anything to help Kevin.”

Andrew pretended to consider it for a couple moments and then shot Neil a look, raising his eyebrow. Neil shrugged. Permission to use the Trojan’s prison contact had been the objective of this meeting, so he didn’t understand why Andrew was drawing this out. He assumed it was due to Andrew’s love of dramatics.

“When this is over, if Thea still wants her revenge on you, we will do nothing to stop her,” warned Andrew, and then he gave a short sigh. “Fine. Inform Alvarez that someone will contact her to work out a plan shortly.”

The Trojans seems shocked that they already knew their contact’s identity, which was foolish of them considering Neil's reputation. Andrew had only set up this parley to persuade the Trojans into providing the incentive for Alvarez to help them.

“I don’t know why I had to be here,” muttered Neil quietly as they left the meeting point.

“To inspire trust,” said Andrew, shortly. “If they can see you then you are not spying on them.”

“And yet you ended the meeting by pointing out that I already have spied on them.”

“They should not underestimate us.”

“I’d rather be underestimated that have a group of people wielding guns and knives waiting for me the next time I try to break into their headquarters.”

Andrew gave a small smile. “You’d probably survive. You’re like a cockroach, impossible to kill.”

“The more attempts people are given the more likely they are to eventually succeed.”

“Go back to your spying and hiding, then, if it makes you feel better. You’re being even more fatalistic than usual tonight. It’s bothering me beyond the telling.”

“Am I bothering you? Last I heard nothing got under your skin,” Neil joked, needing to have the last word before he pulled up his hood and melted into the shadows. His night’s work was not yet finished.
Next time:

*Brick by brick, Andrew thought grimly.*
Chapter Summary

In which Andrew goes for a nighttime stroll.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who commented or left kudos! I'm terrible at responding, but I definitely appreciate it.

Warnings for this chapter: underage prostitution is briefly implied, violence is mentioned in passing

Andrew emerged from the Exchange to cheers from the Foxes. He did not understand their enthusiasm, especially since they had no evidence of what had occurred. This was not a major victory for them, simply a tiny first step in an intricate plan that Andrew could see unfolding before him. Even if Andrew were the type of person to celebrate, an achievement this small would never garner cheers.

“Where’s Neil?” Matt asked suddenly, glancing around worriedly and puffing up like a maternal hedgehog. “What have you done with him?”

Andrew gazed back calmly, feeling a spike of anger deep in his chest. He knew his reputation, but for Matt to actually believe that Andrew would hurt Neil was absurd. Neil himself was unimportant – Andrew felt nothing, Neil meant nothing, when he left it would not hurt – but for Andrew to incapacitate or lose an asset like the Shadow would be foolish, and Andrew prided himself on never being foolish.

“After the meeting, he just pulled his hood up and completely disappeared into the shadows!” enthused Katelyn from beside him, where she had already rearmed herself. “I’ve never actually seen him do his spooky spy shit before. It was amazing! Like he was an actual ghost.”

“Wait,” said Erik, as if suddenly struck by something. “Do we have any proof that Neil’s alive? What if he’s been dead all along?”

“Never mind that nonsense,” cut in Dan, waving an impatient hand and distracting Andrew from the unpleasant clench in his stomach that had resulted from the suggestion of Neil being dead. “What happened during the parley?”

As nobody expected Andrew to answer from where he was diligently replacing all his knives in their proper locations, all eyes were on Katelyn. She fidgeted restlessly and then shrugged. “Oh, you know,” she said, vaguely. “Stuff.”

Dan waited for a couple beats before sighing exasperatedly. “I’ve heard you spin a convincing story
about meeting the Council of Tides, and *that’s* the story you’re giving us? That the parley was about ‘stuff’?"

“Yup,” said Katelyn, popping the ‘p’ sound. Despite his dislike for Katelyn’s relationship with his brother – he had seen her flirt with and charm almost everyone who had passed through the Court, there was no way was he trusted her to not break Aaron’s heart – he had chosen her as one of his seconds for exactly this reason. She was intimidated by him and had always been smart enough to keep her mouth shut when necessary.

“ Aren’t there things that everyone should be doing elsewhere?” asked Andrew, cutting off what was sure to be an angry lecture from Dan. Dan looked chagrined that she wouldn’t get to yell, but the parley had already put a halt to most of their regular activities. There were marks to exploit, debtors to shake down, and rival gang members to intimidate. It would not be smart to linger for too long outside of their territory in these numbers. Dan sighed heavily and then motioned at the rest of the Foxes to get back to their assigned duties. The Foxes dispersed surprisingly quickly, leaving the square almost empty in moments.

“You *will* give me an explanation soon,” said Dan, who, even after all these years, still believed that she could get Andrew to do something against his will.

Andrew inclined his head, conceding. He would need her help, but he trusted no one, apart from Neil, enough to share any information yet. “Sunday,” he said. “You, too,” he added to Matt, who was still waiting to speak with him.

“I have Neil’s knives,” said Matt. Andrew took the bundle of Neil’s most prized possessions without comment and then started walking back towards the Barrel.

He did not get far before he realized he was not alone. Neil had been able to sneak up on Andrew exactly once, the time they had met. Andrew had been caught unawares and vowed never to let the lithe teenager sneak up on him again. Their next encounter had resulted in Andrew breaking his walking stick against Neil’s gut, an exchange of secrets, and an agreement. It had worked out well for him so far.

“I have your knives,” he offered into the darkness, his voice echoing slightly off the alley walls. He heard nothing, but Neil suddenly appeared beside him. He took his knives gently, touching each one reverently and murmuring its name before delicately putting it in place.

“You and your Saints,” scoffed Andrew. “Do you really believe that there is a higher power watching over you?”

“No,” answered Neil quietly. “But my mother always said that men mock the gods until they need them and then are ignored. I feel I’ve angered enough powerful people that it’s foolish to risk pissing off the Saints as well. Maybe I’ll be pleasantly surprised and they’ll help me when I need it.”

“You are being naïve if you think that the Saints, if they exist, would care about you. You should have learned by now that they will never save or protect you.”

“Maybe they already have,” Neil argued, giving Andrew a meaningful look. “After all I have someone in my life who will protect me from anything and will always find a way to come save me.”

“Don’t look at me like that,” said Andrew, feeling fathomless anger begin to boil in his belly. How dare Neil imply that Andrew cared for anything or anyone? That Andrew was good and worthwhile and not the monstrous, destructive force he knew himself to be. “I am not your answer. I sure as fuck was not sent to you by your mythological Saints.”
Neil smiled and slipped back into the darkness. “I was talking about Matt.”

Andrew felt a stab of annoyance at falling for Neil’s fairly obvious verbal trap, at the fact that Neil had made him feel. He wished he could see Neil’s face in the darkness, since he always appeared so pleased with himself after running his mouth. “Are you going to take care of Hawking, as we discussed?” he asked to divert his thoughts from imagining Neil’s happy expression.

“I don’t want to,” replied Neil almost petulantly, from somewhere above him.

“I can offer a trade,” Andrew proposed. “I will sever his fingers if you speak with Renee.”

Andrew did not hear Neil leave, but he felt his abrupt absence. He shook his head. Neil’s strange aversion to Renee was amusing, but would have to be overcome. He would need them to work together for his plan to function. And wasn’t that a strange thought? This job had caught his attention unlike anything had for a long time. He was engaged and interested and it seemed to be making him more animated. He wasn’t sure he liked how much his interest had been piqued; when everything inevitably went to shit it would likely affect him more than he wished.

He headed north along East Stave towards the harbour. He would go as far north as possible before cutting west across the Barrel. He knew this was a weak excuse to avoid the area along West Stave as much as possible. He also knew that the speed at which he was walking, justified to himself as necessary since his lame leg was aching, was another excuse to put off arriving at his destination.

The Barrel was bracketed by two large canals, East and West Stave. Along East Stave, Andrew felt at home. Here were the taverns and gambling halls run by the gangs. The Foxes’ own gambling hall, the Court, was located slightly farther south from the harbour than most, but the hardworking Fox steerers were able to lure tourists and their fat purses with promises of better deals, bigger wins, and prettier girls.

Along West Stave the brothels were located. The crowds in this part of the Barrel were often masked to hide their identities. The crowd itself was a tourist attraction as much as the brothels were; music and performances were often held along the canal, or even on boats, and the masked revellers added to the atmosphere. Costumes could be easily obtained from shops throughout the Barrel - characters from the Komedie Brute were the most popular.

The major brothels, referred to as pleasure houses, each had a theme, some more obvious than others. The House of Snow, where light-eyed blondes could be found; the Menagerie, which offered girls from different ethnic backgrounds dressed in silken animal costumes; the Forge, where the prostitutes were men; the House of Spears, where they were boys.

*Brick by brick,* Andrew thought grimly, as he passed the House of Spears and caught a glimpse of the proprietress, Cass, sipping champagne in the lounge. After all, he had made a promise, and Andrew did not break his promises. He just had to be patient. Bee had taught him that ruination was a worse punishment than death.

Andrew pushed all thoughts and memories away and focused on his task. He was headed to the House of the White Rose, one of the most prosperous pleasure houses. It was a large, white stone building covered with winding vines of white flowers and boasting its own dock on West Stave. The parlour was filled with people, both masked and unmasked, sitting on white couches, sipping champagne and nibbling on white wafers. White roses were in abundance, spilling out of white vases placed liberally throughout the room. The perfume from the roses was cloying, especially as Andrew knew that this variety of rose was scentless; the perfume was added by hand.

He gave a short nod to the woman at the reception desk, and opened a well concealed staff door and
took the stairs to the third floor, where Renee’s private room was located. He bypassed all the large ornate doors, and opened another almost hidden door at the end of the hall. He was unpleasantly surprised to find a woman in the room.

“What are you doing here?” demanded Allison indignantly, from her perch on a settee across the room.

As this was Renee’s room and Renee was a Fox, Andrew felt this did not require an answer. He simply raised an eyebrow at Allison, returning the question. To his surprise, Allison coloured slightly. *Huh,* he thought. He had not known of any kind of relationship between Allison and the Heartrender, and he liked to remain informed. Of course, he relied heavily on Neil for his information and Neil was strangely oblivious to interpersonal relationships.

He nodded towards the panelled door on the wall. “Is she with a client?” he asked. When Allison hesitantly nodded he said “Go away.”

Allison jumped up, outraged, but Andrew waved a hand cutting her off. “I have Fox business to discuss. Does your business here take precedence? Are your Indentures getting in the way of your flirting?”

She deflated. “You’re an asshole.”

“That is news to no one.”

“Are you ever going to tell anyone what insane job you’re working, Monster?” she asked, acidly.

Andrew just stared at her blankly, but then, because he did trust her to a certain extent, answered, “Sunday.” He trusted her in the same way that he trusted all the long-time Foxes: due to exposure he was able to predict their reactions. So he trusted Allison to act like Allison, and with that in mind he told her that he had sent Neil off to dispense justice.

Allison, as mercurial as ever, laughed delightedly; she’d always enjoyed it when Neil’s claws came out. She left fairly quickly, excited to see Neil’s tongue and knives unleashed.

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also had a side business as a Tailor - a Grisha who could change a person’s appearance. She
smoothed wrinkles, adjusted hair colour, and eased dark circles under eyes. Andrew knew that her
skills as a Tailor paled significantly compared to Neil’s, but Neil’s talents were a secret known only
to a few.

The door opened and Renee calmly stepped through. Her dark eyes swept the room quickly. She
was wearing a red silk kefta, the uniform of the Corporalki in Ravka’s military. It was a fake status
symbol for her clients, meant to make her seem more powerful and wise. It not a true kefta, simply a
replica. Renee had never been in the Second Army.

“Hello, Andrew,” she said warmly and came to give his shoulders a brief squeeze in greeting.

Andrew felt that her calm and wise facade was ridiculous. Last year she’d arrived in the Barrel angry
as a wet cat, spitting and clawing at all those around her. Andrew had been impressed; her ability and
viciousness made her an excellent investment for the Foxes and he had offered her protection against
those who would sell a Grisha into slavery. After joining the Foxes she had begun having long
meetings with Abby, their Healer, and had begun worshipping the Saints and had vowed to stop
killing in cold blood. Now, Andrew mainly found her boring, although they often sparred as she was
one of the few people he knew that could best him in hand to hand combat.

Renee moved around the small room, preparing herself a cup of tea before sitting and giving him a
piercing stare. “As you are not Allison, I’m assuming that you have a task for me.”

“What do you know of Kevin Day?” he asked, deflecting her implied question.

A brief flash of surprise lit her eyes as she sat back. She contemplated for a few moments before
answering. “Not more than most, I’d imagine,” she said. “I would think that you could get more
information from Wymack.”

“Wymack?” Andrew asked, surprised. “I was not aware he knew Kevin at all.”

“Jean informed me that Wymack was close with Kevin’s mother during the Ravkan civil war.”

“Interesting,” said Andrew. “Regardless, I want to hear what you know.”

“Very well,” she said patiently. “I know that he is a Grisha, a Materialnik of unsurpassed power. His
mother was a Saint who martyred herself to save Ravka from the Shadow Fold, but he’s lived in Shu
Han since before her death.”

“You never met him?”

“Shu Han is a large country. Not everyone who lives there knows each other.”

“I meant that you know Jean and Jean worked at Evermore as one of Kevin’s guards.”

“I knew Jean when we were children. I met him by chance years later when he wanted help to leave
Evermore, which led to our arrival here.”

“And Thea’s imprisonment?”

“She was trying to make him return. It was an unfortunate necessity and I regret that she’s serving
time for a crime she didn’t commit.”

Andrew gave a grim smile. “You’re so polite and proper. Why can’t you just say that you got her
falsely imprisoned to save your skins? It was a good plan. You should be proud.”
“I am neither proud nor happy that an innocent woman is in prison because of my actions.”

“Well then I have good news for you,” he said. “I am going to save Kevin Day from Evermore. I’ll need you on my crew. And I’ll need someone who knows Evermore inside and out.”

“I assume Jean said no, so you’re planning a prison break?” Renee asked rhetorically. “How can you be certain that she’ll help you?”

“It’s a simple matter of leverage, Renee. However, I know you’ve had some differences in the past. Can you do this?”

Renee tilted her head to the side. “When I was growing up, my mother had a saying that she insisted we live by. It translates roughly as ‘Despise your heart’. It meant that I must always do my duty without regard for my own feelings. Yes, I can do this. But she’ll want revenge against me, Andrew.”

“Revenge may be what she wants,” Andrew answered. “But I can offer her what she needs.”

Renee’s eyes sparkled with interest and Andrew felt a small thrill. The dangerous creature that she had once been was not gone, just covered up. “Tell me,” she said.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

NEIL

Chapter Summary

In which Neil is generally oblivious, gets into a couple fights, listens to Wymack give a monologue, and calls Andrew silly.

Chapter Notes

I'm trying to post a chapter a week, this week's is a little early because I'm going out of town to attend a funeral; consequently, next week's may be a little late.

I forgot to mention that I'm also taking some character and backstory ideas from The Grisha Trilogy. Message me with any questions.

Content warnings for this chapter: violence (especially to fingers), references to slavery/indentured servitude and how that results in forced prostitution

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil did not head directly to the Court following his conversation with Andrew. He instead performed a cursory sweep of the Barrel, surveilling from the rooftops to ensure that nothing unexpected was happening. It was nearing three bells when he decided that he had delayed for long enough and made his way into the Court.

Hawking was easy to find, all six and a half feet, three hundred pounds of him. He was dealing cards to a couple of Ravkan tourists, along with Matt and Allison, who suspiciously rubbed her hands together with something like anticipation when she caught sight of Neil. Neil signalled for another dealer to take over the table, and tried to herd Hawking into the back room; although the Barrel was a rough place, the gangs tried to keep most of the bloodshed away from the tourists.

“No!” howled Hawking, stopping short when he realized what was happening.

“Come on,” urged Neil. “Stop making a scene.”

“I never cheated no one!”

Neil had been the one to notice that Hawking had been skimming from the tables so he knew that this was blatantly untrue. “Take it up with Wymack or Andrew,” he said.

“Keep quiet, Gorilla, and take it outside,” advised Matt from the table, giving a significant look around.

“Oh, I’ll take it up with Minyard alright. I can’t believe he sent a child to try to take me down. Where is the little fucking monster?” demanded Hawking, ignoring both his hated nickname and Matt.

“I don’t know,” Neil lied.
“You always know everything about everybody,” sneered Hawking, looming over Neil. “Isn’t that why the Monster keeps you around? Or is there something else between yous?” He made a gesture that Neil didn’t understand, but Matt made a sound like an angry, scalded cat.

“I don’t know where he is or when he’s coming back, but it would really be better for you if you just quietly came with me right now,” Neil said softly.

“I ain’t never stolen anything, and you owe me money for this shift,” argued Hawking. “Maybe I can take my payment from you, though. Think if I shake hard enough coins will come out?”

Hawking made to grab Neil, but he quickly sidestepped the lumbering man. He moved quickly, slipping on his brass knuckle that he kept at his right hip, and punched the man in the back of his knee, sending him falling on the ground. He then kicked the elbow of the arm that Hawking had caught himself with, causing him to fall flat on his face. Neil stepped on his wrist, slipped one of his knives from its sheaths and quickly detached his ring finger, which was the usual punishment for dealers who had been found skimming. It marked them as cheats and made sure that they had to relearn how to properly shuffle and stack a deck. He wiped the knife off quickly before replacing it, and nimbly leapt away from the bellowing man on the floor.

Neil noticed he was the centre of attention so he swept his gaze around the room and announced, “No stealing.”

The patrons slowly returned to their games, still a little shocked at seeing Neil efficiently take out someone twice his size, but their thoughts soon returned to gambling. Neil joined Allison and Matt who were exchanging money at their table; they obviously had bet on the outcome of the fight.

“That was disappointing,” said Allison. “I wanted you to make him cry.”

Neil looked dispassionately at the weeping man who was being ushered off the floor by two workers. “He’s crying,” he said.

Allison gave a little laugh. “I meant by using only your words. And you should have chopped off more than just his finger.”

“You’re being vicious, even for you,” commented Matt. “I didn’t know you had a vendetta against Gorilla.”

“I haven’t forgotten what he did to Seth,” replied Allison loftily.

“Seth’s been dead for three years,” argued Matt. “No one even remembers what that fight was about. Knowing Seth, he was probably the instigator. What do you know about it? You weren’t even a Fox yet.”

“Seth told me about it.”

“I’m sure that wasn’t a biased account,” said Matt dryly.

“Anyway,” interrupted Neil, wanting to turn the conversation away from Seth. He still felt a little guilty over his role in his death, although Allison had forgiven him long ago. “How did you know that I was coming to deal with him?” he asked Allison.

“How do you think? Your Monster told me.”

“He’s not mine,” said Neil automatically. “And don’t call him Monster.”
“Are you going to tell us what’s going on?” asked Matt, cutting off before an argument could occur. “He generally doesn’t do much, but suddenly he’s calling parleys and making plans. You have to know what’s going on, you’re the only one he trusts.”

“That’s because I don’t betray his trust by giving his secrets out,” replied Neil. “Especially for free.”

“You can’t tell us one little thing?” cajoled Allison. “I’ll take you out for waffles.”

“We go out for waffles all the time. We’re going tomorrow. That was a terrible attempt at a bribe and I’m ashamed for you.”

“Please, Neil. Dan’s all in a strop about him not obeying her,” begged Matt.

“When has Andrew ever obeyed anyone?”

“You seem to be able to get him to do whatever you want,” observed Allison, while examining her nails.

“That’s different. We have a deal. The only one he’ll actually obey is Wymack, and even that’s rare.” Neil sighed and ran his hand through his hair. This was why not having friends was much easier. He’d never had people trying to guilt him into doing anything when he’d been alone. “Don’t worry too much about it. You’ll find out what’s happening when he’s ready to tell you.”

Allison scoffed. “Maybe Gorilla was right about you two.” She repeated the gesture that Hawking had made, but this time Matt laughed.

“I don’t understand what you’re implying,” said Neil, which just caused Matt to laugh more.


“What.” He couldn’t even make it sound like a question as he sidestepped her grasping arms. He looked to Matt for an explanation, but Matt just reached out to ruffle his hair.

“I’ll explain when you’re older, buddy,” said Matt.

Neil abruptly decided that he had spent enough time being friendly for one day.

“Waffles tomorrow?” called Matt after his retreating form.

“Waffles tomorrow,” agreed Neil.

It was very late, or rather very early, when Neil made it back to the Foxhole. The Foxhole was a large four story warehouse that had been converted into living quarters for the Foxes. Neil shared a room with Andrew at the top of the house in an attic gable - it had a window that looked out directly onto the roof which made coming and going quite simple for Neil. He arrived on the roof of the Foxhole where he found Robin waiting for him to give her daily report.

Robin Cross was Neil’s apprentice, and her recruitment had resulted in the longest lasting argument Neil and Andrew had ever had. Neil was still not sure exactly what had transpired to make Andrew so annoyed with him.

At first Neil had been excited. He had found an excellent recruit for the Foxes. Unlike most Barrel gangs, the Foxes did not recruit whoever showed up at their headquarters and wanted to join. Their owner, David Wymack, had built his gang by recruiting those who were generally overlooked by
other gangs. Usually this meant buying out the Indentures of talented people.

Slavery was, of course, illegal in Kerch. People found guilty of human trafficking were punished harshly. There was a loophole, though, where people could sell themselves into indentured servitude by means of strict contracts. In the wealthy areas of Kettedam, Kerch’s capital city, these Indentures were carried out as the law intended; people worked for a set amount of time to pay off the money that had been lent to them. In the Barrel, Indentures were used unscrupulously. Often, people were brought from other countries by slavers and forced to sign unfair contracts in a language that they couldn’t read. These contracts were impossible to complete; costs for room and board were often added at such a price that the money owed constantly increased regardless of the work performed.

Wymack made a habit of searching out talented people who were on illegal Indentures; he felt that by giving desperate people a fair chance he could make his gang stronger. He bought out their contracts in exchange for joining the Foxes. In return he was repaid with unwavering loyalty by those people he had saved. Many had stayed on after their Indentures had expired.

Neil had been in the lounge of the Menagerie, a brothel where the owner often made use of illegal Indentures. He was there on Fox business - he had needed to bribe the owner for information. Generally these types of tasks were better suited to Andrew, but Neil took all tasks that would have required him to enter a pleasure house. He had been waiting for the owner to make her appearance when Robin had suddenly spoken to him.

He had whipped around and stared at her. She was of a height with him, a Suli girl with copper skin and long dark hair. She was wearing the traditional Suli lynx costume, a light breezy dress covered with bells, yet she had been able to approach him without his notice in a brightly lit room. He’d inquired after her name and background - she was an acrobat, which made sense. His own light footed abilities stemmed from the fourteen months he and his mother had lived among Suli acrobats.

When he’d returned to the Foxhole he’d gone straight to speak with Wymack, convincing him to offer to buy out Robin’s Indenture. He’d felt that she would be an excellent investment for the Foxes. Luckily Wymack had agreed and had made the arrangements. Neil had then gone directly to Andrew to share his exciting news.

“I’ve found you a spy,” he had told Andrew proudly.

Andrew had just watched him for a few moments. “I already have a spy,” he had answered.

“I won’t be here forever,” argued Neil.

At that Andrew had gone still. “Are you suddenly tired of us?” he had asked snidely. “Are you finally running away?”

“No,” Neil had said, but he was starting to get very annoyed. “But you’ve known from the beginning that I was never going to stay forever. Now I’ve found an excellent replacement for me. I’ll train her and then you will not be at a disadvantage when I go.”

“I told you that I would protect you. Do you doubt me?”

“And I told you that I wouldn’t risk putting you or the rest of the Foxes in that much danger.”

“Fine,” said Andrew shortly, turning away from Neil. “You may leave whenever you want. You will not be missed.”

Neil had been hurt and had left after making some cutting remarks of his own. The coldness and tension remained between him and Andrew for several weeks and had not abated until Andrew had
taken an interest in Robin, teaching her how to fight properly. Although they had returned to a semblance of their normal relationship, Neil still felt a slight distance between them that he didn’t know how to combat but that caused a sharp pain in his stomach and sometimes made it difficult to breathe properly when he thought about it.

“Hey, boss,” Robin said now from her perch on top of the Foxhole.

“Any interesting news?” asked Neil.

“Eh, not much,” said Robin, tilting her hand from side to side. “Nothing interesting from the Trojans. I think the Ravens are up to something, but when are they not?” Neil snorted in amused agreement. “And I found that the honourable mercher Charles Whittier has a mistress at Nineteen Burstraad. He likes her to call him ‘Daddy’.”

“Oh.” Neil blushed a little. “That’s his mistress? I thought she may have been an illegitimate daughter.”

Robin gave a little laugh. “Yeah, Andrew said that you weren’t great at determining just who is fucking whom.”

“Yes, well,” said Neil, a little flustered. “It’s good that you’re here to catch that kind of information now. Knowledge like that can be incredibly useful. Good job.”

“Goodnight, boss,” replied Robin, still laughing a little, as she took off across the rooftops.

Andrew was not in their room when Neil entered so he headed down to the lower floors of the building. On the second floor, a door opened as he passed it and, as he was instinctively turning around to see who had emerged, he was grabbed and pushed up against the wall. In a heartbeat he had a knife against his attacker’s throat.

He really didn’t understand how so many people could confuse Andrew and his twin brother. Although they were nearly physically identical (short, blond, golden-eyed), their movement and countenance were completely different. Now, for instance, Aaron was snarling at him with an ugly expression that never would have broken through Andrew’s self-control.

“I want to send a message to Andrew about putting *my girlfriend* in dangerous situations,” Aaron growled.

“Katelyn made her own choice to become a Fox. *Everything* we do is dangerous. Even someone as sheltered as you should have realized that by now.”

“You will tell Andrew that he’s not to use her like that again.”

“Take it up with Andrew yourself,” Neil spat back. “Except you’re too cowardly to do that, aren’t you?”

Aaron simply tightened his grip around Neil’s biceps and drew in a short breath as Neil pressed his knife harder against his throat. “I’m not a coward,” he said.

“Are you not? That’s news to me,” Neil taunted. “Listen to me very closely. I know that you get away with being a selfish asshole to everyone because they’re scared of Andrew. But I’m not. I’m not responsible for everything that’s gone wrong in your life, despite your claims. Your grudge against me has gone on too long. If you ever attack me unprovoked again, I will hurt you.”

“I’d like to see you try.”
Neil pushed his knife in a little deeper. “It would be easy,” he said, and he felt a terrible smile overtaking his face. “Unlike you, I have spent a lot of time killing and maiming for this gang. I’ve become quite good at it.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” said Aaron, a little desperately.

“Why? Because Andrew said he’d protect you? He promised me that, too. And you should consider whether you are absolutely certain that Andrew would choose you over me if he were forced to pick sides.”

Aaron gave Neil a look filled with absolute loathing. “You think that you’re so tough and important. You’re nothing but his worthless whore,” he spat.

Neil went absolutely still. “If I were you, I would be very, very careful about using that word as an insult,” he advised. “But then again, if I were you I would have stopped sulking years ago and attempted to become less useless. Now,” he continued smoothly, “get your hands off of me and walk away while you still can.”

Aaron shoved him violently before letting him go and backing up while cursing. He stormed back into his room and slammed the door behind him. Neil shook out his arms and ran a hand through his hair. He then reached up to wipe his father’s smile off his face. He dug his fingers into his bottom lip until he could feel it disappear. He silently counted to ten in all the languages he knew to calm himself.

He brushed off the questions of the Foxes who had come out of their rooms to investigate the noises, and slid down the banister to the main floor.

Andrew was just entering the building. He gave him a shrewd look. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing,” answered Neil. “I’m fine.”

Andrew looked supremely unimpressed and continued to watch Neil.

“It was just a difference of opinion with your darling brother,” Neil finally relented. “Everything’s under control.”

Andrew continued to search his face for a couple moments before nodding. He grabbed Neil’s sleeve and dragged him along behind him as he entered Wymack’s office with a cursory knock on the door frame.

David Wymack was a large, intimidating man who had enough personality and presence to fill any room in which he found himself. He had dark eyes, hair, and skin, courtesy of his Zemeni father, and had a fair number of tattoos along his arms, neck, and back. He was gruff, grumpy, and impatient, but also showed unwavering support of his Foxes. Neil had been extremely wary of him when Wymack had first attempted to recruit him. He still avoided contact with him as much as possible, but that was true of everyone save Andrew. Somehow, in his three years acting as the Shadow, Wymack had bypassed many of Neil’s defenses, leaving Neil to regard him with grudging trust and respect.

“What do you want, you tiny, miserable bastard?” grouched Wymack. “Must be something big for the little spook to join us visibly.” He sent a pointed look up at the grate near the ceiling that Neil often used to spy on Wymack’s private meetings.

Andrew ignored him and settled comfortably on a chair, putting his boots up on Wymack’s desk and crossing his ankles. Wymack sent him an annoyed glower, but Andrew just brushed invisible dirt off his coat. Neil started inspecting the room, poking at random objects on shelves, which seemed to
annoy Wymack further. “Sit the fuck down, kid,” he ordered. “You’re making me nervous.”

Neil sat and waited for Andrew to say something, but Andrew continued to sit quietly, fiddling with the edges of the armbands he always wore. Neil picked a spot on the wall to stare at and wait for Andrew to speak.

Wymack was the first to break. “Okay, look, I forfeit this contest of dominance, or whatever the hell is happening here with you two bozos. Can you just get on with it?”

“I believe that you are both aware that I dislike surprises,” said Andrew, after another short pause. “And that I do not appreciate being kept in the dark. You both are aware that ever since Luther Hemmick approached me to rescue Kevin Day from the ‘evil clutches’ of the Moriyamas I have been looking for more information about Kevin, yet I learned today that there has been some critical information withheld by the two of you.” Andrew appeared completely apathetic, as if what he was saying did not affect him in the slightest.

Neil shifted a little uncomfortably, which was an obvious tell that he never would have displayed before. His time with the Foxes was making him soft. He was quite certain that Andrew couldn’t have uncovered his own past encounter with Kevin; no one knew who he was, so no one could have divulged that information. It was far more likely that someone had disclosed Wymack’s past with Kevin’s mother or about his covert surveillance of Kevin’s childhood.

Wymack looked wary. “What information?” he asked.

“Apparently you knew his mother,” said Andrew. “And have kept tabs on him for years.”

This time Wymack looked surprised. “I assumed that Neil would have discovered that.”

“I did,” said Neil.

Andrew gave him a sidelong look. “And you hid it from me?”

“No,” replied Neil. “But I promised Wymack discretion about what I found out about his personal life when I agreed to work for the Foxes. I would have told you had you explicitly asked.”

“It was implied,” said Andrew shortly.

“Yes, but I’m stupid, remember? I need things spelled out for me.”

Andrew gave him an angry look but Neil cut him off before he could speak. “I don’t give away information for free; you should know that by now.”

“Stop talking. You,” Andrew continued, pointing at Wymack, “are going to tell us about your history with both Kevin and Kayleigh Day, since I feel it may be relevant to our current interests.”

“Look, I know almost nothing about Evermore and very little about Kevin. I’m not sure that what I can tell you will be helpful,” started Wymack, before sighing deeply. “The Ravkan civil war happened, what, about twenty years ago now? For years before it began I was working as a privateer, keeping the shores of Ravka safe and securing their imports. My mother was Ravkan; she was very patriotic and claimed kinship with the royal family. Anyway, that’s when I met Kayleigh. She was a nobody, a Ravkan peasant. She joined my crew and she fit in nicely but she was nothing special.”

Neil could barely believe that these words were being spoken of a Saint. “At the time, Ravka was split in half by the Shadow Fold,” Wymack continued. “It was a dark nothingness inhabited by
ravenous monsters, running from south to north across the country splitting the east from the west. It made it very difficult to get supplies from Ravka’s west coast to the inland areas.

“My crew and I were hired to transport some goods across the Shadow Fold; the pay was very good for such work. We had to hire Grisha: Inferni and Squallers to protect us. Halfway across the Fold there was an attack, and I don’t know exactly what happened, but Kayleigh just… lit up. Literally. It was like there was a tiny fucking sun in the middle of the Fold. All the monsters fled in panic.

“Afterwards, she was taken to the Little Palace, where the Grisha train. The country rejoiced; we had been waiting generations for a Sun Summoner to destroy the Shadow Fold. She was venerated as a living Saint. My crew and I went back to privateering.

“The next time I saw her was several months later. By that time the Darkling, the leader of the Grisha, had declared war on the royal family, and the civil war had begun. I was hired by the Darkling to transport some cargo, and when I found that the cargo was Kayleigh, I helped her escape. I then pledged my support to her and the royal family.

“I managed to stay with her and a small group of her allies throughout the war. That’s where I met Abby and Betsy. It was not a particularly fun or happy time in my life, and the war ended when Kayleigh sacrificed her life to destroy both the Darkling and the Fold.”

“And Kevin?” asked Andrew, without regard for the emotional toll this story was taking on Wymack.

“He was born several months before the end of the conflict and somehow he’d been kept a secret. For his safety he was taken to Shu Han by one of Kayleigh’s trusted friends. Tetsuji was related to the Moriyamas and pledged to keep Kevin safe. I got as many reports about Kevin as I could throughout his life, and as far as I can tell he was kept safe and happy until a couple years ago when Tetsuji died. Now I believe he is being mistreated. And the amplifiers that Hemmick showed you are extremely dangerous. If Kevin really is making synthetic amplifiers, then he must be stopped. Abby knows more about it than I do, but it was the Darkling’s search for unnatural amplifiers that created the Shadow Fold in the first place.”

Andrew slowly tapped his finger against his lips. “Do you know who Kevin’s father is?”

“I don’t see how that’s relevant,” answered Wymack. “But, no. It could be me. But as far as I knew there were other possibilities. Tetsuji, one of the Grisha at the palace, the crown prince, hell, maybe even the Darkling. It doesn’t matter. I asked you to accept the job because of my regard for his mother, but you chose to take it for your own reasons.”

“Money,” supplied Andrew.

“His only motivation,” put in Neil.

“How about saving the Saintsforsaken world from the unnatural powers given by those strange amplifiers? Protecting Grisha and preventing war?” growled Wymack.

“Oh, boss,” said Andrew lightly. “You should know by now that I don’t care about anyone or anything.”

Wymack growled. “I don’t believe that for a second. Now, get out my sight. I’ve had enough of you to last a week.”

Andrew gave Wymack a two-fingered salute and they left his office. Because Neil was able to nimbly and quickly climb the stairs while Andrew laboured because of his leg and cane, he was able
to make it upstairs and prepare for sleep before Andrew reached their room. Neil had often wondered why Andrew preferred to live at the top of the building but the only answer he had ever been given was that the view made Andrew feel.

Andrew propped open their window to have a cigarette and Neil settled beside him. Neil felt a little stab of joy run through him. It was this that had been missing since their argument about Robin’s recruitment half a year ago. This near-daily ritual of silently sitting together, not needing to wear the masks that they so often wore around others.

After Andrew stubbed out his cigarette, Neil retreated to his pallet in the corner and began to get comfortable. When Neil had first started working for the Foxes he had refused to sign a contract with Wymack; unwilling and unable to chain himself in place. He had also refused a room in the Foxhole, arguing that he was not an actual member of the Foxes, he was a freelancer. That had lasted until Andrew had learned that Neil slept on benches, or under stairs, or on rooftops, and had stated that he needed to protect his investment in Neil so he may as well sleep on a pallet in Andrew’s room.

Andrew changed clothes quickly, removing his armbands before washing in the shallow basin in the corner. He was never seen anywhere without his armbands that sheathed his knives, so Neil was the only one who knew of the deep scarring on his left forearm, the result of the violent, gouging removal of the tattoo that had once been there.

Andrew caught Neil’s eyes in the mirror watching him. “Are you going to tell me what your argument with Aaron was about?” he asked softly.

“It wasn’t important,” replied Neil. “He was unhappy that you used Katelyn as your second in the parley.”

“He said something to upset you.”

“It wasn’t important,” repeated Neil.

“It was, or else you would not be trying to keep it from me.”

“You won’t like it.”

“To be fair, there isn’t much that I do like,” said Andrew, with slight amusement.

Neil huffed in agreement. “He called me your whore.”

Andrew closed his eyes briefly. “I do not like that word.”

“I know that.”

“It’s not true.”

“I obviously know that.”

“He is still angry about how his life changed when his mother died.”

“You’re still not providing any information that I don’t already know.”

“I’ll teach him a lesson about using that word derogatively,” declared Andrew.

Neil laughed outright. “No you won’t. Your lessons involve knives and fists and crying, and you’ve made a deal with him.”
“Why should I keep my end of the deal when he so blatantly ignores it?”

“You’re the better person.”

“Shut up. I am not,” Andrew said, with a hint of anger in his voice. He had finished washing and was now turning off the lamps and climbing into his bed.

“Yes you are,” teased Neil, snuggling into his pillow happily while yawning.

“Haven’t you heard? I am a monster.”


“Don’t be silly. You’re the best person. Where would I be without you?”

Andrew was quiet for so long that Neil thought that he’d fallen asleep. “I hate you,” he finally said.

“I know,” replied Neil sleepily.

“Go to sleep, Neil.”

“‘Night, Andrew,” Neil mumbled into his pillow before drifting into dreamless sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

“Oh, Renee. Terrible things happen to innocent people every day. Take your complaints to your Saints and leave me out of it.”
RENEE

Chapter Summary

In which Renee spends Saturday night at a show.

Chapter Notes

Thank you everyone who left comments or kudos. As always, leave a comment if you have questions or to let me know what you think.

Warnings for this chapter: Violence, violence against animals, implied torture

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The incessant bobbing of the rowboat was helping neither Renee’s stomach nor her mind to settle. She was annoyed at her twisting innards - she’d spent enough time on boats that seasickness shouldn’t trouble her. She was steadfastly ignoring the possibility that her queasiness could be caused by nerves or fear. Her mother had trained her so that she was unaffected by such things. She’d been tempered like the finest steel, crafted into a killer who showed neither remorse nor hesitation.

But, no, that was no longer her life. She was Renee now. She was allowed to feel guilt and nervousness. She solved problems without murdering anyone in her way, and prayed that the Saints may forgive her previous transgressions. Her new identity still sometimes sat strangely on her, like an ill-fitting coat, but she certainly slept better at night.

She adjusted her blue silk cape and veil, part of the Lost Bride costume that Andrew had thrust at her upon greeting her at Fifth Harbour, and watched her surroundings. Andrew, rowing the boat steadily, was dressed in a truly hideous orange cape with a Madman’s mask perched atop his head. The other two occupants of the boat were dressed as the Gray Imp and the Scarab Queen. Renee had seen all these costumes frequently; they were all from the Komedie Brute and were common among the pleasure seekers along West Stave. She wasn’t entirely sure why they were wearing costumes, but assumed that it was an essential part of Andrew’s plan, not an elaborate hoax or practical joke on her.

Neil, in the signature horned mask and high-necked tunic of the Gray Imp, looked somehow even younger than usual as he leaned forward to speak quietly to the boat’s fourth occupant, a woman by the name of Alvarez who Renee had never met before this evening. Likely they were going over last minute plans or discussing their strategy. Renee had mostly been left in the dark about how this prison break was going to unfold; she’d been told when and where to show up and that was it. She had learned that this was Andrew’s way - he only shared the parts of the plan to the people directly involved. He claimed it reduced the chances for betrayal.

It was already full dark as they approached the ever present mist that surrounded Terrenjel, one of Ketterdam’s tiny outlying islands, where the prison of Hellgate was located. Although her vision was slightly hampered by the gauzy veil, she was able to see other boats headed towards the island. The occupants of these boats were also dressed as members of the Komedie Brute, quieting her fears of
being the butt of some kind of joke.

The tiny boat hit the rocky shoals of Terrenjel and they disembarked, dragging the boat above the tide line. They followed a winding path up towards the prison and were stopped by a man who bore a raven tattoo on his left forearm. He demanded their entrance fee, so Andrew tossed him a bag of kruge before they were ushered into a large, open room. Here they waited for a guide. Each group was warned not to wander off and that they must be escorted at all times. They were led through a corridor and then along a stone walkway which seemed to connect the main prison to another building. They ended up in a gigantic room, with a round arena in the middle, ringed by high walls and small balconies for spectators.

The four of them stepped out into the spectator area and the passage back was blocked by a prison guard in a grey uniform.

“Where are we?” asked Renee quietly.

“The old prison,” answered Andrew. “They’ve kept it for housing certain special prisoners and for … entertainment after the newer prison was built.”

“Who are all these people? Do they just come to Hellgate for fun?”

“Every Saturday,” answered Alvarez, grimly.

There was a sudden shout from most of the spectators, following by a cacophony of cheers as a lone man, obviously a member of the Ravens, was lowered into the arena on a platform. He gave a signal and a door was opened and a man dressed in prisoner’s garb entered the far side of the arena. He made his way to the platform, where he lifted his shackled hands to spin a giant wheel. Renee couldn’t quite make out the colourful shapes adorning the wheel, but when it ticked to a stop the red needle was pointing at a green shape. The roar of the crowd was at a fever pitch now, as the Raven unlocked the prisoner’s shackles before his platform was raised out of the arena. The prisoner was desperately searching the sand around him: there were many items strewn on the ground and he eventually found a knife to arm himself. From the opposite side of the arena, a gate was lowered, and a large green lizard shuffled slowly into the arena.

“What is that?” asked Renee. “I’ve never seen a lizard so large.”

“It’s called rinca moten,” answered Neil. “It’s native to the desert in Novyi Zem. It has lethal poison in its saliva.”

“It seems slow,” observed Renee.

Neil huffed in amusement. “So do I, when I’m trying to lull my opponent into a false sense of security.”

As Renee had observed the pure turn of speed that Neil was capable of when motivated, she turned her attention quickly back to the arena. The lizard moved like lightning. The prisoner attempted to lash out with his knife, but the fight was over almost before it began. Then, several Ravens wearing protective gear and wielding long sticks and lashes were out in the arena corralling the victor and removing the loser.

“This is barbaric,” said Renee, speaking over the boos emerging from the spectators. Obviously they had been hoping for a longer fight. “Surely there must be some laws against forcing prisoners into death matches for spectators?”

“They volunteer,” said Alvarez. “They get well compensated when they win. Private cells, private
baths, contraband. And, well, sometimes the choice of quick death by killer lizard poison is better
than slow death in prison.”

“Desperate people are being taken advantage of here.”

Alvarez raised both her hands in a placating gesture. “I’m not arguing with you, simply explaining.”

“Isn’t humanity grand?” asked Andrew sardonically. “Welcome to the Hellshow. An extremely
lucrative enterprise for the Ravens and Drake’s pet project.”

“Drake?” asked Renee.

“Drake Spear. His mother owns the Ravens.”

Renee was surprised. “I thought that Riko led the Ravens.”

Andrew gave a humourless laugh. “Riko’s just an underling with a cruel streak that’s a mile wide
and an inflated sense of importance. The Spears are the real power there.”

Renee had met Riko, shortly after she had arrived in Ketterdam about a year ago. Thea had been
trailing Jean and her since they had left Shu Han attempting to persuade Jean to return for Kevin’s
sake and threatening to have Renee arrested. Once they had reached Kerch, where Thea didn’t speak
the language, Renee had managed to frame Thea for human trafficking with Jean’s help. Her first
several days in Ketterdam were spent in the company of officials and courts which made her skin
itch – she’d been taught to dislike and distrust authority figures. After that, she and Jean had been
penniless, exhausted, and abandoned in a foreign city. The officials had escorted them to the
commercial port, where members of the Ravens gang had been waiting for them. Renee had lashed
out to protect herself and Jean, but eventually the sheer number of opponents had bested her and they
had been brought to Riko. He had offered them membership in his gang in exchange for protection.
Renee, using her rudimentary Kerch, was able to read the contracts he offered – much to Riko’s
displeasure – and had refused to sign a contract so biased in the Ravens’ favour. She and Jean had
been separated, told to think about their precarious situations, and locked away to reconsider the
Ravens’ generous offer.

That night, while she tried to think of a way out of the predicament in which she found herself,
someone had broken in her window. Only the fact that the person appeared to be a child stopped her
from stopping his heart. The child had spoken to her in Shu and had introduced himself as Neil. He
told her that he was there as an emissary of the Foxes. He offered her a work contract that was much
fairer than the one offered by the Ravens and explained that membership in a gang would protect her
from the slavers that preyed on Grisha and from the other Barrel gangs.

“How did you know that I was here?” Renee had asked.

Neil gave a little disbelieving laugh. “You had a rather large fight with some Ravens today. Did you
think it escapes anyone’s notice that a Heartrender who is also proficient in melee combat has come
to town?”

“The Ravens have offered me a place in their gang and protection against slavers.”

“The fact that you’re locked in a room instead of out killing people for Riko indicates that you didn’t
like the terms they offered you.”

“And I’d get better terms with the Foxes? I don’t even know what kind of people you are.”

“Ruthless and violent, for the most part; we’re a street gang,” replied Neil, shrugging. “But Wymack
is fair and will always have your back. Dan’s a good person who’ll work tirelessly for anyone she cares for. And Andrew may seem callous, but he will honour any deal he strikes with you. I can guarantee that you will be better off with any of the Foxes than with Riko.”

Renee had read the contract and had signed it. Neil had taken the signed contract, winked at her, and disappeared out the window. The following morning, Neil had helped her escape from the Ravens’ clutches, much to Riko’s displeasure.

Neil had brought her to the Foxhole. The day had been very overwhelming for her. She met many of the Foxes, and although they were outwardly friendly, they also were very nosy. She had no desire to share her past or make friends and felt suffocated by their cheerful curiosity. By the time she fell asleep she was slightly regretting signing a contract that meant she had to spend years with these people.

The next day, she had asked after Jean and Neil had told her that he’d gone to visit him the night previously, but Jean had not been willing to sign the contract. Neil was planning on returning that evening, hopeful that Renee’s decision to join the Foxes would sway him.

That night at dinner, she was feeling a little more settled with the Foxes. She was surrounded by some of the most senior gang members, and she let their chatter wash over her as she tried to keep herself centred.

They were discussing Neil’s attempt to recruit Jean when Allison mentioned that Jean had not signed the contract because he couldn’t read Kerch and had asked that Neil bring a translation in Shu, which caught Renee’s attention.

“Jean’s able to read Kerch,” she had told them.

They had paused and stared at her. “Riko’s wanted to capture Neil for a while now,” said Matt slowly. “He would have been able to tell that Neil was the only one who could have gotten to you.”

Renee had nodded. “It’s a trap,” she concluded.

What had followed had been a flurry of activity. Dan had started organizing everyone, sending off messengers to Wymack and Andrew to let them know that Neil had likely walked into a trap at the Ravens’ Nest. Everyone else armed themselves quickly and headed out to fight.

When they had arrived at the Nest there had been a gruesome scene. Neil lay bound in the middle of a circle made up of taunting Ravens while Riko loomed over him with a knife. Jean was restrained in a corner of the room, looking horrified. Neil had already sustained several wounds, but that hadn’t prevented him from insulting and goading his attacker. Matt made a sound like a wounded buffalo and sent off a warning shot in Riko’s direction. After that, chaos had erupted. Renee had focused on getting to Jean and freeing him. He had also sustained many wounds, likely from Riko’s knife.

The fight had ended in a tense standoff between Dan and Riko, each aiming a gun at the other.

“You’ve broken the rules of barter by attacking a member of our gang unprovoked!” Dan had cried angrily.

“Are you sure he’s yours?” asked Riko, silkily. “You seem to think it’s acceptable to go after people who’ve yet to sign a contract-” he pointed at Renee and Jean, who were standing among the Foxes “-so you can’t get angry if I go after unsigned talent. He’s mine, now.”

“I’m fairly certain he does not belong to you,” came Andrew’s calm voice from the entrance. Although he must have hurried to reach the Nest so quickly after receiving Dan’s message, he
appeared completely unruffled. He walked forwards through the Foxes towards Neil, who was being supported by Matt’s arm around his shoulders. He gave Neil a searching look and ran a proprietary hand along his back. “Don’t touch my things, Riko. I don’t share. The next time you forget yourself, I will slit your throat.”

Riko had begun spitting curses towards Andrew, but Andrew had remained completely unaffected. “I call a parley,” he said instead. “In accordance with gang rules, we’ll leave now and we can work out this disagreement on neutral ground.”

Riko’s look turned murderous, but he had dismissed them. “Be careful,” he had warned. “I have my eye on you now.”

“Keep your eye to yourself or I will gouge it out,” replied Andrew.

That had been the last time that Renee had come into contact with Riko, but she’d heard more tales of his actions. To consider that there were people who held his leash and condoned his actions was disconcerting.

A sudden thought hit her. “Does … does Thea participate in this barbarism?” she asked hesitantly.

Andrew raised an eyebrow at her. “You ask that like you care about her well-being,” he said. “As if her presence here wasn’t directly caused by your actions. Is this sudden altruism being caused by guilt?”

“Of course I feel guilty.”

“Well then you should be happy,” said Andrew. “I’ve heard you religious types enjoy guilt.”

“You could have freed her before,” accused Renee, trying to ignore Andrew’s barbed comments.

“Are you trying to make me feel guilty? It won’t work,” stated Andrew. “It would have been of no benefit to me to free her sooner. Besides I needed Alvarez for this plan and I didn’t have the leverage to get the Trojans to lend her services to me until recently.”

“You could have just bribed the warden,” suggested Renee.

“It would be foolish to let him know that he had something I wanted.”

“Instead you left an innocent woman to a terrible fate.”

“Oh, Renee. Terrible things happen to innocent people every day. Take your complaints to your Saints and leave me out of it.”

She understood Andrew better than she wanted to. His complete apathy and ruthlessness reminded her of her past and made her a little unsettled. After everything that she had endured and experienced, she had to believe that people were capable of being good. Otherwise, what hope was there for her?

“Your idealism is strange and off-putting,” answered Andrew as if reading her thoughts. “You weren’t like this when you first got to Kerch. I do not understand how you could gain such optimism in the Barrel.”

“Well you’re being callous and unfeeling,” retorted Renee. “One of us has to have faith in humanity.”
“We will become much better friends once you stop expecting me to change,” said Andrew.

“You can’t be annoyed at Andrew for acting completely in character,” cut in Neil. “It’s like being annoyed that the ocean is wet.”

Renee conceded the point. She knew that her feelings of guilt and helplessness were leaving her frustrated. She settling for glaring aimlessly and reciting the mantras that Abby had taught her instead.

There were several more prisoner fights that Renee pointedly did not watch. She heard the cheers and jeers from the crowd as the combatants either succeeded or failed in subduing their opponents.

Her attention was grabbed when Andrew sat forward a little. “Here we go,” he said.

Renee looked as Thea was ushered into the arena, much changed over her year in prison. She was paler than she had been, and had obviously spent most of her time building muscle. She was quite tall, almost as tall as Allison who stood almost six feet, with long, thick legs and arms corded with muscle. Her long dark hair had been cut short, likely to prevent lice. She looked like a tank, able to stop anything that might challenge her.

Thea spun the wheel and Renee waited with baited breath to see what she would have to face. The crowd was cheering wildly; Thea was one of the only female prisoners to participate in the Hellshow. Slurs and misogynistic comments were flung down at her as she turned her cold stare at the wheel as it slowly ticked away. When it stopped, Renee lost her breath.

“No,” she managed to choke out, blindly reaching out to grab Andrew. She felt him tense beneath her hand and quickly removed it, cursing herself for forgetting his dislike of being touched in her distress. “Andrew, no,” she said. “You have to stop this.”

“She can win the fight,” said Andrew, misinterpreting the source of her anguish. “We’ll get her out of here once she’s finished. It’s up to her now.”

Renee could only watch with horror as the gate was opened, and a scrawny, half-starved lion entered the arena.

It was Alvarez who explained. “Lions are sacred to the Shu,” she said quietly. As she had Shu heritage herself, this spectacle was likely unnerving to her as well. “It is said terrible curses befall anyone who harms one.”

“Well let’s hope that Thea does not hold with useless superstitions,” said Andrew.

Renee shot him an angry look, even though she knew the effect of it would be lost behind her veil, and then turned back to the pit.

Thea had found a small axe on the ground. Renee approved; her preferred fighting style was with two small hand axes. She had never seen Thea fight, but the fact that she’d been a guard at Evermore indicated that she was quite proficient. Renee watched with baited breath as the lion began to slowly circle Thea. Thea fell into a relaxed fighting stance, shifting her weight from foot to foot and keeping her eyes on the lion. The lion darted forward and swiped a paw towards her, but Thea sidestepped. It continued circling before suddenly leaping forward. Thea threw herself to the ground, rolling out of the lion’s path. She managed to hit the lion with the flat of her axe, causing an angry yowl. The lion swiped towards her again, and this time Thea wasn’t fast enough. She was caught on the side, the lion’s claws creating vicious cuts along her ribs. She recovered quickly and kicked at the lion’s front leg, causing it to hiss and retreat. It jumped at her again, knocking her over, but she managed to
throw the lion off her, slicing the side of its head with her axe. Thea was now moving more slowly and she had developed a slight limp. She had a cut on her forehead which was freely bleeding down her face, but the lion was moving more cautiously now, too. Finally, it lunged at her again, but Thea managed to avoid it and throw herself on its back. The lion bucked and swiped, trying to dislodge her, but she managed to get her arms around its neck and cut its throat.

As Renee watched in shocked grief, there was a roar of approval from the crowd as the lion collapsed into the sand of the arena. Thea stayed knelt over it, as if in prayer. When the guards came to get her, she had obvious tear streaks running through the dirt on her face. She gave the men a vicious, angry look, but allowed them to escort her out of the arena.

“Who will treat her wounds?” asked Renee.

“They have mediks,” supplied Alvarez. “She won, so she’ll be given the good painkillers and left in a private cell to recover.”

“How can you stand to work here?” demanded Renee.

Alvarez shrugged. “I work in the mediks’ office at the behest of the Trojans. I’m sure you’ve done some distasteful things for the benefit of the Foxes.”

Renee shook her head angrily but didn’t argue. Despise your heart, she told herself. She tried to ignore the bile creeping up her throat as she remembered the fight that she had just witnessed. She would need to attend confession with Abby soon in order to purge herself of the rage that was building up within her.

“Alright, showtime,” said Andrew. “Renee, knock out the guard. You don’t have to hurt him.”

Renee turned towards the guard that was stationed just outside their viewing area. She reached out with her power and could feel his pulse. She slowed it and his breathing down until he fell unconscious. Andrew removed his Madman costume, and Renee was mostly unsurprised that he was wearing a guard uniform underneath. Neil dressed the unconscious guard in the discarded costume and dragged him farther onto the balcony, hiding him from the view from the outside walkway.

Neil observed Andrew’s uniform and adjusted it slightly. “I still think you’re too short to be a convincing guard,” he said.

Andrew slid him an unimpressed look. “Everyone mistakes you for a child. That’s hardly inconspicuous.”

“Maybe I was suggesting that Renee would be a better choice.”

“Her hair is rainbow coloured. Now, be quiet and follow me.”

Andrew led them the opposite way that they had come in, heading deep into the old prison towards the cells. He put his hand up suddenly to prevent them from rounding a corner. They heard a medik saying that Thea would be okay for the night and that she needed sleep and that he’d check on her in the morning. They waited until the footsteps of the medik and guards had retreated, before rounding the corner. Thea lay on a thin mattress on the far side of a small cell. She had a bucket of clean water and clean sheets. These were the spoils of her fight against the lion. Renee considered the lengths to which desperate people would go for meagre rewards.

Andrew was able to pick the cell door’s lock in a heartbeat and Renee tried to make her way to help heal Thea but was stopped by Andrew.
“Neil, go check out her injuries,” commanded Andrew. “Renee, you need to mimic them on Alvarez, here.”

Neil started to do as Andrew had bid, but Renee just stared at him. “I know that Alvarez superficially resembles Thea, but I’m not a good enough Tailor to trick the guards.”

“It’s not necessary,” said Andrew. “You’ll give her the same injuries, plus a little extra.”

“Extra?”

“Make it look like she has firepox,” he said. “Her face will be so swollen that no one will notice the difference.”

“I can do that, but it will wear off after about a week,” warned Renee.

“I have an agreement with the medik,” said Alvarez. “We’ll fake my death in a couple days. Everybody will think that Thea has died from her illness.”

“Okay,” agreed Renee. “It will feel the same as if you’d actually gotten the injuries, though. Are you sure you want to do this?”

Alvarez just smiled. “I’m working off quite a bit of my debt to the Trojans by agreeing to this job.”

“She has two broken ribs on her left side, and four deep scratches across them,” said Neil. “A small cut on the right side of her forehead, and some kind of injury to her knee. I think it’s a sprain.”

Renee recreated these injuries on Alvarez and then added the firepox pustules. After she had finished, Alvarez grinned. “It was fun working with you guys,” she said. “When all this is over, we should go for waffles.”

Renee smiled and agreed before turning her attention to Thea.

“Heal her quickly and wake her up,” commanded Andrew.

Renee hurried over and did a quick healing. She lacked skill in healing, but she could get Thea up and moving. Abby would do a better and more thorough job once they made it back to the Court. Once she had finished, she reached out with her power and forced Thea to wake, despite the drugs in her system.

Thea was slow to wake, blinking slowly and squinting at Renee, obviously not recognizing her changed appearance.

“Come on, Thea,” Renee coaxed. “You’re alright. We’re getting you out of here.”

Thea continued to study her before widening her eyes. “Natalie?” she asked, sounding flabbergasted.

Renee swallowed thickly, ignoring the feeling that hearing her old name had upon her. She nodded tersely, moving to help Thea off the floor.

Thea moved faster than Renee was expecting, suddenly surging up and grabbing Renee’s shoulders, pushing her against the cell bars.

“Natalie,” she growled, with a feral look on her face, before closing her hands around Renee’s neck.

Chapter End Notes
Next time:

Yes, Thea decided, she was definitely losing her sanity.
Thea was certain she was dreaming. She often dreamed of killing Natalie for what the other woman had done to her. This dream was strange, however. Natalie seemed to have changed her appearance, somehow. Her golden eyes were now so dark they were almost black, and her black hair had been cut to chin-length and had all the black leached out of it. It was now shockingly white, almost glowing in the lamplight of her cell, and the ends were alternating pastel colours. She was unsure why she would imagine Natalie’s appearance in this way - perhaps her imprisonment was finally beginning to chip away at her sanity. Either that or being forced to kill a lion had been one hardship too many.

Natalie did not take long to react to Thea’s attack. She jabbed her twice in the stomach and once in the throat before Thea’s left arm suddenly went numb. She stumbled back and quickly took in her surroundings. She was still in her cell, but there was a very short, blond man behind her, wielding a cane with a silver fox head tip. Behind him, a child with messy brown hair was watching her with wide brown eyes. There was also a diseased woman lying on her mattress. Yes, Thea decided, she was definitely losing her sanity.

“Now that I have your attention, I’d like to request that you stop attacking Renee,” drawled the blond man, speaking in Kerch. “We’re here to escort you out of the prison, but we can do that even if you’re unconscious. It would be easier if you walked under your own power, of course.”

Thea had learned to speak Kerch from the other inmates, so she was able to understand him. “What did you do to my arm?” she demanded. Her left arm hung completely numb.

“‘I just hit a nerve,’” shrugged the man. “The feeling will come back shortly. Now, will you cooperate?”

“Who are you?” she asked warily, weighing her options.

“My name is Andrew Minyard.”

“Monster,” she supplied. She had heard stories of the Monster, the Bastard of the Barrel, even locked away in Hellgate. He was one to be wary of. It figured that a criminal like Natalie had joined with him.
“Ah, my reputation precedes me,” he said in a bored voice. “Are you coming?”

“Yes,” Thea decided. She figured that she could follow these people out of the prison and then break away from them. She would just have to take out Natalie first; she didn’t want to fight against a Heartrender.

“Neil, lead the way,” Andrew instructed. “I’ll keep behind our convict in case she gets any ideas.”

The child led the way out of the cell. Natalie kept pace beside Thea, much to her disgust. Andrew followed them, locking the cell behind them. Neil led them to a stairwell on the east wall and began to lead them down.

“The guards will stop us,” said Thea. “We can’t just walk out of here.”

“The guards are about to be very busy,” answered Andrew. “Now, hush.”

Neil stopped on a landing about three quarters of the way down and they huddled there and waited. Andrew started to fidget almost immediately, before sending a reproachful look at Neil.

“He’s late,” he complained.

“He’s always late,” Neil agreed with good humour. “He’ll get it done. Just have patience.”

“I am not a patient man.”

Neil looked over with a disbelieving expression. “Liar,” he said teasingly. “You’ve been working on an intricate revenge scheme for seven years.”

Thea could not understand how these two tiny criminals could be engaging in what seemed to be lighthearted banter during a prison break and was about to tell them exactly what she thought of them (nothing positive), but there was a large commotion from below.

“There,” said Neil proudly. “I told you so.”

“No one likes a know-it-all,” replied Andrew. “Get moving.”

There were screams coming from the direction they headed now, as well as growls and other animal noises.

“What did you do?” asked Thea, with dawning horror.

“It sounds like you let loose some of the Hellshow animals,” said Natalie, accusingly.

“Good ear, Renee,” said Andrew. “That should keep the guards busy for awhile.”

They hurried down the stairs. At the bottom, they ran into a very tall, skinny, Zemeni man, with extremely dark skin, and gravity defying black hair.

“Neil!” the man called happily while smiling widely. “There you are! Let’s get out of here; I don’t think those animals were very happy in their cages.”

“You were late,” said Andrew simply.

“No, I was right on time according to my watch,” the man argued.

“Matt,” sighed Neil exasperatedly, “Your watch is set ten minutes slow on purpose.”
Matt flashed him a grin. “So I’m never late,” he said.

“Can we get out of here?” asked Natalie, tersely.

Thea agreed with her but would never admit that out loud. It was dark down here near the animal cages, and alarming sounds were echoing from down the corridors and from above.

Matt took off down one of the corridors. “Just down here is the tunnel that Alvarez told us about. It leads out to a cove where I left the rowboat.”

There was suddenly a strange clicking sound, and the rinca moten came around the corner. Thea stumbled back; she had never been so unlucky to face it in the arena, but she knew that no one had ever beaten it.

“Matt, I need a boost!” called Neil, taking off running towards both Matt and the lizard. Matt braced himself, and threaded his hands together, leaning down to offer Neil a step. Neil neatly stepped into Matt’s hands and was tossed into the air, sailing over the lizard’s head and landing on its back. Quick as a flash he had knives stuck into its brain stem, causing the rinca moten to fall gracelessly to the ground.

Thea was impressed despite herself. A child had taken down a giant lizard that had already killed countless men. She stared in amazement as Neil simply wiped off his knives and looked back at them. They were all staring at him in various states of shock.

Andrew recovered first. “Idiot,” he grumbled, stalking forward. “I can’t believe that your first instinct was to run at the giant poisonous lizard.”

“I’m fine. Besides, you’re the one who said I was impossible to kill,” replied Neil with a smile.

“I think I’ll be testing that theory out sooner rather than later,” Andrew said sourly.

Matt ushered them forward again until they found a disused tunnel that led out of the prison. They followed the winding path until they came to a small cove where a rowboat was tied up and waiting for them. Thea knew that this was her chance. Matt was wearing a gun on his hip, so she’d have to grab it, and take Natalie out. Then she could hold the others off while she took the rowboat. All she had to do was create a distraction. Neil was standing near the edge of the water - she could knock him in, grab Matt’s gun, kill Natalie and take the boat. She moved suddenly towards Neil, but, as if he’d known she was coming, he neatly sidestepped her and hooked a foot around her ankle, causing her to fall on her knees.

“Knock her out, Renee,” said Andrew impatiently. “We don’t have time for her tantrums. She may even be stupid enough to capsize the boat.”

“No,” choked out Thea, but it was too late. She could already feel her heart rate slowing. “I’ll kill you,” she mumbled as she fell into unconsciousness.

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Thea awoke in a room full of people. Early morning daylight streamed through the curtain on the far wall. Her hands and feet were tied and she had not been afforded anything to lie on so she sat up quickly and shuffled backwards until she was against the wall, feeling slightly safer with something solid at her back. She took inventory of her surroundings.

Natalie - who seemed to be called Renee now - sat the farthest away from her, avoiding her eyes altogether. Beside her sat a tall, blonde woman. She had a haughty look on her face, and, despite her
lowborn clothes and companions, resembled nothing less than a noblewoman. She was likely from Kerch or Fjerda, based on her colouring. Andrew and Neil were present as well, and so was Matt, who was sitting with a Zemeni woman with close cropped dark hair, whose jaw was set in a stubborn and angry expression. There was also a large, broad, incredibly muscular man, with golden hair and blue eyes, who held himself confidently. He looked too much like a *drůskelle* to not be Fjerdan, she decided. The final occupant of the room was a young man who must have had some Suli ancestors. He had floppy, curly dark hair and bronze skin.

“Ah, you’re finally awake,” said Andrew. “I believe that introductions are in order. You’ve already met me and Neil and Matt,” he continued, “and we all know that you’ve met Renee. These others are Allison—” he indicated the blonde woman “—Dan, Erik, and our newest asset, Nicholas.”

“You can call me Nicky,” the Suli man said quietly.

“Why have you brought me here?” demanded Thea.

“We’re all wondering that,” said the woman named Allison, acidly.

“I have a proposition for all of you,” started Andrew, with a grand sweep of his arm.

“You’re being needlessly dramatic,” cut in Neil in an undertone.

“Hush,” replied Andrew. “Children should be seen and not heard.”

Neil rolled his eyes and gestured that Andrew should continue.

“Exactly. As I was saying, I have brought you all here to discuss an opportunity. I’ve been offered a lucrative job and I need you all on my crew in order to succeed.”

“I decline,” said Thea, shortly. “Now let me go.”

Andrew quirked an eyebrow at her. “I know getting knocked unconscious and waking up in unfamiliar surroundings is not the friendliest way to begin a partnership, but you should keep an open mind.”

“There’s no way that I would ever willing work with a monster who employs *that*,” she spat, indicating Renee. Several shouts of outrage split the air.

“We could have you put back in that prison, if you would prefer?” asked Allison, hotly.

“Do what you want,” Thea spat back. “I will not be associating with criminals.”

“Says the convict,” muttered Matt.

“You haven’t even heard my offer, Thea, dear,” said Andrew condescendingly, cutting off all other conversation. “You should be asking yourself why I went to all the trouble to break you out of prison and what more I could possibly offer you.”

“I’m not interested,” she insisted.

“Why don’t you listen to what I have to say before you decide that? If you can’t keep quiet…” Andrew shrugged. “Well, you certainly don’t need a tongue to be of use to me.”

Thea settled for glowering at everyone. Andrew watched her for a couple seconds to make sure that she was finished interrupting before speaking again. “Luther Hemmick, who is, for those of you who don’t know, one of the highest ranking members of Kerch’s Merchant Council, has offered me a job.
Apparently Kevin Day has requested to be rescued.” He paused for dramatic effect.

Thea could only blink in shock. If the Monster was correct, if Kevin had asked for help to leave Evermore, then the situation there had deteriorated far more than she had feared. But why had Kevin reached out to a Kerch merchant for help? Was he aware of Thea’s imprisonment? Kevin had always shown little interest for anything outside of his research and, with her and Jean gone from Evermore, his allies were few. His obsession with his work and his fear of the crown prince had kept Kevin docile and obedient. Had his treatment become so bad in her absence that he had taken initiative to escape his imprisonment?

Thea had been honoured when she had been selected to serve the Shu royal family directly. She had always wanted to be a soldier, joining the army as soon as she was eligible, and making her way up through the ranks through hard work and determination. Her unwavering loyalty and unmatched skill had earned her a coveted placement at Evermore, the crown prince’s official residence. Although it was not located in the capital, Evermore housed the nation’s most secure prison, the country’s major embassies, and the most advanced Grisha research station. Treating Grisha like laboratory specimens had been outlawed in Shu Han following the Ravkan civil war, but research by both Grisha and Grisha experts into what was called the Small Science was pursued relentlessly.

Thea had met Kevin shortly after beginning her assignment at Evermore. Most of the guards had treated him like he was an exotic pet; before the ban on Grisha experimentation, Grisha had been seen as subhuman in Shu Han. Their powers were useful in the same way that snake venom was useful: it must be studied and extracted safely before use. The crown prince Ichirou had always seen Kevin as a valuable possession. Only the influence that Ichirou’s uncle Tetsuji was able to wield over his nephew kept Kevin safe from his sadism.

Kevin had been terrible at taking care of himself. Thea had quickly noticed that he would skip meals and sleep when he became engrossed in his research. Being a Fabrikator, he had a large workshop filled with various materials and he would spend his days either in study or attempting to invent or perfect useful items. Thea had begun keeping an eye on him, bringing him meals, urging him to sleep, or simply listening as he talked about his interests and ideas. She was still not sure if Kevin was even aware of who she was as he never seemed to notice the differences between his guards, but she had come to care for him very deeply. That was why when Jean, one of the only other guards who had been helping her protect Kevin from Ichirou’s cruelty after Tetsuji’s untimely death, had escaped Evermore she had followed in order to bring him back. They had sworn to protect Kevin, but now he was all alone.

Thea’s attention returned to the present as Andrew began to speak again. “It seems that Kevin is being mistreated by his captors. And although the Shu outlawed Grisha experimentation twenty years ago, they are performing research into some questionable areas.”

Thea had tried to warn Kevin of this in the past. Kevin was the type to try to create something just to prove that it could be done. He rarely gave thought to whether a thing should be created.

“Kevin sent the Merchant Council a couple samples of what he has recently been forced to create; he called them synthetic amplifiers,” continued Andrew.

Natalie - no, it was Renee now, she reminded herself - looked confused. “How can an amplifier be synthetic?”

“Why don’t we start with explaining what an amplifier is,” suggested the man that Andrew had called Erik.

“I’m guessing it amplifies,” said Allison.
Renee sent her a sidelong look. “It’s something that amplifies a Grisha’s powers, yes,” she said. “Some Grisha can act as amplifiers themselves, usually they work as Testers. Amplifiers are made of bone, scales or teeth taken from certain animals. Each Grisha can only use one in their lifetime, and each amplifier will only work for the first Grisha it comes into contact with.”

“Kevin sent three synthetic amplifiers and claimed that they were dangerous. He directed the Merchant Council not to test them on Grisha,” said Andrew.

“Let me guess,” huffed Allison. “They immediately tested them on Grisha?”

“Unsurprisingly, yes,” answered Andrew. “Only two, though. First on a Fabrikator and then on a Healer who were working as Indentures in one of the council member’s households.”

“And everything turned out well?” asked Matt, hesitantly. Neil gave a dry laugh.

“The amplifiers gave the Grisha incredible power and seemed to alter their perception,” said Andrew. “The Fabrikator was suddenly able to turn lead into gold, and the Healer was able to take control of her guards, manipulating their brains the way that Heartrenders can manipulate heart rates.”

“That shouldn’t be possible,” gasped the woman named Dan.

“No,” agreed Andrew. “It shouldn’t.”

“What happened to the Grisha?” asked Renee quietly.

“The increase in their powers lasted a little over an hour and then the amplifiers cracked and crumbled into dust. One of them died, but the other one found that her powers were completely gone. She didn’t even have her regular powers anymore. She did not handle the discovery well.”

“The struggle for control over Kevin and those amplifiers could start a war,” said Renee.

“The Merchant Council wants us to deal with this?” asked Matt, incredulously.

“They probably don’t want a diplomatic incident,” said Allison. “Kerch is famously neutral in other countries’ conflicts. They can easily cut us loose and disavow all knowledge of us if we’re caught. I hope you negotiated a high fee, Monster.”

“In exchange for handing Kevin over to the Merchant Council, we’re to receive thirty million krige,” replied Andrew. “After the percentage that Wymack wants, we’ll each get two and a half million.” Matt gave a low whistle.

“Okay,” said Dan slowly. “So how do we break into Evermore?”

“You don’t,” answered Thea, shortly.

“We can if you help,” replied Andrew.

“What you’re asking for is treason.”

“And you won’t do that for anything? Because I have here a nice pardon with your name on it,” said Andrew, drawing a document from inside his coat. After examining it, Thea noted that it did seem to be a pardon, written in both Kerch and Shu. Andrew took it back and put it back in his pocket. “And you can help save Kevin. According to Jean, he’s very important to you.”

Thea could feel herself wavering. Kevin was in trouble. “Why didn’t you just get Jean to help you?”
she asked. “I won’t work with him.”

“You don’t have to,” assured Andrew. “You’ll have to play nice with Renee, but we do not care about Jean. You can even take your revenge on him once the job is finished.”

“I don’t trust you,” said Thea. “What guarantee do I have that you will keep up your end of the bargain?”

“There isn’t one,” answered Andrew, which strangely made Thea more comfortable. If he had started trying to convince her of his trustworthiness she would have been far more suspicious. Better ugly truths than pretty lies.

“Fine,” she said shortly. “I’ll help you save Kevin. But I won’t turn him over to the Council if he doesn’t want that.”

“It’s agreed then. You can untie her now, Neil,” said Andrew. Neil stepped forward to cut the ties on Thea’s wrists and ankles, eyeing her cautiously.

“Now that that’s settled, we can begin to plan,” said Andrew once Neil had finished.

“I just have a quick question,” interrupted Erik. “If this is such an important plan with a huge payout, why did you bring in a useless newbie?” He pointed accusingly at Nicky.

“Oh, he’s insurance,” said Andrew. “And I’m sure he’s not completely useless.”

“Insurance?” asked Dan, with an edge to her voice. “What have you done now?”

“I don’t know why you always assume the worst of me, Dan,” sighed Andrew.

“Yes you do,” said Neil. “But it’s okay, Dan. Nicky’s here of his own free will.”

“Meet Nicholas Hemmick,” said Andrew. “Luther Hemmick’s son and our guarantee of payment.”

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

“Does this seem like a really bad idea to you, too?” asked Nicky softly.
ERIK

Chapter Summary

In which a plan is made.

Chapter Notes

I was uncharacteristically productive this weekend, so here's the next chapter a couple days earlier than I had originally planned.

Warnings for this chapter: none, really. Some referenced violence.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There was a brief stunned silence before Erik started laughing. “I should have known you were a Councilman’s brat,” he told Nicky. “You’re all soft and pretty.”

Nicky blushed. “I didn’t think you knew who I was,” he said shyly to Andrew.

“Why did you think that I’ve been sending jobs your way?” asked Andrew.

“I’m good at maps and engineering and chemistry,” said Nicky.

“You’re passable at those things, yes,” agreed Andrew. “But what you’re best at is being a hostage.”

A look of shame passed over Nicky’s face, which caused a stab of irritation at Andrew in Erik’s stomach. He briefly felt sorry that Nicky was on the receiving end of Andrew’s harsh words before he realized that he had his own reason to be annoyed with Andrew.

“I can’t believe you’ve been having me work jobs with him for the past two months without letting me know that we were just pacifying him in case we needed a hostage,” complained Erik. He had been confused as to why he had suddenly been relegated to glorified babysitting and had wondered what he had done to incur Andrew’s wrath. He hadn’t flirted with Neil that much, had he?

“Really?” asked Allison dryly. “You can’t believe that Andrew didn’t share one of his schemes with you?”

Erik huffed a little. The Foxes were the closest thing he had to a family. His own family was long gone and he had been searching for a place to belong ever since. He hated being reminded that even here he was often on the outside.

“At least this explains why you made us put him under our protection,” said Dan.

“Protection?” asked Nicky in a small voice.

“Nicky,” said Erik with exaggerated patience. “You left your daddy’s mansion, what, about three months now? Three months you’ve been living in the Barrel. Tell me, have you ever had your
“pocket picked?”
“... I don’t think so.”

“Been shaken down for money?” asked Matt.

“Been beaten until you couldn’t walk?” asked Dan.

“Been knifed and thrown in the canal?” asked Allison.

“You’re all terrible people,” observed Thea, from her corner of the room.

Nicky blinked. “I’ve been lucky,” he protested weakly.

Erik snorted. “You’ve been under the protection of the Foxes. No soft-skinned merchling could make it in the Barrel without some help.”

“Now, I don’t mean to sound racist,” started Allison.

“Too late,” muttered Matt.

“It’s basically a guarantee if you start a sentence like that,” agreed Dan.

“But I’ve seen Luther Hemmick,” continued Allison blithely, ignoring the commentary, “and he’s as white as Fjerdan snow. Are you sure this is his son?”

“Pretty sure,” said Neil wryly.

“My mother is Suli,” explained Nicky. “My father met her when he was on a trade visit in Ravka and saved her from being a heathen. He brought her here and taught her about the only thing worth worshipping.”

“Ghezen?” guessed Dan, referring to the Kerch god of industry and commerce.

“Capitalism,” corrected Nicky.

“Why did you decide to leave your father’s house?” asked Renee kindly.

Nicky shifted a little on his chair, blushed, and looked down. “It was just time,” he said unconvincingly.

“Well, it turns out he’s a poor liar,” said Andrew. “But he’s pretty good at making maps, has fairly extensive knowledge of chemicals, has an acceptable understanding of mechanical devices, and he’s done some demo work for us. So, as I said, he’s not completely useless.”

“I’ve also been to Evermore before,” said Nicky shyly. “I went last year with my father to visit the embassy.”

“Good. You can make sure Thea’s not lying to us,” said Dan.

“Okay, get to work. Thea, you describe Evermore to us in as much detail as possible. Nicky, make a map based on the information,” said Andrew.

Thea sighed heavily and looked to the ceiling, as if asking for forgiveness for divulging privileged information. Nicky extracted a ridiculous expensive pen and ink set from his jacket pocket and got ready to sketch on the large paper that was already set out on the room’s single table.
“Evermore is located on the edge of a cliff, looking down at the town of Bhez Ju,” started Thea.

“Can we sail up to the cliff and climb it?” asked Dan.

“No,” said Thea. “It’s a hundred feet high and can be seen easily from town. Don’t be foolish enough to think that this will be easy.”

“Yeah, Dan,” said Matt. “This won’t be anything easy like scaling a hundred foot cliff.”

“Evermore’s outer walls are shaped like a diamond and at each point is a tower. The North Tower faces the sea at the edge of the cliff, but the other three towers are the only three entry points,” Thea continued. “The only way to get to Evermore is to follow a fairly narrow path from town; there are choke points and bridges to prevent large forces from marching en masse.

“Each tower has a gate with checkpoints both inside and outside to prevent entrance by bribing guards. The South Tower is the entrance to the embassy. This is the only gate where public access is allowed and all identification is checked by both checkpoints. The East Tower is the entrance to the guard quarters; obviously only guards can enter and exit through there. Finally, the West Tower is the entrance to the prison. That’s the only gate that is always unlocked. Only two gates are ever unlocked at one time.”

“Can we break into the gate that isn’t unlocked, then?” asked Erik.

“No,” answered Thea shortly. “Locked gates are still guarded by at least four guards. Gates weigh about a thousand pounds and can only be operated from within the tower. The mechanisms for opening the gates are complex and alarmed. If a gate is attempted to be opened when it is scheduled to be locked, an alarm will sound and Evermore will immediately go into lockdown.”

Erik noticed a shiver of unease and uncertainty sweep through the room. So far this sounded impossible.

“You’ll describe all you know about the mechanism for the alarm system to Nicky later,” said Andrew, who seemed characteristically unfazed. “Where will Kevin be kept? In the prison?”

“Maybe if he’s been making trouble,” allowed Thea. “But when I was there last he was staying in the residence in the Inner Court. The buildings of the outer walls surround a moat, and at the centre of the moat is an island where the crown prince’s main residential tower is located. The island is only accessible by a wide bridge from the embassy. The moat and the bridge are watched by multiple guard towers and a lookout from the clock on top of the Inner Court. Anyone who does not have the proper clearance is gunned down the second they set foot on the bridge. A group of foreigners like you has no chance of making it across.”

“Winter Banquet is coming,” said Renee. “On the solstice, the Inner Court is opened up to visitors from every nation for a large party. I know a delegation from the Komedie Brute is usually invited.”

“That’s only two weeks away,” said Neil. “We can’t just wander in in costume like we did at Hellgate. We’d need proper identification and we won’t have time to fabricate it.”

“You’re thinking about it the wrong way,” said Andrew slowly. He had a look on his face that made Erik and the other long-time Foxes sit up and take notice. This was the face that had led to several of the Foxes’ more outrageous activities. Andrew rarely put effort into anything, but when he did it was usually worth paying attention. “What’s the easiest way to steal a man’s wallet?” he asked.

“Hold him at gunpoint?” suggested Matt.
“Knife to the throat?” was Erik’s guess.

“Poison?” said Allison, idly.

“Kill him and then rifle through his clothes?” proposed Neil, bringing them all up short to stare at him. He shrugged, his innocent look at odds with his declaration. “What?” he asked. “He said ‘easiest’ not ‘best’.”

“You’re the absolute worst,” complained Thea.

“No,” said Andrew looking thoroughly unimpressed. “The easiest way to steal a man’s wallet is to tell him you’re going to steal his watch. Redirect his attention. At Winter Banquet all of Evermore’s attention will be on the people entering through the embassy. No one will be interested in the people who are leaving through there.”

“That’s all well and good,” said Dan impatiently. “But we’ll have to get in before we can leave.”

“As Thea has made abundantly clear, we are criminals. We go in as we are.”

“Criminals go to prison,” said Allison with a raised eyebrow.

“Exactly,” agreed Andrew. “They won’t be checking passports and embassy identification at the prison gate.”

“I see a downside here,” said Erik, raising his hand. “In that, after we get in, we’ll be in prison. I don’t know about anyone else, but I don’t want to be in prison.”

“Prison is just a bunch of rooms with locks, and locks can be picked,” said Andrew dismissively.

“So your plan is that we get locked in prison, escape somehow, find disguises, pretend to be guests at the party, find Kevin, and then just waltz out of there with him in tow?” asked Dan incredulously.

“Basically, yes,” replied Andrew. “The details are a little more intricate, but that is the plan.”

Erik just rubbed his head and examined the thoughtful faces of his colleagues. He didn’t really believe that this plan would work, but it looked like they were going through with it.


“Wymack and Abby will still be here,” said Neil. “You can leave Katelyn in charge; she has a pretty good relationship with most of the younger members. And Aaron will be performing his best Andrew impression so that nobody knows that Andrew’s out of town.”

“All of us will be infiltrating Evermore, except for you, Dan,” continued Andrew. “You will be responsible for sailing the ship.”

“We don’t have a ship,” said Dan, sourly. She had been sailing since she was a child and had been a long-time member of Wymack’s pirate crew before they were shipwrecked.

“Wymack has rented one for us,” said Andrew. “You’ll need a small crew, and Bee will be accompanying us to make sure we have favourable wind.”

Dan’s face lit up with happiness. Erik knew that she missed sailing and that her goal was to eventually return to privateering.
“We’ll sail tomorrow,” said Andrew

“So soon?” asked Renee.

“We only have two weeks until Winter Banquet. Dan, you should head out to make your preparations.” Andrew looked at the rest of them. “None of you are to leave. No one’s to know that any of us are going anywhere,” he instructed. “Stay here and amuse yourselves.”

“Fine,” said Erik. “Let’s send Neil to walk around the Court and we can hang back and bet about how often he’s oblivious to people’s advances,” he added with a wink, ignoring Andrew’s slightly murderous glance. If he was going to undergo a punishment by staying locked in a room with these people he might as well piss Andrew off enough to warrant it.

Neil stared at him blankly. “I don’t swing,” he said. “People aren’t interested in me.”

“Neil, you ridiculous, gorgeous walnut,” said Allison. “People flirt with you all the time. Several of us are flirting with you right now.” Neil looked both shocked and vaguely uncomfortable. Matt rolled his eyes expressively and reached over to hand Allison some money.

“I can’t believe that you’re propositioning an (admittedly attractive) child,” said Thea with disgust.

“Oh, for Saints’ sake,” said Neil. “I’m nineteen. I’m not even the youngest person in this room.”

Thea looked him up and down disbelievingly. “Are you sure?” she asked.

“Pretty sure,” Neil ground out.

“Whatever you say, buddy,” said Matt affectionately. “Do you want to have a cuddle to feel better?”

“No,” said Andrew sharply. “Neil and I have errands to run to prepare for our departure.”

“Why doesn’t Neil have to be on lockdown like the rest of us?” complained Matt.

Andrew just gave him a bored look and moved on. “Erik, keep Nicky out of trouble.”

“Why me?” asked Erik, angry that he was still stuck babysitting.

Andrew just shrugged. “You’re already familiar with him. Keep our insurance safe. I don’t want any sudden reconciliations between him and his father before we leave.”

“That’s not going to happen,” said Nicky sullenly.

“Erik will ensure it doesn’t,” replied Andrew with a bit of a threat in his voice.

“Are you going to tell us any more of your ‘ingenious’ plan?” asked Allison snidely, making air quotes.

“On the boat,” answered Andrew. “The less you know the less you can talk.”

Andrew and Neil left then, leaving the rest of them to look at each other in silence.

“Does this seem like a really bad idea to you, too?” asked Nicky softly.

Erik gave a humourless chuckle. “Yes,” he answered truthfully. “There’s probably about seven thousand things that can go wrong with this plan.”
“Not that we even know the plan,” said Allison bitterly.

“We’re risking our lives and our freedom,” argued Nicky. “We deserve to be told the plan.”

“Oh, little merchling,” laughed Erik. “You’re so new. Your naïveté is kind of sweet. But there’s one thing you’ll learn quickly if you keep associating with us.”

“What’s that?”

Erik gave a humourless grin. “If we got what we deserved, we wouldn’t be Foxes.”

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

The schooner exploded, throwing Neil backwards and showering the docks in flame.
Neil spent the next day and a half busily preparing for their departure. Andrew had sent him to get various supplies (including paraffin wax and ammunition) and to stock his Tailoring kit properly. He was not looking forward to exposing himself as a Grisha to the others, but he knew that it was essential. Neil was more privy to Andrew’s thoughts than anyone else but he knew that he was still uninformed about the entirety of Andrew’s plan. He was undecided whether or not he believed they would be successful.

He had just finished a last minute meeting with Robin - giving her direction on how to deal with Aaron’s unrelenting assholishness and letting her know what information to share with Katelyn and Wymack and what to keep under wraps until Neil returned - and was making his way along the rooftops towards the harbour. This was the Ketterdam that he loved: empty and quiet, high above the bustling crowds and casual violence of the Barrel. He was worn out, exhausted after two nights without sleep and the unending activity of the past few days. He made sure to keep a close eye on his footing; it wouldn’t do to miss a step due to inattention and fall to the streets below. Even so, with thoughts of his imminent sea voyage and upcoming unveiling of his Grisha abilities, his thoughts inevitably turned towards his mother.

She would be so angry with him if she could see him now. He had been living in the same place, interacting with the same people, and being the same person for three years now. It was the longest he had stopped running in the eleven years since he had left home. Or, more accurately, since he had left his father’s house. That place had never been his home.

Neil had been born on the Wandering Isle, the only child of a wealthy Kaelish businessman. His mother, an immigrant from Ravka, had married his father after an extremely brief whirlwind courtship. Although Neil had spent most of his life within arm’s reach of his mother, they had not been particularly close. He never would have thought of sharing his thoughts or feelings with her, and would never have dreamed of asking after hers. He therefore had no idea what she had been thinking when she, a Grisha Inferni, settled down on the Wandering Isle.

Granted, there weren’t many safe havens for Grisha. In Ravka they were treated well, yes, but they were expected to join the Second Army and serve as soldiers. In Fjerda they were called witches and
hunted down to be burned alive. Shu Han had a long history of treating them as laboratory animals and performing experiments to discover the source of their powers. Kerch was technically a neutral country, but even here Grisha often had to sell themselves into indentured servitude to avoid being kidnapped by slavers. And on the Wandering Isles, the home of the Kaelish, Grisha blood was believed to cure any illness. When discovered, Grisha were murdered and their blood drained. Neil could not understand why his mother hadn’t fled to Novyi Zem, where people were wary of Grisha but referred to them as “blessed”, when she had left Ravka.

Her decision to settle on the Wandering Isle was nothing, though, when compared to her decision to marry his father. Even though Neil knew he had the benefit of hindsight, he was sure that he would never forgive his mother her impulsive decision to get married. Unbeknownst to her, his father’s business was slave trading. He commanded an infamous group known as the Butcher’s Men, who kidnapped and sold people. Their specialty was hunting down Grisha and selling them to the highest bidder.

Neil’s father had never been a kind man, often taking out his fathomless anger on his wife and son and demanding total obedience from them. Even with the almost daily abuse perpetrated on her son, Neil’s mother hadn’t acted until Neil was eight and she caught him displaying his Grisha powers. She had kept her own powers well hidden, but, not trusting her son’s discretion and knowing what her husband would do if he ever found out, she took Neil and fled to her brother in Ravka.

Neil’s mother had originally left Ravka because she had no desire to join the Second Army as her brother had done; however, Neil had needed instruction and the resources of the Little Palace were the most extensive in the world. Neil’s powers were found to lay somewhere between those of a Corporalki and of a Materialki. He could perform minor healing but, despite his mother’s wishes, he’d never been able to wield the powers of a Heartrender. He was slightly more talented as a Fabrikator, manipulating solid materials with ease. However, his true skills lay in Tailoring - he was incredibly adept at changing people’s appearances, especially his own. He had not worn his own classic Kaelish features, those that closely resembled his father’s, since he had mastered the skill.

After sixteen months living with his uncle and training his powers, Neil’s mother had insisted they move on. Neil had been responsible for disguising them. They had joined with a group of Suli, a nomadic people, who were travelling across Ravka. From there, they had country hopped, changing names and appearances, feeding his mother’s paranoid need to keep moving. She was moody and violent; often punishing Neil for both imagined and real offences. There had been many close calls with his father’s people; Neil bore numerous scars from near misses.

Twenty-two names later, in the Southern Colonies, just before Neil had turned sixteen, they had been caught by the Butcher’s Men. Luckily, Neil’s father hadn’t been with them, but despite his mother’s desperate, fiery defense and Neil’s accurate shooting, they had been subdued and captured. They were shackled, locked in the ship’s brig, and told that they were being taken back to the Wandering Isle to be dealt with by the Butcher himself.

Fortunately, their captors had massively underestimated Neil, assuming that he was a helpless child. It had taken a couple days before they were no longer under heavy surveillance, but then he had easily freed himself and his mother from their shackles. His mother had been uncharacteristically quiet as they had sneaked off the ship, stealing a lifeboat and rowing away quickly. It wasn’t until they could see the northwest shore of Kerch that he had realized that his mother was dying; the fight with the Butcher’s Men had left invisible, internal injuries. He had tried in vain to use his basic healing skills, but she had died gasping for breath, forcing promises out of him - never stop running, never look back, be anyone but himself, and never be anyone for long.

When they had reached the beach, Neil had beached the lifeboat and arranged his mother’s body.
Ignoring his overwhelming grief, Neil had burned her body using her Grisha-made lighter. He let her familiar scents of gunpowder, smoke and fire surround him for the last time. He had then made his way to Ketterdam with the idea to earn enough money in order to move on, but he had become entangled with Andrew and the Foxes. Although he knew that he would someday have to leave - he would never willingly allow the Butcher’s Men anywhere near the people he had come to care for - he found it harder and harder to imagine a life outside of the Barrel. On the other hand, if this job went smoothly then he would have two and a half million *kruge* and it was past time that he should leave.

He shook his head and dismissed his dark thoughts. He needed to focus on the present for the moment. He had made it all the way to the Lid without realizing it and he was running late, which he knew would irritate Andrew.

The Lid was a narrow strip of land that attached Fifth Harbour to the Barrel. Fifth Harbour was a bustling hub of activity, with berths for both mercher vessels and tourist ships, bringing trade and pleasure seekers to this part of the city. It hadn’t always been that way; two years ago Andrew had brought an idea to Wymack and Dan and they had had the harbour, which had been unused and abandoned by the city, dredged and built up with docks and quays. The cost had been immense, but had paid for itself within a year. The Foxes were guaranteed first crack at the tourists, their hardworking steerers directing them into establishments owned by the gang. The other gangs often encroached on their territory, inciting gang wars, or trying to convince Andrew to sell his rights to the harbour.

Neil left the rooftops and made his way towards the berth where the ship that Wymack had acquired was moored. From this vantage point, he could see the tops of the Tidemaker towers, thick black towers that were always manned by Grisha Tidemakers. The Council of Tides was responsible for keeping the tides unnaturally high to keep the land bridge that connected Kerch to Shu Han underwater. They were also able to control access to the harbours: altering the tides to prevent certain ships from leaving. Although Neil had tried, he had never been able to find the identities of these Grisha, nor did he know how or why they were loyal to Kerch.

It was dusk by the time he made it to the correct dock. A thin mist was rising from the water; he could see Andrew and several of the Foxes waiting near the pier, and the schooner called *Palmetto* floating in the water past them. They were all wearing unobtrusive garb, appearing to be nothing more than regular dockworkers or sailors. He grinned to himself as he spied Andrew; he looked strange out of his usual dapper apparel (black vest, black shirt, and black trousers) and three quarter length (black) coat. Allison and Erik also looked wrong in the nondescript clothing. Allison clothes were usually expensive and fitted, while Erik preferred bright colours and loud patterns.

As Neil grew closer the wind shifted, bringing the familiar scents of gunpowder and smoke to his nose. It took him a few moments to realize that these scents were actually present, not simply imagined due to his recent thoughts of his mother.

“Andrew!” he cried in warning when he realized what the smell indicated, but he was too late. The schooner exploded, throwing Neil backwards and showering the docks in flame.

Neil reacted instinctively, curling into a ball and relaxing his muscles, falling as he had been taught by acrobats. He hit the ground hard but was up in a heartbeat, sparing a brief glance back towards his friends, who all seemed to be moving, before launching himself towards the cargo crates, scaling them easily to gain a bird’s eye view of the docks.

The situation was alarming. The Foxes were outnumbered and people were moving into flank them from both sides. Andrew had been correct to assume that someone would try to stop their departure.
Luckily he had planned for this; the schooner had been a decoy and the real *Palmetto* was waiting nearby for them. Shots rained down from the *Palmetto’s crow’s nest*, indicating that Matt was providing support, so Neil needed to buy the others enough time to reach the ship.

He pulled up his hood and ran across the top of the cargo containers, seeking out targets. Luckily no one expected resistance to come from above. He dropped down behind two men that were shooting towards the wreckage, quickly loosed his knives and dispatched them. He bent down to check the gang tattoo on one man’s forearm and cursed. Ravens. It was hardly surprising, but upsetting all the same.

He turned down the next aisle of crates, sneaking up behind a woman firing a rifle and then also taking down the man who was supposed to be watching her flank. His knives flashed quickly and he glanced around trying to get his bearings and figuring out his location compared to the mental map he had made from above.

The next corner was blind, with a chance that he could be running into people facing in his direction. Fortunately the two women were facing the opposite direction, distracted by firing at someone who Neil couldn’t see. He slit their throats then listened quietly. Gun shots still sounded, but their frequency had decreased. He had effectively decreased their opposition and now he needed to get to the ship.

He wiped off his knives, then turned, taking a running start towards a stack of cargo containers. As soon as his hands had gripped the edge he felt a sharp pain under his arm, causing him to cry out in pain and lose his grip, falling to the ground. He was yanked to his feet, turned around, and crushed back into the container. His hood was yanked down and he found himself looking into the deranged smile of Riko, one of the Ravens’ top lieutenants.

“Missed my heart,” taunted Neil, slightly breathlessly.

“I finally caught you, Shadow,” said Riko silkily. “I have no intention of letting you die. I can’t wait to hear all the secrets you’ve gathered for the Monster, and all his secrets, too. Then I’ll take my rightful place at the top of the rabble of the Barrel.”

“Your delusions of grandeur are as unrealistic as always,” said Neil. “Despite your inflated sense of importance, the fact stands that you’re nothing but the unwanted son of nobody important.” Neil had no intention of being captured by Riko again and knew that taunting Riko into killing him would be a better fate. He’d lived much longer than he had expected, anyway.

Riko’s face twisted in anger. “I am a Moriyama!” he cried. “I am one of the royal family of Shu Han. One day I will take my rightful place on the throne.”

“I know that you have intricate and endless daddy issues, but you’re a bastard with a lying mother who told you fake fairy stories about your father, and I’ve had enough of your bullshit,” argued Neil. “I don’t know why Cass indulges your fantasies and inflated sense of importance, but you barely have any influence over the Ravens much less on world politics.”

Riko shook him harshly. “I am going to enjoy breaking you,” he snarled.

“You?” asked Neil incredulously, even though he was beginning to see black spots. He was losing too much blood. “You don’t know how.”

“One day soon, you are going to come to me on your knees begging for forgiveness,” predicted Riko with an almost hungry look on his face.
“Speaking of my knees…” said Neil, as he brought up one of his knees sharply into Riko’s groin. Riko let go of him with a yelp and Neil slashed out with one of his knives, catching some part of Riko before turning and staggering away as quickly as possible. He didn’t think he could climb with the wound on his side and he could feel his concentration slipping. *Not good*, he thought. He could almost feel his mother’s heavy blows and whispered commands, urging him forward. *Run, Abram*. Even the thought of the only part of his true name that he still acknowledged, the name his mother had called him when no one else could hear, could not break through the red haze that was enveloping him. He would have to curl up somewhere to hide and wait to see if anyone came to rescue him. If not, he had his knives. He refused to allow the Ravens to take him alive.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

“It’s awfully early in the job for everything to be going so poorly,” remarked Erik
The air was hot and dry around Renee as she crouched behind a crate, desperately trying to piece together what had happened. She’d been standing with Allison, Erik, Nicky, Thea, and Andrew when the world had exploded. She’d ended up shaking behind a crate, trying to take stock of her surroundings.

Shots rang out almost unceasingly, indicating that a large number of people were shooting at them. Their position was completely untenable, backlit as they were by the still-burning schooner. She could hear some shots originating close by, a peek indicated that Erik was returning fire. Close by him a shape was lying on the ground; Nicky was cowering, his hands over his head. Erik seemed to notice him at the same time as she did. He swore and then rushed out to drag Nicky towards her before he could be shot.

“It’s awfully early in the job for everything to be going so poorly,” remarked Erik as they took cover beside her.

“It could be worse,” answered Renee.

“How?!” demanded Nicky sounding slightly hysterical.

Erik grinned at him. “We could have been on the boat when it exploded.”

Andrew suddenly materialized at her right with Thea and Allison behind him.

“Head east to the next dock, board at berth twenty-two,” commanded Andrew.

“What’s at berth twenty-two?” asked Erik.

“The real Palmetto ,” answered Andrew. “This one was a decoy.”

“How lucky,” said Allison dryly.
“I took precautions,” said Andrew. “Erik, you make sure that Nicky makes it in one piece. Allison, Renee, you two provide backup for them. Thea, you’re with me. Don’t forget that if I die your pardon disappears into smoke.” He took off, Thea following closely behind.

Erik grumbled about being a babysitter before asking Nicky if he could shoot.

“I’ve shot some skeet,” Nicky said weakly.

Erik rolled his eyes to the heavens and sighed deeply before handing over the rifle he had strapped to his back. His pistols would be better for this close quarters fighting.

“Okay,” he said. “Nicky and I will head for cover over there, you two provide covering fire. Renee, do you need a gun?”

She wordlessly shook her head. Guns had never been her weapon of choice.

“Ready?” Erik asked Nicky, whose eyes were glazed and far away. Nicky shook his head dumbly.

“Then forget I asked,” said Erik. “Just stay behind me and don’t get shot.”

Erik lay down a spread of bullets, supported by Allison, then dragged Nicky out of their cover and headed towards the area he had indicated earlier. A man stepped out to shoot at them, and Renee instinctively reached out with her power. She recoiled instantly when she realized that she had been planning on killing him. Noticing her hesitation, Allison popped off a shot to down the man. Once Erik and Nicky reached their destination, all of them ducked to regain their breath.

“It’s okay,” Allison reassured her. “You don’t have to kill anyone.”

Renee just looked at her blankly. “I almost killed that man without thought.”

“Just knock them unconscious.”

“That requires more concentration,” said Renee. “And it takes more time.”

“I know you don’t want to take any more lives,” said Allison. “You don’t have to, okay? Try your best to knock some of them out, and I’ll protect you from the rest. I’ve got your back.”

Renee briefly closed her eyes and nodded, feeling both angry at her helplessness and grateful for Allison’s support. She had been in countless fights in her life and she had killed many people, freezing up in the middle of a fight was unacceptable; however, she wanted to prove to herself that she was more than what her mother had made her. She wanted no more lives on her conscious. She was not a mindless killing machine.

Renee had been born into a life of crime: her mother was the leader of a group of Shu bandits. She’d been handling weapons for as long as she could remember and had been participating on raids ever since she was a toddler (she acted as bait: a crying child in the road could lure unsuspecting travellers and allow them to be ambushed). When she had begun manifesting her Grisha powers her mother had been overjoyed. Bandits paid high fees to keep Grisha on their crews. Renee was taught the quickest way to kill and had begun participating in assassination missions.

She had hated these missions from the beginning. She could see the light go out of her victims’ eyes as she stopped their hearts. She’d never been bothered by work that required beating and robbing innocent travellers, but ceaseless killing was weighing on her mind. Her sleep was disturbed by nightmares that involved being surrounded by those she had killed. Renee was never sure if it had been carelessness, exhaustion, or a subconscious desire that was responsible for her capture.
She’d been caught by the military; one of them had been faster than she was and had managed to grab her wrists, forcing her hands to press against each other thus preventing her from using her powers. She’d been terrified, as her mother had taught her that anyone who served the royal family was not to be trusted. Her mother had had a long list of people who were not to be trusted, such as Rovkans, Fjerdans, and all Shu who weren’t her mother.

The military officers had tried to interrogate her, before offering her freedom. In exchange for information about her bandit crew they would allow her to live in safety at Evermore. Renee had not trusted them, especially since her mother had told her that Grisha were treated little better than beasts at Evermore, but had agreed out of desperation. She had told the officers all she knew of her mother’s operations. The raid that they had carried out had resulted in her mother’s death.

She had then been escorted to Evermore. Luckily, she was only afforded two guards who believed that she was a helpless young woman whose only power was her Heartrender abilities. Even with her hands bound, she was able to subdue them and escape.

She had made her way to Bhez Ju to search for passage out of the country. Once she was in town she had serendipitously encountered Jean, a childhood friend who had left the bandits to join the military. Relieved to see an old ally, he had told her horror stories about the abuse he endured from the crown prince. She had agreed to protect him until he found safety if he could arrange passage for the both of them.

Her decision to join a gang as soon as she reached Ketterdam was due to her lack of options; however, it wasn’t the worst trade off. Abby had quickly taken the place in her heart that should have belonged to her mother. Renee would work for the Foxes for a couple years to pay off her Indenture while Abby helped her figure out how to be a good person and then she would be free to pursue her own interests. At least she felt most comfortable among criminals and the Foxes had never asked her to kill anyone.

Although these assailants probably deserved killing, she thought angrily as a shot just barely missed her, the bullet burying itself into the crate behind her. She reached out with her power and concentrated, slowing his heart and causing the man to fall into unconsciousness. Even if she had been willing to kill she was at a disadvantage; the warren in which they were trapped worked against her as she needed to see her targets to incapacitate them.

A flurry of shots was coming from behind a shipping container, pinning Erik and Nicky down. Renee couldn’t see the shooters and Allison, while attempting to returning fire, was also unsuccessful at targeting them. Suddenly the firing ceased, causing her and Allison to glance at each other in bemusement.

“Probably Neil’s doing,” guessed Allison. “Let’s go.”

They moved forward, letting Erik cover their advance. Then they provided distraction so that Erik and Nicky could move towards the eastern docks. Every so often some of their attackers would suspiciously disappear, indicating that they were being supported by an unseen Neil.

They eventually made it to berth twenty-two, but the way to the Palmetto was blocked by at least ten people. There was some support coming from the ship itself; shots rang down from the crow’s nest, but most of the defenders on the boat were pinned down.

Erik swore suddenly from beside her and curled in on himself. “Fuck,” he said. “I’m hit.”

Renee tried to move over to heal him, but he shook his head. “It’s not bad,” he protested. “Just a graze. It can wait until after we get on board.”
“Do you have any brilliant ideas for how we might do that?” asked Allison. “I know that sounded sarcastic, but it was a serious question. How do we get past these people?”


“I know you’re new,” chided Erik. “But that’s really not the best idea in a firefight.”

“Just do it,” said Nicky impatiently.

Allison swore but complied. Renee let her eyes fall closed and suddenly there was a shrill noise, followed by bright light behind her lids. Once it faded, she opened her eyes to find all their attackers stumbling around, blinded by the flash bomb.

“Nice,” said Allison as she started picking off their sightless attackers. Renee and Erik started helping, and soon the path to the *Palmetto* was clear.

“I guess you’re smarter than you look, merchling,” said Erik approvingly.

“It’s not hard,” said Allison.

They hurried to the ship where they found Dan and some of her crew members blinking angrily.

“Dan, it’s us,” said Erik. “Sorry for blinding you.”

“You fuckers,” swore Dan. “All I can see are spots.”

“On the bright side, we’ve taken out our attackers,” said Erik. “Turns out Nicky’s more than just a pretty face.”

“The downside is that I have a sneaking suspicion that some people may be aware of our planned departure,” added Allison.

“Also, I’ve been shot and Neil, Andrew, and Thea are still missing.” Erik paused for a couple beats. “The job is really not going well so far.”

“Is anyone injured other than Erik?” asked Renee. “I’m no Abby, but I can perform minor healing.”

“Just cuts and bruises. You can head to a cabin belowdecks to set up a makeshift infirmary,” Dan answered. She started yelling orders at her crew. “We can head out as soon as everyone else shows up.”

“Let’s pray that they do,” said Renee, guiding Erik down the ramp that led below. She sent up a brief prayer to the Saints to ask for peace for the men and women who had died and to bring their friends safely on board.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

“I warned him what would happen if he touched my things again,” said Andrew. “He had no right to be surprised.”
ANDREW

Chapter Summary

In which Andrew is angry.

Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter: graphic violence, eye injury, major character injury, murder. Also, some of Andrew's backstory is revealed, which involves references to rape, forced underage prostitution, forced drugging, self-harm, torture, and poisoning. There is nothing more graphic than in canon. If any of this gives you pause, don't hesitate to send me a message (@gluupor) for more information. Please let me know if there is anything that I forgot to mention.

If eye injury squicks you out you can skip the paragraphs between when Riko says "I killed the Shadow for defying me and all of you will follow." and when he says "I don't know much."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil had done well, reflected Andrew. They’d been able to fight out of a corner because Neil’s actions had ensured that they were not surrounded. But now the fight had mostly died down and Andrew couldn't find him. Thea still followed closely behind him, competently guarding his back. He didn’t anticipate insubordination from her until they had secured Kevin.

Andrew’s leg was hurting him: the explosion had caused him to fall badly. It felt as painful as when he’d first broken it, falling from his window at the House of Spears. That attempted escape had not been his best decision. Cass had been so angry; the medik she had called had been Proust, she had left Drake in charge of his convalescence, and she had begun medicating him to force him into an unnatural state of perpetual cheerfulness. Andrew shook off his memories to focus on his present problems. Where the hell was Neil?

He was searching among the shipping containers when he heard a pained moan. Andrew cautiously rounded the corner and found Riko lying on the ground, clutching his abdomen which was bleeding from a shallow cut.

Riko chuckled roughly when he noticed Andrew. “I broke your Shadow, Monster,” he boasted.

“I thought you wanted him alive,” replied Andrew calmly.

“If I can’t have him, no one can,” Riko declared wildly. “I stabbed him. It was so nice. The knife slide into him like butter.”

“It looks like he stabbed you back,” observed Andrew, not letting his sudden fear show through his apathetic exterior.
“He crawled away like a coward,” spat Riko. “He’s probably dead by now.”

Andrew’s control snapped and he swung his cane with all his strength, catching Riko across his left arm. There was a satisfying crack of bone shattering, followed by agonized screams. Andrew swung again with less force to knock him unconscious.

“Take him to the boat,” he instructed Thea. “I’ll have questions for him later.”

She nodded and heaved Riko up roughly, like a sack of potatoes. Andrew turned and followed the blood trail.

He found Neil fairly quickly: the blood trail led a short distance to a small crate. When Andrew knelt down he found Neil was curled up inside. His breathing was rapid and shallow, his eyes were closed, and - Andrew’s heart felt like it was in his throat - he had one of his knives positioned above his heart, ready to thrust. Andrew reached forward and grabbed Neil’s wrist before he could drive the knife downwards.

“Today is not the day you die, Neil,” he said roughly.

At the sound of his voice, Neil’s eyes sluggishly blinked open. “Andrew,” he said on an exhale.

“What have you done now?” asked Andrew quietly as he began trying to extract Neil from his hiding place.

“I’m starting to suspect that Riko might have a crush on me,” said Neil weakly.

“Neil.”

“I’m fine,” Neil insisted.

“Stop talking,” said Andrew. “You have a hole in your side, you are lying in a pool of your blood, you are not fine.”

Neil managed to get up with Andrew’s help, but couldn’t keep his footing. Andrew steadied him and then decided to just lift him completely. Ignoring the pain in his leg he walked as quickly as possible back towards the boat. Neil’s eyes fluttered; he seemed to be losing consciousness.

“Talk to me, Neil.”

“You said… stop talking ...” Neil trailed off.

“Neil,” said Andrew warningly.

“You came back for me.”

“You are a useful asset,” said Andrew without emotion.

Neil gave a little scoff. “Asset,” he mumbled. “I’m glad I’m bleeding all over you clothes.”

“I don’t like these clothes,” answered Andrew. “We’re almost there. Just stay with me a little longer.” Neil didn’t respond and didn’t open his eyes. “Neil. I didn’t carry your ass all this way for you to give up now.”

Neil peeled his eyes open and smiled up at Andrew, eyes hazy and unfocused. It was the smile that Andrew hated most, the one that Neil only ever gave to him, when Neil looked at him like he was special and worthwhile. He didn’t think that Neil was aware he was doing it. “Thank you,” said Neil.
quietly, reaching a blood-covered, trembling hand up towards Andrew’s face but stopping short of touching him. “You’re amazing.” His hand dropped back to his chest and his head lolled back.

That was the last response Andrew could cajole from Neil, who had lost his fight to remain conscious. He gritted his teeth and ran the last little distance to the Palmetto.

“Get us out of here!” he shouted to Dan as he came on board. Matt came rushing up to them, fretting about Neil and trying to relieve Andrew from carrying him.

“Get away from us,” growled Andrew. Matt, obviously recognizing that Andrew’s control was fraying, backed away with raised hands.

“What happened?” he demanded.

Andrew ignored him. “Where is Renee?”

“Seeing to the wounded below,” answered Matt. “Let me help you-”

“Get out of our way,” Andrew cut him off and took off down the ramp leading belowdecks. He burst into a small cabin, startling Renee from where she was healing a small cut on Nicky’s arm.

“Move,” commanded Andrew, gently laying Neil down on a table that had been bolted to the deck. He gave Renee a piercing stare. “Fix him.”

“I’m a Heartrender, not a Healer,” argued Renee. “I don’t know if I can-”

“Fix. Him.”

Renee gave him a measured look and nodded. “I’ll do my best.”

Andrew took a step back, keeping his eyes on Neil. He appeared unnaturally still and his skin was taking on a greyish tinge. Andrew couldn’t handle all the feelings that were assailing him.

“Andrew, you’re making me nervous,” Renee said. “Would you kindly leave?”

Andrew hesitated, not want to leave Neil. He wanted to grab Neil and shake him and hold him tightly so that nobody could ever touch him again. It felt as if his presence was necessary for Neil’s survival. The thought was so absurd that he huffed at himself in disgust and made his way back to the deck. He inhaled the salty sea air deeply to calm himself, and watched as Fifth Harbour and Ketterdam faded into the horizon.

Erik, Dan, Matt, and Allison were grouped near the foredeck talking furiously, with Nicky perched on a crate nearby, poking at his arm where Renee had healed him. Thea was also close by, vomiting over the railing. Apparently she was not much of a sailor.

“What in Djel’s name just happened?” demanded Erik, the conversation falling silent as Andrew drew closer.

“We were ambushed,” said Nicky.


“Retract your claws,” said Erik. “He’s not who you’re angry at.”

“I know we were ambushed,” groused Allison. “How did they know to ambush us? How did you
“Andrew had us prepare the Palmetto and told us to lay low until he showed up,” said Dan. “We didn’t know there was a decoy. Then suddenly there was an explosion and people were shooting at you.”

“Is Neil going to be okay?” asked Matt worriedly.

Andrew became aware that he was still covered in Neil’s blood. “I don’t know,” he answered, trying to ignore the overwhelming helplessness he was feeling.

“What happened?” asked Dan.

“Riko,” answered Andrew, reigning in his emotions and feeling his usual apathy reassert itself.

“We stayed holed up at the Court like you told us to,” said Erik, turning to him. “How did the Ravens know that we would be here?”

“I’ll ask,” said Andrew succinctly. He limped over to where Riko was sitting, having regained consciousness. His hands bound and cradled close to his body to protect his broken arm. “Stand him up.” Erik and Matt grabbed him at held him against the railing.

Andrew patted his clothes, trying to decide how he would deal with Riko. He thought of Neil lying still on the table, of his brown eyes glazed with pain before he had lost his fight to remain conscious, of Neil calling him amazing. Eventually he pulled out his oyster knife; he always kept at least six knives on his person, but he didn’t even count this broad, short blade.

“You can’t do this,” snarled Riko.

“Can’t I?”

“You’ll pay for treating me this way.”

“Will I?” asked Andrew, idly. “As far as the Ravens are concerned you’re already dead, and you attacked us so the rules of barter don’t apply here.”

“You will beg me for mercy before I’m finished with you. I am a Moriyama prince!”

“Who told you that?” asked Thea, coming up from behind Andrew to observe the interrogation. “They were obviously lying. I worked for the Moriyamas for years, and I would bet on my life that you’re in no way related to any of them.”

Riko’s face contorted in impotent rage.

“Now that that’s settled,” said Andrew, “why don’t you tell us why the Ravens were out in force to stop our voyage?”

“We don’t need a reason to attack trash like you,” sulked Riko.

“Oh, I see,” said Andrew nodding. “Cass didn’t see fit to explain to you why you were attacking. Let me guess: she took advantage of your inferiority complex.”

“I am her trusted lieutenant.”

“Yet she didn’t bother telling you why you were attacking?” asked Erik incredulously.
You don’t know what you’re talking about, drüskele,” spat Riko. “I am the King of the Ravens, the most prized member. I killed the Shadow for defying me and all of you will follow.”

Andrew slashed with his knife, making a neat cut across Riko’s eye - from brow to cheekbone - before making another cut in the opposite direction, forming an X. Relishing Riko’s agonized screams, he wiped the blood off his knife and replaced it at his waist. He then calmly put on the gloves he had stashed in his pocket and then, ignoring the surprised shouts from his companions, dug his fingers into Riko’s eye socket and pulled out his eye.

Riko was shrieking in pain and rage and Andrew could hear Nicky retching behind him. He threw the eyeball into the ocean then grabbed Riko’s chin in an iron grip. He knew he looked unmoved, his motions indistinguishable from past punishments he had calmly doled out, but he felt unfathomable rage consume him. His control had cracked during Riko’s previous words, so Riko would now suffer the consequences.

“Listen to me,” he said with steel in his voice. “You will stop posturing and you will tell me what I want to know. If you don’t I will cut out your other eye and I’ll repeat this conversation with a blind man.”

“I don’t know much,” cried Riko, who was now sobbing and shaking in panic. “I was just told to incapacitate you. She wanted to give Proust a chance!”

The name caught Andrew off guard. He had not heard the name for some time. Anything that Proust, a sadistic and manipulative man, was doing for Cass could not be good. “A chance to do what?” he demanded.

“To get his crew to rescue Kevin Day.”


“Luther Hemmick offered her a lot of money,” said Riko. “That’s all I know. Now that I’ve answered all your questions, let me go.”

“Of course. I’ll give you exactly what you’ve earned,” said Andrew, before slitting Riko’s throat and throwing his body overboard.

Nicky sputtered. “Why did you do that?” he cried. “He cooperated!”

“I warned him what would happen if he touched my things again,” said Andrew. “He had no right to be surprised.”

“How can you-”

Andrew drew a knife and pressed it into Nicky’s stomach. “I’m sure you’ve heard my reputation,” he said, cutting Nicky off. “I would advise that you stop talking unless you want to follow him over the railing.”

Nicky seemed speechless for a second before he drew himself up. “You can’t kill me,” he protested. “You need me for insurance.”

“I wish people would stop telling me what I can’t do,” said Andrew. “Don’t tempt me.”

“It’s still not right-” argued Nicky.

“Nicky,” said Erik tiredly. “Here’s a Barrel lesson for you: do not argue with an obviously angry
“I would call that common sense,” added Allison.

Dan and Matt retreated, with Dan yelling at some of her crew to clean the blood off her deck.

“Have someone bring me a clean shirt and some fresh water,” Andrew told Erik as he headed to the bow of the boat.

“I’m not your servant,” Erik called back.

“Listen to the bloody man with a knife,” Nicky mocked.

“I have a gun. Gun trumps knife!” cried Erik, but Andrew ignored him.

Once he reached the bow, he let himself collapse in order to sit on the deck to ease the ache in his leg. He sat staring out at the water.

This was why Neil was a problem. He should currently be concerned with more important things, such as how Proust’s involvement might interfere with his plan to save Kevin Day, or how Luther Hemmick was working with the Ravens, or even how Riko’s death may affect his plan for Cass’ retribution, but all his brain could do was sound an alarm that just screamed Neil’s name repeatedly and provide images of Neil’s small broken body. He couldn’t sustain these emotions; he had avoided feeling anything for so long that he was completely overwhelmed. This was all Neil’s fault and from now on he would have to keep his distance to protect himself.

He felt himself become untethered, lost in his thoughts of death, and destruction, and Neil. He lost all track of time until suddenly something cold was in his hand. He made a fist and looked down; he was grasping a soaked washcloth. He lifted his eyes and found Bee watching him, a concerned look in her warm, brown eye. He concentrated on the washcloth and on studying Bee’s face to anchor himself.

“Hello, Andrew,” she said pleasantly when he felt more centred. “Do you know where you are?”

“Palmetto,” he answered shortly. “Going to Shu Han.”

He took deep even breaths, and counted the scars scattered over Bee’s familiar face. His eyes traced over her eye patch; he had bought it for her as a gift. He started using the washcloth and water she had brought to wash the blood off of him.

“Shouldn’t you be making sure there’s wind in the sails?” he asked gruffly.

Bee just smiled. “Dan assures me that the wind is already in our favour. Also, everyone else was too frightened to come talk to you.”

“You always volunteer for the shit jobs, Bee.”

Bee shook her head fondly and settled in beside him. She squirmed a little awkwardly as she tried to get comfortable. She had once complained to him about all the weight that she had gained as she neared middle age, but Andrew thought it suited her; it made her seem more matronly. Of course, he would never use the word ‘matronly’ in her hearing since he had no desire to be zapped by lightning.

The first time he had met Betsy Dobson he had been thirteen years old. Cass’ decision to begin medicating him following the unfortunate incident when he’d broken his leg had not worked out exactly as she’d hoped. Yes, the drugs forced him into a state of manic euphoria, which left him
laughing and joking no matter what was done to him by the House of Spears’ patrons; however, his desire to lash out and disobey had only increased. He sneaked out with greater frequency, even knowing the punishments that awaited him after he had been tracked down and forced to go back. He knew that his actions were costing her enough to make him into a liability; he assumed that sooner or later she would have to have him killed and he was greatly anticipating that day.

Despite his drugs masking his anger and interfering with his attention span, he searched the Barrel looking for fights. He’d found a pathetic fat boy who could barely throw a punch, dragged him into an alley, beaten him up, threatened him with a knife, stolen his money, and taken his trousers. Satisfied, he had left the crying boy behind, counting his coins and slicing up the trousers and tossing them into a nearby canal.

“Why did you take his trousers if you didn’t need them?” a voice suddenly asked him.

He spun around, brandishing his dull, rusty dagger. A quick risk assessment had him relaxing slightly: the voice belonged to a slightly chubby, short woman with chin-length brown hair. He would have dismissed her completely were it not for the impressive scars that adorned her face and the fact that she was wearing an eye patch.

He had shrugged evasively but had answered anyway. “He’s embarrassed without trousers. He doesn’t want to be seen without them. It will take him longer to go look for help.”

She had nodded once. “Smart,” she commented. “Are you interested in joining my gang?”

He had laughed a little wildly. “Are you new? That’s not how we do business in the Barrel.”

“Is it not?” she asked. “What did I do wrong?”

“You can’t just come right out and ask a question like that!” he exclaimed.

“I find value in being direct.”

“I don’t believe you even have a gang,” he said derisively.

“Well, not yet,” she admitted. “But my friends and I are starting one and I’m recruiting. You’re the type of person we’re looking for.”

Andrew knew better than to trust anybody. “I don’t even know who you are.”

“My name is Betsy,” she answered, kindly. “But you can call me whatever you like. Maybe we can get to know each other?”

“Well, then, Bee, I’ll trade you a truth for a truth.”

“Certainly. What do you want to know?”

Andrew was buzzing with curiosity, but was trying to act nonchalant. He doubted that he was fooling her. “What happened to your face?”

Her eye went far away for a second before she answered. “Monsters,” she said simply.

Andrew had scoffed. “Monsters aren’t real.”

“Yes, they are. Haven’t you met any living here?”

“No,” he said slowly. He had heard rumours of a sea monster that lived in the harbour but he had yet
to see it. He wanted to lure it and catch it and train it to fight his enemies.

“Are you sure? Do you think that that unfortunate boy who has suddenly found himself without his trousers would answer the same?” Andrew thought that she may have been reprimanding him, but there was no disapproval in her voice.

“Are you saying I’m a monster?” he demanded.

“It’s a matter of perspective. Everyone is someone’s monster,” she said. “Are there no monsters that invade your nightmares? No one that you wish to protect yourself from?”

“Those aren’t monsters,” he said. “Those are just men.”

“Many monsters masquerade as men.”

“So your scars come from a man?” he asked, trying to decipher her nonsense and redirect the conversation away from himself.

“Yes and no. The monsters that tortured me were magical: giant beasts with beaks and claws called nichevoya. But they were unintelligent and under the control of a single, evil man. Does that answer your question?”

Her response had done nothing but cause more questions for Andrew but he knew that she had technically fulfilled her part of the bargain, so he reluctantly nodded.

“Alright, then my question is: why won’t you join my gang?” she asked.

“Why do you want me?” he challenged.

She smiled at him. “I recognize you.”

Andrew froze. Had this woman been following him? Did she know his mother? Or Cass?

“Not like that,” said Bee, correctly interpreting his reaction. “I meant that you and I are the same. I could tell by observing you that we have a lot in common.”

“I’m nothing like you,” he spat, insulted that he was being compared to this strange, know-nothing woman.

“Right now, maybe not,” she allowed. “I’m wealthy and settled and no longer afraid. But I was once like you. And I can help you.”

He knew better than to believe pretty promises from a motherly woman; once upon a time he had thought that Cass was his saviour. She had seemed sweet and kind and loving. He had tried to love her in the place of the mother who had abandoned him, and she had betrayed him time and time again.

It was time to nip this conversation in the bud. He would not let his hopes be raised. He unwillingly rolled up his left sleeve and showed her his spear tattoo. “I can’t join your gang because I belong to someone else.” It was the first time that he had admitted Cass’ ownership out loud. The words felt like gravel in his mouth. “My mother sold me to pay her debts.”

“I can buy out your contract,” she said.

“I don’t believe you,” he said sullenly.
“You’ll see,” she replied. “If I do, you’ll agree to work for me and my partners?”

Andrew had nodded and Bee had disappeared into the crowds. It was several hours of aimless wandering later that Drake had managed to track him down and drag him back to Cass.

He had been punished harshly for his truancy. Afterwards, he tried to put the strange, scarred woman out of his mind, not allowing himself to hope. Hope wasn’t for boys like him. Therefore, he was struck speechless following day, when Cass had sent for him and had given him to a gruff-looking man who had bought out his contract.

“He’s more trouble than he’s worth,” she had said sourly. “I wish you luck with him.”

The man, Wymack, had taken him to his small lodgings and had introduced him to Abby and Dan, the only other member of his gang.

Bee had also been present and she gave him a challenging look. “See?” she said.

“I still don’t trust you,” he argued.

She had simply raised her eyebrow in response.

That night he went into withdrawal from the drugs that Cass had forced upon him. Abby had helped as much as she could and Bee had sat with him as he vomited and raved. After the drugs had been purged from his system all he could feel was an empty void.

The only emotion he could dredge up was anger. He found a knife and gouged out the tattoo on his arm that marked him as property. “I’m going to kill her,” he swore while mopping up the blood.

“That seems rather short sighted,” remarked Bee idly.

“She gave me to strangers for their pleasure and to her son for punishment and gave me drugs to make me happy about it.”

“By all means have your revenge,” said Bee. “But there are so many worse things than death.”

“It’s not revenge, it’s a promise.”

“When I was young I lived and trained in the Little Palace in Ravka, as do all Grisha of the Second Army,” said Bee apropos of nothing. “One summer I was chosen to be the Queen’s personal Squaller, providing a breeze to keep her cool. She was quite enamoured with me. Unfortunately, so was the King. I had no interest in him, or in men in general, but what could I do? I could not protest being brought to his bed; I was just a servant.” Bee took a sip of her cocoa and met Andrew’s gaze over her cup. “So I poisoned him. Not dramatically, no arsenic in his food, or ricin injected into him. No, with Abby’s help, I used a slow acting poison on my lips. So that every time he took by force what I did not consent to give he ingested a poison that made him old before his time, that ravaged his innards, that made him incontinent and lame.

“So, yes, Andrew, you could kill Cass. But you could also ruin her. It won’t be easy; she’s an incredibly powerful and influential woman. It will probably take years of planning and hard work. You will have to make the Foxes strong. But in the end, you can take away everything she holds dear and bring her back down into the gutter with the rest of us.”

Andrew had made himself a promise right then and there that no matter how long it took, he would destroy Cass Spear. He would dismantle her life brick by brick.
Since those days, Andrew had come to trust Bee as much as he trusted anyone. She had taught him some of the most important lessons of his life, such as “You can’t cut somebody down who is already in the gutter, which makes them more dangerous,” and “If everyone already believes you’re a monster, you needn’t do every monstrous thing.”

“What happened with Riko?” she asked now without censure in her voice. He knew that he could do practically any heinous action and Bee would never judge him. “You don’t usually allow your anger to rule you.”

“I warned him,” said Andrew. “And he ignored my warnings.”

“That’s fair,” she nodded. “He hurt Neil.”

He gave her a sidelong look. “You don’t even like Neil.”

“I like Neil,” she protested. “Just because I hardly ever see him since he avoids me the way an abused stray cat avoids humans doesn’t mean that I don’t like him.”

“He has a reason for that,” said Andrew absently.

“I’m sure he does. But we were talking about you.”

“I’m only worried about the job,” Andrew said ( it wasn’t a lie, he didn’t care about Neil, Neil was nothing ). “Neil’s unique talents are essential to its success.”

“Do you have a plan for what you’ll do if he dies?”

“That’s not going to happen,” said Andrew sharply, feeling his control slip a little.

“Andrew-”

“Do me a favour,” he said, cutting her off. “Let’s neither of us talk for awhile.”

Bee sighed deeply but complied and they sat silently together staring out into the inky blackness of the sea.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

Renee smiled without humour. “My mother always said that if you were unskilled enough to receive a wound then you should suffer the consequences.”
Chapter Summary

In which there is calm after the storm.

Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter: references to murder, death of family members

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Once all the drama had subsided, Erik settled down to sit on the deck with Nicky. Dan was at the wheel of the ship, and Matt and Allison had disappeared belowdecks to check on Neil and Renee. Nicky seemed a little shaken up following Andrew’s questioning of Riko and kept sending unsubtle looks towards Erik.

“You don’t have to keep an eye on me anymore,” he said, bitterly. “I can’t get into trouble while stuck on a boat.”

Erik laughed. “Considering that you were antagonizing an angry, violent man only a few minutes ago I think that I’ll decide when I can stop keeping an eye on you.”

“That was not okay,” scowled Nicky. “You shouldn’t let Andrew get away with that.”

“Listen, if you’re going to stay with us you have to learn to be less judgmental. I know that you have a skewed worldview, since you were raised in a mansion and taught right from wrong by a man who thinks nothing of owning people to show his status, but Andrew’s life has been extremely different from yours. His lines are not necessarily the same as your lines.”

“It was an overreaction,” argued Nicky.

“Maybe where you come from,” allowed Erik.

“The real world?” jeered Nicky.

“A privileged merchling like you has no notion of the real world. You’re not allowed to judge those of us who have had to compromise our morality in order to survive.”

“You don’t know anything about me or my past, but I was taught right from wrong.”

“By your father? Who doesn’t care a whit about what the less fortunate residents of Ketterdam suffer as long as he turns a profit?” Erik shook his head. “The world isn’t black and white. Sometimes you have to hurt somebody before they can hurt you worse.”

“I don’t want to live in a world like that,” said Nicky.

“So don’t,” countered Erik. “You can go home to your father and pretend that the world is happy and
“Just.”

“That’s never going to happen.”

“Then stop regurgitating your father’s flawed views,” said Erik shortly. “He’s taught you, what? That killing is wrong? That the Barrel is full of crooks and liars? We are what we’ve been forced to become. No one’s ever given us anything. Or, if we’ve ever had anything, it’s been violently taken from us. We’re the unwanted, the ignored, the dregs. Despite mercher beliefs, your life is not worth more than mine because you were born rich. We’re not all as lucky as Kevin Day; we can’t just send a letter full of complaint and have people fighting to rescue us. If anything bad happens, no one’s going to cry for any one of us.”

“No mourners,” said Nicky quietly, obviously having heard the Foxes’ saying before.

“No funerals,” nodded Erik. “Let it go. Riko was a terrible person. Good riddance to bad rubbish.”

Nicky huffed, obviously still upset, so Erik let him sulk as they sat together. Eventually Renee and Allison emerged from belowdecks and wandered over towards them.

“How’s Neil?” asked Erik as soon as they were in hearing distance.

Renee looked tired, but also strangely lively; her eyes shone and her cheeks flushed with health. Erik knew it was a result of her using her power. “It was touch and go for awhile,” she said. “But I think he’ll be okay. We just need to wait and see.”

“Wasn’t it easy for you to heal him?” blurted Nicky. Allison sent him a look of annoyance while Renee raised her eyebrows at him. “I mean,” he said, flustered now, “you healed me without any problem.”

Renee sighed and ran a hand through her rainbow hair. “I couldn’t just close the wound like I did yours: he would have continued bleeding internally. I had to seal it properly from the inside out, which requires better anatomy knowledge than I possess. Also, he lost a lot of blood, which is something I don’t know how to fix.” She sighed deeply again. “Hopefully he’ll recover. I wish Abby had been here.”

“You did the best you could,” said Allison stridently. “That’s all anyone could expect from you. He’ll be fine, I know it.”

Erik was slightly taken aback that Allison was offering sympathetic support. He’d known her for three years and considered her to be a member of his family (albeit a fairly exasperating family member) but he never would have considered going to her for comfort. Revenge plans, insults, and sarcasm were more her forte. “I’m sure that if Neil were awake right now he’d tell you that he’s fine,” he said to help comfort Renee, even as he wondered about the seriousness of the relationship between the two women. “He’s pretty resilient. It was very lucky that you were here. My ex-bullet wound vouches for your skill.”

Renee sent him a grateful smile. “If I’d grown up in the Little Palace then I would have had to undergo extensive anatomy lessons, even as a Heartrender,” she explained. “But my training focused only on fighting.”

“Learning to heal yourself after taking a hit during a fight should also be important,” said Nicky.

Renee smiled without humour. “My mother always said that if you were unskilled enough to receive a wound then you should suffer the consequences.”
“She sounds nice,” remarked Erik dryly.

“Not particularly,” said Renee.

“I think we’re going to have to work on your ability to detect sarcasm,” said Erik.

“Nah,” said Allison. “I like her as she is.”

Renee gave a small, tinkly laugh and then yawned widely.

“Okay, sleepy, time for bed,” said Allison, reaching out to squeeze Renee’s arm.

“I should go back to monitor Neil,” Renee argued.

“Matt’s watching him right now,” said Allison, soothingly. Erik didn’t think he’d ever heard her use that tone before. “You need to sleep: if he needs your attention later, it will be better if you’re rested.”

Renee conceded and withdrew. Allison turned back towards Erik. “Where’s the Monster?”

“Speaking of unpredictable assholes,” replied Erik, completely ignoring Allison’s question. “When did that happen?” he asked indicating Renee’s retreating form. “I knew that you were spending a lot of time together, but I didn’t know that it had turned into something.”

“It hasn’t,” replied Allison.

“Yet,” said Erik. “You obviously want it to. You were being nice. It was like seeing a dog walk on its hind legs.”

“Shut up,” said Allison. “I’m always nice.”

He barked a laugh. “Sure you are. But, hey, I didn’t know that you were into women, good for you.” Nicky was looking at him with a look of disbelief and surprise. Erik raised a questioning eyebrow at him, but he looked away and blushed.

“Stop being condescending,” said Allison.

“I’m not!” exclaimed Erik. “I’m being supportive. I think the two of you will be good together. Go for it.”

“It’s not up to only me,” replied Allison. “Anyway, you didn’t answer my question about Andrew. Someone should update him about Neil,” she continued, effectively shutting down the topic of conversation.

“I sent Betsy to talk with him,” answered Erik. “He usually responds well to her particular brand of vengeful crazy.” He liked Betsy quite a lot, but she could be incredibly terrifying.

“That’s kind of you to say,” came Betsy’s disembodied voice from the shadows.

Nicky gave a little startled cry, while Erik figuratively jumped out of his skin. It felt like his heart stopped, before beating wildly. “Fuck, Betsy,” he swore. “Did I accidentally summon you by saying your name?”


That made Erik laugh. “Can you imagine Betsy as a ninja? With how she-” he joked, before catching
Betsy’s eye “-is so youthful and nimble on her feet?” he finished lamely.

“Good save, Erik,” said Betsy placidly. “And I’m here because I heard Allison say she had some news about Neil.”

“Renee says that he should be fine,” said Allison. “He needs rest to recover; Matt’s watching him now.”

Betsy nodded and turned to go. “I’ll inform Andrew,” she said. “Hopefully he’ll react positively to my ‘crazy’.”

“I didn’t mean that you’re crazy,” protested Erik. “Just that … some of the things you say … are …” he trailed off.

“Dig up, stupid,” advised Allison. “Next you’ll be calling her a witch.”

“Using people’s painful pasts against them is cruel, Allison,” interjected Betsy before Erik could react beyond the deep stab of hurt he felt. He’d been wrong before: cutting remarks were Allison’s true forte. “Especially after he just offered you kindness and support.”

“Whatsoever, you’re not my mother,” said Allison flippantly, but she looked chastised. She flicked her eyes to Erik, but he knew better than to expect an apology. “I’m going to go to sleep.”

“Good night,” called Nicky as Allison marched away.

“You know that I didn’t mean any offense and that I love you, right, Betsy?” asked Erik.

She laughed quietly. “I know, Erik. Good night you two.”

They lapsed back into silence, but Erik could feel Nicky’s eyes on him.

“Why would you call Betsy a witch?” he finally asked.

“I wouldn’t,” replied Erik, curtly.

“Riko called you a drüskelle,” Nicky tried again.

“I’m a Fox,” answered Erik, pushing up his left sleeve to show the four fox paws tattooed there. He ran his thumb along them, as always taking comfort from the reminder of where he belonged. He didn’t understand how Neil could be happy without the tattoo or how Andrew could always keep his covered. The tattoo signified home and family to him. “But I used to be drüskelle,” he admitted.

“I’ve met drüskelle when I was in Fjerda,” said Nicky hesitantly. “Other than your hair and muscles-” he coughed a little and blushed deeply “-you don’t seem very similar to them.”

Erik gave a dry laugh. “No, I supposed I don’t. There are reasons why I’m no longer one of them. The fact that I’ve never met a drüskelle with a sense of humour is just the tip of the iceberg.”

“You let Renee heal you without complaint,” observed Nicky. “And you seem to have a positive relationship with Betsy. Isn’t it difficult for you to associate with Grisha?”

“No,” replied Erik sharply. “Because Grisha are just people. There are good ones and bad ones. I do not condone the hunting and execution of an entire group of people based on their genetics.”

“But you must have had something against Grisha at one time, if you joined a group of so-called ‘witch hunters’,” protested Nicky.
“I was very young, and angry, and impressionable,” said Erik. “I grew up in a small village in the south of Fjerda, near the Ravkan border. As you must know Fjerda and Ravka have been at war for decades; there were often skirmishes along the border, but they rarely reached far enough into Fjerda to bother us.” Erik closed his eyes. Even all these years later these memories were painful. “Until one day, when I was about twelve, the Ravkans staged an assault on our village. I had to watch as my family was burned to death by Grisha Inferni.”

Nicky inhaled sharply. “I’m sorry,” he said, sounding slightly awkward.

Erik nodded his acceptance and continued his story. “The drüskelle general that arrived to fight the Grisha took me under his protection. He recruited me into training and promised me a chance for revenge.”

“What happened?”

“I bought into the anti-Grisha rhetoric at first,” confessed Erik. “I agreed that they were all evil witches who deserved to be burned at the stake. But after time, as my initial hurt and grief faded a little, I began to remember my father’s teachings about Djel. How He ran through all waterways to provide life to us all. How He loved us all equally. And I wondered why He had forsaken the Grisha, as many claimed. I couldn’t reconcile the teachings of the drüskelle with what I observed of the world around me.”

“So you left?”

“No,” said Erik. “I was desperate for companionship and I needed somewhere to belong after the deaths of my family. I wasn’t willing to give up the new family that I’d made for myself, my brothers-in-training, even if I found myself unwilling to blindly agree with our commanders. I thought that I could lie to myself about my misgivings in order to conform, to live up to the expectations of the man who had recruited and cared for me.”

“Oh,” said Nicky softly with surprise.

“But I must have given myself away somehow. During the drüskelle initiation ceremony, I was informed that I had been chosen to carry out the sentence of a Grisha who had been found guilty of crimes against humanity. Of course, in Fjerdan law, just being born with Grisha powers is considered a crime against humanity. The punishment is death.”

Erik took a deep breath and continued. “I waited nervously with my rifle, trying to decide if I was capable of killing a person in cold blood. I think that I was hoping that the Grisha would resemble one of the people who had attacked my village so that I could pretend it was justified revenge. But that’s not what happened.

“The girl they dragged out was barely in her teens, shrieking and crying and panicking. She had the traditional colouring of a Fjerdan woman, which meant that she superficially resembled my younger sister. There was nothing I could have done to force myself to kill her. I refused.”

“That was brave,” said Nicky quietly.

“Was it?” asked Erik, derisively. “It didn’t help her; she was killed anyway. I had to desert to avoid being executed as a traitor. And, for a second time, I lost my family.”

Nicky was quiet for a time, absorbing the story. “I play the flute,” he eventually blurted.

“What?” asked Erik incredulously.
“I just …” Nicky seemed flustered now; Erik was fairly certain that he was blushing again. “You just shared a personal story with me, I felt that I should reciprocate.”

“By telling me that you play the flute?”

“It’s embarrassing,” said Nicky. “Especially around this group of hardened criminals. I’ve been hiding it because I assumed that I would be mercilessly mocked.”

“Oh, merchling,” Erik laughed. “You were very correct. I am definitely, **definitely**, going to mock you.”

“So we’re even,” said Nicky.

“Not even close, Pied Piper,” Erik argued, settling back to lie on the deck. “I’ll get your painful childhood stories out of you yet, just you wait.”

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

“Matt,” he croaked out, squeezing the taller man’s hand. “You are not my mother.”
NEIL

Chapter Summary

In which Neil spends time with the person who loves him most.

Chapter Notes

It's March 31st, meaning that it's Neil's birthday. To celebrate, I decided to post this chapter where he spends quality time with his best friend.

Warnings: references to violence and murder, references to abuse by a doctor

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everything hurt. Everything hurt, his bed was rocking, he could smell the sea, and someone was holding onto his hand tightly.

“Mom?” he asked, although his words were so slurred that they were barely intelligible.

“Not quite,” came an amused voice that he recognized. He opened his eyes and then immediately regretted it, squinting against the soft orange light emanating from a lantern. As he did, he was assailed with memories: Riko stabbing him, escaping and hiding in a crate, Andrew coming for him. They must have made it onto the Palmetto.

“I mean, I guess I kind of am,” continued the voice, thoughtfully. “After all I’m the one who makes sure that you are eating properly, and dressing warmly, and getting enough sleep.”

“Matt,” he croaked out, squeezing the taller man’s hand. “You are not my mother.”

“You’re right, I’m way better,” grinned Matt. “Welcome back to the land of the living, buddy,” he said gently, helping Neil sit up a little and giving him a drink of cool water. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine,” groaned Neil.

Matt laughed. “In that case, I have a message from Allison. It is, and I quote, ‘you just won me five kruge, you absurd, precious peanut.’”

Neil blinked. “Don’t tell me that you were stupid enough to take that bet.”

“Nope, it was Renee,” answered Matt. “I know that I generally can’t help betting against Allison, but I know you well enough that I didn’t take it. I think Renee just didn’t believe that you would claim you were fine no matter what, even if you were suddenly missing an arm … or a torso.”

Neil rolled his eyes, before realizing that he didn’t know what had happened to everyone following the explosion. “Did everyone make it on board?”

“Yes, thanks to you. And me. We’re the real heroes here.”
“Where’s Riko?” asked Neil, trying to push himself up off the table before giving up due to the shooting pain in his side. “Help me up. I need to go stab him.”

“Andrew killed him,” answered Matt. “Fairly brutally. Which is too bad, because I wanted to break his face in six places.”

“Oh,” said Neil, not really surprised. “I guess that’s fine then.”

Matt was giving him a fond look. “I remember when I used to think that you were shy and quiet.”

Neil gave a little laugh before groaning and clutching his side. “Ow. Don’t make me laugh.”

“Oh, does getting stabbed hurt?” asked Matt. “You deserve it for making me worry so much.”

“How long have I been out?”

“Three days,” answered Matt, shaking his head. “Andrew’s been completely unmanageable. I don’t think he’s spoken to anyone save Betsy since he dealt with Riko.”

“He’ll be okay,” said Neil thoughtfully. “He’s probably worried whether I can fulfill my role in his plan.”

“I think the more likely explanation is that he was afraid for you.”

“Andrew’s not afraid of anything,” said Neil. That was blatantly false, but Neil had never spilled Andrew’s secrets before and wasn’t about to start now.

“I don’t believe that. I saw his face when he first carried you on board,” argued Matt.

“I’m a valuable asset. My death wound put a wrench in his plans.”

“Has he ever said that to you?” asked Matt with a little heat in his voice.

“Of course he has,” said Neil. “Well, I don’t think he’s ever called me valuable. I’m perfectly aware that I’m only kept around because I’m useful.”

“You’re ‘kept around’ because you’re perfect and wonderful and everyone loves you,” said Matt sharply.

“Matt, I’m not suffering from low self-esteem,” laughed Neil, wincing at the pull in his side. “I know where I stand with all the Foxes. And I know where I stand with Andrew.”

Neil had known where he stood with Andrew since they had first struck their deal. When Neil had first arrived in Ketterdam he had just wanted to make enough money so that he could quickly book passage to a different country. He spent several days on the rooftops, observing the ebb and flow of the crowds, learning the rhythm of the city. He’d broken into all the gang headquarters, trying to determine who was most likely to pay him well for information. He’d followed several of the more prominent gang leaders and had even picked Andrew’s pocket. He’d almost gotten away before Andrew noticed, but he was a couple steps shy of escape when Andrew had patted his pocket and then glared unerringly in his direction.

Neil had saluted him before sprinting down an adjacent alley and quickly making his way to the rooftops. He couldn’t explain to himself why he had antagonized the blond man with the fearsome reputation; just that he couldn’t help himself. Which was usually his excuse when he found himself in trouble due to poor decisions.
Neil had eventually agreed to do some information gathering for the Ravens. They were looking for some information about one of the Foxes, Seth, who had stolen something from a council member. Neil was to provide the Ravens with Seth’s movements. Riko had promised that Seth would not be permanently harmed, only that the council member was paying to teach him a lesson. Several nights later Seth was dead; he had been killed for daring to date a council member’s daughter.

Neil knew that he had gained a reputation among the Barrel gangs for his role in Seth’s murder, so he had tried to distance himself from the Ravens after that, but his skills had caught both Riko’s eye and his fancy. He’d been trying to force Neil into signing a binding contract with the Ravens ever since.

Neil took to hiding on the rooftops to avoid everyone who might be looking for him. After a few days of this, he’d noticed Andrew cutting his way through an alley. Neil’s sense of mischief had overwhelmed his common sense and he’d quickly climbed down to the ground and attempted to sneak up behind Andrew. Andrew had turned at the last second and slammed his walking stick into Neil’s gut, breaking it and driving all the air out of his lungs. Neil lay gasping and choking on the ground while Andrew stared down at him dispassionately.

He tapped two fingers to his temple in salute. “Better luck next time,” he said.

“Fuck you,” Neil gasped.

“I’m not the one in the wrong here,” said Andrew. “You were trying to steal from me again. I am well within the law to protect myself.”

“Like you’re interested in the law.”

“Not particularly,” allowed Andrew as he cocked his head to the side. “I am slightly interested in who you are, though.”

“I’m nobody important,” said Neil.

“Evidently,” agreed Andrew. “But I think that you’re the reason that the Ravens were suddenly well informed, yes?”

Neil didn’t like the way that the shorter teen was looking at him as if trying to figure him out. He wasn’t supposed to draw any attention to himself, and yet both Riko and Andrew seemed curious about him. This was why he was no good without his mother. She would have beaten him for such a mistake. He was useless by himself. “I’m not a math problem,” he protested.

“But I’ll still solve you,” replied Andrew. “Tell me, are you contracted to work with the Ravens?”

“I don’t give out information for free.”

Andrew gave a slight nod. “Excellent. In that case I’ll trade you a truth for a truth.”

“What?” Neil asked.

“You tell me something true and I’ll do the same for you.” He gestured back and forth between their faces. “It’s almost a game: a fair exchange of information.”

“Fine,” said Neil brusquely. “No, I don’t belong to the Ravens. Why don’t you live with your mother and twin brother in the Zelvar District?”

“Oh,” said Andrew, mostly to himself. “Right for the throat. You are better informed than I expected.
Have you been shadowing me without me noticing? You may actually turn out to be interesting. Too bad it probably won’t last.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“My dear mother sold me to pay her debts some time ago. I’m not sure she or my brother even know I’m still alive.”

Neil nodded in acknowledgement. Andrew looked at him curiously. “No pity?” he asked. “How strange. Can it be that you’re already aware of how cruel the world is?”

“It’s not the world that’s cruel, it’s the people in it,” said Neil shortly, standing up. “Are we finished now?”

“Not even close, little shadow.”

“You calling me little is pretty rich,” said Neil, happy that he was taller than someone.

Andrew gave him a dry smile. “I hear that Riko is looking for you,” he said. “You could get him off your back by joining the Foxes.”

“I’m not interested in joining your gang,” replied Neil. “I won’t be tied down here.”

“I’ll make you a deal,” said Andrew agreeably. “You gather the information that I want and you don’t sell my secrets. I won’t even make you sign a contract. What would it take for you to agree to that? Name it and it’s yours.”

Neil considered. He didn’t believe for a second that Andrew could protect him from the Butcher’s Men when they came for him. But he could probably slow them down enough to allow Neil a chance to escape. “I don’t trust you and I don’t think I like you very much,” he finally said.

“The feeling is mutual,” said Andrew. “It doesn’t change anything. Tell me what I have to do to keep you here as long as possible. You can always leave if you’re unhappy with our agreement. Don’t overthink this. I’m proposing a mutually beneficial partnership. We are not going to be friends.”

Neil gazed at him in silence, wondering how suicidal he was for thinking of putting his safety in the hands of a tiny, blond teenager. He was so tired after spending the last few weeks alone; having some kind of support would be welcome. “You give me protection,” he said eventually. “From Riko and the Ravens, sure, but also from anyone else who tries to harm me.”

“Easy enough,” replied Andrew. “As long as you hold up your end of the bargain.”

Neil had tentatively agreed and Andrew had taken him to meet Wymack, beginning his work for the Foxes. And although Neil had violated their agreement by coming to care for Andrew and had long ago decided that he would never allow Andrew to stand between him and his father’s men, he was fairly certain that Andrew’s feelings towards him had not changed. Andrew, after all, had told him that he would not be missed when he left. He knew that Andrew thought highly of his usefulness and in return trusted Neil and provided Neil a home, which was more than enough and far more than Neil had ever expected.

He explained this to Matt, who just stared at him for a couple beats. “You actually think that your relationship with Andrew is purely business? That he has no personal feelings for you?”

“Of course he doesn’t. He’s made that very clear,” said Neil. “We have an excellent working
relationship, but that’s all it is to him.”

Matt shook his head with something that looked suspiciously like disbelief and pity.

“Matt,” warned Neil.

“Are you hungry?” asked Matt, obviously picking up on Neil’s tone and changing the subject. “You’re already so tiny that you can’t afford to miss any more meals.”

“Huh,” mused Neil. “Maybe you are my mother.”


“Not now,” said Neil. “I just want to rest for a bit.”

“Okay,” agreed Matt. “I’ll let you sleep.”

“Don’t go,” said Neil, grasping at Matt’s wrist. “Sorry,” he apologized when he saw Matt’s shocked face; Neil voluntarily reaching out was rare. “I don’t want to sleep yet.”

“It’s too bad I don’t know any epic poems,” lamented Matt. “That would put you right to sleep.”

“Just stay,” pleaded Neil. “And talk.”

“Your eyelids are drooping.”

“I don’t like boats,” said Neil. “Bad memories. The last time I was on a boat was … unpleasant. Can’t let my thoughts wander.”

“You just want me to talk?” asked Matt.

“You could sing.”

Matt laughed. “My singing is pretty terrible. You might decide to shuffle off the mortal coil just to escape the noise.”

Neil chuckled and then clutched his ribs. “Sing.”

“I know Zemeni lullabies or Kerch drinking songs.”

“Drinking songs,” requested Neil. “I like the the one about the sailor who drank a lot. Do you know it?”

“That describes all drinking songs,” complained Matt, but he started to sing.

“Oh, wow,” said Neil. “You really are terrible at singing. I can’t even tell if this is the song I requested or not.”

“I warned you,” said Matt, sounding affronted.

“Teach me the chorus,” demanded Neil.

Matt obliged and the two of them sang and laughed together, hardly noticing the racket they were making until the door to the cabin opened and Renee came in.

“What’s happening?” she asked worriedly, before she noticed that Neil was awake. “Oh, thank the Saints. I thought Matt was wailing in grief.”
“Hey!” cried Matt. “My singing is not *that* bad.”

“Yes it is,” said Neil. “I’m fine,” he told Renee. “I hear it’s thanks to you. I owe you a debt.”

“And *you* owe Allison money,” added Matt.

Renee smiled placidly. “You do not owe me anything.”

“I’ll name another knife after you,” decided Neil. Each of Neil’s five knives had been fabricated after he had escaped a life-threatening situation and named for the person who had saved him. Those were his Saints: not all-powerful deities, but everyday people who had protected him when he needed it. Renee, when she had still been called Natalie, had earned her knife when she’d been the one to figure out that he’d been caught in a trap by Riko and Jean.

“Six is a better number of knives than five,” approved Renee. “*Sankta* Renee has a nice ring to it, yes?”

“Isn’t humility one of the cherished virtues of your religion?” asked Matt.

“We can’t all be as humble as you are, Matt,” said Renee serenely.

Matt grinned and then outright laughed as something occurred to him. “Allison is going to hit the roof,” chuckled Matt. “She’s been angling to get a knife named after her for ages. You’ll have to be careful, Neil. She’ll probably resort to putting you into danger just so that she can save you.”

“She’s like no one I’ve ever met,” smiled Renee. “She surprises me.”

“Yes, like finding a swarm of bees in your dresser drawer,” said Matt. “Or when you pick a beautiful flower and it slices your hands to ribbons with its thorns.”

“She wears her abrasiveness like armour,” Renee acknowledged. “Was she very different before Seth’s death?”

“We didn’t know her before,” explained Matt. “She didn’t leave her parents’ house and join the Foxes until after she found out that her father had paid to have Seth killed.”

Neil ducked his head, but he knew that he had caught Matt’s attention. “It wasn’t your fault, Neil.”

“It was, at least partially,” shrugged Neil, feigning nonchalance. “I provided the information that allowed him to be murdered.”

“But you couldn’t have known what they had planned,” argued Matt.

“It wouldn’t have mattered if I had,” said Neil. “I would have sold them the information anyway. It’s not his death that bothers me; he wasn’t the first person whose death was my responsibility and he certainly wasn’t the last. It was, however, the first time that I had to face someone’s grief in the aftermath.”

“Your apathy towards death always makes me worry for your sanity,” said Matt.

“Andrew’s also apathetic,” defended Neil.

“Yes, Andrew’s a paragon of mental health,” said Matt dryly.

“Is Andrew completely desensitized to death? Allison mentioned that he seemed perturbed after killing Riko,” said Renee hesitantly.
“That was probably due to finding out about Proust’s crew,” said Matt. “Or, you know, he was worried about Neil.”


“Riko said that he was supposed to slow us down to give Proust’s crew a chance to reach Kevin first,” explained Matt.

“Fuck,” breathed Neil. No wonder Andrew had been uncommunicative for days. Proust being involved meant that the Ravens were involved which complicated things.

“Do you know him?” asked Renee.

“Only by reputation,” answered Neil, his thoughts swirling. Proust claimed that he was a medik, but it was more accurate to say that he was a sadist. His stated aim was to truly understand pain; he used that as an excuse to torture as many people as possible in the name of research. He was manipulative and intelligent and the Ravens have provided his ‘research subjects’ for a long time, so he was in their debt and therefore easily controlled.

Neil knew that he had to focus on recovering as quickly as possible. It would be important to Andrew to beat Proust to both Kevin and the thirty million krugre reward and Andrew would require Neil’s support and skills in order to succeed. Maybe Andrew didn’t consider Neil his friend, but he did rely on him and Neil wasn’t about to let him down.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

“This is stupid,” said Thea. “The plan won’t work.”
Chapter Summary

In which Thea hates everyone and everything.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thea was bent over the railing of the boat taking deep breaths of air and trying to prevent her lunch from making a reappearance. She hated travelling by boat, all the incessant bobbing and the ground shifting underfoot. And to make matters worse, no one else seemed to be as affected as she was. All these criminals, who made their living next to the canals of Ketterdam, were used to hopping from boat to boat on the waterways of their filthy city. They’d all found their sea legs quickly, with only the soft one, Nicky, requiring any adjustment time at all. And yet, five days into their journey, Thea was still struggling to refrain from vomiting again. She hated them all.

The air had been thick with tension for the first few days of the voyage, but now, with Neil awake and currently walking slow laps of the deck with Allison and Matt for company, the atmosphere was more relaxed. Only the blond monster - who was currently keeping a close watch over Neil with hard eyes and an inscrutable expression from his place beside the captain, Dan, at the wheel - refrained from obviously giving in to the relief and happiness that swept through the crew.

Thea took stock of where all the other Foxes were located. The Squaller, Betsy, was standing under the sails, summoning wind to move them faster toward their destination. Renee (who had Tailored her appearance back to her original features so that she wouldn’t stand out in Shu Han) lounged near her feet, chatting amicably. Nicky and Erik stood partway down the deck, looking at what appeared to be their blueprints of Evermore and arguing.

Andrew appeared to notice Nicky and Erik at the same time she did, for he headed towards them and motioned that she should join them. She took a couple deep breaths to ensure that the worst of her nausea had passed and walked over to join them.

“Why isn’t this map labelled?” Erik was asking as she got there.

“I don’t know how to spell the Shu names,” Nicky defended himself. “Thea should fill it in.” He looked towards Thea and sighed. “Can you please stop glaring at me? It’s making me nervous.”

“No.”

“How else would we know how she felt about us?” asked Erik.

“This is stupid,” said Thea. “The plan won’t work.”

“You don’t even know anything but the basic plan,” argued Nicky. “No one but Andrew does.”

“I know it won’t work,” she countered. “In through the prison and out through the embassy? It’s preposterous: the prison isn’t connected to the embassy. There’s no way to reach our destination from our starting point.”
“Roof,” said Andrew succinctly, the first thing she had heard him say in days.

“There’s no access to the roof,” said Thea. “I’ve had shifts in the prison sector and the roof is completely inaccessible for entirely that reason. The prison is sealed off from the rest of Evermore. Once you’re in there’s no escaping.”

“Five floors, right?” asked Andrew, pulling out the prison blueprints. “Ground floor has processing and short term holding cells and then there are four floors of cells.” He pointed at the drawing and she nodded. “What’s here? In the basement?”

“Nothing,” she said, surprised at his question. “The laundry room with the incinerator where convicts’ clothes are burnt when they arrive.”

He nodded as if he had expected this. “The incinerator.”

“What about it?” asked Thea, before she realized what he meant. “You want us to climb six stories up an incinerator shaft?”

“It won’t be on. At least I think it won’t. When does it run?”

“Early morning,” she replied faintly. “How do you expect us to—”

“He doesn’t expect us to do it,” Erik cut in, before raising his voice and yelling. “Oi, Neil!” he shouted. “Have you heard about this?”

Neil, trailed by Allison and Matt, walked over with a curious look in his eyes. Renee also got up to join their meeting.

“Andrew here expects you to climb six stories up a chimney while carrying a rope with you so that the rest of us can follow,” explained Erik. Allison and Matt reacted with visible disbelief.

Neil chewed his lip. “Do you have a backup plan?” he asked Andrew. Andrew simply gazed at him in silence, which caused Neil’s lips to quirk up into a smile. “Oh, I see,” he said. “The backup plan is to be stuck in prison.”

Andrew turned wordlessly away, which caused the smile to slip off Neil’s face and a furrow to appear between his brows. “Can you do it?” Andrew asked.

“You know I can,” said Neil, sounding a little puzzled.

“Which is good, considering our lack of alternative options,” said Erik, obviously trying to break the sudden inexplicable tension.

“Are we still planning an approach from the south even though we know that the Ravens have already sent a crew ahead of us?” asked Renee.

“We can’t sail directly into Bhez Ju,” said Thea. “They’ll be checking everyone’s identification in preparation for Winter Banquet.”

“Hearing this plan kind of makes me think that we’re all going to die,” said Nicky.

“If we die, promise that your ghost will teach my ghost to play the flute so that we can annoy Andrew’s ghost for all eternity as punishment,” Erik grinned at him.

“Andrew’s ghost would stab your ghost in the throat,” predicted Matt.
“Or Andrew’s ghost would beat your ghost with the flute,” said Allison.

“I’d hire Thea’s ghost to protect me,” said Erik loftily.

“My ghost would never associate with any of your ghosts,” said Thea harshly, before realizing what she had just said and stalking away angrily in an attempt to regain her obviously lost sanity.

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She caught her first glimpse of the southwestern coast of Shu Han the following afternoon and was shocked at how painful she found the view. She had been steadfastly ignoring her homesickness since her escape from prison, but the sight of her homeland - the land that she was currently planning to commit treason against - brought about all the feelings of anger and resentment she had been trying to bury.

Dan decided to wait for evening to make land, hoping to cover their approach by darkness, so Thea spent the rest of the day helping the Foxes in a flurry of preparation. Andrew advised that no one take anything that had any value to them; they would be stripped of all belongings when they entered the prison. Matt and Erik had particular guns that they didn’t pack, Allison removed a necklace that she always wore, Andrew traded his fox-head cane for a nondescript walking stick, and Neil did not bring his named knives.

Thea was impressed by Neil’s resilience; despite dark circles around his eyes and an appearance of exhaustion, he worked as hard as anyone else, moving without obvious stiffness and not displaying any pain.

They spent the night on the ship, planning to disembark in the morning. The sky was just turning pink as they assembled on deck, ready to set off. Dan kissed Matt deeply as a send off and promised to meet them all in Bhez Ju in one week’s time.

“No mourners,” she called as they made their way off the ship.

“No funerals,” replied the others.

The path was not difficult as they made their way slightly inland. They were disguised as a hunting party but it would be better if they didn’t encounter anyone as they were a noteworthy group.

Now that they were alone, Andrew was willing to share as much of his plan as he felt they needed to know. “Hopefully we’ll be able to get in, get Kevin, and get out without anyone being the wiser,” he said. “We should be taken to the short term holding cells when we first enter the prison, and Thea says that those cells are only visited four times a day for head counts. Therefore, we have six hours to get out of our cells, get to the roof, pass across the bridge to the Inner Court, find Kevin, and leave.”

“What about the other prisoners in the short term holding cells?” asked Thea.

“Erik and Renee have that covered,” replied Andrew.

“How are we going to get out of the holding cells?” was Nicky’s question.

“Leave that to me. Once we’re out of the cells, we’ll have to split up. Neil, Erik, and Matt will go find rope and any other useful supplies in the stables, while Nicky and I go to get Allison, Thea, and Renee out of the women’s holding cells. We’ll then meet in the laundry room. While Neil is climbing, Allison and Nicky will scour the surrounding area for anything that can be used for demo, while Matt and I will look for anything else of value. Thea, Renee, and Erik will search the upper floors of the prison to ensure that Kevin isn’t being kept there.”
“How will Kevin trust us to come with us if we find him?” asked Renee.

“He provided a code word in his letter to the Merchant Council so that he’d know that whoever they sent would take him back to Kerch. It’s sesh-uyeh.” Thea nodded. It meant ‘heartsick’ in Shu, which she supposed was appropriate.

“Are we sure we should let Thea wander around the prison by herself?” asked Erik.

“Thea knows prison protocols and Renee can disable guards silently. You’re to make sure that Thea doesn’t suddenly decide to attack Renee or betray us.”

“I agreed to this mission,” said Thea, hotly. “I don’t break my word.”

“I’ll believe that when I see it,” said Andrew. “The patrols in the rest of the prison make the rounds every two hours and we can’t risk them raising the alarm. We’ll time our movements using the chimes from the Inner Court clock. We will have to make it up the incinerator shaft by eight bells, no exceptions.”

“Then we use to roof to move over to the embassy?” asked Nicky.

“Yes. Thea says that the upper floors of the embassy have living quarters and offices of some of the embassy workers. We’ll search those quickly and quietly to find appropriate clothes. Or, we’ll ‘borrow’ appropriate garb by knocking out the visiting dignitaries. Then Thea, Renee, Neil and I will pass over the bridge to the Inner Court to find Kevin.”

“Why does this sound like I’m going to end up babysitting Nicky again?” asked Erik.

“Allison and Nicky will be in charge of creating as many explosives as possible; we may need distractions if anything goes wrong. Or we may need to destroy the bridge on our way back to town to hold off pursuers if anyone notices that Kevin is missing.”

“So what are Matt and I doing?” wondered Erik.

“Babysitting.”

Matt laughed and Erik swore. “So how do we get out of Evermore?” asked Allison.

“We walk out the Embassy gate. All the attention will be on screening guests who are entering Evermore, nobody’s going to be looking at the people leaving.”

“The guards will recognize Kevin,” protested Thea.

“He will undergo a little bit of Tailoring to prevent that,” said Andrew.

“I’m not sure that I can Tailor him well enough to fool them,” said Renee.

“Don’t worry about that,” replied Andrew. “Neil will take care of it.”

There were a couple beats of silence and then everyone but Andrew turned to stare at Neil.

“So I guess now is when I reveal my secret identity,” he muttered before turning his attention back to everyone else. “Surprise! I’m a Grisha.”

“What kind of Grisha?” demanded Allison, amid all the other exclamations of shock.

“A Tailor, mostly,” said Neil. “I’m also a passable Fabrikator.”
“A Fabrikator?” cried Matt. “You can make stuff? Like what?”

“Well I made my knives,” shrugged Neil. “They’re Grisha steel. And my specialized climbing shoes; I needed to mould the rubber to my feet. Oh, and Andrew’s cane. It has a carbon core so that it’s really strong but light.”

Matt was giving Neil a look of delight. “You’re the best,” he said while ruffling Neil’s hair. “I should be surprised and annoyed that you’ve kept this a secret, but I’m just so impressed.”

“I kept it secret for my safety,” said Neil quietly. “Don’t be angry with me.”

“Oh, Neil, you mysterious, amazing jellyfish,” said Allison with a huge dramatic sigh. “I suppose we still love you, even if you lied right to our beautiful faces.”

“It’s not like we didn’t already know you were a secretive bastard,” put in Erik.

“Moving on,” said Andrew loudly.

“What, we can’t take a moment to absorb the fact that Neil’s literally magical?” asked Matt.

“Grisha powers are technically science, not magic,” said Renee.

“Talk about it later on your own time,” said Andrew. “Now, there are three different alarms that we should be aware of. Thea?”

“Yellow protocol is a sector disturbance, Red protocol is a sector breach, and Black protocol is lockdown,” said Thea, the treasonous words sliding easily off her tongue. The longer she participated with the group the easier she found it to reveal information that she had vowed to take to her grave. “When each protocol is triggered, the bell in the Inner Court clock tower alerts all the guards. Each protocol has a different pattern.”

“Can you mimic them so that we’ll be able to tell the difference between them?” asked Nicky.

Thea sighed deeply. “Fine,” she said shortly. “This is yellow: bing bong bong bong bing. This is red: bong bong bing bing bong. And this is black: bing bong bing bong.”

“I missed that,” said Matt. “What was red?”

“Bong bong bing bing bong.”

“And yellow?” asked Allison.

“Bing bong bong bong bing.”

“And red again?” asked Erik, innocently.

“I hate all of you,” replied Thea.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

“We’re surrounded!” cried Matt. “Take cover!”
Chapter Summary

In which the Foxes get ambushed. Again.

Chapter Notes

A big, big thank you to everyone who is reading and commenting. You're all keeping me motivated to continue writing this story.

Warnings: minor violence

They continued travelling north, keeping to hunting trails and staying in the cover of the forest. They were all chattering ceaselessly, trying to hammer out the precise details of Andrew’s plan. Allison and Nicky discussed the likely chemicals and resources they might find and what types of explosives may be of most use. Neil was continually stretching and climbing the trees, restoring his muscles after his injury. Thea was bombarded by questions: about the numbers and placements of guards, patrol routes, surveillance points. Renee could tell that answering the questions was weighing on her; despite her desire to rescue Kevin she still rebelled against being a traitor to her country.

Renee supposed that she, too, was technically committing treason. She had, after all, been born and lived most of her life in Shu Han. It didn’t feel that way to her, though. She was less affected than she had expected at being on her native land for the first time in over a year. The only joy she derived at being here stemmed from being outside of the city. She felt more at peace away from the crowds and pollution; she decided that she would move outside of the city once she had fulfilled her contract with the Foxes.

Maybe her indifference to her motherland was due to the fact that she had never been in this part of the country so it wasn’t familiar to her, but she suspected that it was due to the misery she had experienced here. Her only loyalty now was to the Foxes.

Shortly after joining the Foxes, she had moved out of the Foxhole and into her room at the White Rose. She had found the atmosphere of the Foxhole far too oppressive, with people being friendly and curious all the time. Her room at the White Rose was quiet and private and all hers.

At first she didn’t go out much. She had helped Jean find a place with the Trojans (the Foxes didn’t want him since they were still upset about his role in Neil’s attempted capture) so her obligation to get him to safety was complete and she no longer needed to associate with him at all. She visited with Abby frequently, as she had come to admire the older woman and took comfort in her presence and advice. Other than that, she left only when she was required to perform jobs for the Foxes. Andrew had been accepting of her decision to no longer kill; he claimed that leaving piles of bodies around would draw unwanted attention from the stadwatch anyway. She much preferred her current life to her previous life, but she didn’t notice how lonely she was until Allison had forced her way in.
After about a month of living at the White Rose, she had found Allison patiently waiting for her in her room following a meeting with a client. She had been slightly surprised.

“Is there a job for me?” she had asked, assuming that explained Allison’s presence. So far, only Neil and Andrew had ever come with instructions for her. She had learned that Andrew disliked West Stave in general and brothels in particular and only came to talk to her when it was very important. Neil had been skittish and wary of her since his encounter with Riko, so she supposed it made sense that one of the other Foxes would be put in charge of keeping her informed.

“Nope,” replied Allison.

“Alright,” said Renee calmly, sitting down. “What can I help you with, then?”

Allison had smiled widely. “You’re not intimidated by me at all, are you?”

“All the others seem completely unaffected,” replied Allison with a shrug. “It’s refreshing. It will make it harder for me to browbeat you into doing me a favour, though.”

Maybe you could start by simply asking?” suggested Renee.

“It’s obvious you haven’t been a Fox for long,” Allison smirked. “Asking is not my forte. Anyway, I’d like for you to Tailor me.”

Renee had not been expecting that. “I’m not a very skilled Tailor,” she explained. “I can’t change your appearance very much.”

“I just want some extra shine in my hair and some colour on my lips and cheeks,” said Allison. “I have a date tonight and I want to look my best.”

Renee considered. She couldn’t see the harm in agreeing. “It won’t last for long,” she warned. “Tailoring has to be redone fairly frequently. But, alright. Let me just get my kit.”

Allison had chatted away as Renee worked some colour onto her face, removed the dark circles under her eyes, and added some glossiness to her blonde hair.

Afterwards, Allison had checked her face in the mirror and smiled. “Much better than makeup,” she said happily. “I’ll have to come to you more often.”

Renee had enjoyed the half hour of irreverent chatter and gossip so she nodded in agreement.

“I’ll take you out for waffles as a repayment,” promised Allison as she was leaving. “You definitely need to get out more. Oh, and don’t mention this to anyone, alright? Dan would be annoyed if she found out I was using the gang Heartrender for such ‘frivolous pursuits’.”

Allison had returned the following day to take her out to eat and to give her a rundown of how awfully her date had gone.

This became routine. Allison would pop by for Tailoring and would always take Renee out afterwards. Sometimes it was by themselves, and sometimes it was to socialize with other Foxes. She took her to see all the sights of Ketterdam, showing her the less seedy parts of town and introducing
her to Kerch theatre and music. In return, Renee began to open up to her. She shared more of her thoughts and feelings than she ever had with anyone other than Abby; her distaste for killing, her guilt for previous assassinations, her lack of guilt over betraying her mother. She told her of her tentative desires for her life - how she admired Abby, Wymack, and Betsy’s attempts to help troubled teenagers in the Barrel, and how one day she wanted to help children with no other place to go. Allison always listened patiently and attentively, offering advice and support. She was so unapologetically confident and sure of herself that Renee found herself falling for her brash, fearless friend.

One evening, about three months before their departure for Shu Han, Allison had been sitting in her customary spot in Renee’s room undergoing Tailoring when she had sighed deeply. “Ghezen, I don’t know why I bother,” she complained. “All my dates recently have been terrible.”

Renee was aware of this, having listened to Allison list off the faults of each of her past dates. “What’s going wrong?” she asked.

“Well, I know it’s not a problem with me. I’m a catch,” said Allison. “But all the guys recently have been expecting me to be a well behaved rich, polite noble. Like my father wanted me to be. They can’t seem to handle the fact that my biceps are bigger than theirs or that I’m taller than they are. All of them want me to change, to be someone I’m not. I’m not stupid enough to change myself for them.”

Renee had hummed and continued her ministrations. “Hey, I don’t mean that you’re stupid for wanting to be different,” said Allison suddenly. “Changing for others is unnecessary, but you’re trying to change because you want to. That’s brave.” She paused in thought. “I changed,” she continued softly. “After Seth died, I had to. It was difficult to give up all the comforts of my life but I couldn’t live with my parents anymore. I needed to give myself armour to survive in the Barrel. And I couldn’t allow myself to be hurt again. I changed to protect myself.”

“Then the problem with the men you’re dating is that they can’t see how wonderful you really are.”

“They’re all insecure in their masculinity, that’s the problem.”

“There is a solution for that,” said Renee carefully. “You could date women instead.”

Allison had looked up at her and a slow smile had spread across her face. “Yeah?”

Renee cleared her throat, her stomach filled with butterflies. “Personally, I’ve always found women preferable.”

“You could be right about that,” sighed Allison, before sliding her a sly look. “Unfortunately I don’t know how to find a woman to date me. Do you have any suggestions?”

“Maybe you could start by simply asking?” teased Renee, happiness spreading through her.

“Yeah?” asked Allison, poking her in the arm. “You know someone who would be interested in someone as fabulous as me?”

“Who wouldn’t be interested in someone as fabulous as you?” Renee sobered a little. She didn’t think that she was ready for a relationship. She had only been allowed to be her own person for less than a year. Allison deserved a complete person, not someone damaged who was still learning how to be a better person. “I know someone who is definitely interested, but she needs to do a little personal improvement before she’ll be ready for a commitment.”

“Well, I happen to think that she’s personally fine,” huffed Allison. “But I’m willing to wait for her
of her mother’s death. But this situation was different. And, if she was being honest with herself, it wasn’t like Allison didn’t already have that power over her. It seemed likely that she was just being a coward about the whole thing; when they arrived back in Ketterdam she would let Allison know that she was willing to try.

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On the fourth day of their march northwards, Renee was feeling anxious. She couldn’t pinpoint exactly what was causing her distress, but her mind was warning her of danger. Erik also seemed unsettled, and Neil was obviously also perturbed; he was twitchier than normal, enough that Andrew (who had more or less been ignoring him since his injury) had started talking quietly to him while grasping the back of his neck to try to calm him down.

“Calm the fuck down, Neil,” he growled. Renee was surprised that this seemed to actually have a positive effect.

They had just entered a small clearing and everyone was on high alert when Renee realized what was causing the hair on the back of her neck to stand up: there were no ambient noises. She couldn’t hear anything around them. This was a tactic she recognized. “We’re not alone,” she said.

Neil instantly vanished, climbing a nearby tree, and Nicky dropped to the ground to dig through his pack. Everyone else brandished their weapons and stood with their backs facing each other, peering out into the surrounding forest.

The attack came suddenly. A burst of fire spilled towards them but expertly avoided anything flammable. *Obviously an Inferni*, thought Renee. *That’s two Grisha they have. Oh, Saints, don’t let them have a Heartrender.* Wind was currently whipping around them courtesy of the Squaller who also would have been responsible for muffling the sound of their approach. Shots rang out nearby, bullets hitting the trees around them, but the wind was blowing leaves in their faces and preventing them from getting a clear look at their surroundings.

“We’re surrounded!” cried Matt. “Take cover!”

“Stay near the trees!” called Renee.

A series of whistles came down from the treetops, which Renee recognized as a Fox communication signal.

“Four attackers that Neil can see,” said Andrew. “Gunshots are from the north.”

Erik had taken cover behind a tree, peeking out towards the north. Renee swivelled her head, continually reaching out with her power, but she couldn’t hurt what she couldn’t see. Fire continued to lick at them from the east, but as long as they stayed close to the trees it didn’t come close enough to touch them. Obviously the attackers were not interested in starting a forest fire.

“I need to draw out the shooter and then distract them,” explained Erik, ducking as a bullet hit the tree near his head. “Got anything for me, merchling?”
Nicky began lobbing small firecrackers northwards.

“I see him,” said Erik. “Throw another one, about twenty degrees to the west.” He followed the colourful explosion with a single gunshot. “Got him.”

The fire suddenly disappeared, followed by a short whistle, indicating that Neil had dealt with the Inferni.

Renee saw movement out of the corner of her eye, but couldn’t see the attacker well enough to deal with them. She motioned to Allison, who sent a flurry of shots into the underbrush in the direction that Renee had indicated. The whipping wind abruptly ceased.

“Think I got that Squaller,” remarked Allison.

“Where’s the last one?” asked Nicky fearfully before he was harshly shushed.

Renee listened closely to the surrounding sounds. Without the Squaller blocking sound waves she could hear the forest noises quite clearly, including the almost inaudible sound of footsteps coming from the west. She pointed and the Foxes split up, moving quietly to try to flank the attacker. A sudden gunshot rang through the silence.

“Clear!” came Matt’s voice. “Got her!”

They retrieved their attackers’ bodies and met back in the clearing where they had been ambushed.

“Bandits,” spit Thea when she got a good luck at them.

“Why did they attack?” asked Nicky. “There’s only four of them and eight of us.”

“Two of them are Grisha,” pointed out Erik. “They were obviously experienced at ambushing.”

“Do you think there are more of them around?” questioned Matt.

“They probably have a camp close by,” answered Renee.

“Friends of yours?” Thea asked Renee scornfully.

“No,” said Renee, examining the tattoos on the insides of the bandits’ right wrists. Much like Barrel gangs Shu bandits inked their affiliations into their skin. She had gotten rid of her own serpent as soon as she had broken from her former associates. “As you can see I don’t have their tattoo.”

“Just because you removed your mark doesn’t mean you’re not one of them anymore,” argued Thea.

“I removed my tattoo for exactly that reason,” said Renee. “Not all of us _chose_ to be branded.” She indicated the small black M that adorned Thea’s cheekbone. All members of the Moriyamas’ household wore the mark and seemed inordinately attached to it; even Jean had refused to have his removed even though it would had provided him anonymity.

Thea clapped her hand protectively over her tattoo, anger and uncertainty flashing over her face. “I am not like you.”

“You can get off your moral high horse anytime,” said Allison. “You’re helping us commit criminal activities; you’re not so different from us.”

“How am I supposed to do this?” Thea demanded, her voice cracking. “No matter what I do I’ll be betraying _someone_. ”
“You should have thought of that before you joined us,” replied Allison sharply. “You can’t back out now.”

“I’ve just been reminded of something important,” spoke up Andrew, sounding bored but derailing the argument. “We will likely be stripped and searched upon our entrance to the prison, so everyone’s tattoos will have to be removed. We don’t want anyone to be able to figure out our affiliations, especially Thea’s.”

Almost everyone spoke up in outrage. Renee agreed with their objections; she didn’t want her symbol of the Foxes removed from her.

“It’s okay,” Neil assured them all. “I left ink on the Palmetto and I can redo your tattoos as soon as we’re back on board. I don’t even need to use needles, I can just sink the ink into your skin.”

After some more mandatory grumbling, everyone eventually agreed to have their tattoos removed. Neil and Renee went to work using their Tailoring skills to remove the ink from under everyone’s skin. It did not escape Renee’s notice that Andrew did not seem to have a tattoo to remove.

Renee approached Thea, who was sitting a little apart from everybody looking despondent. She allowed Renee to remove her tattoo without protest.

“Yuyeh sesh,” said Renee quietly, speaking Shu words to try to comfort the other woman. Despise your heart. Do your duty. The words her mother had told her over and over. Even now they inspired her, despite her negative feelings for the woman who had spoken them.

Thea wordlessly met her eyes and nodded. Renee wondered how Thea would interpret the words. Would she ignore her loyalty to her country to go through with the treasonous plan? Or would she disregard her feelings for Kevin and the promises she had made and betray them all?

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

“Is it too late to decide that we’d rather go in as entertainers?” asked Erik. “Apparently Nicky can play a mean jig on the flute.”
They arrived in Bhez Ju mid-morning on the day before Winter Banquet. The town was a hive of activity, everyone excited for the following day’s celebrations. Neil looked towards the harbour, hoping that Dan and the *Palmetto* had managed to dock successfully, flying their Kerch merchant flag and bringing goods for trade. If they had not arrived then their attempted escape tomorrow would be extremely short lived.

Their group managed to join the flood of travellers and traders that were making their way into Bhez Ju and found themselves in the Upper city. Neil had been worried that Andrew, Allison, and Erik’s fair hair would draw attention but there were enough foreigners in town for the festivities that their group managed to melt into the milling crowds.

They walked until they found a run down tavern that boasted a single benefit: an outdoor terrace on the roof. They were brought slightly suspect food that none of them touched; they couldn’t afford food poisoning so close to their planned prison break.

From where they sat they had a clear view of a checkpoint that guarded the path up to Evermore, one of two according to Thea. Four guards were stationed there.

They were all growing impatient by the time a prison wagon pulled into the checkpoint. Its roof and high sides were covered in black canvas and it was pulled by four horses. One of the drivers handed a packet of papers to a guard, and then escorted him around to the back where the door, padlocked and barred, was unlocked and opened. The prisoners inside were sitting along the benches on the side of the wagon, hands and feet shackled and wearing black sacks over their heads.

“*Ghezen*,” swore Allison, clear discomfited. The apprehension emanating from everyone was almost palpable. Even Andrew looked uncomfortable about the prospect of being in that wagon.

“Is it too late to decide that we’d rather go in as entertainers?” asked Erik. “Apparently Nicky can play a mean jig on the flute.” Nicky blushed and looked away.

“We go in as prisoners,” said Andrew.

“How often do the wagons run?” asked Matt after sighing resignedly.

“In the morning,” answered Thea. “Sometimes in the afternoon, but I would suspect that they won’t want to bring prisoners in when guests are at Evermore.”

“Then we’ll make sure we catch the morning wagon,” said Andrew.

“The guards will notice eight extra prisoners,” said Thea impatiently. “They do headcounts at each checkpoint and compare it to the paperwork provided by the drivers.”
“If only I’d considered that,” said Andrew dryly. “Oh, well. I guess we’d better go home.”

“Bunk biscuit?” guessed Erik.

“Was that gibberish?” asked Thea.

“It’s a thieves’ term,” explained Matt. “When people are walking through an area known for crime, for example the Barrel, they tend to keep patting their wallet to check that it’s still there. However, what they’re actually doing is broadcasting the location of their wallet to everyone paying attention.”

“Nicky does it all the time,” put in Erik.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” asked Nicky.

Erik shrugged. “It’s more amusing watching you wander around completely out of your element.”

“Anyway,” Matt cut in. “A good thief will replace the wallet with something of similar size and shape, a so-called bunk biscuit, so that the mark will still think their wallet’s there, and the thief will be long gone by the time the theft is noticed.”

“Duping innocent people is nothing to be proud of,” said Thea sullenly.

“It is if you do it well,” said Andrew. “We’ll remove eight prisoners and lock ourselves in their places.”

“The wagon door locks on the outside,” pointed out Thea.

“That would only be a problem for an amateur,” answered Andrew.

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Neil woke with a start early the following morning. After their observation of the prison wagon, he and Renee (the only two of them who spoke Shu other than Thea) had been sent out to chat with locals in search of information. It hadn’t taken them long to find that the prison wagons always stopped at a small tavern about two miles up the road toward Evermore. The tavern had been too crowded to risk planning their switch there, so they had continued farther up the road until they found an area with suitable cover, surrounded by trees. They had set up camp, and Matt left to keep watch down the path in order to give them advance warning when the wagon was on its way.

When Neil awoke, Andrew was already busy melting the paraffin wax that Neil had brought from Ketterdam over the embers of their fire.

“Thea says it should be soon,” said Andrew in response to Neil’s questioning look as he handed him the soft wax. Neil wrapped the wax around both his forearms tightly until it was nearly indistinguishable from his skin. Renee was doing the same. Andrew went back to ignoring him and watching for Matt’s signal. Neil was trying not to be hurt by Andrew’s indifference towards him. He knew that Andrew was preoccupied with thinking of his plan and worrying about Proust’s potential presence at Evermore, but he had become accustomed to Andrew’s attention. Neil had asked Matt if he thought that Andrew was acting strangely, but Matt had just given him a puzzled look and told him that Andrew was acting completely in character. The only other time that Andrew had acted this coldly towards Neil had been following Robin’s recruitment and their ensuing argument. Neil wondered if he’d said something that had angered Andrew when he’d been mostly unconscious following his injury. He’d have to find a way to apologize.

A flare went up in the sky and it was followed by a sharp popping and cracking noise. Neil was on
his feet instantly, reaching for his knives, even though he’d already disarmed himself in preparation for their imprisonment.

“Calm down, twitchy, it’s just Nicky,” explained Allison. Neil got up and walked to the road with the others, where Nicky was pouring some substance on a tree’s roots. The roots then withered, curling up out of the soil.

“He told me that it was salt concentrate,” said Renee.

With the tree’s roots out of the soil, Erik and Thea were able to easily push it over, blocking the road. This way, the wagon’s drivers would not be suspicious since it appeared that the tree had fallen naturally. Then they all climbed into a nearby ditch to wait for the wagon.

“Remember,” Andrew said, “the prisoners will be hooded so we can’t talk or we’ll raise their suspicions. As far as they know it’s a routine stop.” The rest of them nodded in agreement.

After several minutes, the wagon trundled into sight, coming to a stop by the fallen tree. The drivers looked down at it, before complaining loudly. They climbed out of the wagon and started unhitching two of the horses to pull the tree out of the road.

Andrew went to the back of the wagon and quickly unlocked the door. Then he froze.

“What’s wrong?” asked Allison quietly from beside Neil. Neil shrugged and motioned for everyone to remain where they were while he investigated. He approached Andrew slowly, trying not to startle him. He motioned a hand in front of Andrew’s face so that he could see it before he grasped his sleeve and gave a tug. Andrew’s eyes locked onto his. Neil made a questioning face, but Andrew didn’t react. He turned to look inside the wagon and paused.

Unlike yesterday, the prisoners were not sitting along the benches. There were so many of them that they were standing, packed in like sardines, hands shackled, and necks encased in metal collars that were attached to hooks in the roof.

“Fuck,” he breathed out, understanding Andrew’s hesitance.

But there was no time to waste so he signalled the others. They started unloading some of the passengers, trying to find prisoners with similar skin tone and height to the eight of them. Neil had brought some supplies to perform quick Tailoring to match their appearances as well as possible to the prisoners they were replacing. The two shortest men were obviously chosen, as well as two men with skin of a darker shade.

“What’s going on?” asked one the prisoners in Kerch.

“Quiet!” barked Thea in Shu, startling Neil by sounding exactly like a drill sergeant. The prisoner who had spoken shrank back in fear.

Once eight prisoners had been extracted, Renee slowed their heart rates and injected them with a solution to keep them asleep for several hours before their hoods were removed. There were three Shu, two women and a boy, two Zemeni men, two brown-haired Ravkans, probably a brother and sister, and (Neil shuddered) a Kaelish boy.

“Are we just going to leave them there?” asked Nicky quietly.

“Being free is better than being chained,” replied Neil. “We’re doing them a favour.”

“We’re leaving them unconscious in a ditch,” argued Nicky.
“Quiet,” ordered Andrew - who seemed to have recovered from his previous hesitance - and pushed Nicky towards the wagon.

Nicky was the first to be hooded and locked into place followed by Renee. Meanwhile, Neil was using his copper powder to colour Allison and Erik’s hair brown, and then antimony powder to colour Andrew’s hair black. He did a double take. With his golden eyes, the black hair made Andrew look truly Shu; Neil guessed that his absentee father must have had Shu heritage.

Matt arrived just then, jumping into the wagon to help Allison and Erik get locked into place. Neil quickly discarded his supplies by the side of the road, double checked that his gloves were still in his pocket, and took the opportunity to check on the wagon drivers. The tree was almost out of the road, meaning they likely only had a few minutes to finish up. He gave a short bird call as a signal and joined Andrew around the back. Then, he did the thing that he had been avoiding for over a decade. He removed the dyed colour from his eyes and hair and reverted to his natural Kaelish appearance. He knew that he closely resembled his father as he had been unable to keep up his normal Tailoring during their journey; he usually rounded out his cheeks to give himself a more youthful appearance. He had found that looking like a child allowed him to more easily blend into the background.

Andrew was staring at him. Neil raised an eyebrow in question but Andrew scoffed. “I hate you,” he muttered, climbing into the wagon to lock Matt into place and close the door.

Neil was not sure what he had done to earn Andrew’s hatred this time - usually Andrew only told him he hated him after Neil tried to be funny or nice - but he put it out of his mind and locked the door using the padlock and bolt. He waited a couple seconds and then the other side of the door was pushed open: Andrew had removed the door’s hinges. He slipped through the slim opening and allowed Andrew to attach his hood and shackles. He could hear Andrew replacing the hinges on the door and then felt him take his place beside him. Fastening his own wrist shackles was child’s play for Andrew.

There was shouting in Shu from outside and then someone checked the lock on the door before the wagon began moving again.

Neil could tell the exact moment when Andrew started to panic. His breathing sped up and all his muscles tensed. Being surrounded and pressed up against by strangers while he was in such a vulnerable position would be almost intolerable for him and being blindfolded would mean that he couldn’t ground himself enough to pull out of any flashbacks.

Neil wracked his brain for what he could do to help. He couldn’t handle this feeling of helplessness.

“Robin discovered that Whittier has a mistress,” he eventually blurted out in Ravkan, knowing that none of their companions could understand and that Andrew had no bad memories associated with the language. “She was working as a chamber maid in one of the inns, but I told Katelyn to befriend her and get her a job in one of the Foxes’ taverns as a server. Maybe she’ll be useful, yes?”

Andrew’s breathing hitched a little and its pace slowed slightly, and he leaned a little against Neil. “In the last few weeks, Hemmick has begun buying shares in the coral fisheries of the Southern Colonies, I'm not sure why. Oh, and one of the newer council members, Andritch, is a little in debt. We can probably take advantage of that in the future. I’ll monitor the situation.” Neil took a deep breath.

“Keep talking,” rasped Andrew.

“Okay,” said Neil and continued to chatter aimlessly, first about the happenings in Kettermam, then about some of the places he had lived, letting his voice stay at a low, soothing murmur as the wagon rolled towards Evermore.
Next time:

Matt sent him a thumbs up and muttered, “Well we’ve successfully managed to get ourselves locked in one of the most secure prisons in the world. So we’re either super geniuses or the stupidest assholes who’ve ever lived.”
ANDREW

Chapter Summary

In which the Foxes are imprisoned.

Chapter Notes

All your comments and kudos are greatly appreciated!

Warnings: mention of scars, references to childhood abuse, vague/implied panic attacks, minor implied violence, implied torture

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As Andrew let Neil’s voice wash over him to combat his panic, he realized that he was fighting a losing battle in denying his feelings for Neil, who had become an even bigger problem than he had initially suspected. It was dangerous for him to trust and rely on one person so much. He had tried to distance himself from Neil following his injury, but that had caused nothing but wounded puppy expressions from Neil, which shouldn’t have affected him but made his insides hurt.

Andrew had always been aware how gorgeous Neil was; coupled with Neil’s general cluelessness it had caused many frustrated nights for Andrew. He’d spent more time than he’d ever be willing to admit watching Neil and during their trip through Shu Han he had noticed subtle changes. His injury had caused some weight loss, thinning out his face, making his cheekbones more prominent, and causing him to look older and more attractive than usual. The sun had caused freckles to appear across his nose adding to his overall prettiness, which annoyed Andrew to no end. Then Neil had unveiled his natural Kaelish appearance, all big blue eyes and curly auburn hair, becoming somehow even more attractive, and drawing Andrew’s ire. How dare he be so good looking when Andrew was trying to ignore him?

Then the asshole had recognized Andrew’s panic and knew exactly how to draw him out of his dark thoughts. Being trapped and surrounded and vulnerable led to horrifying memories that he couldn’t dispel. By speaking in Ravkan (a language that Andrew associated with Bee and Neil), Neil managed to comfort him immensely, reminding him of where he was and allowing Andrew’s perfect memory to dredge up less traumatic images.

Neil had been a problem from the very beginning, he reflected. Firstly because he was just so fucking pretty and he was completely oblivious of that fact. Secondly because he seemed to create problems as easily as breathing. Andrew was unsure why he had continued their partnership after all the trouble that Neil had caused following their deal. Even the advantage his information gathering skills had provided had not been worth the aggravation.

The first issue had been about loyalty. The Jackals, a rival gang, had managed to get a jump on the Foxes and ruin one of their schemes. Andrew had been irritated that Neil hadn’t been aware of the Jackals’ plans.
“What use are you if you couldn’t even find out about their planned attack?” Andrew had asked.

Neil had looked at him as if he’d suddenly grown a second head. “Of course I knew about it,” he said, sounding affronted.

“Then why didn’t you tell me?” demanded Andrew.

“You didn’t ask,” Neil replied simply. “I already told you: I don’t give out information for free. Which is why I was the one who sold the information to the Jackals about the Foxes’ plans.”

“You did what?” asked Andrew incredulously. “What about our deal?”

“The deal was that I gather the information you request and that I don’t share your personal secrets. There was nothing about providing you extra information that you didn’t ask for, or about not selling information to others. I have to earn money somehow. I can’t feed myself using your protection.”

“What about you needed compensation?”

“I assumed you knew but weren’t interested in paying me since that isn’t part of our deal.”

Andrew considered whether or not it would just be simpler to strangle Neil, but had sighed deeply and conceded the point. “Idiot,” he said. “Let’s make another deal. You are not to sell any information to any other gangs and I want you to bring me any information that could be useful or relevant, even if I don’t specifically ask for it. In exchange, I will make sure that Wymack compensates you accordingly.”

Neil had agreed and that problem had been resolved.

The second issue that had arisen was Neil’s refusal to deal with any of the Foxes other than Andrew. Although he would report to Wymack, he would only do it under duress. The other Foxes, who were incredibly curious about their new spy, only ever saw him in Andrew’s company and had begun to refer to him as “Andrew’s shadow”. Whenever they tried to corner him, he disappeared like smoke. Andrew understood Neil’s desire to not interact with the others - it wasn’t like Andrew himself wanted to interact with them - but Neil’s complete avoidance was putting a little bit of a kink into some of Foxes’ operations that required group participation and cooperation. Andrew had eventually had to give Neil five truths in order to convince him to interact with the others. Luckily, that had turned out well as he’d become friendly with several of the gang’s members.

The final, and largest, issue was Neil’s smart mouth. Andrew didn’t personally mind his naturally antagonistic attitude; it baffled him, since Neil generally hated being noticed, but he found it mostly amusing. The rest of the Foxes tended to treat Neil like a badly behaved puppy: everything he did was endearing, even when he was being aggravating.

The rival gangs, however, were less tolerant of Neil’s sharp tongue.

When Andrew had first made his deal with Neil he hadn’t anticipated a lot of trouble on his part. Sure, Neil had Riko after him and was obviously running from someone, but he was sneaky and good at disappearing so Andrew assumed that he was able to escape most altercations. He didn’t think that Neil would actually require a lot of protection. He had been wrong.

The first time a fight happened, Dan had accosted Andrew outside the Court to tell him that his shadow was inside instigating a brawl with some Jackals. Andrew had managed to defuse the fight fairly quickly (his reputation alone was enough to scatter the Jackals when he glared at them) and had admonished Neil. Neil had been unrepentant.
The second time, Matt had come to tell him that Neil had been arguing with a couple members of the Bearcats. Matt had come across them as they were dangling Neil over a canal and threatening to slice his throat. Matt had managed to subdue them and Neil had escaped unscathed.

The third time, Andrew had been at the Foxhole when Wymack had come storming in, practically carrying Neil by the scruff of his neck. He had resembled a utterly annoyed mother bulldog dragging her puppy out of mischief.

“What did he do this time?” Andrew had asked tiredly.

“He decided that the best course of action was to call Riko a worthless piece of shit and then punch him in the face,” growled Wymack. “He’s lucky I was there or he probably would have been killed.”

“He deserved it,” said Neil sullenly. He had immediately moved out of Wymack’s reach, something that had not escaped his notice. Wymack gave a little grimace and eased some of the tension out of his shoulders.

“Can you try to tone down your animosity around your enemies?” he asked exasperatedly.

“I can’t,” said Neil. “I have a bit of an attitude problem.” Andrew had snorted at how much of an understatement that was.

Wymack had given Neil a thoroughly unimpressed look before turning back to Andrew. “He’s your responsibility,” he said.

“You are making my job more difficult,” Andrew told Neil. “The next time someone comes for you, stand down. Or disappear into the shadows and escape, like you’re supposed to.”

Neil had just regarded at him balefully, so Andrew had left to find Bee in order to vent his annoyance. She had made him cocoa and watched him shrewdly as he ranted about Neil’s stupidity and apparent death wish.

“This is interesting,” she had commented. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you so affected by someone before.”

“He’s an idiot,” Andrew ground out. “I should carve the skin from his body and hang it outside of the Foxhole as a warning for everyone who is considering irritating me.”

“Still,” said Bee, “it’s good that you’re connecting with and expressing your emotions as we discussed.”

“I didn’t think all consuming frustration and annoyance were the emotions you were talking about.”

Bee had just hummed thoughtfully and continued gazing at him over her own cocoa.

The fourth time, Andrew had been walking down East Stave when he heard shouts from a nearby alley. Investigating, he found a group of Terrapins attacking Neil, who, even in this situation, had not stopped antagonizing them. Andrew had been overcome by fury (both at Neil and at his attackers) and had beaten the four Terrapins within an inch of their lives, breaking another walking stick in the process and almost being caught by the stadwatch.

Afterwards, he had grabbed Neil by the sleeve and dragged him back to his room at the Foxhole. “Is your learning curve a horizontal line?” he asked. “I told you last week after your fight with Riko to stop making my life difficult.”
“I don’t remember promising anything,” replied Neil blithely. “Besides this time it wasn’t my fault. They cornered me when I was sleeping.”

It occurred to Andrew that although Neil had refused a room at the Foxhole, claiming that he didn’t need it, he had no idea where he’d actually been staying. Which was apparently on benches and in alleyways and on roofs, which caused Andrew’s stomach to tighten in fear.

“What happens when you fall and break your legs?” he demanded. “What good would you be then?”

Andrew knew that something had to be done since he was unable to keep a constant eye on Neil in order to uphold his promise of protection. He’d gotten Neil to agree to sleep on his floor, sent Neil to Matt for boxing and self-defense lessons, and decided to teach Neil how to use knives. It was an uphill process, as Neil had some kind of reluctance to use knives despite the fact that he obviously knew how, so Andrew focused on teaching Neil how to think of the knives not as weapons but as protection. Once Neil was able to stab an attacker without having a panic attack afterwards, Andrew considered the lessons successful. Neil had gifted him a light but sturdy fox head cane as thanks.

“This one won’t break, since that seems to be a recurring problem of yours,” Neil told him with a smile. It was the first time that Andrew had seen Neil’s true smile. *Uh oh,* he thought.

Andrew’s wandering thoughts were brought forcefully back to the present as the doors to the prison wagon were thrown open. Then hands - strangers’ hands - were on him and only his extreme level of self control prevented him from lashing out violently. His collar was unlocked and he was dragged out of the wagon. He hoped desperately that none of the other Foxes had noticed his distress; although he didn’t want Neil to have seen his vulnerability, it wouldn’t be the first time. He trusted Neil to never betray him or use his weaknesses against him.

Once the other prisoners had joined him outside the wagon, they were herded forward. He heard some kind of gate mechanism at work and blindly followed the group of prisoners. Eventually the guards shouted some words at them in Shu and Andrew blinked wildly once the sack was pulled off his head.

He found himself in some kind of interior courtyard; they had entered through the prison gate and were now locked in Evermore. The courtyard was encircled by guards monitoring them, and several guards were walking among the prisoners, matching people to the descriptions provided by the wagon drivers’ paperwork.

“Well isn’t this lovely,” said Allison, sneering at the black walls that made the entire courtyard oppressive. A guard shouted at her and slammed his rifle into her stomach, knocking her down. Andrew noticed that every muscle in Renee’s body tensed, but she was smart enough to not visibly react. Allison coughed a little before standing and glaring at the guard who had hit her.

“Andrew,” said Neil quietly, and Andrew felt himself gravitating toward the sound of his voice. His recent panic and the vulnerable situation were causing all his instincts to demand that he place himself within reach of Neil right now.

Andrew’s eyes tracked Neil’s gaze to the top of the prison gate and his breath caught when he found what had seized Neil’s attention. Four men had been impaled on stakes, limbs hanging limply. They were bruised and burned almost beyond recognition, but at least two of them were immediately recognizable as Ravens from their dark tattoos.

“Proust’s crew,” he breathed. Had Proust failed, then? He didn’t think that any of the bodies was Proust’s. Was he still in the prison? His apparent failure was a little nerve-wracking; he was
intelligent enough to have come up with a good plan.

The prisoners were then ushered farther into the prison, passing into a small room where an old woman sat chained, flanked by guards. Her eyes showed no life or comprehension, like she was an empty shell. As each prisoner passed she gripped their wrists.

*A Tester*, thought Andrew. *A human amplifier.* She could sense Grisha power through touch and made sure that the Shu found every Grisha that passed through the prison. Neil’s small frame was tight with tension and fear. Andrew kept one of his hands on the small of Neil’s back as he followed him to be Tested, ready to defend, to distract, if the paraffin on his forearms didn’t work to mask his power from the woman. Neil passed through without incident, as did Renee a few minutes later.

Andrew let out an almost inaudible sigh of relief before the men and women were separated and taken in different directions. The men were led down a corridor that had one black wall on the left and, on the right, a window opening into a large glass enclosure, large enough to house a ship. Inside were various armaments, large artillery, ammunition and bombs, and also strange-looking armoured wagons with large guns on top of them.

“*Torvegen,*” said Erik under his breath. “Those are Fjerdan tanks. They don’t need horses to pull them.”

“Why are they here?” murmured Andrew.

“Fjerda must have sold them,” shrugged Erik. “Maybe they’re hoping that Shu Han will resume their conflict with Ravka? There’s been more skirmishes along the border, now that the Ravkans aren’t always fending off attacks from the south as well.”

“Glass is Grisha made,” said Neil quietly. “Definitely bulletproof, probably impenetrable.”

Andrew filed that information away before his attention was grabbed by Matt. Matt sent him a thumbs up and muttered, “Well we’ve successfully managed to get ourselves locked in one of the most secure prisons in the world. So we’re either super geniuses or the stupidest assholes who’ve ever lived.” Andrew just raised his eyebrow in reply.

They were led into another room, equipped with hoses, shower heads, and drains in the floor. The guards barked something in Shu and several prisoners began disrobing. Andrew felt bile rise in his throat. He’d known this was coming, he just had to endure it. He would be fine. Nothing would happen.

Repeating his mantra, he slowly removed his clothing, leaving his armbands for last. These were not his regular armbands, with sheaths for his knives, but he did not enjoy taking them off where others could see.

His attention was caught by Neil beside him, who was still wearing his undershirt. Neil’s breathing had slightly sped up, and his eyes were wild. *Damn,* thought Andrew, *we can’t both be panicking.* One of them had to be calm enough to ensure that their plan didn’t derail. That thought more than any other succeeded in slowing his heart rate and allowing him to regain his control.

“Neil,” he said lowly. Neil shook his head mutely. One of the guards was headed in their direction. Generally the easiest way to calm Neil down was to grasp the back of his neck, but the fact that they were unclothed and that the guards were watching meant that that was not an option. Andrew tried to catch his eye instead. The guard drew closer. It would be disastrous if he made it to them and tried to force Neil out of his clothing. Andrew would then be forced to kill him, which would probably throw a wrench in their rescue attempt.
Andrew could only think of one thing to say to shock Neil out of his thoughts. “Abram,” he said insistently, quietly enough that no one else could hear the secret name that Neil had trusted him with. Neil’s eyes flew up to meet his and Andrew calmly stared back. He didn’t know what comfort Neil could possibly derive from their eye contact, but Neil relaxed slightly and nodded minutely, closed his eyes, and removed his shirt. There were several shocked murmurings from the guards and the nosier prisoners at the sight of Neil’s bared chest, the horrifying marks of a violent childhood and years on the run. Andrew had seen it all before; the gunshot wound on his upper chest, the many, many burn marks from his mother cauterizing his wounds with her fire, the fine lines made by knives. Neil stared at the floor and didn’t engage with anyone.

Andrew took a quick glance to check on the rest of his companions. Nicky’s eyes were tightly closed and he was mumbling to himself, but Andrew had to send vicious glares at both Matt and Erik who were taking the opportunity to check out Neil’s naked form. Awareness of their surroundings, his own discomfort, and Neil’s obvious unhappiness prevented him from following suit. Honestly, *fuck Neil* for being so distractingly attractive.

They were sent one by one through freezing cold showers and then handed grey cotton tunics and trousers. Andrew was annoyed that the short sleeves bared his arms. He folded them against his chest to hide his scars. After donning the clothes, they were escorted to the short term holding cells.

Andrew was aware of the assessing looks sent by the other prisoners. For some of them, the best idea would be to establish their dominance by picking off weaker prisoners. Due to their height, or lack thereof, he and Neil would be the most obvious targets. Andrew exaggerated his limp to make himself seem more vulnerable, gritting his teeth and thinking that he’d be willing to trade half of his two and a half million *kruge* reward if he could just have the comfort of his fox head cane.

When they got to the cell, Matt herded Neil against a wall and then sat beside him, obviously understanding that Neil was a potential target. He spoke to him quietly and ruffled his hair affectionately, probably commenting on his changed appearance. Erik accompanied Nicky back to claim a spot on a bench, while Andrew lounged indolently near the doorway.

“Hey, you! Cripple,” said one of the mouth breathers in Ravkan. Andrew ignored him. “I’m talking to you, you tiny bastard,” the man tried again in Kerch.

Andrew felt the air shift as the man took a swing at him, but he neatly sidestepped and helped with the forward swing, pushing the man’s arm through the bars until they rammed his shoulder violently. He grabbed the back of the man’s head and smashed it into the bars, then punched him in the kidney for good measure. He then pulled the man back and pushed him against the wall. “Don’t touch me,” he growled and let the man drop to the floor, before returning to his place by the door.

There was a shocked silence in the cell, before murmured conversations resumed. Andrew prevented himself from orbiting towards Neil and tried to think about what he was going to do about Proust. He was mostly satisfied so far; although both he and Neil had almost succumbed to panic nothing had gone disastrously wrong. Now all he had to do was plan and wait.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

“How are we going to get out of here?” said Nicky, sounding close to panic. “We’re stuck in here and we’re going to die.”
ERIK

Chapter Summary

In which there is a minor snag.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Erik felt jittery, wanting to pace, which was abnormal for him. His childhood spent accompanying his father while hunting and the rigid drüskelle training that he’d endured had effectively drilled fidgeting out of him. This whole situation - being trapped in a prison - was getting to him. He’d been so worried and focused on observing the guards for trouble that he hadn’t managed more than a single appreciative glance of Neil’s naked form and shocking scars, and he hadn’t even checked out the others at all.

Although now he wished he’d taken a better look; both Matt and Nicky were attractive, and seeing Andrew vulnerable would have been a novelty. He also wanted to examine the Tailoring that Neil had done to himself. It turned out that red hair and ice blue eyes were a good look for him, and he’d done something subtle to his face making the childish roundness disappear. Andrew’s Tailoring was also quite good: he looked very Shu.

He stopped himself from bouncing his leg. Evermore reminded him too much of the Ice Court. The sight of those torvegen had aroused the strangest pang of homesickness within him. Generally he didn’t miss the Fjerdan palace, since his thoughts always returned to that poor Grisha girl he had been expected to kill. Her desperate pleading, her tears, her blood staining the snow.

His homesickness was generally reserved to thoughts of his childhood village. Of the absolute certainty that he was loved and that he belonged. Of the smell of his mother baking bread and the shrieking laughter of his younger sister. Of his father taking him hunting and teaching him the skills that had been passed down father to son in their family for generations. The lessons his father had imparted about how the trees and the animals were all blessings from Djel and must be honoured. The prayers of thanks to be given after taking a life, either flora and fauna. How all animals would be dangerous if cornered or threatened, so to treat them gently and respectfully.

His attention was drawn back to the present by some movement near the cell door, but it was just Andrew beginning to pace. The other occupants of the holding cell had been giving Andrew space following his demonstration earlier. His obvious agitation was adding to Erik’s unease; he didn’t think he’d ever seen Andrew so outwardly affected by anything before. He wondered what time it was. It felt like they had been locked in here for hours, was it almost six bells?

Erik noticed motion in his peripheral vision and turned towards Nicky, who had started rocking and looking like he might vomit.

“Stop that,” instructed Erik quietly. “You look extremely suspicious.”

“How are we going to get out of here?” said Nicky, sounding close to panic. “We’re stuck in here and we’re going to die.”
“Quiet,” snapped Erik, then flashed a grin. “Trust me.”

“You don’t even know the plan,” complained Nicky. “What’s going to happen?”

“Calm the fuck down,” said Erik. “Even if we are stuck in here, what good would panicking do?”

“How did I let myself get talked into this?”

“You left your father’s house looking for a grand adventure without thinking through the consequences.”

“You don’t know anything about why I left.”

“So why don’t you enlighten me?” asked Erik. Nicky pursed his lips and glanced away. Erik sighed. This inexperienced merchant’s spoiled brat should not have such an enticing mystery associated with him. Erik had become so curious that he’d asked Neil for information when they’d been travelling through Shu Han. He’d spoken in Fjerdan to ensure that nobody was eavesdropping.

“I don’t know why he left,” Neil had told him. Erik hadn’t hidden his surprise that Neil was uninformed about someone they were working with. “The members of the Hemmick household are well paid and well treated enough that they were fairly immune to bribes from ‘suspicious young men’. I did hear a rumour that Nicky had been caught in a torrid affair with his music tutor.”

Erik had whistled. “Go Nicky,” he said. “So his father chucked him out?”

At that Neil had frowned. “I don’t think so,” he said slowly. “Nicky’s been getting letters from him every week, but he never opens them.”


“Of course I’ve read them,” scoffed Neil. “But you’ve reached the limit of the free information I’m willing to give on this subject.”

“I’ll give you one no-questions-asked favour,” offered Erik, his usual offer for when he was trying to pry information out of Neil.

“Four favours,” bartered Neil.

Erik had shot him his own unimpressed look. “For the content of letters? Two, at most.”

“Fine. Two favours,” Neil had agreed. “The letters are short of information, they mostly just say things like, *Come home and you’ll get what’s owed you and Mistakes can be rectified if you return and Everything can be fixed.*”

With that in mind, Erik watched Nicky attempt to ignore him for a couple minutes. “You said that you’ve been to Evermore before and that you’ve met *drüskelle,*” he eventually said. “So your father used to take you travelling?”

“Yes,” answered Nicky warily.

“Until … ?” prompted Erik.

“Until?” echoed Nicky.

“Yes, until. He took you with him until you got drunk and vomited at an embassy dinner, or until
you insulted the Queen of Ravka’s nose, or until you accidentally humped an ambassador’s leg.”

“Maybe the leg was asking for it,” said Nicky with a small smile.

Erik laughed. “There you go,” he said. “Don’t you feel better than when you were needlessly worrying?”

“It was not needless, I was raising a legitimate point—”

He was interrupted by guards showing up and shouting, just as the sound of the clock striking six bells became audible. The prisoners lined up for a head count and for an opportunity to get some water to quench their thirst. When Erik received the tin of water, he splashed most of it down the front of his shirt. He made sure to jostle Nicky so that he was drenched as well.

“What was that for?” asked Nicky, following him back to the bench.

“You’ll see,” said Erik. “Now stop distracting me. I need to concentrate.”

Erik lifted the leg of his trousers to display his ankle. Along the thin skin under his anklebone, a neat line of stitches was visible.

“What’s—” started Nicky.

“Quiet!” Erik hissed, gritting his teeth and beginning to pull out the stitches. He fished out a small pellet that Renee had sewn into his ankle that morning. It had been bothering him all day and he was glad to be rid of it, despite how painful its extraction had been.

“Pull your shirt up over your nose and mouth,” he instructed, moving over towards the bucket in the corner that served as a makeshift toilet.

“What?” asked Nicky.

“Stop being dense. You’re much cuter when you’re smart.”

Nicky blushed, but complied. “When you bargain with a fox, beware of tricks,” Erik announced loudly, noting that Matt, Neil, and Andrew all covered their faces with their similarly wet shirts. Allison had teased Erik once she’d found out what code phrase he’d decided to use to alert the others, but it was an old saying that his grandmother had often used. He felt it was appropriate.

He covered his own mouth and nose with his shirt and then dropped the pellet into the bucket. There was a little pop and a slight hissing sound, before a mist began rising. The cell was quickly enveloped in a greenish cloud. Nicky looked around wildly with widened, panicked eyes as all the other inmates slumped into unconsciousness. The fog quickly dissipated. After about a minute, Erik tentatively lowered his shirt and took a breath. There was still a slight odour in the air, but it didn’t affect him. He nodded to the others.

“Was the chloro gas?” asked Nicky, sounding slightly awed. “It reacted with the ammonia in the urine, didn’t it?”

Erik grinned. “Definitely cuter when you’re smart,” he said. “They’ll be none the wiser. In a couple hours they’ll wake up with headaches. I know what that’s like, although I prefer to wake up with more pleasurable aches,” he added with a wink. Nicky blushed again and looked away. Erik wasn’t certain yet, but he thought it might be more fun to flirt with Nicky than to argue with him. It was harmless since nothing would come of it. Erik wasn’t stupid enough to start anything with a mercher’s son (who might not even be remotely interested) who would eventually be returning to his
father's mansion. His youthful rebellion and adventures with the riff raff of the Barrel would one day become an interesting story to tell at upscale dinner parties.

Neil had moved to the bars and was holding his hands near them, creating a black cloud between his palms.

“Are you extracting the iron ore from the bars?” Nicky asked.

Neil didn’t answer, his face twisted in concentration as the shapeless cloud coalesced into a lockpick. It pinged as it fell onto the floor. Matt quickly picked it up and passed it to Andrew.

“Again,” said Andrew.

Neil rolled his eyes, but started the process over again.

“Can he dissolve the bars?” asked Nicky.

“No,” answered Andrew, slightly derisively. “Look how thick they are. Plus it would be an obvious sign that something was wrong.”

Neil finished the second lockpick and within a heartbeat Andrew had unlocked the cell and ushered them out before he re-locked the door. They split up, with Andrew and Nicky heading towards the women’s holding cells, where Renee should have extracted the pellet out of her own skin and knocked out the other prisoners. Erik followed Matt and Neil towards the stables.

“Do you need me to come with you?” Neil asked. “I’d prefer to head to the laundry room to scope out the incinerator shaft, if you don’t mind.”

Matt sent a glance over at Erik, who shrugged, so they sent Neil on his way. The route to the stables backtracked along the path they had taken to the holding cells. Thea had said that these areas were only staffed when new prisoners were being brought in, but it was still nerve wracking walking alone through the prison and hoping that no guards would suddenly show up. The final sprint to the stables passed a large window. All they could do was put their heads down and run, praying that nobody would see them.

Once they were in the stables, they almost immediately found large spools of rope, hefting them up easily. Despite Matt’s skinniness he was able to heft two spools easily. Erik always found his wiry strength surprising when it was exposed, although he probably shouldn’t since he’d known Matt for long enough to know that his punches packed a lot of power.

They hurried to the laundry room, where they found Allison, Nicky, and Neil searching through bins.

“Where are the others?” asked Erik.

“Andrew didn’t want to wait for you,” said Allison. “He took Renee and Thea to search the upper floors.”

“With his leg?” asked Erik incredulously. “He’s going to limp up and down all those stairs? We’re not even late!”

“At least this way you don’t have to deal with Thea,” shrugged Allison, moving on to search a cupboard under the sinks, pulling out several containers of different chemicals.

“You know, I have a sneaking suspicion that she may not like us,” said Erik.
“It’s hotter in here than I was expecting,” observed Matt, wiping his brow. “Is the incinerator on?”

“No,” replied Neil. “I checked it out. It’s uncomfortably warm in the shaft, but I don’t think it has been used since this morning. They must use some Grisha Alkemi powders to make the flames burn hotter than normal.”

“Can you still make the climb, buddy?” asked Matt.

“I don’t know. I need a little luck.”

Erik went over to the incinerator shaft and opened the blast door; an incredibly hot gust of air greeted him.

“I don’t think we can bring anything explosive in there,” he commented. Looking down he could see the embers from the fire; Neil must be correct, these coals should not be giving off this much heat. He turned his head to look up but all he could see was darkness.

“Neil,” called Nicky, “I found our clothes.”

“Oh, good,” said Neil, wandering over to the bin that Nicky was digging through. “Some luck.” He dug through their clothing until he found his little rubber soled climbing shoes, a pair of gloves, and Andrew’s armbands. “I was hoping I’d be able to find these things. They should provide a little protection against the heat of the chimney stones,” he explained as he donned the accessories.

“I would hug you, you talented, beautiful, tropical fish,” called Allison, “if I didn’t think that everything you just put on was swimming in diseases.”

“So you can do this?” asked Matt, fussing paternally.

“Yes,” said Neil, displaying that feral smile of his that had always unnerved Erik. “I can.”

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

“I haven’t lived this long to be killed by gravity,” said Neil.
“So, Neil,” said Dan, returning to their table with a pitcher of beer and a glass of water for Neil. “Tell us about yourself.”

Neil wanted nothing less than to be here right now. He’d never been allowed to be social or to make friends. It was dangerous for people to know him. But Andrew had traded him five truths - one for each member of the gang that Neil agreed to try to get along with and one to stop him from avoiding Wymack - so Neil was here with these overly curious people. Even Allison was watching him with open interest, although she was also sending her fair share of unsubtle looks filled with loathing. Neil tried his best to ignore her; her grief and anger about Seth’s death made him uncomfortable.

He wasn’t quite sure how to answer Dan’s question; “Neil” was still a relatively new persona, built upon all of his other past patchwork identities. It’s not like he could tell them that he was a bundle of lies wrapped in deceit, could he?

“Well,” he started awkwardly, “my name is Neil. I’m five foot three and I have brown hair.” He knew he was astoundingly bad at small talk; he was used to hiding from people or insulting them, not letting them examine the loose threads that held together his fabricated identity.

The other four occupants of the table stared at him, waiting for him to go on. When he didn’t Matt barked a laugh. “Yes, Neil, we can see that,” he said. “Can’t you tell us something that our functioning eyes didn’t already let us know?”

“Like what?” asked Neil warily.

“Where are you from?” asked Dan.

“Ravka,” he decided. Although he was one quarter Suli, he’d inherited his father’s skin tone and Kerch wasn’t sunny enough to tan his skin sufficiently dark to pass for Suli or Zemeni without raising questions and therefore attracting unwanted attention.

“Where in Ravka?” Dan pushed.
He chose a city at random. “Ryevost.”

“Your Kerch is very good for a non-native,” remarked Allison, narrowing her eyes.

Neil didn’t hear a question there, so he didn’t answer.

“Why did you come to Kerch?” asked Erik.

“I like canals.”

“Ghezen, this is like pulling teeth,” complained Allison.

“I don’t know what you want from me,” said Neil, feeling stressed out by this whole experience.

“We’re just trying to be your friends,” said Matt.

“Well, stop!” Neil’s fraying temper snapped. “I’m here because of a deal I made with Andrew. I don’t want or need friends. I may work for your gang, but I’m not one of you.”

“Neil,” started Dan, speaking calmly as if she were confronting a spooked animal.

“No,” said Neil, getting up to leave. “Leave me alone. I’m not a Fox and we’re never going to be friends.”

***

“Alright, Neil,” said Dan. She was crouched in an alleyway with Neil, watching as several members of the Bearcats broke into a nearby warehouse. “This is just reconnaissance. We don’t want their attention, and we don’t want a fight.”

Neil nodded his acquiescence, wondering how long this would take. He figured that asking Dan that question would be construed as him being unfriendly again. Andrew had been distinctly unimpressed with his first foray into getting along with the Foxes, so he was determined to do better this time.

Suddenly there was a scream from inside the warehouse and a woman with a torn shirt came sprinting out. She was followed by two of the Bearcats that he and Dan were following.

Dan swore and then rushed forward. “Hey fuckers,” she called. The two men stopped in surprise and Dan shot both of them in their kneecaps. “Run!” she shouted both to the woman and to Neil, and they took off sprinting.

When they reached the Court, Neil gave Dan a look. “I thought you said no drawing attention and no fighting,” he panted.

Dan gave a breathless laugh. “Do as I say, not as I do, rookie.”

***

“Hey Neil,” said Erik approaching him. “Andrew asked me to get you an appropriate shirt for our job this evening.” He handed Neil a silken grey shirt. “I got it in your favourite colour.”

“Grey’s not my favourite colour,” said Neil in bemusement.

Erik’s face fell briefly. “Is it not? What is, then?”

“It’s …” Come to think of it, Neil didn’t really have a favourite colour. He generally stuck to greys
and blacks to fade into the shadows. “Grey, I guess.”

“I could get you a different shirt,” Erik suggested.

Neil looked at Erik’s outfit: he was wearing a bright orange shirt with a navy pattern on it, forest green striped trousers, and a red fedora. “No,” he said quickly, taking the shirt. “This is fine.”

“Oh, come on, Neil,” argued Erik. “You’d look great in purple!”

“No,” repeated Neil, making his escape.

***

After their most recent boxing lesson, Matt proposed that they go out to eat. Neil had been getting more accustomed to the taller man, but still didn’t feel comfortable socializing.

“Oh, come on,” Matt cajoled upon Neil’s head shake. “You need to put on some muscle. We’ll go for waffles.”

“How will that help me put on muscle?” asked Neil, bewildered.

Matt ignored him and started singing the praises of Ketterdam waffles. “Have you ever had them?” he asked. When Neil admitted he hadn’t, Matt was flabbergasted. “They’re the most essential food in the world!”

“I highly doubt that,” said Neil.

“What could be more essential?” Matt demanded.

“I don’t know, maybe rice? Potatoes? Some kind of staple, at least.”

“Waffles are a staple,” argued Matt. “They’re full of carby goodness, have useful little indents to put toppings, and can be served with either sweet or savoury toppings so you can eat them for breakfast, brunch, lunch, dinner, or dessert.”

Neil shook his head in amusement and listened to Matt continue to extol the virtues of waffles until they had been served. Matt watched with rapt attention as Neil took his first bite.

“So?” he asked. “What do you think? Perfect, right?”


***

Allison was sitting beside him on a bench at the docks as they were carefully recording the goods brought in by the mercher vessels. They had been sitting in absolute silence for most of the morning.

“I’m sorry,” Neil finally said. “He didn’t deserve it.”

“Yeah, well,” Allison started, before she sighed deeply and steeled herself, “you probably didn’t deserve whatever happened to you to make you into such a twitchy little weirdo.”

Neil smiled thinly. “I hope not.”

“So I forgive you.”

Allison huffed a laugh. “Alright, we’re done here,” she said. “You’re going to take me out to eat now, you tiny, awkward pineapple.”

“What did you call me?”

“You’d probably better get used to it.”

***

“Neil!” cried Matt in a panic, running up to him. He grasped his shoulders, running his hands along Neil’s arms as if checking him for injuries. “What’s wrong? I came as fast as I could.”

“I told you in the message I sent that it wasn’t urgent,” replied Neil.

“I figured you were downplaying your grievous injuries. If you were calling for help, it had to be bad.”

“I wasn’t calling for help, I was …” Neil trailed off, embarrassed now about why he had paid a child to carry a message to Matt.

“What? What’s going on?” demanded Matt worriedly. “Who do I have to hurt?”


“Okaaaaay …”

“It looks like Andrew.”

Matt froze for a couple seconds before bursting out into hysterical laughter. Neil waited patiently until he calmed down, regretting all the decisions he had made that afternoon.

“It was Andrew’s birthday last week,” said Neil when Matt’s laughter had died down. “I need to borrow money to buy the cake so I can bring it back to the Foxhole for a celebration.”


“What do you mean?”

“Well, you’re normally quite ignorant of normal human social customs.”

“I know what a birthday is, Matt,” sighed Neil. “Will you lend me the money?”

“He will kill you,” warned Matt.

“I’ve had a pretty good run,” shrugged Neil. “At least my last act on this earth will bring joy to others.”

“I love you, buddy,” said Matt, affectionately ruffling Neil’s hair while chuckling.

***

“Ninety percent of the time I want to kill you,” said Andrew blandly as he peered at the grumpy cat cake.
“Only ninety?” Neil asked teasingly.


“Time is finite,” said Neil. “You can’t hate me more than one hundred percent of it.”

“Watch me.”

***

“So the important thing to remember is to watch your footing,” Neil said. He’d taken Robin up on top of the Church of Barter, a giant building shaped like a hand located next to the Exchange. It provided an excellent vantage point to the Financial District, but the roof was in generally poor repair. He was glad to share some of his favourite places in Ketterdam; he had always wanted to bring Andrew up here, but his fear of heights made that impossible.

He pointed to the south. “You can keep an eye on the Exchange without interference since none of the stadwatch ever come up here.”

Robin suddenly stumbled and Neil caught her. “See what I was saying?” he asked. “You have to-” he was cut off as the tile he was standing on suddenly cracked and slipped. He fell hard, sliding down the roof towards the eaves. Just as he was falling over the edge he managed to get a handhold.

Robin’s terrified face appeared above him. “Oh, Neil, thank the Saints,” she exhaled. “I thought you’d fallen to your death.”

“I haven’t lived this long to be killed by gravity,” said Neil. “Help me up.”

She got a hold on his arm and helped him lever himself back up on the roof. They both lay there, panting, before Robin started laughing. “What was that about watching your footing?”

“That was a practical demonstration. Everything was completely under control,” lied Neil. “... Do not ever tell anyone about this. Ever.”

“Sure thing, boss.”

***

Dan watched as he was patched up after the latest run in with the Ravens. She was visibly angry, pacing back and forth.

“What does Riko want with you?” she demanded. “Why does he keep attacking us to get to you?”

“He wants to own me. He’s trying to turn me against you for his gain,” Neil replied.

Dan scoffed. “What an incompetent asshole.”

“Thank you for not asking if his success is possible,” said Neil quietly.

“Of course it’s not possible!” exclaimed Dan.

“I know he’s causing problems for you. I can leave, if you want.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Dan said harshly, wrapping him in a defiant, protective hug. “You’re a Fox. You’re not going anywhere.”
“Neil, I need you,” said Allison, grabbing his arm and pulling him along behind her.

“Most people ask,” said Neil mildly.

“Am I most people?” asked Allison with a shark-like smile. She took him to a high end store in the Financial District. “The seamstress here is skimping on the material of my clothing. She needs to be punished,” she explained. “I need you to go in there and flirt with her.”

Neil gave her a flat look. “As a punishment?” He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. I don’t know how to flirt.”

“You’ve never really shown any interest, but I didn’t think you had zero experience. Have you ever even kissed anyone?”

“A few times, but it wasn’t worth it.”

“You were probably just kissing the wrong people.”

“Probably,” he agreed. “But I meant that my mother didn’t allow it. And kissing wasn’t worth getting hit.”

Allison gave Neil a look that made him feel much younger than he was. “Okay, Neil, we’re going to have to put a pin in that right now. We’ll discuss your mother’s questionable parenting techniques later. We’ll talk about how wrong she was and about how you’re a special snowflake. Anyway, it doesn’t matter. I’m your mother now.”

“What?”

Allison just shook her head dismissing the question. “We’ll work on your flirting skills later,” she said. “For now, just go in there and make your usual doe eyes and clumsy attempts at small talk.”

Neil rolled his eyes, but made his way into the store. “You owe me a favour for this,” he called back to Allison.

He made his way to the front counter, trying to appear frightened and lost. “Hi, sweetie,” said the woman at the counter. “Can I help you with anything?”

He chatted with her for awhile asking increasingly stupid questions about her wares, aware of Allison moving around the store. He managed not to flinch as the woman reached out to move his hair out of his eyes.

“What do you think you are doing?!” Allison suddenly demanded from behind them. “Are you propositioning a child? MY child?”

The woman immediately dropped her hand and took a step back. “I think there’s been a misunderstanding,” she said, keeping her voice quiet.

“Oh, I should certainly hope so!” cried Allison dramatically. “Why did you have your filthy adult hands all over my precious Hendrikus?!”

“Please lower your voice, ma’am.”

“I will not!” Allison grabbed Neil and crushed him against her chest. “What was she saying to you, my dear, precious, innocent boy?” She didn’t wait for Neil’s response, but started dragging him out
of the store. “I will be taking this up with the stadwatch, you … you PREDATOR!” she shouted as they left.

“That was fun!” enthused Allison once they’d made it back to the Barrel. “I owe you one.”

“What was the point of that?” asked Neil wryly.

“There were enough gossips in that store to damage her business,” said Allison conspiratorially. “Plus, while you were distracting her I stole three pairs of shoes, a scarf, and two purses. That will teach her to steal from me.”

“Your logic does not always resemble human logic.”

“How would you know? You’re basically an alien shut-in, Neil.”

“Don’t you mean Hendrikus, Mom?” he asked with a shy smile.

***

“What are you thinking about?” asked Renee kindly as she came upon Neil relaxing near West Stave, his thoughts a million miles away.

He startled and looked up at her. He’d been avoiding her since she’d joined the gang; he had nothing against her, he just avoided all Grisha in case they recognized him as one of their own. “I was thinking about escape routes from Kerch,” he told her honestly.

“For what purpose?” she inquired, taking a seat beside him.

“Do I need one?”

“You can’t have a single escape plan,” she said practically. “Different circumstances can change things.” She cocked her head to the side in contemplation. “How about a zombie invasion?”

“I’ve heard Shu stories of zombies,” he said. “Walking dead plague, right?” Renee nodded. “Do you know about Ketterdam’s plague measures?” he asked. At the shake of her head, he explained. “Since Kerch is an island and Ketterdam’s so packed with people, plagues are especially deadly here. The last plague that hit here affected ninety percent of the population and thousands of people died. Since then, the council installed strict plague measures, which include alerting the population by way of sirens. If they sound, everyone must return to their houses and lock themselves in, leaving the streets open for mediks and officials and to hopefully curb transmission rates.”

“So the streets would be empty,” said Renee thoughtfully. “We could probably successfully loot a lot of places. We’d only have to evade the officials.”

“And the zombies,” said Neil, settling in to debate the best course of action to evade the stadwatch and the walking dead in order to escape the city.

“And the zombies,” agreed Renee with a smile.

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“It’s a good thing I’m wearing gloves,” said Neil, grinning widely and rocking on his feet from excitement.

Andrew just gave him a bored look, flicking his eyes down to Neil’s gloved hands.
“Cause you look too hot to handle,” Neil concluded, before nudging Andrew with his elbow. “Get it? It’s a pickup line.”

Andrew simply raised his eyebrow minutely. “What is happening.”

“Allison’s teaching me how to flirt,” said Neil, deflating slightly. “She says that pickup lines are an essential tool for beginners. But then she cackled, so she may have been lying.”

“Why.”

Neil shrugged. “Beats me. She says it’s an essential skill. Here, let me try another one. Are you a thief?”

“Why are you testing them on me?”

Neil was perplexed. “Who else would I possibly use a pickup line on?”

Andrew gave him an inscrutable look. “You can’t be real,” he finally said.

“I’m not a hallucination,” responded Neil, nonplussed.

“You are a pipe dream,” replied Andrew. “Go away and leave me alone.”

***

“Hello, Neil,” said Katelyn sidling up beside him, running a hand along his shoulder and pressing against his side. “How are you, this fine evening?” She seemed to be blinking a lot, Neil noticed. Maybe she had something in her eye?

“I’m fine,” answered Neil, trying not to tense up and move away. He’d been getting more used to the casual touches that the Foxes bestowed, but this was even worse than usual.

“I was wondering what you might want from me in exchange for some information?” she asked, her lips almost touching his ear as she trailed a finger along his collarbone.

“Depends on the information,” he answered, before giving into his discomfort and taking a small step away.

Katelyn straightened and gave him a piercing look. “This isn’t working on you at all, is it?” she asked.


She smiled brightly. “Oh, you are a sweetheart, aren’t you?”

“Not particularly,” he answered, still confused. “I thought you wanted information.”

“I want to know about Aaron.”

“He’s a grumpy asshole. What more could you possibly want to know?”

“Is he currently seeing anyone? Does he date women? Do you think I have a chance with him?” Katelyn asked sweetly.

Neil stared. “I … there is nothing that you could give me that could convince me to stand here and gossip about Aaron’s love life. Talk to Allison or Erik, if you must.”
“Thanks, I will!” she trilled. “So what can we talk about?”

“Why do we have to talk about anything?”

“I want to get to know you.”

“And you thought bringing up Aaron was a good idea?”

“Come on,” she cajoled. “Tell me one of your interests.”

“I like my knives,” said Neil dryly.

“Oh, I need to get new knives. Do you have any suggestions?”

“Make sure they’re sharp and pointy.”

Katelyn laughed happily. “Oh, Neil. I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

“I highly doubt that.”

She flicked him on the forehead. “I’m going to win you over yet, you porcupine.”

***

“You owe me,” said Erik, sliding into the seat across from Neil at the Court.

Neil raised an eyebrow. “This was your no-questions-asked favour that you owed me for gathering information about that barmaid you had a crush on. If I hadn’t you probably would have ended up naked and robbed.” Neil had needed Erik to act as a distraction while he was breaking into a mansion in the Government District. “It couldn’t have been that bad.”

“She was ancient,” moaned Erik, about the elderly Councillor’s mother he had had to distract. “And she was very handsy. I feel unclean. I need to replace all the water in my body with vodka.”


“Challenge accepted!” declared Erik.

“I in no way challenged you to murder yourself with vodka.”

“I will get the needed supplies,” declared Erik and took off for the bar.

“Well this is going to end in tears and vomit,” predicted Neil as Erik made his way back to their table, bringing enough alcohol for a small army.

“All the best ideas do,” replied Erik, picking up a drink.

***

He was wet. When had it started raining? He ran a hand through his hair and it came back red with watery blood. Oh, right. He was bleeding. He’d forgotten. He curled up tighter, trying to hide himself better from his attackers and to present a smaller target. But, no, that wasn’t right. He’d gotten away. He was confused. Had he lost time? It was dark now. This was why he hated head injuries. They muddled everything and made him vulnerable.
A dark shape approached him and he lashed out instinctively.

“Hey,” said a calm voice. “Hey. It’s all right.” He knew that voice. Why did he know that voice? “Neil,” said the voice. That’s right. He was Neil.

“Help me,” he gritted out, his voice hoarse.

“Let me,” replied Wymack. He closed his eyes and forced his body to relax as Wymack gathered him up and carried him inside his house. He remained still as Wymack bandaged his wounds and wrapped him in a blanket.

“I didn’t sign it,” said Neil, trying to work through his brain fog. “He tried to force me to sign a contract, but I wouldn’t. I’m a Fox.”

“Of course you are,” replied Wymack.

“I’m sorry for bothering you,” apologized Neil. “I know I’m Andrew’s responsibility. I just didn’t know where else to go.”

“Don’t be stupid,” growled Wymack. “Will you be alright by yourself for a bit? I have to get Abby and let Andrew know that you’re here before he burns the city to the ground trying to find you.”

Neil shook his head and immediately regretted it. “You can’t. We had a fight. He’s mad about how much trouble I cause. He said not to go crying to him the next time someone tried to break my face. If he finds out about this he’s going to send me away.”

Wymack gave him a long searching look. “I can’t tell if you’re being obtuse to fuck with me or if you’re really that dumb,” he said gruffly. “Or if your head injury is even worse than I thought. Trust me, kid, that boy is never going to send you away.”

“But-” started Neil.

“No,” said Wymack firmly. “And if he tries, I won’t let him. You can leave whenever you want, but you’ll never be kicked out. You’re one of my Foxes and I’ll protect you for as long as you’ll let me.”


***

He had managed to coax Andrew out of the window in their room and they were sitting on the flat roof watching the sunrise. There was an almost dreamlike calm; the Barrel never slept but it was subdued in the early morning.

“Hey, Andrew,” said Neil, breaking the peaceful quiet. “Why did you recruit me?”

“You managed to pick my pocket without me noticing,” replied Andrew sounding bored. “That had never happened before. And the Ravens wanted you and it’s good practice to deny the Ravens what they want.”

“But why give me so much freedom? You could have coerced me into signing a binding contract.”

“Like those gang leaders and brothel owners who prey on desperate people and force them to agree to Indentures that can never be earned out of? Who take what they haven’t earned?” Andrew scoffed. “Even if you weren’t the type of person to gnaw off your arm to escape a shackle, I
wouldn’t do that. I won’t be like them.”

Neil digested this as he watched Andrew smoke for a few minutes. “The next time someone says you’re soulless I might have to fight them.”

“You’d have to fight the whole city.”

“You think I couldn’t?”

“It wasn’t a challenge, Neil,” Andrew huffed.


“Yes, I’m well aware of your penchant for starting useless fights. I should push you off the roof to rid myself of a giant headache.”

“Do it,” dared Neil. “I’d drag you down with me.”

***

“I cannot believe that those Terrapin fuckers stole the de Kappel before we could,” moaned Dan, her head down on the table and Matt rubbing her back comfortingly. They’d only been about an hour too late to steal the priceless painting.

“And that they’ve already moved it out of Ketterdam,” said Matt.

“I know,” commiserated Allison. “We would have gotten such a big payout if we’d been able to fence it.”

“Maybe the real de Kappel payout was the friendships we made along the way?” suggested Erik sarcastically.

Allison snorted. “We were already friends, asshole.”

Dan suddenly sat up straight. “Yes,” she said fiercely. “You guys are worth way more to me than some stupid painting.”

“Are we?” asked Neil suddenly. “Friends?” he clarified when they all stared at him.

“Neil, you are going to be the absolute death of me,” declared Erik.

“No, Neil, we’re not friends ,” said Matt, causing Neil’s stomach to drop unpleasantly. “We’re family.”

A warm glow spread through Neil and he could feel a happy smile unfurl on his face. Family .

“You’re stuck with us, like it or not,” said Allison.

“To family,” toasted Dan, raising her drink and they all clinked their glasses together.

***

Two thirds of the way up the incinerator shaft, Neil was not enjoying himself. Matt and Erik had wet the rope and Neil’s clothes to try to provide some protection from the heat, but Neil was sweating heavily and the wetness added weight to his clothes and the rope tied around him. When he had first leaped up the chimney, he had wanted to immediately recoil; the stones were even hotter than he had
been expecting. Even through his gloves his hands felt like they were blistering.

Neil looked up, spotting a hazy grey sky above. Sweat was pouring into his eyes and rolling down his face, momentarily obscuring his vision. Climb, Abram!, demanded the voice of his mother. Her phantom fists propelled him up the wall. He sneezed, the soot from the wall tickling his nose, and his left foot slipped.

He looked down and his heart sank. The rubber on the soles of his climbing shoes was melting. Now that he could see what was happening to his feet he couldn’t ignore the pain. He tried to adjust his balance to transfer his weight to his shoulders to take some of the pressure off his feet. Climb, Abram! his mind yelled at him. He searched for a handhold before he slipped again, scrabbling against the wall just to hold on. He tipped his head back to search for the sky again; it seemed impossibly far away. He didn’t think he could go on; he was at the end of his rope. Even the memory of his mother’s blows and angry rebukes could not force him any farther.

“Sorry Mom,” he murmured. She would be so angry that after everything she’d done to keep him alive he would find his end here: an incinerator shaft in a Shu prison that he’d entered willingly.

He tried not to think of his friends below. When he failed here, they would have no way out. Andrew, who had given him a home; Matt, who called him family. They were relying on him and their inevitable deaths would be his fault.

No, he thought fiercely. I will not let them die. As thoughts of the times they had spent together - their kindness and care, their laughter and shared adventures - flooded his mind, he realized why his mother’s voice had failed to motivate him. With her, by design, he had been nothing and no one. A jumble of lies with nothing to fight for. But now he was a Fox. He was Neil Josten. He liked being Neil Josten and he would fight to remain Neil Josten for as long as possible. He’d come to Ketterdam every inch a lie, but the Foxes had made him into someone real.

Slowly, slowly he forced himself to climb again. He would not let his friends down. He had been taught to run at the first sign of trouble, but he’d broken every promise he’d ever made to his mother and found that actually living was preferable to simply surviving. No matter what, he would protect his friends. He was their family. They were his. They were worth every burn and bruise and scrape.

He was Neil fucking Josten and today was not the day he died.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

“Out of the two of us, I am not the one who has shown a willingness to have the other locked in prison,” Thea reminded Renee.
Thea followed Andrew up the stairs towards the upper cells, walls black and each landing lit by gas lamps. She was aware of Renee following her, her footsteps almost inaudible. *Criminals*, thought Thea. Even Andrew’s limping steps were quieter than her own. Andrew seemed to be struggling a little with the number of stairs and Thea wondered at his decision to accompany them on this task. They hadn’t been running late, so he must have some other purpose. She wondered if this had been his plan all along; he seemed perfectly content to leave everyone else in the dark if it suited his purposes. Thea was not particularly surprised that he would keep her uninformed, but was intrigued that he didn’t seem to fully trust his closest companions.

She found it disorienting to be back at Evermore, especially wearing standard prisoner garb. She hadn’t worked in the prison sector since her early days here. She’d been worried that she would be recognized when they were processed, but all the guards who would know her worked mainly in the Inner Court. Still, she considered what she would do if she were caught. She could tell the truth: that she’d been brought here under duress by a bunch of delinquents who were planning a prison break and a kidnapping. In that case, she’d likely undergo a trial but she believed that she would eventually be found to be innocent of wrongdoing. Would she be allowed to resume her position? Would she be willing to condemn all these people to imprisonment and death in order to regain the life she had had? Did she even still want that life? And what if Kevin was truly in trouble? Was she willing to ignore his treatment so that she could live out her childhood dream of serving the Shu royal family?

When she had been a young girl, the royal family were like fairy tale characters come to life. They lived in palaces, wore fancy clothes, were interesting and important. She wanted nothing more than to get close enough to them that their enchanting lives could inject a little magic into her own.

It had not taken long to become disillusioned. Tetsuji Moriyama, the King’s younger brother, was kind, but his quiet personality was still far away from her childhood ideas of what a prince should be. He could rein in his nephew’s excesses, but preferred to spend his time reading or with Kevin. He had a great love of traditional Shu poetry and would often recite his favourites to whichever unfortunate guards happened to be stationed closest to him. Kevin had loved him as a father and had been devastated at the time of his untimely death.

The crown prince Ichirou had proven himself to be spoiled, cruel, entitled, and violent within weeks of her joining the Evermore guard. He punished perceived slights as harshly as actual insubordination often taking the responsibility for discipline out of his captain of the guard’s hands. All guards were immediately paired up and were expected to share punishments and rewards. The partner that she had been assigned, Jean, had somehow already caught the prince’s attention and was a frequent target of his mercurial moods. Although she could understand Jean’s desire to leave Evermore, she could never forgive him for leaving her and Kevin or for helping fabricate the evidence that had landed her in prison.
She’d forgotten about the clean efficiency of Evermore. Hellgate felt like a million miles away from here - the blood in the sand, the dirt, the grime, the corrupt officials - nothing here resembled that aptly named hellhole. But something seemed eerie here, wrong somehow. Instead of offering familiarity and comfort, the dark walls unnerved her. She was hit with a sudden wave of homesickness. *I want to go home*, she thought pathetically. But this place no longer seemed to be her home. Had she lost that part of her forever? Maybe it would be better when they reached the Inner Court, or maybe her experiences of the last year had irreversibly changed her.

There was a sudden clatter of boots and voices above them, causing them to hurry down to the lower landing. They pushed their way through the door into the third floor cell block. One of the prisoners jumped at their appearance, but before he had a chance to yell and alert the guards, Renee reached her hands out and obviously blocked his windpipe. He struggled to breathe as Renee sent him into unconsciousness. The sounds of the guards passed outside of the door behind them, travelling farther down the stairs. Thea let out a breath in relief.

Andrew waited for a couple beats, before leading them back through the door and up to the top floor where the high security cells were. Once they reached the landing, Andrew raised a questioning eyebrow at her. Pointing to the right corridor she mouthed “Grisha” and mimicked Renee’s hand motion from before. Andrew rolled his eyes at her pantomime, but sent her and Renee down that corridor while he took off alone down the other corridor. Thea wanted to argue - he was the slowest of the three of them and she didn’t want Renee to see the Grisha cells - but he was gone before she could convey this to him.

The cells in this area of the prison were designed to effectively hold Grisha. They did not have any metal that Fabrikators could manipulate, or piping carrying water that could be used by Tidemakers. The cells were made from perfectly smooth glass (Grisha made, like the glass that surrounded the artillery courtyard downstairs) and were mirrored on the inside to prevent Heartrenders from being able to see targets to attack.

Thea had always found these cells vaguely horrifying; she couldn’t imagine how Renee must feel, knowing that this was where she would be imprisoned if they were caught.

When they entered the first corridor of cells, Renee made a little sound like a wounded animal causing Thea to glance back at her.

“I can go without you,” she whispered. “Just stay here.”

“What’s to stop you from alerting the guards?” asked Renee.

“My word,” she said harshly. She was sick and tired of these people acting like she was the dishonest one among them.

“And I’m to trust that?”

“Out of the two of us, I am not the one who has shown a willingness to have the other locked in prison,” Thea reminded Renee, disliking the other woman’s show at moral superiority. “And I haven’t ever lied to any of you.”

“You also haven’t hidden any disdain that you obviously feel for us,” replied Renee. “And you can’t deny that you’ve been considering turning us in to the guards and getting amnesty for yourself.”

Thea flushed with anger, disliking how close to home the words hit. “Thoughts aren’t deeds,” she hissed. “I would think that you’re newly pious persona would understand that what we do is more important than what we may *want* to do. And we are wasting time. I was only offering to go alone
because I thought the cells might make you uncomfortable.”

Renee looked chastised, which caused a thrill of victory in Thea’s chest. “You’re right, I’m sorry,” Renee said. “I will keep watch here while you check the Grisha cells, thank you.”

Thea stalked away, anger still churning in her chest. How dare than woman, that bandit, imply that she was untrustworthy? Renee, who had never done anything for her, except steal Jean and get her locked in prison, was acting like she had the right to judge Thea’s decisions. Thea could lock her in Evermore and throw out the key and it would be right, and fair. She owed Renee nothing.

She quickly checked the cells, without paying too much attention. She wasn’t expecting Kevin to be here. Still fuming, she hurried around the corner and ran directly into a guard. He stared at her in shock for a couple beats before opening his mouth to shout. Thea hit him in the throat to prevent that and then kicked him in the stomach. He recovered more quickly than she had been expecting, managing to block her arm and to punch her in her kidney. She fell to her knees and received a kick in her stomach. The guard drew his weapon, aiming his gun directly between her eyes. She froze, staring up at the guard, wondering how it was possible that she was going to die as a nameless prisoner in Evermore, when the guard suddenly crumpled to the ground.

She spun around and found Renee behind her, hands outstretched. The two women stared at each other breathlessly for a couple beats before Renee grabbed her arm and yanked her to her feet.

“Come on,” she said. “We have to get up the incinerator shaft before anyone finds him. We’re already running late.”

Thea nodded, and they took off running. At the end of the hall they looked around for Andrew. He was nowhere to be found. Renee took a couple steps down the corridor that he had disappeared down and hissed his name as loud as she dared before turning back to Thea with wide eyes. Just then the Inner Court clock chimed seven bells and half chime.

“Either he’s been caught or he gave up waiting for us. We can’t wait here any longer. We have to go,” insisted Thea.

They hurried down the stairs and entered the laundry room just as the clock began chiming again. Only this time it wasn’t the steady ringing that signalled the hour, it was the panicked clamour of yellow protocol - alerting all guards to their actions.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

Neil poked Andrew’s bicep with his finger. “I trust that you’ll get us all out of here,” he said with certainty.
Chapter Summary

In which Andrew has to rework his plan in the middle of a prison break but he still manages to spend most of his time pining.

Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter: violence, very vague reference to Proust's abuse, minor character injury

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Andrew peered into each cell as quickly as possible. These high security cells were made of solid steel, with a small window set at eye level. Well, at eye level for people who weren’t him. He growled under his breath, cursing his genetics as he had to hop at each window to see inside. His annoyance was not helping his patience. He was quickly running out of time and he had to find Proust. He shook his head at his recklessness. There was no need for him to find Proust; if he hadn’t already been killed by the Shu he wasn’t going to be let out of prison anytime soon. But this was an opportunity for Andrew to ensure the removal of one of Cass’ biggest supporters without retribution. It was selfish for him to think of his own interests, but it was too tempting to take another step in his revenge scheme. Brick by brick , he thought. And the elimination of both Riko and Proust would be two pretty large bricks.

Of course, he would have to find Proust first and that seemed more and more unlikely as time passed. It was impossible that he would find him in time. He kept telling himself that it couldn’t be done until he hopped up to peer in a cell and Proust was inside.

Andrew quickly let himself inside the cell and observed the sleeping man. He’d only come into contact with him once, when he’d broken his leg, but he was very aware of the cruelty of which he was capable. His leg had not healed properly as the so-called medik had been more interested in breaking him; at that point in his life Andrew was so used to crimes against his person that it barely affected him. He didn’t hold his life in any regard so what did it matter if Proust threatened it?

Proust have obviously undergone quite a beating. He was covered in multicoloured bruises and one of his arms lay at an odd angle. Andrew figured it was time to finish the job. He crossed the small cell, grabbed the threadbare pillow from underneath the sleeping man’s head and smothered him. It didn’t take long for Proust to wake and start struggling. Somehow in his squirming he managed to smash his elbow into Andrew’s temple. Andrew staggered back a step while Proust gasped for breath and lashed out in Andrew’s direction. Andrew punched him in the face, hearing the snap of bone while blood spurted out of his nose. Taking another step forward, Andrew grabbed him and snapped his neck. The body fell heavily to the floor and Andrew stood over it, trying to catch his breath.

The Inner Court clock chimed seven bells and half chime, knocking Andrew out of his reverie. He
was very late. He let himself out of the cell, locking it behind him, and hurried towards the stairwell. There was no sign of Renee or Thea but he assumed that they would have left without him when he hadn’t returned on time.

Halfway down the stairs, an alarm started ringing. Either someone had already found Proust’s body, discovered the unconscious prisoners in the holding cells, or the women had run into trouble. He quickened his steps, knowing that the alarm would bring guards to this section.

Matt was waiting for him in the laundry room. The room had been tidied; it showed no evidence of their presence. Matt looked relieved at his arrival and took off up the incinerator shaft. Andrew waited for him to clear the entrance and then grabbed the rope, pulling himself up and closing the blast door behind him. Then he climbed, keeping his eyes on Matt above him and ignoring how far he was off the ground. Once Matt made it up to the roof, Erik and Allison pulled the rope and Andrew free of the shaft.

“What happened?” demanded Allison. “What is that alarm for?”

“I was attacked by a guard,” explained Thea. “Renee incapacitated him, but someone probably found him.”

“By the way, Thea,” said Erik. “Your imitation of the bell was spot on. If you’re looking for a new job after this, I have a suggestion.”

“I also have a suggestion,” responded Thea. “Go die.”

“And you?” asked Allison ignoring them and turning towards Andrew. “You also fought with a guard?”

“No,” he answered simply. “Where are the others?”

“They’ve already gone to the roof of the embassy sector,” explained Erik. “Are you really not going to explain why you’re wounded and covered in blood?”

Andrew looked down at his shirt and was slightly surprised to see that, yes, he had been spattered with Proust’s blood - probably when he’d broken his nose. He ignored Erik and gestured to the coils of rope that the others had brought to the roof. “Leave the one in the incinerator shaft, but take the clean ones.”

He made his way to the tether that Neil must have secured; it ran from the top of the prison section over to the embassy roof. Using a sling they could safely slide over. Andrew closed his eyes tightly and tried not to think about how high off the ground he was. How Neil could enjoy this was baffling.

Happily, the roof of the embassy section was flatter and had considerably more entry points. Andrew found the others perched near the giant skylight that looked down into the entrance lobby. Neil was sitting with his feet in Renee’s lap, holding his climbing shoes in his hands. He looked up at Andrew as he approached. He was filthy; soot-stained with sweat streaks on his face, scraped and blistered, hair damp and tousled. He had the bright-eyed look that he only got after he used his Grisha powers. Andrew had the sudden overwhelming urge to kiss him.

Neil gave him a relieved smile, before a slight crease of worry marred his brow. “Renee said you got separated,” he said lightly. “Did you get in a fight?”

“In a manner of speaking,” he answered. “What’s wrong with your feet?”

“Burned. He had to use his Fabrikator abilities to extract melted rubber from his skin,” said Renee,
Neil grimaced. “The stones in the shaft were hotter than I expected. The rubber of my shoes melted into the soles of my feet. I tried to fix my shoes, but they’re ruined. My hands were all blistered, too.”

Andrew crouched down and reached for one of Neil’s hands to examine the damage but the skin was all new and pink. “I already healed those,” explained Neil, as Andrew ran his callused thumb across Neil’s smooth palm. Neil reached up to hover his other hand beside Andrew’s temple. Andrew felt an almost unbearable itchiness; Neil must be healing where Proust had elbowed him. “All that time fighting and you never learned to duck?” Neil scolded, while tapping his thumb on the skin beside Andrew’s eye. “That’s enough evasion,” he declared. “Fight?”

“Proust is dead.”

“That wasn’t part of the plan,” said Erik suddenly from behind them, reminding Andrew that they were not alone.

“I improvised,” replied Andrew.

“You went off on some kind of secret, personal mission?” demanded Allison. “What if something had gone wrong?”

Matt waved his hand around to indicate the still-sounding alarm. “Is this not something gone wrong?”

“It wasn’t me who was stomping around getting noticed by the guards.” Andrew cut a look towards Thea.

Thea flushed angrily. “It is not a shortcoming that I don’t possess sneaky thief skills like the rest of you. I didn’t mean to be discovered.”

“Yet you were,” replied Andrew. “Desires do not absolve actions. Incompetence is not an excuse.”

“Don’t be so harsh,” said Renee. “What’s done is done and complaining about it won’t help us.”

“Uh, guys,” called Nicky. “They’re putting up an extra checkpoint on the bridge.”

The others rushed over to have a look, but Andrew returned his attention to Neil whose eyes had not left his face since he’d told him of Proust’s death.

“That’s two of her three biggest supporters you’ve taken out,” remarked Neil with feigned nonchalance.

“It won’t matter if we don’t get out of here alive.”

Neil poked Andrew’s bicep with his finger. “I trust that you’ll get us all out of here,” he said with certainty.

Andrew shook his head angrily. How could Neil still have such unwavering faith in him after he’d failed to protect him from Riko?

“Oh, hey, I found something,” said Neil, obviously realizing that Andrew wasn’t going to answer him. He picked up a bundle of black fabric from beside him and handed it to Andrew. Andrew unrolled it to find his armbands. He had noticed the curious glances that the others were sending towards the scarring on his left forearm, evidently Neil had as well. He rolled on his armbands and
rubbed his hands soothingly along them, feeling instantly more settled. “I found them in the laundry room before the climb,” explained Neil.

“Six stories in the dark,” marvelled Andrew. His own trip up the rope in the uncomfortably warm shaft had been bad enough. How had Neil managed it?

“I told you I could do it.”

“I didn’t doubt you.”

“I did,” admitted Neil. “But I didn’t want to let you down.”

Andrew felt a strong compulsion to tell Neil that he appreciated his efforts; that Neil could never let him down, that he was important and necessary and desired. Before he could put any of his thoughts into words the others moved back towards them.

“We have to leave while we still can,” Nicky said. “We’ll never make it to the Inner Court with them checking identification.”

“Our original escape plan isn’t an option anymore,” said Thea. “The guards are on high alert because of yellow protocol. They’re going to be searching for missing prisoners.”

“So what are we going to do?” asked Matt worriedly.

Andrew let his mind wander over the problem; he’d always enjoyed puzzles and outsmarting people. Thoughts drifted in and out of his head. … Kevin’s letter … black protocol … checkpoint in the embassy … tanks … guard uniforms … one bridge to Inner Court …

“What’s going on?” asked Nicky.

“Shhhhh,” said Neil, looking completely unbothered and relaxed. “He’s thinking.”

Andrew noticed that everyone but Thea and Nicky appeared alert and excited. Neil had once told him that Andrew in planning mode made the Foxes take notice; they all believed that any problem could be solved by his remarkable brain.

He shut them all out and focused. When he closed his eyes, he could see all the parts of the puzzle slotting into place. The alarm bells ceased ringing, leaving them in deafening silence. Finally, he opened his eyes to find seven pairs of expectant eyes on him.

“Okay,” he said. “I have a plan.”

***

After asking some clarifying questions to ensure his plan was feasible, Andrew had outlined his plan for the others. He was met with shocked surprise.


“Nice vocabulary word,” sneered Allison. “It’s batshit insane, is what you mean.”

“I thought the goal was to be sneaky,” said Nicky.

“Not anymore,” replied Andrew. “Now we’re taking inspiration from Thea’s stealth skills.”

Thea gave him a dirty look. “We’ll need the Moriyama tattoo if we’re to pass for guards.”
“That’s easy,” said Neil with a wave of his hand.

“So we’re doing this?” asked Erik. Looking around at everyone’s faces he shrugged. “I guess so. Well, it was a pleasure knowing you all. If we die, at least we’ll go out as we lived: making as much trouble as possible.”

There was scattered laughter and then an awkward silence.

“No mourners,” Matt eventually said, breaking the silence.

“No funerals,” everyone responded.

They made their way to the far side of the embassy sector, before they found an appropriate skylight. Andrew made quick work of the lock so that Erik and Allison (both blonde again) could drop into the room. Erik briefly returned with a bottle of ink and a quill before disappearing again. Nicky drew the stylized M tattoos on Renee, Thea, and Andrew’s cheekbones and Neil sank the ink under their skin.

They used the rope and a grappling hook that Nicky had fashioned out of the supplies he’d found in the laundry room to swing from the embassy sector to the guard sector, Andrew closing his eyes and pretending he wasn’t swinging high above the earth. When the job was over he was refusing to leave the safety of the ground ever again.

Andrew picked the lock of the roof access door and Thea led them down to where the guard uniforms were kept. He, Thea, and Renee quickly pulled on the uniforms. Andrew was unable to find a uniform where the trousers fit him properly; Neil had to cut off the excess length with shears that Matt had scavenged.

“I told you that you were too short to be a guard,” said Neil.

“Shut up,” replied Andrew, before pulling Neil aside. Thea was giving directions to Matt and Nicky in an urgent undertone across the room.

“Neil,” said Andrew quietly, “if I don’t make it out of here-”

“You will,” cut in Neil.

“Listen,” said Andrew sharply. “No matter what happens, promise that you’ll scurry away to safety, like the rabbit you are.”

“I don’t want to be that person anymore. I want to come back for you.”

Andrew shook his head angrily. He couldn’t deal with this right now; he had to keep his attention on the task at hand.

“Andrew,” said Renee from close by. “We have to go.”

Andrew acknowledged her and then looked back at Neil. “I hate you,” he told him - admitting to himself that if anything did happen to him or Neil he would regret these being the last words he ever said to him - then turned to Matt. “Remember: eleven bells and not before.”

“When have I ever been early?” asked Matt.

Andrew gave a lazy salute as Thea led him and Renee out of the guard’s barracks. They didn’t expect to find anybody; most of the guards were either on duty or participating in the night’s revelry.
She led them around the outer edge of the moat, running her hand along the wall of the guard barracks. Finally she found a small mark and stopped. Andrew peered out towards the moat and saw nothing but water.

“There’s nothing here,” said Renee.

“Nothing obvious,” agreed Thea, before taking a step out onto the water. Her boot sank only about an inch before it stopped; there was a bridge, made of glass, slightly submerged so as to be invisible. Andrew nodded in victory. Thea had been surprised when he’d demanded she share the secret route to the Inner Court, accusing him of mind reading capabilities, but it was just common sense. No guard force would only have a single path to and no secret exit from the area they were responsible for guarding.

They made their way across the bridge, walking tall and proud instead of sneaking, wary of the surveillance from the guard towers. Thea had said that only Shu people wearing appropriate guard uniforms would not be shot on sight. The water on the bridge seeped into his shoes, freezing his feet. At least it was better than being on the roof.

They ran into a couple guards on the far side of the bridge and gave the salute that Thea had hastily taught them. He could see Thea relax slightly as they passed them. She then walked, looking confident and at home, towards the Inner Court. She let them in a guard door, with all of them again giving the proper salute, and then down towards the basement. Pushing open a large door, she stepped into a cavernous room and then froze. The room was completely empty, with cobwebs in the corners of the ceilings and a thin layer of dust on everything.

“I don’t understand,” Thea said. “This is his workshop. There should be something here!”

“Where else could he be?” snapped Andrew.

“I… I don’t…” Thea seemed at a loss.

“Thea,” interrupted Renee calmly. “Did he sleep down here? Does he have a living space?”

“Yes!” cried Thea, and took off for the stairs. They followed her up four flights - Andrew’s leg was really bothering him now - until they reached a decorated hallway. The carpets were thick and plush and large pieces of artwork adorned the walls. Thea indicated a door, and Andrew wasted no time getting it open.

Kevin was also not in this room, but at least this room showed his presence. Clothes were strewn about and books were left lying around, open to random pages. Plates of food were moulding on the floor and Andrew counted at least sixteen empty liquor bottles.

“Where is he?” demanded Thea. “He wouldn’t be at the party, and he would have thrown a fit if anyone touched anything in his workshop.”

“Obviously his workshop has been moved somewhere else,” Andrew pointed out. He was reevaluating their plans in his head. Luckily he had given them enough of a buffer in case they had run into problems locating Kevin. “We’ll have to ask.”

“Ask who?” asked Thea, sourly. “It’s not like we can just enter the ballroom and start demanding answers.”

“Renee will need an appropriate dress and to get that mark off her cheek,” said Andrew. “And then she can mingle with the guards and try to discover where Kevin is.”
“I’m not really the greatest at small talk,” protested Renee.

“Well, the alternative options are that me or Thea try to flirt the information out of the guards,” drawled Andrew. “Which option would be better? Especially considering I don’t speak Shu and Thea could be recognized?”

Renee acknowledged his point and Thea pointed out which room nearby belonged to a woman of Renee’s approximate size and might have what they were looking for. Renee emerged, clad in a silky red dress, tattoo gone from her cheek, and properly made up in record time.

“Hanging around with Allison definitely has its benefits,” she said in response to his raised eyebrow.

She took off towards the ballroom while Thea and Andrew made their way to a guard post so that they could watch her progress from above. The clock signalled nine bells and three quarter chime - they had just over an hour to find Kevin and get him out, which was cutting it close. They rounded a corner and ran into a surprised guard.

“Thea?” asked the guard incredulously before Andrew reacted. He knocked the man unconscious as quickly as possible. Thea was still looking shell-shocked but she helped him hide the body in a nearby closet.

Thea straightened, shouldering the guard’s rifle and Andrew saw realization enter her eyes. He slowly turned towards her, showing that he was unarmed. She aimed the gun at him, hands steady and breathing slightly rapid. He felt no surprise as he had been waiting for something like this to happen; Thea had been too divided in her loyalties. She needed to decide once and for all whose side she was on.

Andrew stood gazing at her steadily, eyes betraying no fear and daring her to shoot.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

Renee felt her heart skip a beat. She looked around frantically, wondering why Andrew and Thea hadn’t arrived to help her.
RENEE

Chapter Summary

In which there is a sudden yet inevitable betrayal.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Renee was uncomfortable with her surroundings. The opulence on display was at complete odds with her childhood. She weaved her way through the crowd trying to decide who to approach for the information she needed. She desperately tried to remember what Katelyn had once told her about charming information out of people. Be polite, she remembered, be interested in what people had to say, but not so interested that it was suspicious. Be vulnerable (which was something at which she did not excel), act weak so that men were not intimidated, and allow them to correct her to let them feel knowledgeable.

She took a glass of champagne off a passing serving tray and started to make her way over to where several highly ranked members of the guard seemed to be congregated. She didn’t want to take an obvious, direct path to them, so she wended her way, stopping several times to make small talk. She was beginning to sweat; she had only a small window of opportunity to succeed, otherwise she, Andrew, and Thea would be trapped here.

Renee was near the edge of the ballroom, not too far from her desired destination, when a drunk man threw one of his arms around her shoulders. She stiffened immediately and tried to inch away inconspicuously.

“Aren’t you a pretty one?” he slurred.

“Thank you,” she replied as politely as possible, trying not to push him away violently.

“I hear there’s some rooms set aside for people who want to have a little fun,” he said, running his hand down her spine to rest at the small of her back. “You look like fun.”

Renee smiled sweetly. “I am,” she said. She reached out and dropped his heart rate enough to send him into unconsciousness. After he crashed to the ground, a servant rushed over to see what the commotion was.

“I think he had too much to drink,” said Renee innocently, before distancing herself from the scene.

As she neared her targets, she overheard that they were discussing Grisha, which was an excellent stroke of luck. One of the guards was gesturing wildly as he spoke so she moved stealthily into the space behind him. The next large gesture he made caused him to crash into her, making her stumble and spilling her champagne. The heeled shoes that she had put on as part of her disguise helped make her clumsier; she would have found it difficult to be as ungraceful in her regular flats.

The guard turned towards her looking angry before his expression transformed into one of guilt. “I’m sorry, miss,” he apologized while turning red.

“You clod,” chastised one of the others. “Are you that far into your cups that you can’t help making
a fool of yourself?"

A different guard turned to her. “Are you alright?” he asked officiously.

“Yes, yes, I’m fine,” she said, smiling shyly. “I was just startled. I apologize for derailing your conversation.”

“It’s no problem,” he replied. “Kurt here was just telling of a recent argument he had with one of the Grisha Squallers who lives here.”

“Oh?” she said. “What are the Grisha like?” She lowered her voice conspiratorially, and shivered a little. “I’ve never met one. Is it exciting to work with them? I’ve heard that they’re dangerous.”

“They can be,” said the guard pompously, obviously enjoying her naivety and taking the opportunity to try to impress her. “But we know how to deal with them. We’ve got them trained like pets.”

She did not let her disgust and disdain show on her face and took a wide-eyed look around. “Are there any at the party?” she asked. “It would be thrilling to meet one.”

“No,” he answered. “They’re all kept in the laboratories, back in the-”

“Towns,” barked a voice, interrupting him. They turned, finding an older man looking at them shrewdly. Renee recognized his rank pin from Thea’s description. He was the guard captain - Browning, Thea had called him.

“Good to see you, this fine evening,” Browning told the guard - Towns, apparently. “I hope that you are enjoying the festivities?”

“Sir,” said Towns, standing up straight. “I am.”

“And you’re making friends, are you?”

“Yes, sir. I was just telling this woman about the Grisha that we supervise. She’s never met one before.”

Browning gave her an appreciative look, skimming his eyes up and down her body, causing a wave of revulsion to sweep through Renee. “Is that right?” he asked, after his appraising examination. He reached out a hand in invitation. “Would you like to, my dear?”

Renee was horrified at his ill-concealed interest in her, but she was running out of time to find where Kevin was located. She could go with this man as he seemed ready to show her to location of the Grisha as a way to entice her into his bed. If he tried anything, she was a Heartrender. She could take care of herself.

She swallowed her discomfort (Despise your heart, she told herself. She could deal with this awful man’s attentions for a short period), reached out to link their arms together, and smiled demurely. “Can I really?” she asked in awe.

He patted her hand and led her forward. “A pretty little thing like you should have everything you deserve and more.”

He led her through the crowd and out to the back courtyard. They wound their way through the garden. Renee hoped that Andrew and Thea were able to follow them inconspicuously. She didn’t want to have to deal with trying to find them after she learned of Kevin’s location.
Browning chatted idly, explaining some of the history and layout of Evermore and pointing out some of the more impressive plants they had in the garden, as they made their way towards a squat, circular building on the far side of the grounds. Two guards were standing on either side of a massive door with an intricate lock on the outside of it. She didn’t think that even Andrew could break his way through that lock.

“This is the vault,” he explained. “The most secure location in Evermore.”

“All the Grisha are in there?” she asked.

“Yes. Because Grisha are dangerous, manipulative animals that deserve to be caged,” he said.

He made a sudden aggressive move in her direction, so she took a step back and raised her hands in defense. The second she did so, she knew she had made a mistake. Only a Grisha would defend themselves in such a manner. Browning reacted instantly, grabbing her wrists and forcing the palms of her hands together. She struggled, kicking out towards him, but her dress and heels put her at a disadvantage and he had support from the two door guards. She had no chance against three muscular men that had obviously been trained to subdue Grisha and before she knew it she was contained in specially designed shackles made to keep her hands together, preventing her from using her powers.

“What’s … what’s going on?” she asked breathlessly, not having to fake her fear. “I think there’s been some kind of mistake.”

“Did you think I wouldn’t recognize you, Natalie Shields?” Browning spat.

Renee felt her heart skip a beat. She looked around frantically, wondering why Andrew and Thea hadn’t arrived to help her. Where were they? Would they get here in time? Would they be able to stop this?

“I know of every Grisha under my charge. I know that you were sent to me so that I could properly contain you here in Evermore. Instead, you managed to escape and somehow steal two of my guards,” explained Browning. “But at least one of them has returned to me.”

Renee stared at him, not understanding, until Thea stepped forward from the shadows.

“What—” started Renee.

“You thought she was on your side?” asked Browning.

“I’d never betray my country, unlike you,” said Thea derisively. “Serving here is my lifelong dream.”

“She informed me of what you did to her, of what she had to promise for her freedom,” continued Browning. “But your kidnapping attempt has been foiled now. Thea has told me of your ridiculous plan. Your companions will be caught, Kevin Day is safely in his laboratory, and you will not escape Evermore alive.”

Renee struggled like a wildcat, but it was no use. Browning unlocked the vault door and he and Thea dragged her through. Inside, there was a large, central room with another intricately locked door and two corridors leading off to either side. She was taken down one of the corridors, which was honeycombed with cells that resembled the Grisha cells from the main prison. They arrived at another cell that had an examination table in the middle of it and Browning opened the door with the key chain he carried at his waist.
“No,” Renee gasped, trying to prevent them from pushing her through the door. “You can’t do this! Grisha experimentation is illegal!” She was thrown onto the floor, limbs splayed in all directions. She rolled over and saw Thea’s expressionless face watching her.

“What is going to stop us?” she asked.

“How could you do this?” Renee demanded.

“Yuyeh sesh,” said Thea. “I did as you suggested. But I must say that it brings my heart joy to see you trapped in a cell where you belong.”

“I saved your life!” cried Renee.

Thea looked at her steadily. “You probably shouldn’t have,” she answered, before slamming the cell door closed.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

The ringing of the Inner Court bell was loud and panicked, signalling an emergency. Black Protocol. Evermore was in complete lockdown.
Neil felt nothing but anticipation and determination as he crept with Nicky and Matt towards the gate in Evermore’s East Tower. He felt more settled after his decision in the incinerator shaft. He would remain Neil. Obviously, if someone threatened the Foxes, he would be willing to leave in order to protect them, but first he would stand his ground. His mind spun with possibilities: he’d been living in Ketterdam for three years but he’d never allowed himself to plan farther than two weeks ahead. He knew that he was getting ahead of himself - his father would likely show up to ruin everything and he was currently trapped in a fortress - but he thought that maybe he could make tentative plans to stay.

Of course, first he’d have to get back to Ketterdam, and that required doing something insane: triggering Black Protocol. Andrew had asked if Nicky was capable of breaking the East Tower gate, rendering it useless and the guards trapped. Nicky seemed confident that he could, but that Black Protocol would be initiated, alerting all the guards to their location and putting Evermore into lockdown.

Currently, the guard barracks in the East Tower was probably the safest place in Evermore; it was almost completely abandoned, the guards either on duty or celebrating at Winter Banquet. It was slightly unnerving walking through abandoned corridors. They made their way to a vantage point that overlooked the interior courtyard that marked the entrance into Evermore.

The gate controls were located up a small staircase that was located directly beside the gate. As Thea had told them, four guards were standing watch. Neil considered what course of action they should take.

“We’ll have to take them out without them summoning help,” he whispered to his companions. “We don’t know if any others guards are around and we obviously can’t be caught.”

“So how will we take out four well-armed guards?” asked Nicky.

They were still clad in their prisoner clothing; although they could also have stolen guard uniforms, that probably would have roused just as much suspicion as they clearly were not Shu.

“I can climb above them and drop down to take them out,” said Neil, indicating the area above them that he could reach. “I don’t think I can take out all four of them at once, especially if they’re on their guard, and I don’t have a weapon. You’ll have to distract them.”
Matt handed Neil the shears, which made Neil grimace. They weren’t really the most efficient murder weapon.

“They’ll shoot us on sight,” Nicky hissed.

“Then we can’t let them see us,” said Matt, good-naturedly.

Nicky and Matt took off cautiously to the ground level while Neil made his way into position above the guards. He wasn’t particularly happy with his position - it was pretty exposed and he could be seen if the guards looked up. He waited patiently for the distraction. Suddenly there was some singing coming from the hallway on the far side of the courtyard. By the quality of the voice, he knew it couldn’t be Matt singing.

Nicky’s singing - of the Shu national anthem, of all things - grew louder and attracted the attention of the guards.

“Go check it out,” one of them said. “It sounds like some drunk partygoer got lost.”

One of the guards took off and the others kept their attention fixed on him. As soon as he was through the door, Neil dropped down behind the three remaining guards. He snapped the first one’s neck almost instantly and then drove the shears into the second one’s throat as he turned to see what was happening. The third one almost got his gun up before Neil grabbed it and smashed the butt of the rifle into his mouth. He swung the rifle again to knock the man out before he could make any noise. The one with the shears in his neck gargled a little as he lay clutching his throat desperately. Neil removed the shears and then used them to silence the man forever.

He took off across the courtyard to see what Matt and Nicky had done to the fourth guard and found them standing over his unconscious body.

“Come on,” he said. “We have to hide them.”

The two dead guards were hidden in a large chest in the guardroom that was located just off of the courtyard. Then they observed the two unconscious men.

“Should we kill them?” asked Nicky tentatively.

Neil shook his head. It would be easier, but Matt would not be happy to kill unarmed, unconscious men.

“That’s slightly more ruthless than I was expecting from you,” Matt told Nicky. “Have you ever even killed anybody?”

“I’d never even seen a dead body until I moved to the Barrel,” admitted Nicky sheepishly.

“That’s not something to be ashamed of,” said Matt. “It’s healthier if you don’t get too comfortable with death.”

Nicky turned to Neil. “How do you handle it?” he asked, eyeing Neil’s bloodstained hands.

Neil shrugged. “My first memories are of people dying,” he said. “The novelty’s worn off.”

“Neil’s a walking tragedy,” explained Matt. “That’s why we must protect him.”

Neil rolled his eyes. “Make sure the gags are tight,” he said. “We can’t afford anybody finding them too soon.”
They bound the unconscious guards’ hands and feet with some of the rope they had brought, gagged them with their own shirts, and stuffed them into a closet in the guardroom.

Neil checked their surroundings as they made their way up to the gate control room. The room was occupied by a large winch, with handles at each end and a thick chain coiled around it. The chain extended into slots in the stone.

“Huh,” said Nicky lightly.

“That doesn’t sound good,” said Matt.

“I was expecting rope or cable, not chain,” explained Nicky. “In order to prevent the gate from opening, we’ll have to cut through the chain.”

Neil examined the thick metal chain. “Well, fuck,” he said.

“Fuck,” agreed Matt.

Neil handed Nicky the shears. “I’ll try to weaken the metal in the chain, but you’ll have to try to saw through a link with those.”

Nicky paled a little. “That’s impossible.”

The Inner Court clock chimed ten bells. “We’d better make it possible,” said Neil. “We only have an hour to break the gate.”

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Forty-five minutes later, Neil began to worry. He’d been weakening the metal of one of the chain links continuously for almost an hour now. Matt and Nicky had taken turns filing away at the metal with the shears: both their hands were bloody with blisters.

“It’s almost time,” muttered Matt, from where he stood guard with a rifle. “I don’t think we’re going to be able to do this.”

Neil didn’t answer, too busy concentrating. He was covered in metal filings from the single link they had been focussed on.

“Okay,” said Matt as the clock began to signal eleven bells. “We’ve run out of time. Let’s just open the gate and then shoot the winch until it breaks.”

Neil nodded in defeat and then helped Nicky turn one of the large handles while Matt turned the other. The gate started to open and Neil experienced doubt. Why was the alarm not activating? Was Black Protocol just a story to deter people from trying to open the gates?

BING! BONG! BING! BONG! The ringing of the Inner Court bell was loud and panicked, signalling an emergency. Black Protocol. Evermore was in complete lockdown. They let go of the handles, letting the gate fall heavily to the ground, but still the chain didn’t break. Neil hung off the weakened link, using all his energy to try to weaken it more. Matt joined him, hanging off the link with all his weight.

“They know where we are. They’ll be here soon,” said Nicky fretfully. “We can’t stay for long.”

“We can’t fail, either,” replied Matt. “The gate has to be inoperable.”

“This will have to be-” started Nicky but was cut off by the sudden snapping of the link, dropping
Neil and Matt to the ground. The chain uncoiled and disappeared into the slot in the wall.

“Well,” Matt said, picking up his rifle. “Congratulations to us. We’ve successfully locked ourselves in a fortress with our enemies and alerted them to our presence.”

“Get what you need, Nicky,” Neil said, also shouldering one of the rifles. “We have to get to the roof.”

Once Nicky had gathered what supplies he required from the broken winch, they took off down the stairs. As soon as they entered the courtyard a group of three guards came running in from the other side. Matt started shooting, downing one of the men instantly. Neil also tried to shoot, but his rifle was jammed. In frustration, he reacted instinctively, using his power to lash out. All the metal shavings from his clothing, as well as from Matt and Nicky’s responded by flinging themselves across the courtyard and into the guards. The guards’ bodies were ribboned with wounds, shrapnel buried in their tissues and organs.

Matt and Nicky stared in horror and Neil felt himself go numb. He’d never killed anyone with his power before. His abilities had always been secret, special. Something for him to master and enjoy by himself, without the interference of outside life. He’d used his powers to protect and heal himself, to fabricate his knives and Andrew’s cane - beautiful, useful objects. Never before had he tapped into the well of power within him during the bloody, violent moments of his life. He could feel his mother’s phantom fists and harsh words punishing him for being so stupid. Never, *never*, let enemies know that he was Grisha.

“Neil? Neil!” he could distantly hear Matt’s voice, urging that they had to go, that more guards were on their way, but he couldn’t stop himself from staring at the men he had just killed. Everything else felt far away and unimportant. He had just signed his death certificate. Eventually, he felt strong arms wrap around his waist and hoist him up, carrying him away from the courtyard.

He came back to himself on the roof, Matt having carried him up all the flights of stairs to the roof access where they had entered the guard barracks earlier. Matt and Nicky were giving him concerned looks.

“I’m fine,” he said. At Matt’s disbelieving look he expanded, “No, really. I am. I just … didn’t know I could do that.” He turned to use his lockpicks to lock the door behind them, and started off back towards the prison roof.

“Neil,” said Matt as he caught up with him. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

“Yes,” insisted Neil. “I’m sorry for freezing up, I was caught off guard.”

“You know it’s not a weakness to be disturbed by killing, right?”

“It wasn’t the killing that bothered me. It was blatantly using my powers after I’ve spent so long keeping them hidden.” His mother had drilled into him that as soon as he openly displayed his power, he would be caught and killed. He shook off the feeling of dread: his mother’s dire warnings couldn’t control his behaviour anymore. His friends already knew he was a Grisha. He would be fine. “Come on,” he said, mustering up a weak smile that likely didn’t fool Matt. “We have a rendez-vous to get to and several other batshit insane things to do.”

Chapter End Notes
Next time:

Browning was giving her an appraising look. “It’s good that you’re back, Muldani,” he said.
In which we (finally) meet Kevin.

Thank you to everyone who is reading and commenting! You guys are helping keep me motivated.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Thea heard the clock chime eleven bells as she slammed the cell door shut, closing Renee’s anguished expression away from her view. It felt… less satisfying than she had been expecting, locking Renee in prison.

Browning was giving her an appraising look. “It’s good that you’re back, Muldani,” he said. “There have been many interesting developments since you disappeared.”

“Like the amplifiers,” she supplied.

“Just so,” he answered, leading her back toward the main door, passing room after room of Grisha experimentation rooms. “And we’ve begun more research into the source of Grisha powers using live subjects.”

“Grisha experimentation was outlawed twenty years ago,” she pointed out.

“The crown prince does not agree with all the King’s previous edicts,” he shrugged. “He’s smart. There’s power to be tapped here. And, as you told that traitor, who is going to stop us?”

She hummed noncommittally. “What about Kevin?” she asked. “We should check on him to make sure that he’s still secure.”

“Nobody could have reached him,” Browning said soothingly. “He’s locked in the central vault here and I have the only key.” He patted his chest, showing the disc-shaped key that hung from a chain around his neck. “It’s late and it’s been a busy day, but I’ll let you see him tomorrow. First we’ll deal with your reinstatement.”

Thea’s breath caught. “That easily?” she asked. It was that simple to regain the life she had been forced to abandon?

Browning smiled. “That easily,” he agreed. “We can force the traitor to sign a statement that will absolve you of all criminal charges. Kerch will have no reason to demand your return.”

Thea tried to stutter out her gratitude when suddenly the alarm for Black Protocol sounded. Browning wheeled around in shock and Thea grabbed him from behind, putting him in a sleeper hold (ironically one he had taught her) to cut off his oxygen. He struggled for a few minutes before
falling unconscious.

“Sorry,” she whispered. “I made my choice.”

She took the disc-shaped key from around his neck and the key ring from his belt and stuffed his body into the nearest empty cell, hoping that no other guards would find him until she was long gone. Luckily, the vault was deserted and most of the guards would be converging on the barracks or locking down the other sectors due to Black Protocol.

She rushed to the front doors, unlocking them to find Andrew standing outside with a bored expression and two dead guards at his feet.

“Hurry,” he said curtly, stepping into the building and closing the door behind him.

She had had him at gunpoint watching him regard her without fear, almost daring her to shoot. She could do it, she had thought. She could shoot him, doom all the others, and retake her place as an Evermore guard. All she had to do was shoot an unarmed man who had so far kept his end of their bargain, in order to reclaim a life she was no longer sure she wanted. She lowered the gun.

“I wasn’t sure you wouldn’t shoot when it came down to it,” said Andrew, seeming completely unaffected by the whole ordeal.

“Neither was I,” admitted Thea. Andrew then adjusted his sleeve, letting her catch a glimpse of a knife in his grip. She had no idea when he’d gotten it - probably from a guard - but she understood that he had only been a couple seconds shy of throwing it into her throat. “It was a test,” she realized. “You were never in any danger.”

Andrew had scoffed. “I am not about to die now. I have promises to keep.”

They’d made their way to a vantage point overlooking the ballroom. When they’d arrived, Thea had noticed Captain Browning was tracking Renee’s movements through the crowd, watching her like a hawk and subtly closing in on her. She’d started towards him, but Andrew had caught her arm.

“Be smart,” he had said. “There’s a way to protect Renee and find Kevin at the same time.”

Thea had stared at him for a couple of moments before understanding hit her. She’d hurried down the stairs into the ballroom.

“Sir,” she called, grabbing Browning’s arm.

“No now,” he said.

“But, sir!” she argued. “I have information about a kidnapping attempt on Kevin Day!”

He’d turned towards her and his eyes had widened. “Muldani?” he asked. “I’d thought you had deserted - or had died.”

She shook her head and told him a small sliver of the truth: that she’d been betrayed by Jean in Kerch, that she’d been imprisoned and broken out of prison by a group of thieves who wanted her help to kidnap Kevin, that she’d finally gotten away from them in order to warn Browning of their plans, that Natalie Shields was here as part of the plot.

She couldn’t believe that everything had worked. She now knew where Kevin was and once she and Andrew retrieved Renee from her cell they could free him and escape. That was assuming that Andrew’s inferences were correct.
Thea used the captain’s keys to open Renee’s cell. Renee looked up sharply but visibly relaxed when she saw who had opened the door.

“I would have preferred to know that you were only pretending at betrayal. I did not enjoy that,” she said simply, as she raised her hands to have the shackles removed.

Thea shrugged remorselessly, unlocking the other woman’s wrists. “There wasn’t enough time to let you know. Besides, you probably deserved it, at least a little. We’re even now.”

“Well we’ve each gotten the other locked in a cell and then broken them out,” mused Renee. “But you haven’t saved my life yet.”

“Don’t press your luck,” replied Thea. “I was in Hellgate for almost a year. Come on, Kevin’s in the central vault.”

The bells outside were still clanging wildly when they reached the central vault. Thea unlocked the giant door and ushered them inside. It was a large workshop, reminiscent of the one that they had initially searched for Kevin. The walls were lined with shelves filled with strange objects, beakers and containers stood open on benches, and Kevin was hunched over something on the far side of the room, one of his arms bandaged heavily and held against his body.

“I’m busy,” he called out. “Come back later.”

“Sesh-uyeh,” called Thea, knowing the fastest way to get Kevin’s attention away from his work would be to provide the password that meant he was being rescued.

Kevin’s head snapped up and looked at them shrewdly. Then his eyes opened in disbelief. “Thea?” he called, getting to his feet and rushing towards her. “Where have you been? I thought you were dead.”

She reached towards him, feeling overwhelmingly happy to see him, to know that he hadn’t forgotten her.

“Kevin,” she said. “I’m here to take you to Kerch.”

“Oh,” he said pulling up short and glancing around the room. “Right now? I was right in the middle of something.”

“Yes, now, Kevin,” she sighed, wondering how he could be ignoring the insistent clamour of the alarm.

“But - my research!” cried Kevin. “I have to take it.”

“Those amplifiers should be destroyed,” spoke up Renee from Thea’s left.

Kevin looked almost surprised that there were other people in the room, but nodded. “I know. I didn’t mean to make them, but when Prince Ichirou found out what they could do he forced me to. He… he broke my hand.”


Kevin nodded, defeated. “He broke it to punish me for disobedience, but he has healers fix it when he wants me to do something for him. He breaks it again when I’m finished. He won’t let me do my work without direct supervision anymore.”
“Then let’s go,” urged Thea.

“This work should be destroyed so that no one else can replicate it,” said Renee.

Kevin gasped and looked physically pained. “No, not my research!” He started rushing around, gathering up as much as he could, having trouble with only one functioning hand.

“We can’t take everything, only what you and I can carry,” said Thea, moving to help him. “We’ll have to find some way to destroy the rest.”

Kevin paused and looked around. “Maybe I shouldn’t go,” he said absently. “I can’t abandon my research and Ichirou will be angry.”

“Kevin,” she said, attempting patience. “You asked for help. We’re here to help. Come with us.”

“I’ll make you a deal,” said Andrew suddenly. “Come with us and follow my instructions, and I’ll ensure that Ichirou will not touch you.”

Kevin took in Andrew’s short stature and snorted. “You?” he asked derisively.

“I broke Thea out of prison and masterminded our infiltration of Evermore,” said Andrew. “And I promise that no harm will come to you as long as you obey me.”

Thea nodded at Kevin. If anyone could help keep Kevin safe, it was Andrew who she suspected was actually a demon in human form. Kevin’s obvious fear of Ichirou warred with his desire for freedom. His shoulders slumped. “Alright,” he said.

“How can we destroy this workshop?” asked Renee.

“I’m an Alkemi as well as a Durast,” explained Kevin reluctantly. “I’ve invented a large number of explosive powders.”

“Okay,” said Thea. “Take those powders and whatever else you want, it’s past time we left.”

Kevin frantically gathered up several large books, ineffectually shoving them in a bag. He then looked around and grabbed a bracelet shaped object.

“Is that an amplifier?” asked Renee. “You’re bringing one of your synthetic amplifiers?”

“It’s my last one,” explained Kevin.

“It should be destroyed.”

“They’re impossible to destroy without using them. I’ve already destroyed all my notes about how I made it. I can’t risk leaving it in Ichirou’s hands.” Kevin whimpered. “He’s going to kill me. He’s going to be so mad and he’s going to ban me from my workshop.”

“Kevin,” snapped Thea. “No he won’t. We won’t let him. Focus. Are you ready to go?”

Kevin tried to grab at least fourteen more objects last minutes before she stopped him. He whined pitifully, before spreading one of his powders around the room. “Where are we headed?” he asked.

“That’s up to you,” said Andrew. “You know a secret path out of the fortress, yes?”

Kevin blanched. “How did you know that?”
"I suspect he can read minds," explained Thea.

“Simple deduction,” corrected Andrew, giving her a sidelong look. “You’ve obviously been able to get messages out of here without the prince’s knowledge despite the fact that according to Thea you’re not allowed to leave and you have no allies among the guards, ergo you know a way out.”

“Yes,” said Kevin, walking purposefully now. He trailed one of his powders behind him. At the entrance to the vault, Thea opened the door cautiously and looked out, making sure that there weren’t any guards nearby. She ushered the rest of them through the door. Kevin paused on his way through the door and lit a match to igniting the trail of explosive powder. “Run!” he yelled, sprinting away. They made it to cover before there was an explosion from the building behind them.

“That will probably help draw the guards away from the others,” mused Renee.

“But towards us,” answered Thea. “Are we close to your secret passage?”

“This way,” said Kevin, taking off toward a hedge maze. He took each turn knowledgeably, hardly having to check where he was going. In the very centre of the maze there was a statue, which Kevin twisted, causing a hole to open in the ground in front of them.

“How many people know about this?” asked Andrew.

“I don’t know. My uncle Tetsuji showed me a long time ago, when I was still a child.”

“Where does it go?” asked Thea.

“Near the docks,” replied Kevin.

“That’s fortunate,” remarked Renee. “This has been easier than I thought it would be. Let’s hope the others are having as much luck as we are.”

“Idiot. Now you’ve jinxed us all,” growled Thea, leading the way down into the passageway.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

Erik wondered if getting imprisoned in the same prison twice in one day was a record of some kind.
“Just how long am I to be kept waiting?” a stout man, with a ridiculous mustache was complaining to the guard. “I came here at considerable expense, and it wasn’t so that I could spend the whole evening lounging around the entrance!”

The guard looked down his nose at the man - Erik would have called him short if he hadn’t spent so much time around Neil and Andrew, thereby redefining his definition of short - and replied curtly. “Security measures are in effect. Once all the guests in front of you have cleared the checkpoint, then you will be allowed into the party. Until then, you must remain detained here until your identification can be checked and verified.”

“Detained?” cried the man. “Like common criminals?”

Erik snorted, but covered it with a cough. The other guests around him murmured in agreement with the mustachioed man.

He and Allison had been in the embassy’s lobby milling among Evermore’s guests for the past hour; mingling, commiserating, and thieving. Allison passed through his peripheral vision and he tracked her progress around the room. He was trying not to let her get too far away - she was, after all, supposed to be his wife.

It had taken them some time to find clothing that wouldn’t arouse suspicions. Neil had fabricated a set of lockpicks for them; however, Allison’s lockpicking seemed extremely slow when compared against Andrew’s superior abilities. They’d had to search four rooms before they were able to find appropriate clothing - Allison had needed a fashionable coat to wear over the dress she had found. Then she had been fussy about her hair.

“I have to look Fjerdan,” she explained, twisting and pinning her blonde locks in place.

“You don’t look Fjerdan at all,” replied Erik, considering himself an expert on the subject. “You look Kerch. Plus it’s not like you can speak Fjerdan.”

“Flingen florgen bork bork.”

“... What was that?” He was a little worried that Allison had lost her mind. That would certainly make achieving their goals more difficult.

“It was Fjerdan,” replied Allison dismissively.

“It was gibberish.”

She shrugged. “Sounds the same to me.”
“Are you trying to be as insulting as possible?” he demanded.

“Usually,” Allison’s grin was sharp. “I’m sure I could come up with many more ways to insult your homeland and culture.”

“Okay, no,” replied Erik. “I’m a Fjerdan businessman and you’re my very expensive Kerch wife.”

“You wish,” Allison snorted.

“Ew,” he said. “You’re practically my sister.”

“You couldn’t handle me, anyway.”

“So few people can, you’re a catty bitch,” he said affectionately.

Which remained true, as Allison overwhelmed many people in the waiting area, flirting conspicuously, complaining incessantly, insulting people loudly, and performing sleight of hand. He was amazed that no one had noticed yet; Allison’s coat probably jingled with all the jewelry she’d pocketed.

Ten bells and three quarter chime was signalled by the Inner Court clock and he caught Allison’s eye. It was getting late. She moved closer to him, before pushing her way through the crowd to the harried guard barring their entrance farther into Evermore.

“I’ve had enough,” she demanded loudly. “Either take us to the checkpoint or let us go.”

“Security measures—”

“I don’t care,” she cut him off. “I have been in this room for far too long. Do you know who my husband is? Do you know who I am? I am way too important to be dismissed and ignored like this. Either you solve this problem now or I’ll find someone else who will.”

The guard looked pained. “Ma’am,” he said. “I’m sorry for the inconvenience—”

“I’m sure you are.”

“-but we cannot overlook the safety of our royal family just because of your unhappiness.”

“I’m tired of this speech,” said Allison, her voice raising even louder now, gaining the attention of everyone in the room. “I’m going in and you will not stop me.”

“My dear,” said Erik quietly, trying to grasp her elbow to pull her away from the guard. “You are making a scene.”

Allison pushed him sharply and raised her arm into the air threateningly. “Well if it takes a scene to get to the party, then I will make a scene!”

There was a loud gasp from behind them. “My bracelet!” cried a woman. “She’s wearing my bracelet!”

Allison froze and looked down at her wrist. She quickly covered the stolen item with her coat again and laughed breezily. “Have you already gotten into the champagne?” she asked the woman. “Judging by your outfit I would never steal anything that you chose to wear.”

“No, that’s mine!” called the woman, coming forward. Murmurs ran through the crowd as well as sharp exclamations.
"My necklace is missing!"

"Where is my watch?"

"My ring!"

Two guards approached Allison to check out the bracelet and she pushed them back. "You won’t lay hands on me!" she shrieked.

Erik approached and tried to drag her away. "Unhand my wife!" he yelled. "This is completely uncalled for!"

They were both grabbed by guards and given a cursory search. Allison was divested of numerous pieces of jewelry. Erik was quite impressed about how much she had managed to steal. He had only gotten two watches, several cufflinks, a bracelet, and a ring.

Everybody’s eyes were on them, looking at them with disgust. Just then the alarms of Black Protocol began to ring. There was a moment of stunned inertia before all the guards sprang into action, mobilizing incredibly quickly and herding the guests away.

"Take these thieves to the prison," ordered one of the guards pointing to Erik and Allison. "Strip them, search them, and interrogate them."

They both struggled and cursed as they were manhandled out the embassy gate and towards the prison. There was a well worn path that led from the South Tower to the West Tower but Allison managed to delay them several times by stumbling in her heels. She couldn’t delay forever, however, and for the second time that day they were escorted through the Evermore prison gates. Erik wondered if getting imprisoned in the same prison twice in one day was a record of some kind.

The courtyard was filled with a much larger number of guards than had been there earlier. They were alert, mobilizing in response to Black Protocol. None of them spared a glance for him and Allison, petty criminals as they were. The three guards dragging them didn’t even bother to bind their hands; evidently they thought the two of them were not dangerous.

They were taken down the same path that Erik had followed earlier in the day, down the corridor next to the large glass enclosure where the torvagen were located. The door at the far end of the corridor opened just before they reached it and Matt stepped into the corridor. He immediately shot one of the guards accompanying them. The other guards froze in shock for an instant, but Allison and Erik were already reacting: divesting the guards of their weapons and incapacitating them.

Nicky and Neil also came into the corridor, each carrying a coil of rope. They were covered in soot again, a remnant of their trip back down the incinerator shaft.

"Congratulations on alerting all the guards to our presence," said Erik.

"Congratulations on getting arrested again," returned Matt.

"Did you get a diamond?" asked Nicky.

Allison scoffed. "Of course I did." She reached down the front of her dress to fish out a large diamond necklace from her cleavage, before handing it over to Neil who was looking distinctly uncomfortable.

"Lucky they didn’t find it," remarked Erik.
“I would have bitten off the head of anyone who tried to search me that thoroughly in public. I also have a couple other items hidden away,” she said with a wink.

Nicky had begun fitting together a massive screw and the handle of a winch to form a drill, and Neil was busy turning the diamond necklace into a drill bit - fabricating something that was hard enough to break through the Grisha-made glass.

Erik went to barricade one of the entrances into the corridor and Matt went to secure the other.

“Hurry,” said Allison. “We only have a few minutes before a patrol notices that those doors are locked when they shouldn’t be.”

“Shockingly, telling me to hurry doesn’t make me work faster,” said Neil.

Suddenly there was a thump followed by shouting at one of the barred doors. Matt and Allison took up the guards’ guns. Nicky attached the diamond bit to drill and Erik helped him put it in place on the glass. Slowly they turned the handle.

“Is anything happening?” asked Erik.

“The glass is thick,” said Nicky. “But I think it’s working!”

The progress was painfully slow. They turned the handle, drilling into the glass in a circular motion.

“Can you go any faster than that?” griped Allison.

“You’re welcome to come over here if you think you’ll be able to do this any faster,” gritted Erik through his teeth. Nonetheless, he turned the handle faster.

There was a crash at the barred door. “I think they have a battering ram,” said Matt, firing a couple warning shots into the door. The door splintered a little on the next impact.

Finally, the circle was complete and the glass popped free and fell inward, leaving behind a circular opening.

“Out of the way,” said Neil, before he backed up a couple steps and took a run at the small window, diving head first through it. He barely fit but Erik could see that he’d jumped far enough to grab onto one of the hanging light fixtures. He swung a couple times before climbing like a monkey to the ground. Erik - as always - was vastly impressed with Neil’s abilities, but he didn’t have time to marvel. He picked up a gun and proceeded to help Matt and Allison ward off the guards who were trying to break through the door.

It felt like an eternity before there was the pinging of dozens of bullets from the inside of the glass; Neil was giving them a signal.

“Get away from the glass,” called Erik, grabbing Nicky and forcing him to take cover near the barricaded door that wasn’t currently being broken down. The four of them huddled, protecting their heads and waited.

And waited. “Was it?” asked Nicky, before there was an enormous impact and the glass of the enclosure shattered into tiny pieces.

Matt started laughing. “Go Neil!” he cried. He took one of the rope coils and secured it, while Erik did the same with the other. Then the four of them descended the ropes into the enclosure.
Gunfire rained down on them and they could see guards scrambling towards the enclosure’s entrance so they hurriedly made their way to the tank that Neil had hijacked. As the only one of them with any experience with torvegen, Erik climbed into the driver’s seat. He turned on the behemoth, laughing wildly. This was fun.

He left the main cannon control to Neil, who had swiveled the gun around to aim at Evermore’s outer wall. He pressed the fire button - following a short pause there was a thunk from inside the tank before the cannon fired, causing several cracks to form in the wall.

“Again,” said Erik, getting a feel for the controls. The tank roared to life loudly, black smoke puffing out of the engine as he moved it backwards. Neil fired again. The three others had taken refuge in the upper level of the tank; Erik could hear the turret shooting out at their attackers, indicating that they’d found the gun controls.

“Brace yourselves!” he called loudly, giving everyone a warning before impact. He pushed the lever as far forward as possible, causing the tank to make a run towards the crack in the wall. They hit the wall with a loud bang, breaking through the stone and careening out down the path towards the city.

He could hear incredulous laughter from the others as they realized that they had done it - they’d escaped from Evermore. Now they only had to make sure no one could follow them.

Halfway down the path there was a narrow bridge. Neil readied the cannon and, as soon as they had passed it, he shot two cannonballs into the bridge supports, destroying them. That would prevent the other tanks that they could see starting down the hill from being able to follow them into town.

“Take the western streets,” said Neil. “Warehouse district. It should be empty at this time of day.”

Erik nodded his acquiescence and maneuvered the tank through the deserted streets of Bhez Ju. They didn’t have much farther now. They were almost at the docks. He felt disbelief and hope rise within him. They were actually going to get away.

He stopped the tank dead after turning the last corner.

“Oh,” said Neil quietly. The others crowded around to look out the front window. There were approximately two hundred armed guards standing between them and the docks.

“She didn’t mention this part of Black Protocol,” said Allison sourly.

“Maybe she didn’t know?” suggested Nicky.

“Can we just shoot them all?” asked Matt.

“We’re out of cannonballs,” said Neil. “And I can see two soldiers with Grisha Heartrender insignia. We’ll be dead before we can make a dent.”

“I can see the Palmetto,” said Nicky sadly. At that Erik looked up, and yes, he could see the Palmetto’s Kerch flag just beyond the blockade.

A loud voice emanated from the soldiers. “Hand over the captive Kevin Day and surrender yourselves,” it commanded.

“It sounds like the others got to Kevin, at least,” said Nicky.

“Fuck, we were so close,” lamented Allison.
“I’m not letting them take me alive,” said Neil.

“Me neither,” Nicky said fiercely.

“Oh, merchling,” sighed Erik. “Look how much we’ve influenced you. You deserve better friends.”

“The rest of you should surrender,” insisted Neil.

“Like hell I’m leaving you to die alone,” gritted out Matt.

“I’ve had enough captivity for today,” agreed Erik.

“My brave, beloved coconut,” said Allison. “You should know better than that by now. All for one and one for all. We go out together.”

“I repeat,” said the voice. “You have until the count of one to comply or you will all be killed. Ten...”

“At least we accomplished some pretty amazing things,” said Erik.

“Nine...”

“I stole a giant diamond necklace,” added Allison with a feral grin.

“Eight...”

“We rode in an awesome tank,” said Matt, ruffling Neil’s hair.

“Seven...”

“I climbed the incinerator shaft,” supplied Neil with a faraway look in his eyes.

“Six...”

“I broke a giant gate,” was Nicky’s input.

“Five...”

“And we’ll go out fighting,” said Erik, sharing a look with Nicky.

“Four...”

“They’ll be sorry they ever messed with us,” snarled Allison.

“Three...”

“It’s been fun, you guys,” said Matt with a tremulous smile.

“Two...”

“No mourners,” whispered Nicky.

“One.”

And then everything stopped.
Chapter End Notes

Next time:

“I told you he would come for me,” said Kevin, panicking. “He’s going to kill me.”
Chapter Summary

In which Renee is become death, destroyer of worlds.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thea led them cautiously forward through the dark tunnel and Andrew took up the rear guard. That left Renee walking with Kevin, who seemed fairly distressed that he’d slipped his master’s leash.

“Tell me about those amplifiers,” said Renee, partly to distract him and partly because of personal interest. It was smart to study your enemies and an object that could steal her powers and potentially kill her was definitely her enemy.

“I didn’t mean to make them,” said Kevin. “I was just seeing if I could.”

Thea made a disgusted sound. “We talked about this,” she said. “Research can’t happen without morality or ethics. Progress for progress’s sake will cause trouble. There will always be people willing to use your inventions for evil.”

“I know that,” snapped Kevin. “... now.”

“Why amplifiers?” asked Renee to get Kevin back on track.

“How much do you know about my mother’s history?”

“Sankta Kayleigh? Only that she martyred herself to save Ravka from the Shadow Fold.”

Kevin nodded and his voice took on a slightly arrogant, bossy tone. “Yes, but she was not nearly powerful enough to do so alone. According to my uncle she was in possession of three incredibly powerful amplifiers. And they weren’t ordinary amplifiers; a Fabrikator made them centuries ago. They allowed her to channel enough power to close the Fold.”

“But that killed her,” argued Renee. “Why would that make you decide to fabricate amplifiers?”

“I just wanted to see if I could do it,” defended Kevin. “It was very difficult. Amplifiers must be organic material: bone, scales, teeth. And the Grisha who wants the amplifier must kill an animal and harvest the materials themselves in order for the resulting amplifier to work properly. I had to try many different materials until I found one that worked. Coral.”

“Coral?” asked Andrew sharply from behind them. “You mean that ocean rock that’s only found in the fisheries of the Southern Colonies?”

“Coral’s not a rock,” said Kevin condescendingly. “Coral is an animal. It’s a small spineless sea creature that makes a rock-like structure to live in.”

“So what we refer to as coral is a rock made by a living organism?” asked Renee.
“Yes,” said Kevin enthusiastically. “Something about it allows it to amplify Grisha powers unlike other rocks, but its nature allows it to be manipulated more easily than bones or scales.”

“Is there danger of others figuring this out?”

“I don’t think so,” admitted Kevin. “Others know that coral can be made into an amplifier, but I doubt that anyone else could do so. I’m probably the most powerful Fabrikator alive and it takes quite a bit of power to achieve the end result. After I started refusing to make any more, Ichirou tried to force other Fabrikators living at Evermore to try, but they were never even close to successful. Also, it’s a very complicated process: the coral had to be treated with different substances including… um… Grisha blood.”

“Kevin,” admonished Thea.

“I know,” he said. “I know that I shouldn’t have made them.”

“What happened to the Grisha who used the amplifiers?” asked Renee.

“It was like… like an oil lamp,” said Kevin slowly. “Imagine that every Grisha has a certain amount of non-renewable fuel within them to support their powers for their lifetime. Every time they use their power a small amount burns, creating a soft glow. With the amplifier, all the fuel lit at once. Blinding light, but it burned through quickly. One hour, maybe two. And then gone forever.”

“They died?” asked Thea.

“Not all of them. It seemed to be like going through withdrawal from a drug. Some died from the shock when the power ran out, but others recovered slowly. They seemed to crave their powers, descending into anger and madness. Ichirou sent them away, I don’t know what became of them.”

“The two in Ketterdam died,” supplied Andrew. “One right away and the other killed herself after her powers disappeared.”

“What?” demanded Kevin. “I specifically told them not to use the amplifiers! I sent them the amplifiers for safekeeping!”

“Never underestimate the greed or curiosity of human beings,” replied Andrew.

“I sent them three amplifiers.”

“Maybe they learned their lesson after two disasters,” shrugged Andrew. “I wouldn’t count on it, but Grisha are valuable resources after all.”

The pathway, which had been steeped steadily downward suddenly evened out.

“We’re almost there,” said Kevin. “We’ll be slightly east of the docks. You have a ship, yes?”

“Yes,” answered Thea. “It’s flying Kerch merchant colours, so it should be located on the westernmost dock.”

They emerged out of a trap door in a stone cellar. Thea checked that the coast was clear before signalling to the rest of them. The streets were busy in celebration, despite the late hour. Revellers were enjoying Winter Banquet; however, they easily made way for Andrew and Thea, since they were still dressed in Evermore guard uniforms. Closer to the docks it was quieter and there was more tension in the air. Renee could still hear the bells from Evermore signalling Black Protocol. Clearly the city’s inhabitants were worried about the incessant alarms.
They made their way towards the docks but were routed at the last moment. Renee could see the Palmetto’s flag, but at least two hundred troops were waiting, blocking their way to the docks.

“What?” gasped Thea. “Did they change the protocol? There shouldn’t be a guard presence in the harbour.”

“Maybe it’s special Winter Banquet protocol? To prevent visitors from causing trouble and then simply sailing away?” suggested Renee.

“I told you he would come for me,” said Kevin, panicking. “He’s going to kill me.”

A loud rumbling was approaching from the west before an awesome sight came into view. A large horseless wagon, with a giant cannon came snorting and belching into the opposite side of the square before stopping abruptly.

“They actually made it,” breathed Renee.

“But no farther,” said Andrew, just as a voice raised from among the soldiers.

“Hand over the captive Kevin Day and surrender yourselves.”

“Don’t let them take me,” moaned Kevin.

“I promised you, didn’t I?” said Andrew harshly, but his expression uncharacteristically betrayed his worry.

“Got any more tricks up your sleeve?” asked Thea.

Andrew shook his head helplessly as they watched in horror as the voice began counting down.

“They’re all going to die,” whimpered Kevin. “And then so are we.”

“No,” said Renee suddenly, standing up straight. “They will not. Give me that amplifier.”

Kevin gaped at her. “You’ll die,” he protested.

“Maybe,” allowed Renee, as if the idea didn’t terrify her. “Better one death than many. Give it to me.”

Kevin hesitated a little, but Thea punched him in the arm. He reached into his bag and handed over that last amplifier. Renee slid it over her wrist and waited. It felt like nothing had happened, but then suddenly… oh.

It was unimaginable power. She could feel it, like a live wire running under her skin. Had she always had this power but not been able to feel it? She felt like she was glowing, lighting up from the inside. Perhaps this is what it felt like to be a god, she mused. This connectedness to everything: she could hear her companions’ heartbeats and the rush of their blood. She could feel the life emanating from the soldiers. How had she gone so long without this feeling?

She stepped out from their hiding place just as the voice said, "One," finishing the countdown.

“Stop,” she commanded, raising her arms. Everything stopped. She could practically see the electrical impulses in the guards’ brains forcing them to obey her. “Sleep.” They all dropped like stones, marionettes whose strings had been cut. She could see her friends disembarking from their tank and staring at her in shock. Andrew, Thea, and Kevin began picking their way through the fallen men, making their way towards the ship. After a few seconds of open-mouthed staring the
others began making their way forwards as well.

It was eerily quiet - or it would have been had Renee not been focused on the sounds of heartbeats and blood flow - as they made their way towards the boat. Dan jumped onto the dock to greet them with an expression of disbelief on her face. Thea herded Kevin on board the Palmetto.

Renee turned to make sure her friends were on their way. She could hear Andrew’s heart speed slightly as Neil made his way over to him. Allison stormed up to Renee.

“What the hell did you do?” she demanded, grabbing Renee’s wrist to examine the amplifier. “You look high. Your pupils are huge.”

“I wasn’t paying super close attention, but don’t those things kill Grisha?” asked Erik, before quailing under the look that Allison shot him.

“She’s not fucking dying,” spat Allison. “Even if I have to drag her from the brink of death myself.”

Renee was distracted by movement in the square. She swept Allison aside. Evermore guards, led by Browning (who had obviously been saved from the vault), wearing strange metal mesh over their bodies and heads, were advancing on them. They must have also known of another secret passage to town to have gotten here so quickly.

“Get to the boat,” she commanded the others.

“Like hell I will,” said Allison.

“Natalie Shields, traitor!” called Browning. “Turn over Kevin Day and we will spare your life.”

“I would rather die than be at your disposal,” she answered. She attempted to put them to sleep like she had the others, but the metal mesh seemed designed to prevent her from doing so.

“So be it,” he replied and opened fire.

The bullets pierced her skin but they were no match for her amplified healing abilities. She was healing herself before she could even be hurt. She started stalking towards her attackers who had stopped firing in shock. Their expressions were terrified, as if they were in the presence of a monster.

“Your powers won’t work on us,” Browning yelled.

“No,” she agreed. “But they work on them.” She commanded several of the sleeping soldiers to wake and to attack Browning and his guards. They swarmed them, pulling at their clothing and tearing at them.

“Kill,” she commanded, but was suddenly yanked back by her elbow.

“No,” said Allison firmly. “You are not killing anyone.”

“They’re experimenting on Grisha,” Renee argued.

“No,” Allison repeated. “You won’t do this. It’s not who you are.”

“You don’t even care if they die.”

“I don’t,” agreed Allison. “But you do. Will you really force those guards to become murderers? Could you live with yourself afterwards?” Allison forced eye contact with her. She was tearful and pleading. “I promised to protect you. If you do this, you’ll destroy yourself. I won’t let you do that.”
Renee stared at Allison for another couple moments. She had never seen Allison look this desperate and upset before and she didn’t like it. She released the soldiers from her control and let Allison drag her onto the ship. Dan had already gotten ready for departure and Betsy quickly conjured some wind so they could sail away as fast as possible. Browning and his guards had sustained enough injuries that there was no one in pursuit. Renee could still hear the bells of Black Protocol, the sound travelling easily over the water.

She met Andrew’s eyes across the deck and he inclined his head respectfully. She absently healed Kevin’s broken arm as she passed him, dismissing his gasped gratitude. She ignored the others and wandered to the bow of the ship, taking a spot looking over the water. She could hear movement on deck: shouted orders and scuffling feet. But above that she could hear heartbeats. Allison’s drew closer to her. She’d never realized how everyone’s heart sounded different.

“Kevin says that the effects will last for about an hour, maybe two,” said Renee. She heard Allison’s sharply indrawn breath. “And then I’ll either die in agony or wish I had,” she continued, her hands shaking. “Distract me?” she asked quietly. “Tell me something nice?”

“Everything’s going to be fine,” said Allison in that arrogant way of hers. Renee could almost believe her. Allison was stubborn enough to get her way. “When we get back to Ketterdam, we’re going to be rich. We’ll get a house outside of the city and we’ll fill it with orphans to appease your do-gooder heart.”

“You’d hate that,” said Renee.

“No,” said Allison thoughtfully. “I’ll buy a seamstress’ shop to make and sell all the clothes I plan to design. I don’t have to be in town for that. And I can help you teach the children useful things - like shooting and pickpocketing.” Renee laughed softly. “You can be all smug about your selflessness. We’ll be happy,” concluded Allison with a hitch in her voice. “So you can’t die. Otherwise you’ll miss out.”

Renee turned towards Allison and cupped her face in her hands, before raising on her tiptoes and kissing her. She could hear the changes in Allison’s breathing, feel the rush of her blood and the quickening of her pulse. She could hear all the ways in which she was affecting her. When she pulled away, Allison had a tear running down her cheek, which Renee brushed away with her thumb.

“I just had to do that once,” explained Renee. “In case I don’t get another chance.”

“Stop being dramatic,” said Allison, rolling her eyes expressively. “We’re going to do that hundreds, thousands of times. We’ll be kissing when we’re old and grey and wrinkled and toothless. I will still be fantastically beautiful, of course.”

Renee smiled. “Of course,” she agreed, before settling down to wait for her fate, holding hands with the woman she loved. Saints, she thought, please don’t make me go. Let me stay.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

“I didn’t think I was a personal problem,” said Neil, sounding confused. “You hate me, remember?”
Chapter Summary

In which Andrew decides to give Neil a clue.

Chapter Notes

I've been terrible at responding to comments recently but please know that I read and love them all! I've been low on motivation lately and all your kind comments help.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Palmetto’s deck was quiet - everyone spoke in hushed voices, as if they were afraid that speaking too loudly would attract Death’s attention. Andrew was surprised to find himself hoping that Renee would be alright. Not that he usually wished for the deaths of his allies, but he was normally indifferent to their lives. Renee had proven herself resilient and useful and he wanted her to be okay.

Andrew had retrieved his cane the first chance he got. He felt more settled with it in his hands. It was probably his favourite possession. He’d been aware for awhile that it was Fabrikator craft, he’d figured it out once he’d found out that Neil was a Grisha. He knew that it was incredibly valuable - anything Grisha made could sell for an extremely high price, but he would never sell it because of its usefulness and its sentimental value (not that he would ever admit that out loud). It felt good to take some of the weight off his bad leg; he’d been running around on it and climbing up and down stairs all night. Days of sitting still on board the Palmetto as they made the return journey to Kerch sounded wonderful.

Neil was making the rounds, replacing everyone’s tattoos and Tailoring their appearances back to normal. He’d had a quiet discussion with Renee, lending her his kit so she could Tailor her hair back to white with rainbow pastel tips, before she’d disappeared below deck with Allison.

Andrew noticed that his weren’t the only eyes that were obsessively tracking Neil. Kevin was also watching him with a peculiar expression. Andrew headed over to where Neil was offering to replace Thea’s tattoo while attempting not to look at or engage Kevin at all. Something very strange was going on.

“Wait a minute,” said Kevin suddenly, interrupting Neil and Thea’s conversation. “I knew you looked familiar! You’re Nathaniel, Stuart’s nephew, aren’t you?”

Neil flinched. Andrew stopped and stared at him. He was aware that Neil had gone by over twenty different names in his time on the run but he’d never been told Neil’s original name. He’d asked once, but Neil’s distressed reaction had prevented him from ever asking again. Could it be that Kevin knew it? Why had Neil not mentioned that he’d met Kevin before? (The answer to the latter was obvious - Andrew had not thought to ask specifically if Neil had ever met Kevin Day).

“You're a Fabrikator,” said Kevin. “What are you doing Tailoring these people? Your talents could be put to much better use. We’ll have to get started on a training programme right away. You can’t keep wasting away in hiding like this.”

“No, that’s okay,” said Neil. “I’d prefer to remain in hiding.”

“I’m hoping that the Kerch Merchant Council can help me get to Ravka,” said Kevin, ignoring what Neil had said. “I didn’t want to risk a war between Ravka and the Shu by asking the Ravkans to rescue me, but Ravka is my ultimate destination. When I go, you must come with me. The laboratories of the Little Palace will help you develop.”

“He said no, Kevin,” said Andrew sharply, startling Kevin who hadn’t been aware of his presence.

“He can’t stay squandering his talent in your backwater city,” argued Kevin haughtily. “He could be one of the future leaders of the Second Army.”

“You’re very pro-Ravka for someone who has lived in Shu Han your whole life,” said Andrew. “How did you two meet anyway?”

“He was visiting Ravka for a period when my mother and I were living with my uncle,” explained Neil. “And stop discussing me as if I’m not here. Kevin, I have no plans to go to Ravka any time soon.”

“But—”

“If you stop bothering me right now, I’ll let you train me for the rest of the boat trip,” bargained Neil.

Andrew took in the stubborn set of Kevin’s jaw, recognizing the look immediately. Kevin really was Wymack’s son, then. He guessed that it didn’t really matter. Wymack didn’t seem concerned one way or the other. Andrew supposed that Wymack already had more than his fair share of broken surrogate children, what difference did it make that this one shared his blood?

“Maybe you’ll want to stay in Ketterdam,” said Andrew. “After all, we work for your father.”

“David Wymack?” asked Kevin. “It will be good to meet him. My uncle Tetsuji - the man who raised me - always spoke very highly of him. But, no, I will be moving on to Ravka as soon as I’m able. That’s the only place where I can resume my research.”

“Hopefully with more thought into the potential repercussions this time,” said Thea dryly.

Neil took advantage of Kevin’s momentary distraction to escape to the far side of the deck. Andrew joined him after sending a quelling look towards Kevin who had started to follow. Neil sat down and opened his Tailoring kit. He took out his inks and a quill and began to fashion four fox paws on his left forearm.

“You’re giving yourself the Fox tattoo?” Andrew asked. Neil had always resisted anything that would make him more memorable, which Andrew felt was a losing battle, considering the way Neil looked.

Neil hummed assent and sunk the ink into his skin. “I had an epiphany when I thought I was going to die in that incinerator shaft,” he said absently. “I’m a Fox.”

“We’ve been telling you that for years.”

“I’m slow, remember? It took until now for me to believe it,” he smiled when Andrew sat beside
him, then reached his hand to Andrew’s hair. His face twisted with concentration as he removed the dark colour before he smiled again. “That’s better,” he said. “Now you look like you again. Did you want a Fox tattoo, too?”

Andrew shook his head. He had long ago decided that he would never be marked again. He was aware that there was a big difference between being marked as property as being marked as a gang member, but the thought of ink under his skin made him queasy.

Neil nodded as if he’d been expecting that response, then took out a mirror and examined his face. He was obviously avoiding making eye contact with his reflection.

“What are you doing now?”

“I’ve got to Tailor myself back, make myself look younger again. I’m too noticeable like this; I look like my father.”

“Don’t,” said Andrew impulsively.

Neil gave him a look. “It took Kevin point two seconds to recognize me. I can’t take the risk.”

“I’ve told you that I will protect you,” said Andrew. “You should stop hiding, pretending to be someone that you are not. Be real.”

Neil snorted. “You’ve told me enough times that I’m not real. I don’t think I know how to be real.”

“You’re real enough.”

Neil gazed at him for a long time, before sighing and packing up his kit. “Since Kevin gave you my birth name, I want to take a turn,” he said. They very rarely had to trade truths anymore; Neil would generally answer anything Andrew asked and Andrew had already traded almost all of his history. He wondered what Neil could possibly want to know. “Why were you angry with me after Riko stabbed me?”

“I wasn’t angry,” Andrew told him truthfully.

“You were ignoring me,” argued Neil.

Of course this would be Neil’s question. He’d never understood when Andrew needed to take a step back to avoid his feelings for Neil. Andrew figured that it was time to enlighten him.

“I couldn’t afford distractions of a personal nature when so much was riding on the job,” he admitted.

“I didn’t think I was a personal problem,” said Neil, sounding confused. “You hate me, remember?”

“Every inch of you,” agreed Andrew, because he did. He hated how Neil could make him feel, he hated how Neil seemed to know and understand him, he hated how Neil could strip him of his control. How Neil could look at him the way he sometimes did and make Andrew want, yet how he seemed completely clueless about the way he affected Andrew. Suddenly he was tired of Neil’s obliviousness, of Neil not knowing what every single other person seemed able to detect. He decided to be blunt. “That doesn’t mean I wouldn’t blow you.”

Andrew watched as Neil’s carefully constructed beliefs about their relationship shattered around him. His eyes were huge and shocked and his mouth gaping open, trying to form words. It would have been funny if it wasn’t so disappointing. Andrew hoped desperately that this wouldn’t end with Neil
disgusted by him.

“Don’t worry about it,” Andrew said finally, giving Neil an out.

“You never said anything,” Neil managed to say faintly.

“Everyone else seems aware. Besides it doesn’t matter.”

“Doesn’t matter,” echoed Neil.

“Nothing will come of it,” explained Andrew.

“Nothing.”

“I’m not that stupid.”

Neil continued to stare dumbly at him until Andrew lost his patience. “I told you not to worry about it. It’s not like I’m going to force myself on you.”

That snapped Neil out of his daze. “Fuck you,” he spat. “I would never think that of you. You should know me better than that.”

“Then what’s the problem? It’s not new and it doesn’t change anything.”

“Why not?”

“Because you don’t swing. And you’re going to leave.”

“But I-”

“I am not going to jeopardize our working relationship because I’m attracted to you.”

“But Andrew-”

“I know better than to pin any hopes on a pipe dream like you.”

“...oh,” said Neil softly, with something in his voice that Andrew couldn’t identify, and began chewing his lip.

“Our deal still stands. You are still my spy and I will still protect you. Nothing will be different… except we can get you your own room at the Foxhole.”

“You don’t want to share our room anymore? What did I do wrong?” Neil asked, sounding slightly panicked.

“I thought you might not be comfortable sharing a room with me.” And having Neil so close when he couldn’t have him was excruciating.


Andrew stared at Neil incredulously for a couple moments. “Neil,” he said sternly and waited for Neil’s eyes to meet his. “You’re not going anywhere. Nothing is going to change. Stop worrying.”

"Andrew, I..." Neil trailed off, shaking his head.

Andrew sighed deeply. “I want to stop discussing this topic now.”
Neil paused. “Okay,” he said, still sounding a little uncertain, but offering a waveringsmile. “Should we discuss our plans to trade Kevin to Luther Hemmick and become millionaires?”

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

“Let’s go get rich,” said Dan excitedly.
When Erik had pictured their return journey to Kerch, he had not imagined this. It had been hard to imagine that they would successfully infiltrate Evermore and emerge with Kevin, but he had thought that if they had somehow managed to carry out Andrew’s insane plan then the boat ride would be a never ending party as they celebrated their triumph.

Happily, Renee had survived when the amplifier wore out, but she was incredibly unwell. Allison sat vigil, her eyes dark and frightening. Kevin alternated between lecturing Neil, supposedly teaching him Fabrikator techniques (although it sounded mostly like he was just verbally abusing him), and emptying the ship’s stores of alcohol while moaning about how Prince Ichirou would kill them all. He had gone once to visit Renee, but had been kicked out almost as soon as he had entered her room. Erik assumed that Kevin’s habit of arrogantly and insensitively spouting his opinions as if they were indisputable facts had irked Allison instantly.

Erik felt a little at odds. Neil and Andrew seemed to be cautiously circling and avoiding each other when Neil wasn’t with Kevin, and he wasn’t stupid enough to try to talk to either of them when they were in strange moods. Matt's time was split between using his own experiences to try to help Renee through withdrawal and learning about all things nautical from Dan. That left Nicky for company, but even he had seemed preoccupied with something ever since they’d made their escape. Perhaps he was trying to distance himself from them now that the job was complete and he would no longer have to slum with criminals.

“What are you thinking about?” asked Nicky, joining him at the railing, staring into the nothing that was between them and the horizon.

“I was thinking about how I am going to spend my two and a half million kruger,” answered Erik, skirting the truth. “That much money will surely make me popular with the fine girls of the Barrel.”

Nicky cleared his throat and affected a nonchalant posture, keeping his eyes on the railing. “Just girls?” he asked.

Erik fought off a grin and didn’t look at him. “No, not just girls.”

Just then Kevin approached, telling Nicky that Andrew wanted to talk to him, and seeming intent on informing Erik all the ways in which Fjerdans in general and drüskelle in particular were wrong.
about Grisha. Despite Erik’s insistence that he had no problems with Grisha personally and that he’d left the drüskelle, Kevin was almost impossible to shake off once he’d gotten started on a topic. He wondered if the Merchant Council would still pay them if Kevin was slightly damaged. Of course he wasn’t willing to bring Thea’s wrath down on himself, and apparently Andrew had taken Kevin under his protection, so he resigned himself to listening to Kevin’s rant.

When Kerch finally came into view, Erik was definitely suffering from cabin fever. Seeing his adopted city made him feel a little strange; it looked the same, obviously (they had been gone for less than three full weeks), but it felt like it was on the cusp of change. What would he do now that he would be able to pay off his Indenture and could go where he liked? Where would his friends, his makeshift family, the main reason why he stayed with the Foxes, go?

Dan dropped the Palmetto’s anchor when they were still quite a distance from shore. Andrew waited until nightfall before heading out in one of the longboats, taking Betsy with him. He also asked Matt and Erik to accompany them in order to row the boat.

When they reached Fifth Harbour, Betsy left to go meet with Wymack and Abby and Andrew took off to find a courier to take a message to Luther Hemmick in order to arrange their trade.

“It’s weird that it looks the same,” commented Matt idly as they waited for Andrew to return.

“I know,” agreed Erik. “I was just thinking that after everything that has happened it should look different.”

“We should have gotten fireworks to welcome us home.”

“That probably would have been at odds with the fact that we were on a secret mission.”

Andrew returned before long with a return letter from Luther. The letter proclaimed that representatives of the Merchant Council would meet them on Vellgeluk at dawn the following day. Your country thanks you, the letter concluded.

Matt looked puzzled. “Did you suggest Vellgeluk?” he asked. Erik could understand his confusion. Vellgeluk was one of Ketterdam’s outlying islands. It was tiny, completely flat, and popular with slavers and smugglers. It was well outside of the harbour patrols and had no buildings or hiding spots where ambushers could be waiting. It was an ideal meeting place between people who didn’t trust each other.

“No, it was Luther’s idea,” answered Andrew.

“Why would an honourable mercher know about Vellgeluk?” asked Matt with a frown.

“Maybe he’s not as honourable as he pretends,” suggested Erik. “Will Nicky be coming to the meeting?”

“No. If we need to use him as insurance of our payment, it will be best if we don’t tip our hand too early.”

Erik agreed that that was smart, and rowed them back to the Palmetto.

“Where’s the other longboat?” he asked when they arrived and he noticed it missing.

“Repairs,” replied Andrew.

Erik spent a restless night and was up far in advance of the dawn. He paced in the pre-dawn light
waiting for their departure. Against the lightening sky he could see the outline of one of Luther’s mercher vessels anchored on the far side of Vellgeluk. As the others joined him on deck, he could just make out three longboats heading out from the other ship, looking like shadows headed towards them.

Andrew, Dan, Neil, Kevin, and Matt joined him in the longboat. He was slightly disappointed that Nicky hadn’t bothered to come say goodbye and wish them luck.

“Is Thea not coming?” he asked.

“We faked her death in Hellgate,” said Andrew simply. “It would be best if the Merchant Council didn’t know she was involved.”

They travelled quickly through the still water, the longboat cutting a direct route to the island. They reached the island slightly ahead of the Merchant Council’s boats, pulling their boat up on shore.

“Let’s go get rich,” said Dan excitedly.

“No mourners,” added Matt.

“No funerals,” the rest of them dutifully replied.

They waited at the centre of the island. The other boats pulled up on the far shore; a single man wearing black mercher’s clothing accompanied by a fair number of the city’s stadwatch in their purple uniforms. And, Erik noticed with a start, Jean from the Trojans was also with him. Two of the stadwatch struggled under the weight of a large chest, carrying it from their boat. It appeared that thirty million krug was heavy.

“Just you, Luther?” asked Andrew as the man in question stepped into auditory range. The chest was set down behind him. Luther Hemmick was a tall, thin man with a severe face. He was almost completely bald, but kept a short beard trimmed neatly. Erik couldn’t see any resemblance between him and his son.

“The Council thought it best that I deal with this alone,” said Luther. “Seeing as I was the one to offer you the job in the first place.”

“Not only to us,” returned Andrew.

“Ah, so you found out that I also hired the Ravens?” asked Luther. “It’s not that I didn’t believe in your talents, I just knew that the chance of your success was small. It seemed wiser not to put all our eggs in one basket. But you managed to succeed! No harm, no foul.”

“Thirty million krug will help soothe my hurt feelings.”

“Not so fast,” said Luther, gesturing to Jean.

“Yes,” said Jean. “That is Kevin Day.” He said something in Shu to Kevin, but Kevin ignored him. Jean’s face melted into a stricken, guilty expression.

Luther dismissed Jean back to the boats. “You’ve fulfilled our deal,” he said.

He then motioned to his men, who brought the chest towards them. Andrew stepped forward and examined the money in the chest. Once he was finished, he signalled that Kevin could join Luther. Kevin’s steps faltered a little, but he crossed the short distance to stand across from them.
“Well, I would say it’s been a pleasure, but I don’t think I can lie that well,” said Andrew. “We’ll take our leave, then.”

“Oh, I believe there’s been a misunderstanding,” replied Luther, causing one of Andrew’s eyebrows to raise in question.

Luther pushed Kevin behind him. “None of you will be leaving this island alive.” He motioned sharply, and one of his guards stepped forward, raising his arms. The purple sleeve of his uniform slipped down slightly, revealing a white bracelet. The wind began whipping around them, throwing sand in their faces.

“A Squaller with an amplifier!” Matt shouted.

“I guess the Council didn’t learn their lesson after all,” mused Andrew. Then he raised his voice to be heard over the wind. “Luther, if the Council doesn’t honour its deal with us, no one from the Barrel will ever do business with them again. Your word will be meaningless.”

“That would only matter if the Merchant Council was aware of this deal,” said Luther, snidely. “They wished to remain neutral, but I could only see gain if we managed to control Kevin. Every country except Ravka will be clamouring for those amplifiers to neutralize their Grisha.”

“You’ve been buying coral fisheries,” said Andrew. “You hope to profit while you force him to make more of those amplifiers.”

“That’ll start a war!” cried Dan angrily. “It will be chaos!”

“Chaos can be profitable,” said Luther dismissively.

“When the Council finds out what you’ve done—” started Matt, but Luther cut him off.

“How will they ever find out? You are not leaving this island and no one will investigate your deaths. Who will care? You’re scum from the Barrel.”

The wind picked up, and on Luther’s signal a whirlwind destroyed their longboat, stranding them on the island. The wind then moved out over the water, forming a cyclone that made its way towards the Palmetto.

“No!” cried Erik desperately, thinking of the people they had left on board.

“Luther Hemmick,” called Andrew very clearly. “Your son is on that ship.”

Luther stared at Andrew for a couple beats, before he signalled his Squaller to stop, causing the cyclone to dissipate.

“My son?”

“Nicholas Hemmick is on that ship. Destroying it will kill him.”

“You’re very uninformed if you think that I care about my son. I threw him out months ago.”

“You send him a letter every week that asks him to return so that everything can be fixed,” argued Neil.

“Let me let you in on a little secret about my son,” said Luther, spitting the word with loathing. “I would have given him everything. He was heir to the greatest shipping dynasty in Kerch. Despite the flaws that must have been conveyed by his mother’s inferior blood, he was to inherit everything of
mine. But my son has decided that he’d rather be a degenerate - choosing to lie with men. How would he continue my dynasty? I tried to reason with him, sent him to experts to fix him, but he continued to adhere to his disgusting lifestyle.”

“That’s it?" asked Erik incredulously. “That’s all that’s ‘wrong’ with him? That’s not a defect; I don’t think a single one of us here is straight!”

“Your own degenerate lifestyles are easily explained by your low birth. It’s simply unacceptable for a nobleman to behave in such a manner.”

Erik was livid. “How could you give up on him because of that? He’s your son!”

“He’s completely worthless, a mistake,” sneered Luther. “One that will be rectified shortly. My mistress is carrying a new child; one that will be my heir and will replace the abomination that wants to bring disgrace to the name Hemmick.”

“You’re the disgrace,” said Erik disgustedly. “He’s amazing and talented and he deserves a far better father than you.”

“Deserved,” said Luther shortly, before signalling the Squaller again. The cyclone reformed and bore down on the Palmetto. Before anyone could say anything else, the cyclone hit the ship, breaking it into a thousand pieces and killing everyone on board.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

“I’m going to destroy you, Hemmick,” said Andrew.
ANDREW

Chapter Summary

In which Andrew has a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.

Chapter Notes

EDIT: Check out this amazing comic from this chapter!

So this chapter brings us to the end of Six of Crows! But don’t worry, the events of Crooked Kingdom are also going to be covered in this story (it’s going to be ridiculously long).

Warnings for this chapter: threats of violence.

Erik screamed in wordless rage as they watched the Palmetto break apart.

“My ship!” moaned Dan.

“Your ship!?!?” cried Erik in outrage. “There were people on board.”

“Calm down,” ordered Andrew. Erik sent him a look filled with betrayal. It didn’t matter; he’d find out the truth soon enough.

“They raise you so cold in the Barrel,” said Luther snidely. “No tears for your comrades? Why don’t you rail against the injustice of the world?”

“Because he knows something - well, many things, but only one that matters right now - that you don’t,” provided Neil when it became apparent that Andrew wasn’t going to answer.

“Such as?”

“Nobody was on board that boat. And that,” said Andrew, pointing at Kevin, “is not Kevin Day.”

“A weak bluff,” dismissed Luther.

“I don’t bluff a lot, do I Neil?”

“Not as a general rule, no,” said Neil with good humour.

“And why’s that?” asked Luther.

“He’s an instigator at heart and his opinions are often unpopular,” supplied Neil.

Andrew shot him a look. “I’m an instigator?” he asked incredulously. Then, turning his attention back to Luther, “I don’t bluff because I tend to stack the odds in my favour.”
“Like you, he’d rather cheat,” spoke up the man who looked like Kevin, using Nicky’s voice. Erik jolted and stared at him. Even knowing that Nicky had been Tailored, Andrew found that hearing Nicky’s voice come from Kevin’s mouth was disorienting. Evidently, Luther Hemmick agreed, as he performed a comical double take at the sound of his son’s voice.

“Hello, Father,” said Nicky as he crossed the short distance to stand with the Foxes. “Turns out I was right,” he said to Andrew.

“Nicky assured me that you would have no qualms about ending his life,” Andrew explained. He had been willing to believe it; in his experience parents rarely did what was best for their children. “So I needed a different type of insurance in case you attempted to double cross me. Turns out my caution was justified.”

“It’s not possible,” said Luther in shock, searching his son’s face for any familiar features.

“It’s amazing what a little Tailoring can do,” replied Neil. Andrew was impressed with what Neil had achieved. Kevin and Nicky has similarly skin tone and hair colour, but he’d managed to change the shape of Nicky’s face enough that he was unrecognizable as himself. Even standing side by side Andrew didn’t think that he would easily be able to tell them apart - except that Nicky was a couple inches shorter, of course.

“Wouldn’t your face have been red if you’d just killed Kevin Day when you sunk that ship?” asked Neil.

“Where is he?” demanded Luther. “What have you done with him?”

“I’ll be happy to tell you once we’ve left this island alive with our money,” said Andrew.

“That’s not going to happen. The six of you are no match for my guards and my Squaller.”

“If you kill us, you’ll never find Kevin,” warned Andrew.

“You don’t all need to be alive to tell me where he is,” threatened Luther.

“I’m the only one who knows,” Andrew told him. “And I’ll never tell you anything if I don’t have my money and my live companions.”

“It’s just a matter of giving you the right incentive,” sneered Luther. “We will kill them one by one until you tell me what I want to know.”

“You can try,” snarled Dan, hefting her gun.

Andrew knew the second that it happened that he’d made a mistake. With the threat against them, his eyes unerringly travelled to Neil. He saw Luther notice and his eyes widened in realization. Since Erik had informed him that none of them were straight he would be able to put the pieces together.

“You,” said Luther, pointing at Neil. “I’ll make you a deal.”

“Your word is worth nothing,” replied Neil hotly.

Luther ignored him. “If you come with us willingly, we’ll not hurt your friends.”

“I think I’d rather take my chances in a fight.”

“Be smart. We outnumber you. I have a super powered Grisha. Will you really let your friends be slaughtered when you could stop it?”
Andrew could see that Neil was wavering. Somehow in the three years he’d spent in Ketterdam, he’d turned from a rabbit who would drop and run at the first opportunity into a martyr that no one had asked for. “Neil,” he said warningly. “No.” He took a step towards Neil and four guards pointed their guns at him, which didn't faze him, but then two of them changed their target to Neil, stopping him in his tracks.

“Take another step and they’ll shoot. You’ll both die before any of you can get off a shot to stop me,” threatened Luther.

“You won’t find Kevin then,” said Neil, clearly starting to give in to Luther’s threats.

“Just disarm yourself and come with us,” said Luther in a smooth voice. “And no one will die today.”

Neil sent a tortured look in Andrew’s direction before beginning to divest himself of his knives.

“Neil, stop that,” ordered Andrew.

“If it means losing you, then no,” answered Neil, without looking at him. Andrew felt as if all the air had been knocked out of his lungs. He could only watch helplessly, knowing that any movement on his part could end Neil’s life.

Neil took a couple steps towards Luther before disarming. He threw down the two knives he kept at his hips - *Sankt Andrew* and *Sankt David* - his most reliable support and protection. *Sankt Matthew*, the knife he kept at his back, followed. A small, vicious dagger hidden in his sleeve ( *Sankta Mary* ) hit the ground next, followed by *Sankta Natalie*, the unexpected knife in his boot. He spread his arms to show that he had no more weapons. Andrew twitched with the desire to stop Neil from what he was doing, but he couldn’t see a way out of their predicament.

“Take him to the boat. Kill him if anything happens to me or the money,” Luther instructed the Squaller.

The Squaller dematerialized into a mist-like substance, and rematerialized next to Neil. He scooped Neil up and dealt him a sharp blow to the head that caused him to fall limp, causing Andrew’s hands to curl into fists and an outraged cry from both Dan and Matt. The Squaller then flew away, heading towards Luther’s ship.

“Holy fuck, he can fly,” swore Matt.

“I can shoot him,” suggested Erik.

“No!” cried Matt. “You can’t take him out without also killing Neil.”

Two guards came forward to collect the chest, while Luther retreated to his boat. “You have one week to bring me Kevin Day or everyone in town will hear your boy’s screams,” he called. “And the next time you see him, he’ll be in pieces. After that I will inform everyone about who you’re hiding. You will be the target of every government, gang, and outlaw group in the world.”

“I can shoot him,” offered Erik.

Andrew wrestled with the decision, but he would not do anything that could result in Neil’s death. As long as Luther held Neil his life was safe. He shook his head no.

“I’m going to destroy you, Hemmick,” said Andrew conversationally, walking to the edge of the water so that Luther could still hear him as his boat pulled away. “I am going to take away
everything you value. Your name will be worth less than mud. I am going to do that to punish you for your double cross, no matter what you do to Neil. But if you harm him, then I will kill you. Slowly. I will flay you alive, I will carve out your flesh, I will cauterize the wounds so that your death will take hours. You will watch as I kill your wife and your mistress and your unborn child. You will die in agony because you dared touch what is mine.”

“Your threats are meaningless,” said Luther with false bravado. “You have no power. You have nothing.”

“Let there be no misunderstanding here: it was not a threat, it was a promise. You will rue the day you ever crossed me.”

Andrew could feel himself shaking in fury. How could he have fallen for such a ploy? Luther had managed to blind him by dangling a shiny reward of thirty million krige in front of his face. Only Luther's word had convinced him that the Council was involved. It was a beginner's con. He’d scammed enough people to know better. And now he had no money, no boat, no Neil. He’d been overconfident in his abilities and too focused on the prize.

“Djel, this can’t be happening,” lamented Erik, as they watched Luther’s ship sail back to Ketterdam. “And did you just say rue the day?”

“Well, fuck,” said Dan, slumping to the ground. “That did not go as well as I had hoped.”

“What are we going to do?” fretted Matt. “He took Neil, we have to get him back. Andrew? What are we going to do next?”

“There is no next,” said Nicky, fretfully. “My father will send soldiers to search for Kevin. The Barrel isn’t safe for us anymore. There’s nothing we can do.”

“We can’t give up now,” argued Matt.

“It is not the time for your defeatist attitude,” agreed Dan.

Andrew shook his head wordlessly, he couldn’t waste his energy on speaking right now. He wanted to lash out, to destroy, but he couldn’t let himself turn on his allies. He took a couple steps away and stood staring towards Ketterdam.

“How are we going to get off this island?” asked Nicky tentatively after a couple minutes of morose silence.

“The others will eventually notice that we haven’t returned and come and investigate,” explained Dan. “Get ready for a mind numbingly boring wait, though.”

“Well then we can have a discussion about why you suddenly look like an anxious, arrogant asshole,” said Erik accusingly, glaring at Nicky. “And why I didn’t know of the plan.”

“No one knew,” replied Nicky. “Except for Neil and Andrew. And Thea. Oh, I guess Allison and Renee know because they are with Kevin right now. And Dan because she was there last night when the other longboat was taking the others into hiding.”

“I also knew, because Dan told me,” supplied Matt.

Erik shook his head, amused. “So everyone but me? Why’d you do it?”

“You needed insurance and I needed to know what my father really thought of me,” replied Nicky.
quietly. “And now I do.”

“He’s wrong,” replied Erik. “You know that, right? You’re not worthless or disgusting. You deserve better.”

“If he got what he deserved, he wouldn’t be a Fox,” said Matt.

“But I’m not a Fox,” protested Nicky.

“Of course you are,” said Erik. “Even if only temporarily.”

“I can’t believe that your father actually thinks that taking his mistress’ bastard child as his heir is less controversial than having a gay son,” scoffed Dan.

Andrew tensed and stood up straighter. An itch of an idea was lighting up his brain, a solution to a puzzle that he was slowly working out.

“Andrew?” asked Dan, obviously having noticed his change in posture. “Do you have an idea?”

“Oh, good,” said Erik. “I hope that we’re going to destroy Luther. I mean, sorry Nicky, I know he’s your father and everything.”

“Andrew promised,” Matt interrupted. “Luther took Neil. Of course we’re going to destroy him.”

Andrew could almost see it. Not a whole plan, not by a long shot, but the beginnings of one. He was going to get Neil back and get their money, too. He needed... he needed some serious cash, and the Foxes, and Bee, and his Shadow - but he supposed that Robin would have to do. It would be difficult, but he was willing to burn down the city, rip it apart brick by brick until he had Neil back. Luther and Cass and every other fucker that wanted to stand in his way had better get ready. Andrew Minyard, as everyone knew, was a soulless monster. And he was coming for them.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

How did I end up here? wondered Nicky
Chapter Summary

In which step one of Operation: Rescue Neil does not include a) rescuing, or b) Neil.

Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter: references to homophobia, murder, prostitution, blackmail, threats against children

Nicky did not understand how he’d ended up here. Not here, literally, where he was dressed in the sky blue serving uniform of the Millport Club while still wearing Kevin Day’s looks, but here, working with a gang of thieves and liars. This was so far away from the life he had always envisioned: taking over his father’s businesses, growing them, doing good in the world. Maybe he had been naïve; everyone seemed to think so.

It had been four days since the disastrous events on Vellgeluk, four days since his father had outed him and told everyone what he truly thought of him. Four days back in Ketterdam after three weeks away and Nicky could still not believe what he’d done in the last month. He wasn’t sure why he was still with the Foxes, except that he needed the money, and Neil had saved their necks enough times that he felt it necessary to help rescue him. Especially since it was his father who had taken him in the first place. If he had another reason for staying - a blond, incredibly muscular reason - he was ignoring it for now. Lying to himself was easier.

He wondered at the ease that the others displayed settling into this new environment. He had lived all his life with servants, how did he not know how to act? How should he hold his arms? Was everyone staring at him?

He was standing against the wall waiting for someone to summon him at the Millport Club, an exclusive gambling hall located in the Lid. Andrew had booked this private room for tonight’s entertainment. Matt sat at the table, gambling. Dan was acting as a dealer, Renee was perched on the knee of one of her clients, Katelyn was flirting easily with George Waterhouse, and Aaron, also dressed as a waiter, stood against the far wall glowering angrily.

“Waterhouse,” Andrew had said when outlining the plan to them, “has a penchant for high stakes Three Man Bramble and for blondes. We’ll supply him with both.”

Renee (whose eyes Nicky no longer could meet for the darkness in them) was still recovering from her ordeal with the amplifier and trying to adjust to her life without powers. She appeared washed out, thin, and exhausted. Here, she appeared better, the makeup that Allison had applied working wonders. Her hair was white again, with pastel coloured tips, and tonight it was pinned up. She was dressed conservatively, in a dark navy dress, and she sat giving encouragement to her client.

Hernandez was his name, a minor mercher that had frequented Renee at the House of the White
Rose to receive her stress reduction treatment. He was an old friend of Wymack’s, who often did favours for the Foxes. He’d agreed to invite Waterhouse to a private card game.

Katelyn, who Nicky had only met briefly, had donned a blonde wig and caught Waterhouse’s attention immediately. She seemed able to keep it, as well. She was leaning over him, displaying her ample cleavage and giggling and asking inane questions. Nicky was worried that she would get cold in such a skimpy outfit.

“I don’t know how you remember all these rules,” she was simpering in Waterhouse’s ear. Aaron crossed him arms tightly over his chest and Nicky had to fight to keep from rolling his eyes.

Nicky had been surprised to meet a clone of Andrew, although the copy seemed angrier. After they had finally been rescued from Vellgeluk, they had travelled to where Kevin and the others were hiding: Black Veil, an island that housed an unused cemetery, in the south of the city. Rumours of ghosts and spirits kept squatters at bay, and strict rules about the cremation of corpses to prevent plague meant that no one was buried there anymore. It was deserted and eerie, but a wonderful hiding place.

Andrew had left shortly after their arrival to go talk to the Foxes’ leaders and had returned with Katelyn and Aaron in tow. Aaron couldn’t stay in the city when Nicky’s father was looking for Andrew, so he had to hide with the rest of them. Katelyn was currently coordinating the Foxes and had come to update Dan and ask for instructions and offer any help she could provide to help them recover Neil.

Which is what she was doing now. Andrew had told them that they had to keep Waterhouse busy until at least twelve bells and Katelyn was certainly pulling her weight in that regard.

Matt, on the other hand, was steadily losing. He’d taken to stroking the knife strapped to his belt for luck, drawing Waterhouse’s assessing gaze. Nicky recognized the knife as one of Neil’s; Andrew had collected the knives that Neil had shed prior to his capture and had handed one of them to Matt, saying something about protecting his back.

“That is a remarkable knife,” observed Waterhouse. “Grisha steel? You don’t see too much of that outside of Ravka.”

Matt had briefly closed proprietarily over the knife’s grip. “What of it?” he asked.

“I’m just displaying interest,” said Waterhouse. “I have a fine collection of knives and guns, and I always keep my eyes open for any potential additions.”


“I’d love to see your guns,” Katelyn cooed at Waterhouse. “Are we just going to sit here all night?”

Nicky was slightly confused - wasn’t the idea to get Waterhouse to stay? And Andrew had told them that Waterhouse never cheated on his wife, he just enjoyed a blonde in his lap from time to time.

Waterhouse’s face took on a stubborn look. “Hush, now,” he said. “I’ll buy you something pretty when I win big.”

“Right now, I’d settle for some more oysters,” Katelyn giggled.

“As you wish,” said Waterhouse dismissively.

“Waiter!” called Katelyn impatiently. Nicky started and headed over to her, since Aaron showed no
sign of wanting to get closer to where his girlfriend was pretending to be a prostitute. He carried over a bottle of champagne, and refilled their glasses. Pouring champagne properly was one of the only things he had picked up from his father’s endless dinner parties.

“Is there anything else I can get for you?” he asked, wondering if he was speaking softly enough. It seemed to him that all waiters spoke at a certain pitch, but he didn’t think he was hitting it correctly. Every time he spoke it sounded either too soft or too loud.

“More oysters,” said Katelyn imperiously, pushing her used tray at him. “And make it snappy this time.”

That was the signal. He tried not to outwardly show his apprehension as he made his way into a little pantry. He placed the used tray on a table, and then made his way over to the dumbwaiter built into the far wall. A horn shaped speaking tube was beside it, and he used it to pass down the order for more oysters.

By the time he’d made it back with Katelyn’s new order, Matt had almost lost all his chips and Waterhouse seemed ready to pack it in.

“But my food’s just arrived!” argued Katelyn.

“We can get you food at many other lovely establishments,” said Waterhouse. “But it seems that this table is finished for the night.” He patted Matt on the shoulder. “Good luck next time.”

“I’m not finished yet,” growled Matt.

“Oh?” asked Waterhouse, gesturing at Matt’s lack of chips. “It would seem that you are.”

Matt looked around wildly, but then took Neil’s knife and put it on the table. “How much for the knife?”

“Sir, we only accept cash or credit from the Gemensbank,” said Dan officiously.

“I’ll stake you,” said Waterhouse with casual indifference. “Since it will get the game moving again. One thousand krige?”

“Ten,” replied Matt hotly.

“Four.”

“Seven.”

“Six, and that’s my final offer.”

“Don’t!” cried Nicky. How could Matt trade away one of Neil’s knives? They were going to rescue him and when they did he’d want his knife back.

Waterhouse stared at him. “What insolence!” he muttered. “Waiters aren’t meant to involve themselves in the game!”

Aaron stalked forward and shoved Nicky back. “Get out of here,” he ordered, before turning to Waterhouse. “Please accept my apologies for that, sir,” he said in a more polite tone than Nicky had even suspected him capable of using. “He’s new. And he won’t be here for long.”

Nicky left the room just as Matt was pushing the knife over to Waterhouse’s side of the table while Waterhouse was pushing a stack of chips towards Matt.
He left the Millport and ran into Andrew, who was wearing his usual black ensemble, grasping his fox head cane, and waiting for him. Nicky discarded his sky blue jacket and took the dark cloak that Andrew handed him.

“Matt gambled away Neil’s knife,” he told Andrew.

“How much he’d get for it?”

“Six thousand.”

Andrew nodded sharply. “That should keep him at the table for the next two hours.”

“You planned that?”

“He’s a weapons collector and knives like that are rare. Katelyn’s cleavage could only keep him interested for so long, but the chance to walk away with a treasure…”

“Won’t Neil want his knife back?”

Andrew gave him a flat look. “Too bad I don’t know any thieves who could retrieve it for him.”

They made their way through the Barrel and into the Zelvar district. This area of town held the businesses and residences of the middle class; no one truly wealthy but those who served the upper class: artisans, bookkeepers, barristers. The houses were packed closely together with no private gardens or decks. Waterhouse’s house, which also served as his office, was located along a dark street with almost no foot traffic, with lamps lit along the canal. With the time being slightly after ten bells, the respectable people of this neighbourhood had all retired.

They met Erik and Thea waiting for them in a darkened doorway near the Handelcanal.

“Two servants left shortly after six bells,” Thea told them. “And the lights on the top floor went off over an hour ago.”

“What a riveting five hours we’ve spent,” added Erik. “I’ve tried to give suggestions on how Thea could improve her personality, but she seems resistant.”

“Would you miss him if he were suspiciously murdered?” asked Thea.

Andrew shook his head. “I haven’t let any of them hit Kevin yet,” he said, “so keep yourself under control.”

Erik smirked at her while she scowled, then accompanied Andrew and Nicky towards Waterhouse’s house.

“Are we just walking in the front door?” asked Nicky. “Shouldn’t we try to sneak in?”

“Cuter when you’re not being dense,” Erik reminded him. Nicky blushed. He wasn’t sure why Erik kept saying things like that to him. He assumed that Erik was just like this with everyone. He shook off his thoughts and focused on what they were doing.

“We’ll be less suspicious if we just look like we belong?” he guessed. Erik smiled proudly.

Andrew cleared his throat and held out his hand. Nicky produced the whistle that Katelyn had lifted from the chain around Waterhouse’s neck and hidden under the oyster shells for Nicky and handed it to Andrew. Erik stepped into the shadows across the street to provide a lookout.
Andrew picked the lock almost before Nicky could blink and they stepped inside. Instantly, six massive dogs were bearing down on them. Andrew used the whistle to blow a command. Nicky couldn’t hear anything, but he assumed it had worked when the dogs just stopped and started sniffing them. Andrew blew another command and the dogs left the entrance and lay down to wait in the next room.

Nicky knew that this had been the trickiest part of the plan to work out. They couldn’t poison the dogs without alerting Waterhouse so they had to find out how to command them. Luckily Waterhouse had whistle trained his dogs instead of training them to attack anybody whose scent they didn’t recognize. Nicky felt sick as he thought about how they had obtained the whistle commands.

Andrew had had one of Waterhouse’s clerks suspended over the side of Hanraat Point Lighthouse, holding his ankles. The clerk had struggled for some time, offering money, information on Waterhouse’s clients, and free access to a prostitute before he’d given up the whistle commands.

Before Andrew had hauled him back up, he’d asked about the prostitute.

“One of the girls at the Menagerie,” said the clerk. “I have some information on her skimming money so she sneaks me in for free.”

Andrew’s expression had darkened. “Do you know what happened to the last girl who was caught skimming at the Menagerie? No?” he asked when the man had just shaken his head. “She was beaten to death as a lesson to the others.”

“Exactly! She can’t afford to be caught. In return for silence, she’ll give you some for free - you, your friends…”

“Does it make you feel powerful to hold someone’s life in your hands?” Andrew asked, sounding deceptively calm.

How did I end up here? wondered Nicky, recognizing the threat in Andrew’s voice. He’d sounded like that before he’d ripped out Riko’s eye.

The man seemed to realize that he’d made a mistake. “She’s just a whore!” he protested. “A nobody! I’m a good person!”

Andrew raised an eyebrow. “There are no good people in Ketterdam,” he said and then simply let go of his legs.

Nicky shuddered from the memory of the man’s screams as he fell. As he and Andrew made their way into the house, Andrew studied the dogs with a bit of a wistful expression. “I wish people were so easy to control,” he said, before shaking himself and taking off for the second floor, where Waterhouse’s office was located.

He whistled lowly as they entered and he looked at the files along the wall. “Look at all those rich merchers we could exploit,” he murmured, almost caressing the files as he looked for the ones pertaining to Nicky’s father. Waterhouse was a lawyer and property manager who represented many Merchant Council members, including Luther. Andrew found what he was looking for and passed half the ledgers to Nicky.

“Look for anything under your mother’s name, his mistress’ name, or your name. Check for any new acquisitions.”

“I highly doubt my father has anything under my name. And he doesn’t trust anybody else to have put anything that earns money in their names.”
“You’d be surprised what people do to avoid paying taxes,” said Andrew shortly.

The next half hour was spent going through the ledgers, with Andrew interrupting to ask about properties that he didn’t recognize, but they didn’t find what they were looking for. The next name in the property list made Nicky give a bitter laugh.

“What is it?” asked Andrew.

“You were right. He did have something in my name. Eil Komedie.” He shook his head. That was just like his father. The only property in Nicky’s name was an abandoned island with nothing but a broken down amusement park. A worthless place for his worthless son.

“You were also right,” said Andrew. “All of his property that generates substantial amounts of money, like the sugar silos and jurda warehouses, are in his name.” He paused thoughtfully. “What’s your mother’s maiden name?”

“Garcia,” answered Nicky. “Did you find something?”

Andrew snapped his ledger closed. “I know where they are.”

Nicky helped clean up and then Andrew gave the room a once over, moving some papers and a pen back to the exact position they had been when they arrived. Andrew cracked open the door to leave and then froze. Over his shoulder Nicky could see a child out on the landing, petting one of the dogs. She appeared about five years old, her nightdress brushing her feet. Andrew recovered and stepped through the door, pulling it almost closed behind him. Nicky could still see him as he crouched near the girl.

“Do you work for my daddy?” she asked innocently.

“No, Eva, I don’t.”

Ghezen, thought Nicky. What’s he going to do to her?

The girl cocked her head thoughtfully. “How do you know my name?”

“I know all children’s names. I know Martijn who lives next door and Tim on the next street over. I live under their beds and in the backs of their closets.”

The girl’s lip trembled and her eyes opened wide in fear. “I knew it,” she said. “Mama said there was nothing there, but I knew it.” Then she peered at Andrew closely. “You don’t look like a monster. You are short, but you just look like a man.”

“You’ll find that the worst monsters look just like men.”

“Are you going to eat me? Daddy says that monsters eat children who do not go to bed on time.”

“Yes, that’s true,” replied Andrew. “But I won’t. I will give you one warning. You go to bed right now and never, ever tell anyone you saw me and I’ll leave you alone. But if you tell anyone, I will be back for you. I will slit your mother’s throat while she’s sleeping, I will pull out your father’s heart, and I will strangle your beloved dog. I will leave you for last so you can see what I do and know that it’s your fault.” The girl’s face was white as a sheet as she blinked back tears. “Do you understand?” asked Andrew. She nodded fervently, her chin wobbling. “Alright, away with you. No tears or I’ll be back later.” She skittered away from him, hurrying up the stairs with her useless guard dog at her heels.
Nicky left the room and gave Andrew a level look. “Did you have to do that?”

“I could have snapped her neck and made it look like she fell down the stairs accidentally, would you have preferred that?”

“She’s just a child.”

“We were all children once. And luckily for her I doubt her parents will abandon her in the Barrel in a couple years.”

Nicky just shook his head and headed down the stairs. Andrew followed, blowing the whistle as they left the house, causing the dogs to jump up into guard position again. They met up with Erik, and then Nicky was shoved around the corner to hide in a shadowed alcove.

A little after twelve bells and half chime, Nicky heard Thea give a bird call from about a block away just before a man appeared at the end of the street, walking with purpose. As he came closer, Nicky could see that it was Waterhouse. As Waterhouse began to turn the corner towards his house, Erik and Andrew came the opposite way around the corner and Andrew barreled into him.

“Watch where you’re going!” snapped Waterhouse, as he lost his feet.

“Terribly sorry, sir,” said Erik, in a panic, as Andrew helped him up and frantically patted his coat to make sure he was alright. Erik turned towards Andrew. “You klutz! Pay more attention in the future!”

Waterhouse took a step back, but Erik stopped him. “Sir, is that your wallet?” he asked, pointing to the object on the ground. “Curse my brother’s clumsiness! You almost lost it!”

“So I did,” replied Waterhouse, surprised. He picked up the wallet and then extracted a five krige note, handing it to Erik. “It pays to be honest.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Erik earnestly. “Sorry again and may Ghezen bless you.”

Waterhouse went on his way, patting his pocket and pulling out his whistle when he reached his front door. Even knowing what was going to happen and watching the whole thing Nicky had still missed the moment when Andrew had returned it to him.

“Five krige ,” crowed Erik. “What did you get?”

He’d directed the question towards Andrew, who just brandished Neil’s knife that Matt had gambled away earlier. Nicky hadn’t seen him lift it, either.

Erik laughed. “I think he’s cured me of my life of crime. I’m on the straight and narrow from now on. Well,” he corrected, giving Nicky a once over and a wink. “Not straight .”

Nicky blushed and avoided eye contact. He isn’t serious , he reminded himself. He’s just teasing you. Your own parents don’t want you, no one else will either.

“Come on,” said Andrew sharply, leading them towards where Thea was waiting near the canal where they had left a gondel . “The others will be on their way back to Black Veil by now. We have plans to make.”

Chapter End Notes
Next time:

“Oh, man, Kevin,” said Matt, clapping him on the back. “Are you growing a sense of humour?”

“Certainly not,” said Kevin, affronted.
Chapter Summary

In which there are several fights, some dog puns, a reunion, and another ambush.

Chapter Notes

I wasn't originally planning on having Matt have a POV chapter, but I couldn't get this to work properly using any of my regular POV characters. Savour it while it lasts! Also there's so many group scenes in this. TOO MANY CHARACTERS.

Warnings for this chapter: references to drug addiction, withdrawal, Aaron

The trip to Black Veil was quiet. Katelyn had left to return to the Foxhole, Dan was rowing the boat, Renee was curled into a miserable ball, her exhaustion resurfacing now that they’d achieved their goal, and Aaron sat among them like a stone of loathing. He was always like that, Matt reflected, acting like his recruitment into the gang was a hardship and a nuisance instead of what it actually was: an opportunity to not live as a penniless beggar and to achieve his goals of becoming a medik. Matt himself was subdued because he had gambled away one of Neil’s knives. Andrew had warned him that he may have to give up the knife to keep Waterhouse’s interest so that they could find the information that would help them get Neil back, but he still felt awful about it. All he could think about was that the knife that Neil had named for him was currently in the grubby hands of a lawyer.

The walk through the graveyard was as unnerving as ever. Fog clung to the sides of mausoleums giving the entire area an incredibly haunted vibe. Matt hadn’t ever believed the ghost stories about the place, but staying here was quickly changing his mind.

They let themselves into one of the larger crypts and were greeted by a frazzled-looking Allison.

“Oh, thank Ghezen you’re back,” she exclaimed. “If I had to listen to him for another minute I would have shot myself, and then him.”

“You can’t shoot me if you’re already dead,” said Kevin haughtily.

“I didn’t say I would have shot myself fatally,” replied Allison, before turning to the others. “He’s been lecturing me about the history of commerce in Kerch for the past hour and a half. I’m Kerch; stop giving me a history lesson about my own country.” The last sentence was said at a pitch that Matt could barely hear. Allison got up and went to Renee, taking in her appearance. A wrinkle of concern appeared on her forehead.

“The history of this country is fascinating,” Kevin said. “I can’t believe how uninformed you people are about where you live.”

“Kevin, shut up,” said Allison fiercely. “I wasn’t kidding before.”
Kevin huffed angrily and looked around for help, before apparently realizing that none was forthcoming. He crossed his arms petulantly.

“How’d it go?” Allison asked once it was clear that Kevin wasn’t going to say anything more. “I can’t believe you left me here.”

“Someone had to babysit Kevin and you drew the short straw,” Dan reminded her.

“Everything on our end went well,” Renee said. “We won’t know if the others were successful until they return. Hopefully they were.”

Allison snorted. “Can you imagine? The terrifying Bastard of the Barrel being defeated by dogs?”

“He’d have to flea from the scene,” said Dan, “with his tail between his legs.”

“If the dogs caught him, they would have packed a punch,” said Allison. “Unless their bark is worse than their bite.”

“If he’d managed to screw the pooch that badly,” added Matt, “then all our hard work would have been a mastiff waste of time.”

“We definitely would lose our upper hound,” agreed Dan.

“We would have to dog Waterhouse night and day to find the information we need,” said Renee, to Allison’s delight.

“Andrew would be even more of a bitch to live with,” said Aaron dryly.

“Everyone stop talking,” said Kevin.

“Oh, be a good dog,” said Allison scathingly. “Now, sit. Stay.”

“No, I meant that I had one, but you wouldn’t let me get a word in,” said Kevin. He cleared his throat. “Ahem. If Thea was injured, we’ll have to go retriever.”

“Oh, man, Kevin,” said Matt, clapping him on the back. “Are you growing a sense of humour?”

“Certainly not,” said Kevin, affronted. “Puns are the lowest form of humour. I was simply trying to join in.”

“Well, it’s over now. You ruined everything,” sighed Allison.

A bird call was heard, indicating that the others had returned to Black Veil. They waited for them to enter the crypt before bombarding them with questions.

“How’d it go?” asked Matt. “Do you know where we need to go?”

“I have a pretty good idea,” answered Andrew. “We’ll strike tomorrow at midnight.”

“Is that enough time to prepare?” asked Erik.

“It will have to be. It’s already been four days,” retorted Dan. “We can’t just sit around waiting for an engraved invitation. He said that he’d start hurting Neil after a week.”

“I don’t see why it matters,” said Aaron idly.
“That’s because you’re a miserable gremlin who doesn’t know anything about friendship,” replied Allison.

“We have Kevin, let Luther keep Neil,” said Aaron.

“How about we trade you for Neil?” asked Matt, rage running through him. “It’s a win-win for us: we’d be getting rid of your deadweight as well as getting Neil back.”

Aaron ignored him, turning towards Andrew. “You know I’m right. The practical thing to do is it sell Kevin to the highest bidder. I’m sure the Fjerdans or the Shu would pay through the nose for those synthetic amplifiers. Then we’ll all be rich.”

“I don’t want to be sold to the highest bidder,” said Kevin.

“What do you mean ‘we’ll all be rich’?” demanded Allison. “What exactly did you do that earned you part of our payment?”

“You want us to just leave Neil to be tortured?” asked Dan incredulously.

Aaron shrugged. “We already have a replacement for him. And he can’t be that good in bed that my brother isn’t willing to trade him for millions of krUGE.”

Andrew met Aaron’s eyes without emotion. “You are awfully heavy to be treading on ice this thin,” he said.

“You are putting us all in danger to rescue your whore.”

Allison moved forwards with obvious intent to hurt Aaron, but Matt managed to grab her at the last second. She struggled wildly, but he kept his grip. As much as he also wanted to beat Aaron’s face in, he remembered what had happened the last time that Allison had laid a hand on Aaron. Only Neil’s ability to influence Andrew had prevented him from snapping her neck. They all knew that touching someone under Andrew’s protection would result in pain.

Andrew had gone absolutely still following Aaron’s declaration. “You seem very disdainful of prostitutes,” he said with danger in his voice. “Especially considering your girlfriend’s former profession and the fate that Neil saved you from.”

“He saved me from nothing!” Aaron burst out. “He ruined my life! Everything that went wrong was his fault!”

“No,” said Andrew. “It is always going to be her fault.”

Matt only knew a little of what had transpired before Aaron had joined the Foxes. Neil had been heavily involved, and Aaron and Andrew’s mother had ended up dead, but he knew almost none of the specifics. Considering that the woman had sold her young son to a brothel owner, Matt figured that the world was better off without her. Aaron had always blamed Neil for the sequence of events, though.

Aaron was red-faced and panting, face twisted with anger, when there was a small knock at the door and Robin slipped inside.

“You know,” she said. “Your hideout may eventually be compromised if you continue discussing everything at the top of your lungs.”

“Did you finally learn sarcasm?” asked Erik incredulously. “You’ve been spending way too much
time with Neil.”

“Ha,” replied Robin, deadpan. “Sorry to break up your noisy fight, but I bring news.”

Aaron stalked away from them - an action that was basically useless considering that they were in a twenty square foot crypt - and sat huddled with his back to the wall, glaring at nothing in particular.

“News?” asked Dan lightly, pulling attention away from Andrew who was staring at his brother, his hand clenched into a fist.

“There are a lot of important people who suddenly seem to have found it necessary to visit their embassies,” said Robin. “For instance, the Fjerdans are here with their drüskelle leaders.”

“Better be careful,” Allison told Erik. “If they claim you as a deserter, they’re legally allowed to take you home.” Erik shuddered.

“Also, this evening the Shu crown prince has sailed into harbour,” continued Robin.

Kevin gave a little whimper. “I told you he would come for me,” he told Thea.

“There are also Zemeni dignitaries visiting. It’s only a matter of time before the Kaelish and Ravnans send people, too,” finished Robin.

“Why are they here?” asked Matt. “Do they know about Kevin?”

“There are rumours floating around, but no one definitively knows where he is,” answered Robin.

“How are we going to get Kevin to Ravnka without starting a war?” wondered Thea.

“Who said he was going to Ravnka?” asked Andrew.

“I did,” replied Kevin. “That’s the only place that I can continue my research.”

Andrew gave him a bored look. “The only way you can go to Ravnka is if you’re dead,” he said.

Kevin flinched. “Otherwise you’ll cause problems because of all the people trying to get their hands on you.”

“You’re not the boss of me,” argued Kevin. “I’m going to Ravnka.”

“Oh, Kevin,” sighed Andrew. “You’ll have much more success if you ask for things you can actually have.”

“I can have this,” spat Kevin.

“No,” replied Andrew. “You can’t. Our deal was that you do as I say and I protect you from Ichirou. If you want to end the deal, fine. But then I will sell you back to him. It matters very little to me.”

Kevin growled in frustration and then went to sit near Aaron, joining him in glaring angrily.

Allison took in the twin glares. “You’re in fine form this evening,” she remarked to Andrew.

“So if we’re not going to Ravnka, where are we going?” asked Thea. “We can’t stay in Ketterdam; Kevin’s too recognizable and I’m supposed to be dead.”

“Once everything is finished - when we’ve taken Luther’s money, plus interest, and we’ve taken his reputation so that he can never do any business ever again - then anyone who needs to disappear,
any dead convicts, famous Grisha, or disinherited sons who may have a price on their heads - can find refuge in the Southern Colonies.”

“You’re shipping me away with Kevin and Thea?” asked Nicky despondently.

“One last thing,” said Robin. “Someone’s kicking up a fuss looking for Matt.”

Dan’s eyes narrowed. “Creditors or his dealer?” she asked thinly.

“Hey,” said Matt, offended. He had been clean for over a year and a half and had not accrued any new debt. Dan glanced over and gave him an apologetic expression. He knew that his past mistakes meant that others often thought the worst of him; it just hurt more when it was someone he loved.

“Nope,” said Robin. “Some woman up in the University District is looking for him. Says she’s his mother.”

***

Matt fidgeted in the tweed jacket that Dan had forced him into to go meet with his mother. To stay safe in the Barrel they had been costuming themselves as characters from the Komedie Brute, but those costumes would make them stand out here in the University District as much as they protected them from notice along West Stave.

Dan was providing a steady stream of chatter, obviously slightly nervous that she was going to meet her boyfriend’s beloved mother for the first time. Or they thought they were. There was a chance that this could be a trap, so Erik, Thea, and Allison were shadowing them.

Matt was looking forward to seeing his mother, although he was slightly worried about how she would react when she found out all the secrets he had been keeping. He hadn’t seen her since he’d left Novyi Zem almost six years ago, although he wrote to her frequently. She was a member of the military and was often away from home. He wondered if he should resent her for leaving him at home with his father so much, but all he could feel was admiration and love. She’d taught him all the fighting skills he’d ever known and had paid for him to escape his father’s jurda farm and move to Kerch for university. It wasn’t her fault that he had almost instantly dropped out of school because of his drug habit that had formed under his father’s supervision. It was only luck that had led him to fall in with the Foxes instead of dying in a dark alley.

His mother had wanted to come take care of him when he’d relapsed last year, but she hadn’t been able to get leave. He’d been slightly grateful because although he’d let her know of his drug troubles, he hadn’t let her know that he no longer was a student at the university - that he was instead a member of a gang.

He and Dan turned into a courtyard outside of the university library and he could see his mother. She was standing near the fountain, dressed with military precision, her dark hair twisted into braids that covered her head.

Matt felt overwhelming relief flood his chest; it wasn’t a trap, his mother was here. “Ma!” he called, while rushing towards her, lifting her up in a hug. She hugged him tightly back, burying her face in his neck. Matt felt tears pricking his eyes as she mumbled her greetings and love into his skin.

“I thought you were dead!” she admonished when he’d let go of her. “According to the university you don’t exist.”

He rubbed the back of his neck guiltily. “We can discuss it, but we should get out of the open.”
“We can take your mother to lunch,” suggested Dan, drawing his mother’s gaze.

“Ma, this is my girlfriend,” Matt introduced. “This is my mother, Randy.”

Randy’s eyes raised into her hairline. “Girlfriend?” she asked. “I was under the impression that you had a couple boyfriends - Dan and Neil.”

“Ma!” Matt objected. “I’ve written to you all about my girlfriend!”

Randy shrugged helplessly. “Truthfully, Matty, I mostly skim your letters.”

“You skim them?” gasped Matt, affronted.

“I try to pay attention to your pages and pages of effusive praise for Dan and Neil, baby, but I just can’t,” said his mother, looking guilty.

“You should,” grumbled Matt. “They’re the best.”

“So… no boyfriends?”

Dan snorted. “Nope, just me. Danielle. Dan for short. Neil is his son.”

Matt didn’t think that his mother’s eyes were able to bug out any farther. “I have a grandchild?”

Matt swatted Dan’s arm. “No, Ma. Neil is my best friend. He’s kind of a human disaster, though, so Dan and I look out for him.”

“Well, then, where’s my grandson?” Randy asked with a grin, looking around.

“About that…” said Dan. “He’s kind of been kidnapped.”

“Kidnapped?” repeated Randy faintly.

“Told you he was a disaster,” said Matt, feeling a little ill remembering Neil’s expression as he was being taken from them. “We’re working on it. But we’ve recently had a little trouble, so, again, we should get out of the open.”

“But, Matty, what’s been happening? I got a letter saying you needed help. I came as soon as I got it, but then I couldn’t find you. Why aren’t you registered at the university anymore? No one had ever even heard of you!”

“Look, Ma, I’ll explain. It’s… it’s that-”

He probably shouldn’t have been relieved that a gunshot went off just then. He lunged for his mother, pulling her down beside the fountain as the bullets hit the cobblestones around them.

“This city is even worse than the guidebooks say! Are those bandits?” asked his mother, automatically reaching for a weapon even though she hadn’t brought one to visit her son.

“It’s not the city, Ma,” sighed Matt. “As I was saying there’s people after us.”

“Who are they?”

Matt shared a look with Dan, who shrugged. “There are a number of possibilities,” she answered.

“Matty, what have you gotten yourself involved in?”
Matt shook his head and took out the two guns he was carrying, handing one to his mother. She almost instantly picked off two of their assailants.

They were at a disadvantage on the ground. The attackers were on the rooftops surrounding the courtyard. Hopefully their backup was in a position to fight and hadn’t been ambushed themselves.

Just as that thought crossed his mind, he heard Allison yelling. “Heads up!” she called, followed by a high pitched shriek that he recognized.

“Close your eyes,” he told his mother, slamming his own eyes closed before the flash bomb could go off. Once the bright light disappeared from behind his eyelids, he opened his eyes to find a couple bodies had fallen from the rooftops. He heard gunshots picking off the others.

Allison and Thea made their way off the roof and rushed to them.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” said Thea. “Who knows how many more of them there may be.”

“We’ll go back to Black Veil,” declared Dan. “Erik!” she called up to where Erik was keeping watch. “Make sure no one follows us!” He sent her a thumbs up.

“I’ll explain when we get there,” Matt told his mother. She gave him an assessing look before nodding.

They took a circuitous route back to the graveyard; trying to throw off any attackers. Erik rejoined them eventually, helping to row their gondel.

“Alright,” said Matt’s mother once they’d reached the crypt, looking around wonderingly. “I would like an explanation now.”

Matt could see Andrew’s raised eyebrow (he was evidently wondering why they had brought back a complication to their hideout) but he could only focus on how disappointed his mother would be.

“We’re in a gang,” he told her, trying to ignore her recoil at his words. “The Foxes. Those ambushers were probably from another gang.”

She blinked. “You dropped out of university?” she asked. “And joined a gang?”

“Yes.”

“Are you happy?”

“I… yeah,” he answered, honestly, looking at Dan. “I have friends here, people I love. Dan and I are saving up money to buy a ship. I don’t feel the need to use jurda anymore.” It had started innocently for him. His father worked a jurda farm. The powdered dry blossoms of the jurda plant were used as a stimulant all over the world. He’d needed it to keep his focus on his studies, to feel interested in his surroundings. Eventually it hadn’t been enough by itself. He’d begun using the stronger, more addictive version jurda parem. He’d managed to kick his habit shortly after joining the Foxes with the help of Wymack, Abby, and Dan.

His relapse had been gradual - too many nights without sleep led to him using regular jurda for the stimulation. Thousands of people used it every day without adverse effects, it should have been fine. But he’d escalated to using parem again, going into debt with almost every dealer in the city while trying to hide it from the Foxes. He knew that Andrew had been the one to tell the others what was going on; he’d become suspicious and tasked Neil with following him for a few days. The second time coming off the drug had been hellish - he never wanted anything like that to happen to him.
again. Dan had paid off his debts for him and he was working hard at repaying her. The payout from this job was supposed to have cleared his debt and allowed the two of them to purchase a ship. Dan wanted to sail again, to be a pirate, to destroy all the slaving ships that plagued the seas. Matt wanted to be wherever Dan was.

His mother surveyed him for a few minutes. “Okay, then,” she said.

Matt blinked. “Okay?”

His mother hugged him. “All I want is for you to be happy and safe. As long as you’re happy, we can work on getting you safe.” Matt let himself soak up her warmth, feeling very young.

“Why are in you Ketterdam?” asked Andrew suddenly, causing their hug to break apart.

“Pardon?” asked Randy.

“You said you got a letter?” Dan suddenly remembered.

“Yes, a little over a week ago. Saying Matt needed me here.”

“We weren’t even back from Shu Han yet,” mused Erik. “Who would have sent that?”

“Someone obviously wanted some kind of leverage,” said Andrew.

“Could be one of your ex-dealers, or one of the other gangs, or even Luther Hemmick,” said Dan. “I’m not sure it matters, but we’ve got to make sure that Randy’s safe.”

“Yes, we already have quite enough hostage situations,” said Allison.

“You’re all members of this gang?” asked Randy as she watched the discussion. “Did you get a discount on identical twins?”

Matt followed her gaze to Aaron and Andrew, who were still studiously ignoring each other after yesterday’s argument, then to Kevin and Nicky. Nicky looked horrified at the implications, and Matt stifled a laugh. It was still incredibly strange to see Nicky’s expressions on Kevin’s face.

Andrew was studying their guest. “You have an honest face,” he said, hoisting himself up off the floor.

“Andrew, no,” said Matt.

“Don’t be rude, Matty,” chided his mother.

“It’s not a compliment,” Matt told her. “He wants to use you for something.”

“A backup plan,” said Andrew. “In case there is a problem with getting our money.”

She looked to Matt for an explanation. “We’re owed some money for a job we did. A lot of money. But it turns out that the honourable mercher who owes us is not so honourable. So we have to work to get our promised payment from him.”

His mother nodded and turned to Dan. “You’re saving up for a ship?”

“I grew up privateering,” explained Dan. “Matt and I want to return to that. We’re going to take out as many slavers as possible.”
“Alright, I’ll do it,” declared Randy.

“Ma, you don’t even know what he’s asking,” argued Matt.

“You’re owed this money,” she told him. “I’ll help you get it.”

“You could be put in danger!”

“I’m your parent. I’ll always go willingly into danger for you.”

“It’s nothing extraordinary,” said Andrew, sounding bored but cutting off Randy’s sentiment. “We’ll put you up in the Geldrenner hotel. You can take your meals in the dining room, but for your safety it’s best if you don’t leave the premises.”

“What are you up to?” asked Matt. “The most expensive hotel in town?”

Andrew waved off his questions. “Can you take her to Bee? She’ll get her checked in. Ask her to use one of Abby’s aliases, she’ll know what I want.”

Matt caught Dan’s eye and she nodded. “We’ll take her now,” she said.

That had gone better than expected, Matt reflected as he followed his mother and Dan towards their gondel. Taking in their amicable conversation and the evil grin that Dan was sending him, he realized that the worst may not have passed yet. Now he had to survive his mother and his girlfriend becoming friends.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

Renee tried to keep up her gentle and calm façade, but the others’ presence grated on her. She wasn’t sleeping well, restless in her sleeping bag, and it took a considerable amount of energy to prevent herself from snapping at everyone.
RENEE

Chapter Summary

In which Renee and Andrew cement their friendship by beating the shit out of each other.

Chapter Notes

It's my birthday! Happy birthday, me. As a present, here's the latest chapter.

Warnings: minor violence, some more murder of nameless guard characters

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Renee sat in the boat as it glided across the water, bringing them closer to their goal. She was... nervous, she supposed this feeling was. She didn’t think she’d ever felt it going into a fight. But then, she’d almost always entered fights with an advantage. Her Grisha abilities gave her strength and confidence. Now all she could feel was emptiness. She hadn’t even been aware of the low constant burn inside of her; however, she keenly felt its absence.

When the amplifier had stopped working and crumbled into dust, she felt like she had let go of a live wire. Silence descended on her, now that she could no longer hear the sounds of the living. It was like being suddenly deafened and all the lights gone dark. Then her body had reacted to the loss of power. She’d begun shaking uncontrollably, her stomach roiled, her skin itched. Her body craved what she had lost. She’d suffered for all of the return trip to Kerch, unable to keep any food down and or to maintain a calm exterior.

She was amazed that Allison had stayed with her. She was embarrassed now about all the anger and vitriol she had let off her tongue, words meant to wound, to harm. Renee had never been sharp-tongued, maintaining a veneer of politeness. Allison didn’t seem affected by the things that Renee had spit at her during the worst moments of illness and craving, not being a particularly gentle person herself. Renee was just glad that the rest of her friends had been kept away during that time.

It wasn’t until she’d started getting over the illness of the withdrawal that the loss of her regular powers became apparent. She instinctively tried reaching out towards the others, but it was if they were made of stone; she couldn’t feel their heartbeats or the rush of their blood. When she tried, she encountered a vast nothingness at her very core. It frightened her more than she was willing to admit: would she remain the rest of her life with a void in her soul?

She felt like railing against the universe for making her choose this - for forcing her hand. She couldn’t have let the others die. But now she was cursed. She tried to keep up her gentle and calm façade, but the others’ presence grated on her. She wasn’t sleeping well, restless in her sleeping bag, and it took a considerable amount of energy to prevent herself from snapping at everyone. Particularly at everyone who participated in all the childish bickering.

When it got to be too much, she excused herself, sitting among the trees in the graveyard. She
wondered that the ground seemed to radiate calm to her; she’d never particularly found peace among
sites for the dead, but something about this particular graveyard seemed to comfort her.

The previous night, after what seemed like hours of tossing and turning and trying to sleep, Andrew
had collected her and taken her to another crypt, not far from where they had set up camp. The tomb
was large, square, and the floor was cleaned of all debris. There were a couple lanterns lighting the
room, making it obvious that Andrew had prepared it ahead of time. She sent him a questioning
glance, but he’d just handed her two small axes - her melee weapons of choice.

Andrew had shucked off his coat and armed himself with a pair of knives - two of Neil’s, she
recognized. Then, without warning, he’d stabbed out at her. She’d sparred with him countless times,
but he’d never attacked with such fury. She wondered if it was Aaron’s comments from earlier or
Neil’s predicament that made him fight with such emotion.

She instinctively blocked his attack, taking a step back. He’d continued to attack relentlessly and
she’d remained on the defensive, before she saw a break in his form - he’d never had any formal
lessons, he fought like a street brawler - and she took advantage.

Kicking out at his knee, she’d forced him backwards and managed to knock him down. He flipped
back to his feet, but now she was the one attacking. She herded him back, until he hit the far wall.
He lashed out with one of the knives, but she managed to elbow him in the face and hit the flat of her
axe into his ribs, causing him to expel his breath. Hooking her foot around his ankle, she knocked
him flat on his back, settling on top of him with her knee to his throat, her feet holding down his
wrists, one axe to his eye, and the other to his groin.

She gave him the chance to yield or try to keep fighting, but he just lay gazing up at her calmly. She
retreated and he got to his feet.

“Again,” he said, and attacked.

Later, they sat exhausted, covered in cuts and bruises. Renee felt better than she had since she’d first
used the amplifier. She was reminded that she had power, even without her Heartrender abilities.

“You were letting emotion rule you,” she chided gently. “You were sloppier than normal.”

Andrew didn’t contradict her, he simply stared at the ceiling. “That is not usually a problem I have.”

“No,” she agreed.

“It’s dangerous,” he said. “It’s why Luther won at Vellgeluk.”

“It can also be useful. Fighting for something can be beneficial.”

He was silent for a time. “I am worried,” he eventually admitted extremely reluctantly, “that my plan
might have flaws that I cannot see. Usually I rely on Neil to go over everything beforehand to ensure
that there are no problems.” He appeared chagrined that he was, however obliquely, asking for her
help.

“Ah,” said Renee. “I see. But why ask me? You’ve known the others for longer.”

“Despite everything, they still see the world with rose-tinted goggles.” He shook his head.
“Optimists. You are more like us.”

She wondered if he was even aware how often he referred to himself and Neil as a unit. The
observation made sense, though. She was aware of Andrew’s reputation; although she’d never
witnessed him partake in at least half of the terrible things he was rumoured to have done, she knew that his reputation was built on truth. She’d also never seen Neil shy away from the uglier parts of life in the Barrel. She knew that deep down she had the same ruthlessness that they did, that the other Foxes lacked.

She smiled at him and asked him to tell her his plan. Listening attentively, she made comments and suggestions, even awed as she was by his ability to seemingly consider all outcomes and the number of backup and contingency plans he had.

“You are worried most about your part in the plan,” she observed.

“It could be carried out by someone else, and then I could-”

“No,” she cut him off. “It has to be you. You are only pretending otherwise because you don’t trust the rest of us.”

“To a certain extent, I do.”

“But not with Neil’s safety.” He met her look mulishly. “You know that most of them would die for him.”

”I would prefer to supervise,” he said grumpily.

“Andrew,” she said sternly. “You know it has to be this way. Your feelings are blinding you. You must despise your heart.”

“I have no heart.”

She gave him an unamused glance. “We both know that’s not true.” Then she yawned widely. “Otherwise, the plan is sound. And I think it’s time we got some sleep.”

She levered herself off the floor, and gestured to his face where bruises were starting to form. “I’m sorry about your face,” she said.

“I’m not sorry about yours,” he replied, to her amusement.

They made their way back to the crypt where the Foxes were sleeping. Renee climbed back into her sleeping bag, and snuggled up against Allison.

Allison stirred and sleepily blinked open her eyes. “Where did you go?” she whispered.

“I was having a meaningful discourse with Andrew.”

Allison blinked a couple more times and noticed her bruises. “Did he hit you?” she demanded.

“I hit him first,” replied Renee, cheerfully.

“Did not,” Andrew countered from across the room, but then he considered. “Maybe,” he allowed.

“Who won?” asked Allison.

“I did,” replied Renee, in surprise. Had there been any doubt?

“Good,” Allison said, before cuddling around her like an octopus. “Now go to sleep. We’ve got things to do tomorrow.”
In the morning, Matt had whistled when he saw Andrew’s bruises and exhausted features.

“Feeling better?” he asked Renee.

"Less sulky about your loss of powers?" put in Erik.

Matt shushed him and continued. “I know that it’s different but when I was coming down off of parem, I was angry at everyone and everything. Hitting things always made me feel a little better.”

“It was therapeutic,” she acknowledged. “But I don’t think it helped Andrew as much.”

“I do not sleep soundly when surrounded by so many people,” Andrew admitted, after the others had left to go rendezvous with Matt’s mother. “After our fight, I was able to sleep… slightly better.”

“I am glad that you’ll be better rested for this evening,” she told him.

It was good that he was, she reflected, as they pulled the boat up onto the beach. This would require attention to detail and delicacy to work properly. Only five of them had come; Kevin and Nicky were working on their project back in the crypt with Thea guarding them, Aaron and Dan had gone to Fifth Harbour to act as a diversion. Andrew sent Renee and Matt to take out the guards on the west side of the property, while Erik and Allison were sent to the east. He, alone, would cover the north. Renee touched the axes at her hips, wishing for her Heartrender abilities - it was much easier to render men unconscious quietly when you could control their heart rates.

It was beautiful here, she realized. Outside of the city, surrounded by water. It was the winter, but she could see how lovely the place would be in the spring and summer. This, she decided. Probably nothing quite so expensive, but this was the type of place where she would eventually like to settle.

There were three guards between them and the entrance, but none of them were overly alert. It seemed as if no one was expecting them to be here. Luther had obviously thought this hiding place was unknown and secure.

A twig snapped behind her. She and Matt were concealed in the shrubbery but they couldn’t let anyone raise the alarm. Glancing behind her she saw another guard. He was getting closer to them, obviously suspicious. Matt raised his gun silently, but Renee shook her head. A gunshot would be disastrous. Instinctively, she reached out with her power, but of course found nothing. Except… there was something. She pushed a little harder and she grabbed hold of it and pulled. A cloud of dust raced towards her, enveloping the guard. He swatted at it, as if it were a swarm of bugs, before opening his mouth presumably to scream. Instead, he choked on the dust before toppling over. Renee stared wide-eyed at him. How had she done that?

“Ghezen,” swore one of the other guards. “Did you see that? What was that?”

The three guards cautiously left their post to investigate. They stood around the fallen guard’s body and stared at it dumbly.

Matt grasped her elbow, pulling her attention away from what she had just done. His eyes were also wide and shocked, but he gestured to the three men and then gave her a countdown on his fingers from three. When he reached one, they jumped out of the bushes and knocked the three unaware guards unconscious.

“Saints,” said Renee. “Is he dead?” She peered at the first guard that had been brought down - he lay with sightless eyes, his mouth and nose caked in dust.

“Did you do that?” asked Matt.
“I don’t know how,” said Renee, shaking her head. “I didn’t mean to kill him.”

“How is a side effect from that amplifier?”

“It must be. But Kevin didn’t say anything about this.”

Matt shrugged. “We can’t worry about it now. We’ve got to get Neil back.”

*Despise your heart*, Renee thought, remembering the advice she had given Andrew the previous night. She nodded sharply. She would deal with this later. Right now, she had a job to do.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

Neil pulled himself forward along the metal shaft, scraping his belly, wondering how things like this always seemed to happen to him.

He’d woken up sometime after the disastrous meeting on Vellgeluk lying on cold cement. His hands had been bound with rope behind him, his ankles were similarly tied, and he’d been wearing a blindfold. He lay still for several minutes, listening intently for any indication of where he might be located. It was eerily quiet, and he could see no hint of light through his blindfold. He eventually sat up and scooted backwards until he was against a wall, using the solid surface to work the blindfold down his face.

It was no help when the blindfold was off: it was still pitch black. He shuffled along the wall, following it to try to determine the dimensions of the cell. It was a fairly small room with a single door. He used to wall to help him stand, surveying the small space for anything of note.

Although he trusted that Andrew would most likely be coming to get him - and if not Andrew, then Matt would certainly be on his way - he was not some helpless damsel to sit around and wait for rescue. He was not Kevin.

He heard footsteps in the distance and sat back down, trying to look defeated. He didn’t have enough time to replace the blindfold before the numerous locks on the outside of the door were disengaged and the heavy door swung open.

The sudden light almost blinded Neil, but he was able to notice a small vent near the ceiling on the other side of the room. Good, the thought, an exit point.

He squinted up at the man who was in the doorway, flanked by two guards. He was holding a tray of food and smiling gently at him. The man placed the food on the ground and then unbound Neil’s hands before retying them in front of him. The tray held a bowl of porridge and a cup of water - no utensils, which meant that Luther wasn’t quite as stupid as Neil suspected. Although he had double crossed Andrew, so maybe he was.

The man sat across from him and continued smiling. Neil scowled in return.
“Your wrists seem a little raw,” the man eventually said. “I’ll ask if we can get you some padded cuffs instead.”

Neil didn’t respond, but took a small sip of the water. It tasted normal. He slurped up a little porridge and caught himself from making a face. Drugged. Likely Luther wanted him kept witless and pliant. Oh, well. He would have needed to starve himself so that he could fit through the vent, anyway. He would eat only a little of the porridge, just enough to keep his strength up.

“I’m Roland,” the man introduced himself. “I work as a music tutor for the Hemmick household.”

Neil continued to ignore the man. Roland attempted to get Neil to talk to him, asking him some vague questions about the Foxes and Andrew. Neil allowed his contempt to show on his face, but Roland seemed unaffected, keeping up a steady stream of friendly chatter and smiling at him. Eventually Neil’s hands were bound behind him again and he was left alone.

This process repeated itself a couple times a day. Neil was having trouble keeping track of time - he ingested enough porridge so that he wouldn’t actually starve, and it left enough of the drug in his system to keep his drowsy - but he thought that he had been four days in captivity, now. It was time to make his move.

The next time that Roland appeared with his food, Neil swayed on his feet from dizziness, crashing to the floor and upsetting his porridge, knocking it over and breaking the ceramic bowl.

Roland tsked and helped him up, giving him an assessing look.

“If you’d eat, you wouldn’t be so weak,” he chided.

Neil just glared silently and sipped his water. He had been wary of them beginning to drug his water as well, but he hadn’t been able to detect it if they had.

“Mr. Hemmick says that I’m to force feed you if you don’t start eating,” Roland went on.

“Try,” Neil gritted out. “I have a feeling that a music tutor won’t be of much use without the tips of his fingers.”

Roland grinned as if he had won something, making Neil curse himself silently. Roland always acted as if he’d scored a victory if Neil spoke; however, Neil’s hunger was making him unfocused and he was having trouble not raising to Roland’s bait. Neil had never been particularly gifted at keeping quiet.

“If you were more cooperative you’d find that Mr. Hemmick is a reasonable man.”

“He’s a lying, cheating scoundrel,” replied Neil.

“I would have thought that was a plus, from the company you keep,” said Roland lazily.

Neil just glowered and Roland huffed a put-upon sigh. “Really, though,” he continued. “If you weren’t being so stubborn, you and I could have some fun together.”

“How could we possibly?” asked Neil scathingly, displaying his bound wrists.

Roland just smiled. “Bondage could be fun.”

Neil couldn’t believe his ears. “I am a prisoner,” he spat, “that your boss wants to torture and kill. And you’re propositioning me?” Despite his friends’ beliefs, Neil was generally aware when people
were flirting with him. They looked at him in ways that made him feel uncomfortable, or touched him in ways that made him feel uncomfortable, or suggested things that made him feel uncomfortable. He had discovered long ago that pretending not to notice their intentions was easier than explaining that he was not interested. He’d only been surprised a couple times when he’d found out about people’s interest in him - Andrew’s being the most recent example.

“Don’t take everything so seriously,” said Roland lightly. “Mr. Hemmick and your Mr. Minyard will come to an agreement. Mr. Hemmick is a businessman. I highly doubt he’ll resort to torture. You’re being dramatic.”

Neil raised an eyebrow. “Perhaps you’d like to stay here bound in the dark in my place and then we can discuss whether or not I have just cause to be concerned. And you don’t know Andrew. Who is to even say that he’ll be willing to trade for me?”

Roland just laughed lightly and shortly after left him alone, leaving Neil to his thoughts. He was relatively certain that Andrew would come for him - this fell under his promise of protection after all. But the pragmatic thing to do would be to sell Kevin to the highest bidder and leave Neil to his fate. Neil knew that the money was important to Andrew’s plans of revenge against Cass, since he couldn’t move openly against her without vast resources. And Neil had caused enough trouble that Andrew had threatened to end their deal more than once. Would this even be considered part of their deal, since Neil had gone with Luther willingly?

And what about what Andrew had revealed to him when they were on board the Palmetto? Neil had been willing to explore that, but Andrew had insisted that he didn’t want anything to change. Neil didn’t think that it would compromise Andrew’s ability to strategize; he assumed that it was just a physical attraction on Andrew’s part. He would be completely unaffected by Neil’s death or departure, as he had previously claimed.

Still, he thought as he extracted the piece of broken ceramic from his porridge bowl that he had earlier stashed in between the ropes binding his ankles when he had pretended to swoon, he wasn’t about to sit around and wait to see if Andrew deigned to rescue him.

He worked to slice through the rope binding his wrists, cutting his hands in the process. It was slow, laborious work, but he eventually succeeded. He then made quick work untangling the rope around his feet, and made his way over to the vent that he had caught a glimpse of. Taking a running start at the wall, he caught the lip of the vent and pried it from the wall. It was a tight fit, but he was luckily very small. He wondered what would happen if he got stuck partway along the vent. Would Luther have to grease up a child to extract him?

He wriggled like a worm, making his way forward and hoping that the vent didn’t come to an abrupt end and that it led somewhere useful. He wasn’t even sure if he was even in Ketterdam anymore; he didn’t even know where the Foxes were, or if he was even in one of the foxes. He had no idea what lay on the other side of the grate. Still, he didn’t want to be part of whatever it was.

Eventually he felt a breeze coming from in front of him, indicating the end of the vent up ahead. He frantically pulled himself towards it and peered out. He could see nothing in the pitch blackness. He had no idea what kind of room this vent opened into. It could be Luther’s bedroom for all he could see. He listened carefully, but there was nothing but silence emanating from the room.

He hadn’t come all this way for nothing, so he dislodged the grate, swearing under his breath as it slipped through his hands. He grasped after it desperately but it fell with a clang to the ground. He held his breath, waiting for the shouts of guards or footsteps coming to investigate, but there was still nothing. He slowly pushed himself out of the vent, sliding head first down the wall. At least the grate hitting the floor had given him an idea of how far up he was. He slid down as cautiously as possible, but curled into a ball to protect his head and neck when he hit the floor.
He jumped up and felt the wall behind him, moving along it until he found a door. He tried the handle. Locked. Suddenly, the room lit up. He spun around, noting his surroundings. He was in an abandoned theatre, behind the back row of moth-eaten green velvet seats. Luther’s guards were stationed strategically around the room. Luther himself was standing on the stage among the broken set pieces; it appeared that a Komedie Brute play had been staged here. A fake sick room was set up, complete with comically large medical instruments (he saw a saw and a mallet) and a table with straps to hold down a patient.

They’d been waiting for him: the vent in his room had obviously been a trap. Neil didn’t wait for them to come to him. He jumped up on the back of the row of seats and gracefully ran along them to the stage, where Luther and Roland were staring at him with slackened jaws. He grabbed one of the stage ropes and began climbing.

“Cut him down!” Luther yelled, and a man appeared on the catwalk, cutting the rope that Neil was climbing. He softened his body for impact with the floor, and attempted to get up and away again before two sets of hands grabbed him. The two guards held him roughly and turned him towards Luther, who was smart enough to stay out of range of Neil’s legs.

“Did you think we didn’t know of your rather unique talents?” asked Luther snidely. “You are not going to get out of here without my help or that of Mr. Minyard. And as we both know, he is vile, ruthless, and amoral. These were the traits I needed for Kevin Day’s rescue, but probably won’t help you out of your predicament. Perhaps we could come to an arrangement where you’d consider changing allegiances?”

“Unlikely,” said Neil.

“I’m sure we can come to an understanding.”

“You should honour your old deals before attempting to make new ones.”

Luther’s face twisted angrily. “Do not presume to pass judgment on me, you degenerate gutter rat,” he snarled. He then seemed to recover himself a little. “The city is awash in rumours about Kevin Day and his amplifiers. It’s causing quite a lot of activity. A Fjerdan drıskelle delegation has arrived, as has the crown prince of Shu Han. The Kaelish are only a day away. Everybody is looking for your friends.”

“You’re worried,” Neil realized. “They might steal your prize. Andrew has probably gotten Kevin out of the city. They’re long gone.”

“They are not,” said Luther simply. “I would have heard something. I have spies everywhere.”

“Clearly not everywhere.”

A flash of anger crossed Luther’s face before he smoothed it out. “You are the Shadow,” he said. “You know all the Foxes’ hideouts and safe houses. You will tell me where Minyard is hiding Kevin.”

“Andrew isn’t stupid enough to hide him anywhere I could lead you,” spat Neil.

“Nevertheless you will tell me everything you know.”

“And if I don’t?” Neil challenged.

Luther snapped his fingers and the two guards holding Neil slammed him down on the operating table that was part of the set. He was bound in place.
“If you don’t I will slice your tendons. First your ankles, then your knees. You will never be running anywhere ever again. And if that isn’t enough, I will have one of my guards take that oversized mallet and crush your legs, pulverize the bones, so that they will never heal properly. You’ll be even more crippled than Minyard. What do you think about that?”

Horror seized Neil. “I think fuck you,” he said, knowing he was on his last nerve. Running and climbing were his last line of defense.

“Maybe we’ll take your tongue, too,” mused Luther.

“How would I tell you any information, then, idiot?”

“Maybe a demonstration?” suggested Luther. Neil caught Roland’s look of horror over Luther’s shoulders. One of the guards came forward with a sharp knife. Neil struggled against his bonds, the sight of his father’s favourite weapon causing mindless panic.

“Don’t,” he said.

“Consider whose side you wish to be on,” said Luther, smugly, and gestured the guard forward.

At the first brush of the knife against his skin, Neil lost his control. “He’ll never trade for me if you break me!” he cried, hating the desperation that fear, anger, and truth gave to his declaration. “I’ll be worthless to him.”

Luther raised his hand in a halting motion. “You raise an interesting point,” he said thoughtfully, tapping his index finger against his lips. “Think about your loyalties, Mr. Josten. Tomorrow I will not be so merciful.”

Neil was manhandled back to his cell, while Roland followed, wringing his hands. The guard dumped Neil on the floor. He surveyed his cell, noting that the vent had been blocked.

“Why don’t you just tell him what he wants to know?” asked Roland fretfully. “You know it’s preferable to being tortured.”

“What I know is that you’re a spineless coward who doesn’t deserve to breathe.”

Roland looked shocked and taken aback. “How can you say that? I’ve been nothing but kind to you!”

“You’re the type to sit back and let monstrous men do horrible things without speaking out against it, and then you pat yourself on the back for your decency.”

“That’s not fair!”

Neil chuckled humorlessly. “Well congratulations for making it this long thinking that life’s fair.”

“I try to do what’s right.”

“Yeah?” asked Neil. “So when Nicky got thrown out of the house for his sexuality - you spoke up against that? Especially considering what the two of you were doing?”

Roland paled. “How did you know about that?”

“Is that fear I see? So I guess your boss doesn’t know about how you were carrying on with his son and heir? I’d imagine not, considering his bigotry and the fact that you’re still employed.”
“I am an Indentured servant. For my safety and my employment I can’t speak out against my boss.”

“You condone his actions by keeping your silence,” said Neil derisively, before nodding to the cup of water that Roland had carried with him into the cell. “You’ve also been drugging me without my consent. So go ahead and force that water down my throat, but I don’t think you can keep telling yourself that you’re actually a good person.”

“I… what? You know about the drugs?” Roland asked, before shaking his head. “I’m sorry about this.”

Neil just glared angrily and tried to bite as Roland got closer, but he eventually got a hold of Neil’s jaw and forced the drugged liquid down Neil’s throat.

“I truly am sorry,” said Roland, backing away.

“Fuck you,” said Neil, feeling the drug take effect. He lay on the cell floor and let his words to Luther from before run through his head. He’ll never trade for me if you break me. How many times had Andrew told him that he would have no use without his abilities to climb and spy? There was no way that Andrew could come for him if Neil couldn’t keep up his side of their agreement. The other Foxes, Matt and Dan and Allison and Erik, would never let him rot away here, but without Andrew’s planning abilities could they save him?

He gave in to the drug and let his dark thoughts drag him into unconsciousness.

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The guards returned for him the following night. At least he thought it was night; he’d lost track of time while drugged and had been left alone throughout the remainder of the day. But he’d come up with a plan. He would tell Luther of places he knew; old safe houses that the Foxes no longer needed, or that belonged to other gangs. He would stall. Luther would have to send guards to check all of these places, buying Neil some time.

He was brought back to the stage, bound hand and foot and held by two guards. The theatre was more packed tonight: at least thirty guards stood watching the entrance.

“Do you know where you are?” asked Luther.

“Eil Komedie,” replied Neil, having recognized the run down theatre on the small island.

Luther gave him a slimy smile. “Yes. And Minyard knows where you are, too. Roland has been quite conspicuous in his trips between Fifth Harbour and here for the past five days.”

Neil looked around the room. Luther chuckled. “Yes, it’s a trap. And your boy has fallen into it. I was worried when he didn’t seem to be taking the bait, but he obviously wants you back - for what filthy reason, I couldn’t even begin to fathom.”

“I understand that no one’s ever liked you so you’ve never had a friend,” started Neil. “But that’s what friends-” He was cut off by Luther slapping his face, hard. The two guards let him go and backed off, as Luther caught him by the throat.

“I understand that no one’s ever liked you so you’ve never had a friend,” started Neil. “But that’s what friends-” He was cut off by Luther slapping his face, hard. The two guards let him go and backed off, as Luther caught him by the throat.

“You’re an unnatural piece of trash,” he said. “And your friends are going to be killed right in front of you. Then, Minyard is going to be brought here, and I’ll take turns torturing the two of you until one of you tells me what I want to know. I hear that Drake Spear has a… special relationship with Minyard - maybe I’ll ask him to help extract information.”
Neil flinched. It was a good thing that he didn’t know where Kevin was hidden - he would spill everything he knew the second anyone laid a hand on Andrew.

“Your Monster and the Zemeni girl who was on Vellgeluk were seen getting into a boat earlier this evening. They should be here soon. There are only minimal guards outside; I didn’t want to make it seem too obviously like a trap, you see.”

Neil watched the door with trepidation. Had this mercher outsmarted Andrew? Would he have to witness all his friends dying and Andrew being tortured?

There was a commotion outside, and Luther began rubbing his hands together expectantly. The door was suddenly thrown open and a frightened young messenger rushed in, before taking note of all the armed guards. He yelped and put up his hands.

“What?” demanded Luther. “Why are you here?”

“The lake house!” the messenger panted, obviously having run to get here. “They came from the water! They killed one guard and left the others tied up in the pantry. Kathy’s been kidnapped. They left a note.”

Luther went almost purple in rage. “Well?” he commanded. “What does it say?”


“And what?” said Luther. “Continue!”

The boy stuttered a little before continuing to read. “Um… Harm what’s mine and you’ll be heirless as well as bald.” He was barely speaking above a whisper at the end.

Neil couldn’t help himself. He started laughing. How could he have doubted Andrew, even momentarily? How could he have thought that Luther had won?

“This is not funny! That is my heir! My legacy!” cried Luther

“And you were stupid enough to tell him how important that is to you on Vellgeluk,” Neil laughed. Luther looked murderous, and slapped Neil again. “Does Minyard think we are playing a game?”

“It seems he’s winning,” chuckled Neil.

“I am going to cut you into pieces, you worthless faggot,” hissed Luther, grabbing Neil by the biceps and shaking him.

“Oh, yes,” said Neil. “Tell me all the awful, wrong, degenerate things I am. Break me into pieces.” He slammed his forehead into Luther’s nose, relishing the snap he heard. Luther backed away howling, cupping his face in his hands. Neil smiled his father’s smile as Luther’s blood gushed. “If you lay another finger on me, Andrew is going to slice your precious heir out of your mistress and hang its dead body from the roof at the Exchange.” Neil was currently incredibly grateful for Andrew Minyard the Monster would haunt Luther until his mistress and his unborn heir were returned.

“Shut up!” commanded Luther.

“Do you think he won’t?” taunted Neil. “What was it you called him? Vile, ruthless, amoral? So go
ahead. Hurt me. Break me. *Dare him.*” Neil continued to smile his horrible smile as Luther roared in wordless rage. “I guarantee that you will not enjoy what the Bastard of the Barrel does in return.”

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

“Oh, merchling,” sighed Erik. “We’ve thoroughly corrupted you, haven’t we?”
ERIK

Chapter Summary

In which Kathy Ferdinand is not the Foxes' favourite person.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Although Erik had done many questionable and regrettable things in his life, he’d always believed that deep down he was a fundamentally good person. He felt that he housed unshakable decency at his core. Which was why it was so surprising when he’d come to the conclusion that he was going to murder their pregnant, unarmed hostage if he had to spend another minute in her company.

The assault on the lake house had gone off without a hitch. Only two days after Neil’s capture, after they had successfully moved everyone to Black Veil, Robin had informed them that lights had appeared on Eil Komedie, a broken down amusement park and theatre located on an island north of the city. A man had been seen making his way between the island and Fifth Harbour; Robin had identified him as a Zemeni music tutor that was Indentured to the Hemmick household. Nicky had paled at that.

“Who is he tutoring?” wondered Erik.

“She lives at your father’s house?” demanded Allison, who, despite having lived in the Barrel for three years, still bristled at any high society faux pas. Letting your wife and your mistress live in the same house was majorly frowned upon by the nobility: most people had mistresses, but pretended they didn’t.

“It’s not a regular situation,” said Nicky. “My father loves my mother, despite what he calls her inferior bloodline. But they were never been able to have another child after I was born. Again, my father blamed that on my mother. So he came to an agreement with the Ferdinands - they’re an old noble family that has lost most of their fortune. Kathy’s the youngest of four daughters, she has nothing to attract an appropriate suitor. In exchange for providing a true, Kerch-blooded heir, my father offered to pay for her schooling and dowry.”


“Well, that’s certainly surprising,” said Erik. “Since Luther Hemmick is such a well known feminist.”

“When I was still there no other men were allowed anywhere near her, so my father could be absolutely sure of the parentage of her child,” said Nicky. “But once she was pregnant my father hired a music tutor for her. Roland,” he continued with a flush, raising Erik’s interest. Neil had said something about Nicky having an affair with his music tutor. “She adores him. She loves music.”

“Is she any good?” asked Dan.
“...She’s enthusiastic,” said Nicky after a pause.

“So Neil’s at Eil Komedie?” asked Matt, steering the conversation back to the task at hand. “When do we go get him?”

“We don’t,” replied Andrew, drawing everyone’s ire, which he waved away. “Luther thinks he’s being clever. It’s too obvious.”

“A trap,” groaned Dan. “What are you thinking?”

“Hit where the mark isn’t looking?” suggested Nicky, timidly, causing everyone to gape at him. “What? That’s what Andrew said about our assault on Evermore, wouldn’t that work here?”

“Oh, merchling,” sighed Erik. “We’ve thoroughly corrupted you, haven’t we?” He could think of several other ways he wished to corrupt Nicky, but decided not to bring them up quite yet. Nicky had gotten strangely skittish after his father had revealed his sexuality. As much as Erik enjoyed flirting with him and making him blush, he didn’t want to make him uncomfortable.

“We need leverage,” said Andrew.

“We have Kevin,” Allison pointed out.

“Kevin’s already leverage for the money he owes us,” said Andrew. “And other than money the only thing that Luther cares about is his legacy.”

“You want to kidnap his mistress?” asked Renee, understanding before the rest of them.

“Yes,” replied Andrew. “And then trade her for Neil.”

“He’s moved her out of the city,” pointed out Robin, who had been doing surveillance of the Hemmick household.

“We’ll have to find where,” said Andrew simply. Which had led them to George Waterhouse’s office and the lake house that was in Nicky’s mother’s name.

Luther had obviously stationed the major force of his guard at Eil Komedie, with only a skeleton crew at the lake house, located about ten miles south of Ketterdam. The lake was surrounded by wealthy mercher’s summer homes, all of them empty for the winter.

Dan and Aaron were sent out as a distraction. They were to be very obvious about getting into a boat at Fifth Harbour, Aaron dressed to look like Andrew. They were to shout instructions at nearby boats, pretending that they were leading an assault on the island where Neil was held. Erik imagined that the occupants of the other boats, likely tourists or pleasure seekers, were incredibly confused why strangers were shouting at them.

The kidnapping had been almost comically easy. One of the guards had even been asleep in the gazebo. Erik had had to wake him up before knocking him out. The only setback was that something had gone wrong with Renee and Matt’s part of the plan and one of the guards had ended up dead. Both of them were tight lipped about the mistake.

Wearing masks to hide their identities, Erik and Allison had entered Kathy’s room, where she sat painstakingly plucking out a tune on the piano. She looked up when they entered, but was completely docile as she allowed herself to be bundled into a coat, bound, and blindfolded. She quietly followed them as they pulled her back to the boat.
Erik was perplexed about Kathy's lack of worry. “Is this natural?” he whispered to Allison.

“Maybe her pregnancy is causing her to not get enough blood to her brain?” Allison whispered back, equally confused.

About halfway back to Ketterdam, Kathy seemed to realize her situation and began to cry with big gulping sobs. By the time they’d gotten back to Black Veil and settled her into the crypt, she’d begun to moan.

“I want to go hoooooooomeme,” she wailed.

Kevin had given her a single horrified look and had promptly left the crypt with Thea on his heels. Nicky looked resignedly back at the others. The noise had not stopped there. For the next several hours, Kathy sobbed and wailed and whined and cried. She ineffectually tried to untie her bound hands and remove her blindfold. Eventually, Andrew stalked out of the crypt. They all followed.

“Someone better shut her up, or I will,” he threatened. “And I will make it permanent.”

“She’s a frightened pregnant girl, who’s barely out of her teenage years,” chastised Renee mildly.

“Did I ask for a description?”

“I vote that we smack her on the head and knock her out,” said Allison. Matt sent her a vaguely shocked look.

“She’s kidnapped and terrified,” defended Matt.

“It’s not her fault that her parents basically sold her to my father,” added Nicky.

“Make sure she’s stopped her wailing by the time I get back,” ordered Andrew, as he made his way towards one of their gondels. He passed Kevin and Thea who were sitting under a tree nearby, still hiding from their hostage.

“It’s good to know that Andrew will remain a grumpy asshole in all situations,” said Allison sarcastically.

“He’s just worried about Neil,” supplied Renee.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Erik with an eye roll. “He hates Neil, remember?”

Renee just shook her head and led them back into the crypt. Kathy had quieted a little, giving little gulping hiccups while her hands rested on her belly. Renee lowered herself beside her.

“Do you want some tea?” she asked kindly.

“Do you have honey?” asked Kathy in return.

“I… don’t think so,” replied Renee, glancing around their scant supplies.

“I’ll only drink tea with honey and lemon,” said Kathy, her lip beginning to quiver again.

“How about some cookies?” asked Erik, desperately, as he spied a box of chocolate coated cookies. Allison gave him a dirty look. “Katelyn brought those cookies for me,” she snarled.

“Suffer,” he advised, grabbing the box and offering one to Kathy.
“Careful,” Matt warned him. “She'll get her revenge. She’s basically a dessert-hoarding dragon.”

Allison opened her mouth to retort, but was cut off by Kathy. “You all sound very young,” she said. “Where are your parents?”

Nicky began laughing helplessly, fruitlessly trying to pull himself together.

“Why is that funny?” asked Kathy.

“It’s not,” Erik assured her through a chuckle. “We just don’t have a sense of humour.”

“Like Luther,” said Kathy sagely.

“Let’s… not talk about him,” said Erik quickly, not wanting to hear how this poor, innocent, clueless girl had been treated as a broodmare by Nicky’s evil father. “How about his son, Nicky? Do you have any stories about him?”

Nicky gave him a dark look and started to argue, but was shushed by Allison.

Kathy appeared faintly surprised. “He was always nice to me,” she said. “But he’s gone now. He’s been sent to a special camp in Belendt to fix him. Although I didn’t know he was broken. He always looked fine to me.”

Nicky buried his face in his hands, shame infusing his entire being. Erik felt incredibly guilty for bringing up this topic.

“Of course he’s fine,” Matt said quickly. “Tell us about…” he floundered, looking around for help.

“What are your interests?” asked Renee smoothly. “Maybe we can do something to keep your mind occupied?”

“I like going for walks,” said Kathy.

Allison huffed, irritated. “Maybe later. What else?”

“I like my dog,” replied Kathy, her bottom lip quivering. “I miss him. I want to go home.”

“You’ll go home and see your dog tomorrow,” Erik assured her. “No one is going to hurt you. What else do you like to do?”

“Music,” said Kathy. “I want to be on the stage. Roland says I’m good enough. He’s so kind. I think that one day soon he’ll fall in love with me and then we can run away together to be performers.”

Nicky choked suddenly, seemingly on nothing. While he was still gasping for air, Kathy went on. “Shall I sing?” she asked. “I love singing.”

Nicky waved his hands frantically in the air, mouthing the word No.

“Well...” Erik started to say, but Kathy gave a little intake of breath and began to sing.

And this was much, much worse than the crying.

She wasn’t particularly bad, per se, she just never shut up. She sang to herself as she sat there, she sang between bites of the cookies, she sang louder if anyone tried to say anything. She provided a constant drone of song.
“Do you think this was Luther’s diabolical plan to drive us insane?” Matt eventually asked desperately, before Kathy increased her volume to drown him out.

Erik was definitely going to kill her.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

Andrew raised an eyebrow. “Well, you’ve somehow managed to make it worse,” he said.
Thea had originally followed Kevin outside to ensure that he didn’t attempt to swim away from the distressed pregnant woman and had managed to stay the entire day outside. She’d dozed under the large willow, spoken with Kevin, and did some exercise routines with Matt. Kevin had disappeared inside the crypt for a while; even Kathy’s incessant singing couldn’t keep him away from his work for long. He’d been working on making bombs with Nicky and Allison. He’d eventually been driven out of the crypt, again thoroughly annoyed, but had happily spent a fair amount of time describing his successful work with Nicky. He’d been happy to find someone so knowledgeable about chemistry and apparently Allison was passably talented in bomb making. Renee had come to seek Kevin out as well, pulling him away to have an urgent, hushed conversation that left Kevin perplexed and frowning.

Andrew returned to Black Veil that evening, with Aaron, Dan, and Katelyn in tow. Thea tugged Kevin up from his position under the tree, pulling him along to the meeting with the others taking place outside the crypt where Kathy couldn’t hear them, but the faint sounds of her singing were still audible.

Andrew raised an eyebrow. “Well, you’ve somehow managed to make it worse,” he said.

“You said to stop her crying, you didn’t specify how,” said Allison.

“This is awful!” exclaimed Dan. “Has she been doing this for long?”

“Dan, I love you, but shut your face. You have no idea about awfulness,” said Matt tiredly.

“She’s been doing this for over twelve hours,” said Erik hollowly.

“She even managed to sing in her sleep,” added Nicky.

“Let us off this island now,” demanded Allison.

Andrew was unruffled. “Dan and Aaron can stay with Kevin and Kathy for now,” he said. “But someone else is going to have to stay overnight as well, to accompany Aaron tomorrow.”

Thea saw Erik immediately put his index finger on his nose. She didn’t understand the reason for it, but she did so as well once the others began to follow suit. Only Nicky ended up without touching his nose, looking around with a confused expression.

Andrew gave a slightly amused huff. “It can’t be Nicky or Katelyn.”

This time Thea was faster with her finger, realizing that the last person was going to be volunteered to remain behind.
“Aw, man,” whined Matt, as he lost the contest, “I wanted to go get Neil. Now I have to stay here?” Erik gave him a consoling pat on the arm. “Tough luck,” he said.

“I swear I’m going to get trigger happy if I stay here for much longer,” insisted Matt.

“You can take one of the gondels to drop off the others, since you’ll need it later,” offered Andrew. Matt looked relieved and moved towards him. “That offer is off the table if you try to hug me,” threatened Andrew with a finger pointed at Matt. Matt looked sheepish and took a step back.

Andrew observed the rest of them. “Everyone who’s humourless or uncomfortable in social situations or unfamiliar with the Barrel should be paired up with someone personable,” he muttered, almost to himself. “Thea you’re with Katelyn, Renee you stay with Allison, and Nicky you go with Erik.”

“Are you saying that I’m humorless or just unfamiliar with the Barrel?” asked Thea.

“Why not both?” said Erik, winking when she glared at him.

Thea glanced towards Katelyn, who was smiling happily at her. She hadn’t spent much time with the woman, who appeared harmless, but Thea had spent enough time around the Foxes to suspect that she was anything but.

Andrew handed out cards with information to Katelyn, Erik, and Allison. “The location of the furrier for your costumes and the area you’re to cover are on those cards. You three are to be the steerers, while your partner is to be the Mister Crimson.”

“Wait, what?” said Thea. “Be the what?” Although her Kerch had gotten quite good, she wasn’t always familiar with the words they used, especially when they were specialized terms. She wasn’t sure what a Mister Crimson was, but she was certain that she had no desire to be one.

Andrew waved her off. “Mistakes will not be tolerated,” he said sharply. “We will rendez-vous back here tomorrow evening.” He gave them one last controlled glance, and left back to his boat.

Dan smiled at them more pleasantly, but Thea could still read a threat in her expression. "Go get Neil back,” she said.

Thea sighed and turned towards Kevin. “Behave,” she told him. “Stay here and you’ll be safe.”

“She’s still singing,” he hissed angrily.

“Chin up,” said Dan from close by. “I brought us a present.” She brandished a bottle of whiskey, smiling at the whimper of longing that escaped Kevin’s throat.

Thea frowned. “He’s going to become an alcoholic if you keep bribing him with alcohol.”

“Become?” asked Allison incredulously.

Dan just smiled at her. “Tell you what,” she said. “You can stay in my place, or I can ply him with alcohol.”

Thea sighed again. “See you tomorrow,” she called as she headed for the second gondel where the others were congregating.

“No funerals!” Dan called after her.
Matt rowed the six of them out, stopping in three separate spots to let them off. Thea secured the Komedie Brute costume that she was wearing as a disguise before she and Katelyn disembarked last.

Matt sighed heavily. “How long can I just row around aimlessly before Dan realizes that I delayed getting back?” he wondered.

Katelyn gave him a look. “She is alone with Aaron at his grumpiest and Kevin and a singing pregnant woman. I’ll be surprised if she hasn’t killed anyone yet.”

“Can you two at least give me advice to deal with Aaron and Kevin?” Matt asked desperately. “Since you’re experts and all?”

“Leave Aaron alone,” said Katelyn shortly. “Don’t try to talk to him.”

Thea shrugged and nodded. “Let Kevin drink himself into a stupor. Don’t let him swim away from the island.”

“Maybe I can delay for an hour?” said Matt hopefully.

“It’s your funeral,” Katelyn shrugged.

“Yeah, yeah. With no mourners,” sighed Matt as he gave a plaintive whine and began rowing away. “At least bring Neil back safe,” he requested.

“Your boyfriend is charming,” commented Thea as they walked away from the canal.

Katelyn gave an unladylike snort. “Likewise.”

“No, seriously,” pressed Thea. “I don’t know him that well, but he seems like an unapologetic asshole. How do you put up with it?”

Katelyn raised her eyebrow. “That’s the pot calling the kettle black,” she said slyly. “But mainly I put up with it because he’s nice to me and the sex is amazing.”

Thea flushed slightly. “It’s not like that between Kevin and I,” she said. “I don’t feel that way about him, and I don’t think Kevin’s ever shown any romantic or sexual interest in anyone,” she paused thoughtfully. “I just… I don’t know. I understand him? He needs someone to look after him; he’s useless on his own. He needs me and I care about him. I’d follow him anywhere to make sure that he was okay and I know he likes my company. We’re… friends.” She shrugged. The word didn’t seem to quite encapsulate how she felt about their relationship.

“Platonic life partners?” suggested Katelyn.

Thea was relieved that the other woman seemed to understand her attachment to Kevin. “Yes, that sounds right. I know he can be abrasive and obnoxious but he’s mine.”

Katelyn smiled. “That sounds familiar,” she said. “Aaron was the first person to see me.”

Thea gave her a once over. She was short, with pleasant curves and a laughing face with deep dimples. “I highly doubt that he was the first to notice you,” she said dryly.

Katelyn laughed brightly and winked at her. “No, I meant that he was the first to look at me and see me, not my breasts or dimples.”

“Where did you meet?”
“About two years ago, at the House of the Blue Iris,” replied Katelyn. “Pleasure house on West Stave,” she explained further at Thea’s look.

“You worked there?”

“I signed a contract there as soon as I was old enough.”

“Voluntarily?”

“More or less. I was born and raised in the Barrel. It was the best option at the time.”

“You’re from Kerch?” asked Thea, surprised. “You don’t look it. You look…”

“Ethnically ambiguous?” suggested Katelyn. “My mother was a prostitute at the House of the White Rose. When I was born she left me with a man she claimed was my father - although we look almost nothing alike, so I highly doubt that was the case. I don’t know my ancestry at all.”

“But the man raised you anyway?”

Katelyn waved her hand in a so-so gesture. “He gave me a roof over my head and fed me sometimes, so I guess you could call it that. He wasn’t a bad man and without him I’d be dead, but he wasn’t particularly interested in raising a daughter he wasn’t sure actually belonged to him.” She shook her head. “I spent most of my childhood running around the Barrel causing trouble with all the other unwanted children. I learned how to charm people to get what I wanted. And when I was old enough I signed on with a pleasure house. Luckily, I knew which one to join in order to get good treatment and a fair contract.”

Thea was shocked. “You speak of it fondly,” she pointed out.

“Oh,” said Katelyn, surprised. “Yes, I guess so. I never really minded the work, not like some others. I had a stable place to live and three full meals a day. The girls and I weren’t mistreated and I was popular enough that I could be choosy with my clients. It was my home.”

“But you left?”

“I felt that working for the Foxes could bring me more advancement. And I’d met Aaron.” Thea raised her eyebrow skeptically and Katelyn laughed. “I thought he was Andrew at first. See, almost nobody knows that they’re twins. Andrew is well known around the Barrel and Aaron’s job with the Foxes is mainly to pretend to be Andrew: either to provide a decoy or an alibi. It wouldn’t work if it were widely known that he exists.”

“So you met him when he was pretending to be Andrew?”

“Yes, he was meeting with my boss - Andrew doesn’t like to set foot on West Stave, so Aaron was sent in his stead. The other girls had warned me that it was well known that he was violent and had never looked twice at them, but I decided to try my hand at seducing him.” Katelyn chuckled. “If had actually been Andrew, I probably would have ended up stabbed. But Aaron was polite and attentive and asked me questions about my interests. He wasn’t distracted by my assets and he was interested in me. He managed to convince Wymack and Andrew to recruit me not long after that.”

Thea was still confused about something though. “How can you be with someone who looks down on your former profession?” she asked, remembering the fight between Aaron and Andrew two nights before.

Katelyn’s face darkened slightly. “Was he running his mouth about Neil again?” she asked. At
Thea’s hesitant nod, she exhaled irritatedly. “He doesn’t have a problem with prostitutes,” she said wearily. “He just knows that calling Neil a whore is the easiest way to break through Andrew’s calm, controlled exoskeleton. He tends to lash out when he feels threatened and he was angry that I’d agreed to spend an evening flirting with Waterhouse.”

“He seems to dislike Neil,” said Thea neutrally.

“That’s a mild way to put it,” agreed Katelyn. “That whole issue is a bee-infested minefield and I try to stay out of it. I don’t even know the whole story.”

“Oh?” asked Thea, interest sparking within her.

Katelyn side-eyed her. “Gossip fiend, huh?” she asked with a smile. “I can tell you everything that’s common knowledge, but I expect some gossip in return, yeah?”

“Sure,” said Thea easily. “I’ll share all my Kevin gossip.”

Katelyn chuckled but then sobered. “The twins’ mother, Tilda, sold Andrew to a brothel when they were seven - she had run up some debts keeping up her middle class lifestyle. She went from boyfriend to boyfriend, living off of them but had been stuck in a slump. She told Aaron that Andrew had died. Anyway, Andrew was eventually recruited by the Foxes and started helping Dan and Wymack build them up into power players.”

“Did he contact Aaron or his mother?”

“No,” replied Katelyn. “Tilda had gotten worse through the years, becoming addicted to drugs and becoming more abusive, but Andrew didn’t pay any attention to her or Aaron at all, even after he became a Fox.”

“What changed?”

Katelyn shrugged. “No one knows except for Aaron, Andrew, and Neil and none of them are telling. All I know is that shortly after Neil joined the gang he and Andrew arranged for Tilda’s death. Aaron was then recruited into the Foxes - Wymack offered to pay for him to go to University to learn to be a medik in exchange for acting as Andrew’s decoy and for future medical services rendered.”

“He blames Neil,” said Thea, remembering the argument.

“Neil’s the only one he can blame,” explained Katelyn. “His mother’s dead and Andrew had a legitimate grievance against her and endured horrors that Aaron refuses to think about, so all his grief-fueled anger was directed towards the only other party involved. Also I’m pretty sure he resents Andrew and Neil’s close relationship, considering how many years he spent grieving for and missing his brother.” Katelyn sighed deeply. “The whole situation is basically a powder keg that everyone keeps ignoring in hope that it won’t ignite. I foresee violence. I just hope everyone lives through it.”

Thea hummed thoughtfully. “You still haven’t convinced me why you put up with him.”

“He loves me for me and I love him for him, even when he’s being terrible. I want him to work things out with his brother, but only because I believe it will make him happier. Love is inexplicable, it’s ineffable, it’s-”

“Insane?” cut in Thea, causing Katelyn to chuckle.

By that time they’d reached the furrier. Thea was surprised that it was still open so late at night. Not only was it open, but it was fairly busy. Katelyn explained that tourists needed to rent costumes in
order to fit in on West Stave.

Katelyn spoke quietly with the store clerk and was given a large box. She ushered Thea out of the store before opening the box to reveal a large number of red costumes. Thea had a sinking feeling that she may have an idea was a Mister Crimson was. Katelyn urged her to switch costumes until she was dressed in the garish red cloth.

Katelyn threw her a bag of silver coins. “You'll need those,” she said.

“Are they real?” asked Thea.

“No,” replied Katelyn. “Sometimes in the play they are in order to keep the audience guessing.”

Thea stared at her, trying to make sense of her words.

“It’s from the Komedie Brute,” explained Katelyn. “When Mister Crimson comes on stage the audience yells ‘Mother, Father, pay the rent!’ and Mister Crimson calls back ‘I can’t, my dear, the money’s spent!’ and throws a handful of coins into the crowd.”

Thea continued to stare at her in confusion.

“So if any of the locals see you in that costume, they may yell ‘Mother, Father, pay the rent!’” Thea didn’t answer. “And then you would say…” prompted Katelyn.

“I can’t, my dear, the money’s spent,” replied Thea in a flat voice.

“And throw them some coins,” agreed Katelyn. She shot Thea a thoughtful look. “You may be worse at that than Aaron, and that’s saying a lot. Put some cheer into it!”

“I hate everything about this.”

“Noted,” said Katelyn with an indulgent smile, and dragged Thea towards the Lid. Once they reached their destination, Katelyn seemed to become even more animated and friendly than usual. She called out to everyone, chatting happily, handing out the fliers and costumes from the box. Every so often someone in the crowd would yell at Thea, and she’d dutifully call back the correct words and throw some coins, trying to sound as upbeat as possible. She didn’t think she was doing very well based on the amused looks she kept getting from Katelyn.

They moved along the Lid and West Stave, not staying in one place for too long. Katelyn explained in an undertone that they didn’t want to draw the attention of any of the Barrel gangs.

Some time close to dawn, they emptied their box. Katelyn led them towards Goedmedbridge where they could get into position and get some rest before the confrontation with Luther later that day. She took them to a hotel on the west side of the bridge, nestled between several pleasure houses. Thea could see the House of the White Rose and the House of Blue Iris on either side.

Katelyn spoke to the hotel’s proprietor and was given the key to a room that had been reserved for them; an east-facing, top floor room with a balcony. The balcony overlooked West Stave providing an excellent view of the bridge.

Thea grabbed a pillow off the bed and curled up in the corner. She was accustomed to sleeping on command in uncomfortable locations from her time in the Shu military and she slept lightly, ready to move at any second.

She was awoken suddenly, Katelyn’s hand on her shoulder.
“Go die,” she groaned. She may have been able to wake quickly but that didn’t mean she was happy about it.

“Morning, sunshine,” said Katelyn with a smile in her voice. “Wakey, wakey.”

“Fuck you,” growled Thea as she stood and stretched. “Almost three bells?” she asked.

“Everyone’s in position,” answered Katelyn.

Thea went out onto the balcony and climbed up, hoisting herself onto the roof. She found the rifle, small mirror, and looking glass where Robin had stashed them for her. She used the mirror to reflect the sun, signalling to the others that she was in position. Renee and Erik signalled back from the roofs of buildings on the east side of the canal while Nicky and Allison flashed at her from below them, at ground level.

She turned her looking glass towards the east, and she could just make out Minyard’s blond figure, limping with his cane, pulling Kathy along with him. She was waddling slowly and Thea thought she could make out her lips moving. Was she still singing? Based on the sour look on her companion’s face, she was. Thea grinned, happy that she wasn’t the one escorting their hostage.

She turned, looking for Luther’s approach from the west. She found him rapidly, walking purposefully surrounded by guards wearing the livery of his house. He had a bandage over his nose and dark, purple circles around his eyes. She wondered who had broken his nose, although she had a suspicion. There was a tiny, hooded, shackled figure shuffling along in the centre of the guards. Neil.

She signalled the others about his approach. The two groups reached opposite sides of the bridges and waited for the chiming of three bells. Allison had argued for shooting Luther as soon as they had Neil back, but Andrew had dismissed the idea. Luther wouldn’t suffer enough, he had argued. And it was not smart for them to kill a member of the Merchant Council in broad daylight.

Thea was distracted by Renee signalling her frantically with her mirror. She turned to scan the western approach again and her stomach dropped. She could see multiple groups of stadwatch guards in their purple uniforms making their way towards the bridge. They’d been expecting a double cross from Luther, but hadn’t expected that he would want to alert the city guard to his underhanded dealings.

She signalled the others to be on their guard and readied her rifle. Things were about to get complicated.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

Neil leaned close to Luther. “Before this is over you will regret underestimating Barrel rats,” he hissed in his ear.
NEIL

Chapter Summary

In which Neil is rescued, only to get into a fight almost instantly.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has references to Andrew's childhood and violence/gore. Nothing worse than anything that's already happened and nothing worse than in canon, but if you have any questions about it you can contact me on tumblr (@gluupor).

Warnings for the chapter: references to rape and murder, threats of rape and murder, graphic violence, gore (let me know if I forgot anything).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As soon as the clock chimed three bells, Luther grasped one of Neil’s biceps tightly and escorted him onto the bridge. Neil’s hands were bound with rope behind him and his feet were shackled together, forcing him to walk with an awkward shuffle. The hood over his head was the biggest inconvenience, though.

Luther halted near the centre of the bridge.

“Luther!” called a high, sweet girl’s voice. “Here I am!”

“Yes, I see you, my dear,” answered Luther perfunctorily. He shifted his weight. “I want Kevin Day, Minyard,” he growled.

“We’ve been over this,” Andrew answered in a bored tone. Neil’s hair on the back of his neck stood up in warning. There was something off about Andrew’s voice, but Neil couldn’t quite put his finger on it. “You want Kevin and I want my money. We have a deal, if you would just honour it.”

“I don’t have thirty million kruge to give you,” replied Luther.

“I’m sure someone does,” said Andrew with finality. “Neil, are you hurt?”

“I’m fine,” said Neil cautiously, still put off by the wrongness of Andrew’s voice.

“Do you want your mistress back, or did I drag poor Kathy down here for nothing?” Andrew then asked Luther.

“Kathy, what gift did I present you for your last birthday?”

“Oh, congratulations,” said Neil. “It seems you can learn. Don’t want to be tricked into accepting another Tailored imposter?”

“Kathy?” Luther prompted, ignoring Neil’s taunt.
“A cockatoo,” Kathy called back. “Can we go home now?”

There was some movement around Neil and Luther suddenly pulled his hood off. Neil blinked against the harsh light, taking in his surroundings. Kathy was waiting about ten feet away, standing with Andrew, and - oh. That was why Andrew’s voice had sounded strange.

Neil leaned close to Luther. “Before this is over you will regret underestimating Barrel rats,” he hissed in his ear. “Next time you see me, you will have learned.” Neil fully intended to visit Luther after his downfall to gloat.

He started shuffling towards where Kathy’s captor was impatiently rapping his cane on the ground. Kathy passed him, singing quietly under her breath. Neil hurried forward. They had to get off the bridge; there was no way that Luther would let them go easily. Just as Neil reached his destination, Luther gave a triumphant laugh.

“Andrew Minyard, you liar!” he cried in a loud theatrical voice. Neil turned to look at him. That man should never play poker, he decided. His gleeful expression expressed his absolute belief in his upper hand, just as it had the night before, waiting in the theatre on Eil Komedie. The bruises from his broken nose added to his look of maniacal superiority. That looked painful, Neil noted smugly.

“You promised to return my son to me! What have you done with Nicky?” Luther continued, in an overly loud tone.

Neil surveyed their surroundings. Kathy had been bundled off to safety with Luther’s guards, but stadwatch guards were swarming the bridge in their purple uniforms. The diminutive blond man beside him didn’t hesitate. He pushed Neil’s shoulder, turning him in order to cut the bonds on his hands with an oyster knife. When he was finished he tossed Neil the knife and said, “Flower boat, west side,” before hooking a climbing line onto the side of the bridge and hoisting himself over. Neil heard the clomp of boots heading towards him. He turned and unerringly threw the oyster knife into the approaching guard’s throat before leaping off the side of the bridge onto the boat below.

As his feet hit the deck he looked up at the Minyard beside him. “Are you here because Andrew didn’t want to jump off the bridge?” he asked Aaron with a smirk.

Aaron just rolled his eyes and handed Neil a set of lockpicks so that he could free himself from the shackles around his ankles. “He had something else to do,” Aaron said cryptically. “When did you figure out it was me?”

“As soon as I saw you,” said Neil with a shrug. “I don’t understand how so many people are fooled. You’re twins, but you’re not the same. ... Also, you’re limping on the wrong leg - it’s his right leg that was broken.”

Aaron scowled, but shifted his cane into his other hand. Neil was surprised to note that it was Andrew’s actual Fox head cane; usually Aaron used a similar looking cane, as Andrew did not like to let his cane out of his possession.

“What now?” asked Neil.

“Wait for it,” replied Aaron, but he began to busily root under one of the flower seller’s boxes, pulling out a couple of red Komedie Brute costumes.

Neil had just finished putting on the Mister Crimson mask when there were fireworks above. Aaron nudged his shoulder and pointed to the east, where several stadwatch boats were approaching their location. In sync with several more fireworks from above the two boats rocked, explosions tearing
holes in their hulls. The people above would not have been able to hear the bombs above the noise of
the fireworks.

“Nicky?” asked Neil.

“With Allison and Kevin’s help,” answered Aaron. “Hold on.”

Neil grabbed onto Aaron. When purple fireworks lit the sky, Aaron reeled in his climbing line,
pulling the two of them back up onto the bridge.

The scene above was vastly different from what it had been before their detour several minutes prior.
Almost a hundred people in Mister Crimson costumes were crowded onto the bridge, throwing silver
coins into the surrounding crowd. The *stadwatch* guards were overwhelmed, trying to find the two
of them among all the masked revellers. Neil laughed delightedly. Luther could never have expected
this from Andrew.

“West,” Aaron told him curtly. “Warehouse district.”

Neil took off with Aaron at his heels, escaping the joyous riot. They were only a couple streets away
when there was another loud explosion behind them, followed by terrified screaming. Neil stopped
and wheeled around, pushing his mask up his face and staring with wide eyes.

“Was that planned?” he asked. He didn’t know why it would be; they’d gotten their chaos, there
didn’t need to be collateral damage as well.

“I don’t think so,” said Aaron warily, but he grabbed Neil’s wrist. “You can’t go back. We all just
risked our lives to rescue you. You can’t go running back into danger.”

Neil conceded the point, slid his mask back down his face. He wasn’t in any position to do anything
anyway. He was unarmed, exhausted, and starving. He followed Aaron towards the warehouse
district. They ditched their costumes upon entering and Aaron provided rough spun work clothes that
had been hidden earlier for them to change into. They blended in seamlessly, appearing to be nothing
more than boys who either sought or had employment in the area.

The streets here were straight and clean. Workers milled to and fro, although most were in the
factories. All the goods for import and export were stored in buildings in this part of town. It was
probably the most secure district, with most buildings locked and guarded at all times. Luther would
never look for them here. The Barrel gangs had very little influence or business here.

Neil was distracted as he saw a familiar figure cut his way down the street in front of him, before
turning into an alleyway.

“What’s Drake doing here?” he asked out loud, watching as Cass’ only son and most trusted
underling disappeared into the back entrance of a warehouse.

“What does it matter?” Aaron said irritably.

Neil cut him a look. “Because if the Ravens are up to something, we should know about it.” He took
off after Drake. Aaron cursed behind him, but obediently followed. The alleyway was a dead end,
only containing a doorway into the adjacent warehouse. Neil could see a window above.

“Stay here,” he instructed Aaron, as he started making his way up the wall. He had to pause a few
times; his lack of food or restful sleep was catching up to him. Once he made his way to the window,
he silently opened it, before hoisting himself up. He wasn’t able to fit through completely, but he was
able to get his head into the warehouse.
Drake was meeting with two Zemeni men on the ground floor of the warehouse, surrounded by crates of jurda. Barrel gangs had very little to do with jurda. The garden variety was legal and commonly used in the city and was imported, stored, and distributed just like any other trade good. The addictive, illegal variety, jurda parem, was banned from most Barrel establishments; the drug could provide people with incredible focus and enhanced cognitive abilities for a short time, giving them an advantage at games of chance. Because Barrel gangs made most of their income from gamblers, selling the drug was counterproductive. The jurda parem dealers in the city were mainly representatives of the Zemeni cartels and the Barrel gangs mainly ignored them, except to collect a percentage when the dealers attempted to move product on their territory.

Neil listened carefully as Drake seemed to be making a deal with one of the Zemeni cartels. He scoffed. There was very little profit that the cartels would pass down, making this a fool’s errand. He knew that Cass was smart enough to stay away from the drug trade, but Drake had always been unpredictable and bullheaded.

“What my mother doesn’t know can’t hurt her,” Drake was saying to one of the men. Neil started planning ways in which he could subtly alert Cass to Drake’s actions.

He watched until the meeting started to wrap up and then hurried to the ground.

“Can’t keep your nose out of other people’s business, can you?” sneered Aaron, pushing him away when he reached the ground.

Neil rolled his eyes. “I am not doing this for my amusement,” he hissed. “I am trying to keep Andrew and the others safe. Or would you prefer them be ambushed because they are lacking information?” Aaron opened his mouth to say something else, but Neil cut him off. “I am way too tired and hungry to put up with you right now,” he said. “Where is the safehouse?”

Aaron glowered but started to answer his question before the door was slammed open and Drake stepped out between them. Neil had a clear escape, but Aaron was caught between Drake and the dead end.

“I thought I heard voices out here,” said Drake, an unholy smile appearing on his face. “It’s my lucky day! My property has returned to me.” Aaron had frozen at his appearance. Drake punched Aaron in the face, before reaching out and grabbing him, slamming him into the wall of the alleyway and pressing up against him.

“Fuck off,” Aaron managed to spit at him.

“Oh, AJ,” Drake crooned, using his nickname for Andrew. “Do you know how much I missed you squirming against me? Mom sold you without my permission and then she said I couldn’t go after you without inciting a gang war!”


Drake turned his gleeful expression towards him. “I’m not supposed to be here. Your pathetic Foxes won’t be able to prove that I was when they find your corpses.” He chuckled. “Don’t run off now, little Shadow. You’ll get your turn,” he threatened. “But right now AJ and I need to become reacquainted.” He leaned forwards to whisper in Aaron’s ear. “It’s too bad your twin couldn’t join us. I was so angry when you killed the woman who was going to give him to me.”

Aaron gave a pained gasp at that, his expression filling with horror, and Neil had had enough. Even though he was a foot shorter and over a hundred pounds lighter than Drake, even though he was unarmed, starved, and exhausted, he had to put a stop to this. He rushed forwards, kicking Drake in
the back of his knee to knock him down before elbowing him in the temple. Drake let go of Aaron with a gasp. Aaron crumpled to the ground, looking dazed. Drake snarled and turned towards Neil. He skipped backwards from Drake’s return blow, but Drake was large and mean and angry. He caught Neil on his second attempt and circled his hands around his throat, lifting him from the ground. Neil struggled and kicked out, clawing at Drake’s hands, but he couldn’t force Drake to let him go. Drake slammed his back against the wall, pinning him using only one hand around his neck.

“I’m going to kill you, you little shit,” snarled Drake, punching Neil in the side with his free hand. “AJ, too, once I remind him of all the fun we used to have. And then I’ll track down that twin of his and make him beg for me to kill him too.”

Neil’s vision was beginning to go black, his movements becoming sluggish.

“Hey Asshole,” Aaron called from behind Drake’s left shoulder. Drake turned his head to look at him, just in time for the cane that Aaron swung to make contact with his temple. “I don’t beg.” It was Andrew’s cane, made by Neil: Fabrikator craft with a carbon core, as hard as diamond. Drake’s skull was no match for it. His blood sprayed in a large arc as his skull caved in, and he dropped to the ground. Neil slid down the wall to collapse next to his body. He was coated in Drake’s blood as he sat gasping air back into his lungs.

“Did you…” Neil rasped, sounding strangely like someone had tried to strangle him. “Did you have to wait until you could think of something pithy to say before you bashed his brains in?” He could feel hysteria creep over him.

Aaron was staring at Drake’s body in shock before dropping the cane and backing up against the far wall, his hand coming up to cover his open mouth.

“Cass is going to kill all of us,” he stuttered.

“You regret it, then?” asked Neil harshly.

“Fuck you,” snarled Aaron. “Didn’t you hear what he was saying?”

“Of course I did,” said Neil. “But I’ve heard it all before. Like when he was crowing in triumph when Andrew confronted him after we found out that your mother agreed to sell you to him. He was very explicit when he told Andrew everything that he planned to do to you.” Aaron shot him a quelling look, but Neil continued. “Which is why Andrew has never regretted killing your mother.”

“That had nothing to do with me,” argued Aaron instantly. “That was his own revenge.”

“Then why did he wait four years?” asked Neil. “Why did he wait until you were in danger of being sold to the Spears? He only has enough room for one vendetta in his life and it’s against Cass.”

Aaron looked pleadingly at him. “Why didn’t you just kill Drake, then? Why did it have to be her?”

Neil scoffed. “And start a gang war? Drake’s untouchable. We had to dispose of your mother and recruit you into the Foxes to keep you safe.”

“Don’t pretend you care about my wellbeing.”

“I don’t,” said Neil simply. “But Andrew does.”

Aaron just shook his head wordlessly and then gazed at Drake’s rapidly cooling body. “What are we going to do? We’re already going up against a member of the Merchant Council, we can’t take on the Ravens, too.”
Neil nodded helplessly before an idea struck him. “No one knows he’s here,” he said slowly. “He said that the Foxes wouldn’t be able to prove he was here. That means that no one will be looking for him because no one knows what he’s doing.”

“Someone will eventually find his body.”

“No if there isn’t a body to find.” He looked up sharply at Aaron. “Once it’s dark we’ll leave his corpse for the flat boats. Go down to the canal and get something that can be used as a stretcher,” he said. In Ketterdam, no one was buried. Instead, bodies were collected neighbourhood by neighbourhood by the city’s bodymen in their wagons and stored along the canal in the Warehouse District after dark. Since the Warehouse District was nearly deserted once the work day was finished, this kept the dead away from the living. Corpses were then loaded onto flat boats and taken out to Reaper’s Barge to be burned.

“Someone might still recognize him before he’d taken away,” argued Aaron, but Neil shook his head.

“I’ll take care of it,” he said. “He’ll be nothing more than an anonymous worker. The Ravens will never find him.” Aaron nodded, although he still appeared highly confused. He got to his feet, before Neil realized he should have a disguise. “Wait, I’ll fix your hair.”

Using coal dust from the walls of the alley, he coloured Aaron’s distinctive hair. Aaron stared at him.

“You’re a Grisha?” he finally asked, sounding strangled.

“Oh, right, you missed that,” said Neil dismissively.

Aaron stared at him for a couple more moments, before swallowing heavily and exiting the alley, leaving Andrew’s cane behind. He hadn’t even glanced in its direction after he’d dropped it. Luckily he’d avoided most of the blood spray and the blood pooling on the ground. If he’d been covered in blood, like Neil, he would have raised suspicions.

Neil settled in and began Tailoring Drake’s appearance, making him completely unrecognizable. He could feel his father’s vindictive smile overtake his face as he removed Drake’s distinctive tattoos and started aging his features.

“I wanted to kill you years ago, but he wouldn’t let me,” he whispered to the dead man. “Now you are nothing and no one. No one will miss you. You can never harm him again. You lost. He beat you.”

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

Renee sucked in her breath. “Butcher’s Men,” she hissed.
NICKY

Chapter Summary

In which there is another unexpected complication.

Chapter Notes

Warning for the chapter: homophobic language and references to Luther trying to "fix" Nicky's sexuality, violence

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Nicky laughed happily as the fireworks went off overhead and the *stadwatch* boats sank in the canal. He lit several more fuses to set off more explosions. He couldn’t see Neil or Aaron, but the bridge was filling with people dressed in Mister Crimson costumes. He laughed again. Last night, as he helped Erik distribute the costumes and fliers - advertising a grand opening celebration for a completely fabricated tavern, claiming that everyone who showed up in costume at Goedmedbridge following the fireworks at three bells would receive a free meal - he hadn’t been able to imagine the merry chaos that would result.

His father had retreated to the far side of the bridge, sinking back into the protection of his guards. His face turned purple with rage as he turned on his heel and began ushering Kathy away from the joyful riot. Nicky had been worried about seeing his father again; despite his words and actions on Vellgeluk, it was difficult to view him as an enemy. Nicky sighed. The multiple murder attempts that his father had perpetrated against him really should have been enough to convince his traitorous heart that his family had forsaken him.

The first murder attempt had been a complete surprise. It had happened about four months ago now, but Nicky still sometimes felt that it must have been a big mistake.

Nicky had had his first kiss when he was thirteen. It had been a boy several years Nicky’s senior, the son of a mercher. Afterwards he’d felt as if he were floating. His mother had noticed and teased him for having a crush, making his father laugh and ruffle his hair, asking who the lucky girl was. When Nicky had answered truthfully that he had no interest in girls, his father’s face had darkened like the sky before a storm and his mother had wilted. Not long after that had been the first time that Nicky’s father had sent him to the camp near Belendt.

The camp had been small, just him and four other mercher’s sons, at a wealthy nobleman’s summer home. It was run by a priest of Ghezen who told them that they were abnormal. In order to honour Ghezen they must accumulate wealth and prosperity and pass it down to future generations. How would their unnatural proclivities allow them to create the future upper class? They must give up their disgusting perversions.

Nicky had tried. He wanted nothing more than to make his father proud of him. He’d worked hard to learn how to be a successful mercher and had tried to ignore the fact that his longing gaze always followed men. Overcome with guilt and shame he had retreated into himself, the only solace he
found was in his music.

His mother had chastised him. Why couldn’t he just pretend? She told him that Ghezen was testing him, testing him harshly because of her inferior blood and her previous blasphemous belief in the Saints. *Please*, she had begged him, *please stop bringing this shame on us both*.

Twice more Nicky had been sent to the camp outside Belendt. Twice more he had returned home determined to leave his defect behind.

Shortly before his eighteenth birthday, his father had brought Kathy into their house. Nicky had heard stories of the Ferdinands for as long as he could remember. His father held them in contempt; how could anyone with such impeccable bloodlines let their fortune disappear? Nicky had been incredibly worried that Kathy was there for a marriage contract as only a marriage to a woman would convince his father that he had truly reformed.

“Are we to be married?” he asked his father with trepidation.

His father had snorted disdainfully. “No. Her lineage will not be sullied by you.” Nicky had nodded miserably. He knew that he was inferior and defective. “Your mother has been unable to provide me with any more children,” Luther continued. “But Ghezen requires that a man produces many heirs. Kathy will provide them for me.”

Nicky had felt sick at that, but had nodded before he was dismissed from his father’s presence. It had not taken long for Kathy to fall pregnant. Luther had responded by lavishing her with gifts, including a parakeet and a music tutor.

Nicky had taken advantage of the latter, having Roland help him with his composition all while keeping his eyes and desires to himself around the attractive man. He’d thought he’d been doing a good job until one afternoon Roland had smiled lazily at him.

“You know,” Roland had said, “musical tutoring wasn’t the *only* reason your father hired me.”

Nicky’s breath caught. Had Roland been hired as a lure by his father? A test to determine if Nicky had actually been cured? Why hadn’t he just stayed away and kept his eyes to himself?

“He also seemed adamant that I fulfill all of Kathy’s desires,” said Roland, oblivious to Nicky’s inner turmoil. “It seems that he doesn’t care who beds her now that his child is firmly in place.” Roland looked Nicky up and down and winked. “But she’s not really my type.”

“No?” asked Nicky, still internally panicking and wondering if this was a trap.

“No,” confirmed Roland. “Women are too… soft.”

“That’s a dangerous opinion to have in this household,” said Nicky, barely louder than a whisper. “My father would be angry to hear it.”

Roland stood up and stalked towards Nicky sinuously. Nicky tried to force himself to look away. “I can keep a secret,” he said when he had moved into Nicky’s personal space.

“What do you want?” Nicky’s voice was hoarse.

“I’m not delusional,” replied Roland. “I don’t have any hopes of getting ahead by bedding a mercher’s son. I just want to have a little fun.”

“Fun?”
“Fun,” repeated Roland, and kissed him.

It had been fun while it lasted. Nicky didn’t have any deep feelings for Roland, but he was talented with his hands and mouth. He’d lived in fear of getting caught, but their liaisons were the only time that he felt correct in his own skin.

He didn’t know if anyone had caught them, but judging from his father’s lack of anger, he’d been unaware of his son’s romantic interludes with the music tutor. Nevertheless, his father had summoned him around Kathy’s fourth month of pregnancy.

“I’m send you back to Belendt,” he told him in a cursory manner.

“Why can’t you accept me for who I am?” Nicky had cried, earning a surprised look from his father.

“I am trying to fix you,” Luther snarled. “You should be grateful that I’m willing to do so much for you, despite all the shame you’ve brought upon me.”

“Yes, Father,” replied Nicky dutifully, hanging his head.

“I am sending two guards with you,” his father told him.

Nicky snapped his head up. “Why? I know the way. I’ve never needed guards before.”

Luther had summarily dismissed him, leaving his questions unanswered. He also hadn’t come to see Nicky off on his journey, but his wife had.

“Nicky,” she had said desperately. “Stop angering your father and fix this.”

Nicky had kissed her cheek and taken off into the city, followed closely by the two guards. He’d boarded the browboat headed inland to Belendt. Upon exploration of the boat, he’d come across his two guards arguing over the best time and place to dispose of him. He heard enough of their conversation to learn that his father had ordered his death before he was discovered. They attacked him, managing to hit him hard enough to leave his ears ringing, but he was able to evade them long enough to throw himself into the canal and escape.

Even after that, Nicky had been hopeful that he could return to his father’s good graces. However, the relief he felt when he didn’t have to hide himself every day was immense. And his father seemed determined that no reconciliation was possible. Perhaps his mother’s love was not out of his reach, though.

He watched his father retreat with Kathy and his guards, leaving the stadwatch to continue the fruitless search for Andrew. Nicky lit the final volley of fireworks, before pulling on his own Mister Crimson costume and making his way to the prearranged meeting spot. Allison was already there when he arrived, managing to appear haughty and unmistakable even though she too wore a disguise.

“Nice fireworks,” she said.

“You, too,” he answered. Once Kevin had stopped arrogantly lecturing them, he had actually been useful about the creation of explosives. His work as an Alkemi had led him to suggest several chemical mixes that Nicky would not have considered. His own background in explosives simply came from the many lessons of chemistry he had taken through the years of his father insisting on his education. Allison was talented at creating fuses and timers, skills apparently learned from her late boyfriend who had worked as a demolitions expert for the Foxes.
Together the three of them had created a wide breadth of explosives in order to provide support for multiple outcomes. Andrew had been adamant that Nicky’s father’s plan would be hastily constructed but that he had no intention of letting them leave with Neil.

Another Mister Crimson joined them, this one going straight to Allison to squeeze her arm. Nicky assumed it was Renee or else Erik had some explaining to do. The three of them were startled by a loud explosion behind them, followed almost immediately by another. The joyful laughing from the bridge was almost immediately turned into screams and shouts of terror.

Nicky wheeled around to observe the damage and removed his costume hood for a better view. Dust was thick in the air and a hole had been blown into the second floor of the House of the White Rose. Farther along West Stave another pleasure house had also been attacked.

Erik came running up to join their group. “What happened?” he demanded.

“That wasn’t us,” said Allison shakily.

“Look!” cried Nicky, pointing at two darkly dressed people dragging a bound and gagged figure out of the second pleasure house. The people seemed to be wearing some kind of armour with a sigil of a cleaver dripping with blood.

Renee sucked in her breath. “Butcher’s Men,” she hissed.

Nicky gaped. He knew of the human smugglers known as the Butcher’s Men. They were very rarely seen in Kerch; although the Kerch took advantage of their cargo as Indentured servants, the council would have to uphold their laws regarding the illegality of slavery if they were around too often. This brazen attack was unprecedented.

Allison grabbed Renee’s arm as she started forwards towards the bridge.

“They must be taking Alexei,” Renee protested. “He works out of the Forge offering the same kind of service I do.”

“Do you think the hole in the House of the White Rose is a coincidence?” asked Allison. “They’re looking for you, too.”

“I agree with Allison,” said Erik. “Let’s stay away from the Grisha kidnappers.”

Two more of the smugglers had come out of the House of the White Rose and were surveying the panicking crowd. One of them made eye contact with Nicky before stilling suddenly, yelling something at his companion, and sprinting towards him.

Nicky suddenly realized that he currently appeared to be one of the most famous Grisha in the world. “Guys?” he said uncertainly.

“Time to go,” said Erik shortly, grabbing his arm and taking off running.

The chaos worked against them, forcing them to take an indirect path away from the carnage. The Butcher’s Men were gaining on them. Nicky turned and tossed one of his inventions - a little bomb that produced two balls of purple flames when detonated - into their path. Once it exploded, one of the men was caught in the flame, while the other managed to sidestep.

Allison steered them down an alleyway. They’d made it about halfway down it before Renee gave a little cry. They all turned to find her encased in a metal net that was attached to a winch in one of the smuggler’s hands. She struggled against the net and Nicky lunged forward to grab onto it, trying to
prevent her from being dragged towards her attacker.

“Shu girl with white and rainbow hair,” the man cackled as Renee’s mask fell away during her struggles. “We were looking for you.”

Allison and Erik opened fire, but the bullets bounced off the armour that the man wore. They gave up quickly and switched to helping Nicky pull the net. Renee reached through the netting and grabbed Allison’s gun.

“Let go,” she grunted.

“Renee-” started Allison.

“Now!” barked Renee.

The three of them let go of the netting and watched as the loss of resistance caused Renee to rocket towards the man holding the winch. He staggered backwards a step as she slammed into his lower body. Renee rolled up to her knees and pressed the gun she had taken under the man’s chin.

“Armour can’t protect you against bullets from this range,” she said as she pulled the trigger.

Nicky couldn’t help but stare in shock at the man’s bleeding corpse. Renee threw off the netting as Allison and Erik ran forward to help her. “We need to go to ground until dark,” she said breathlessly, reminding Nicky that behind her polite demeanor was an incredibly ruthless woman.

“I’ve got a couple ideas of where we can go,” offered Erik.

Renee bit her lip and looked over her shoulder, back towards West Stave. “I hope everyone else made it out alright.”

Nicky hadn’t even considered it, but Neil and Aaron were supposed to have escaped in that direction and Matt, Katelyn, and Thea had been on that side of the canal as well.

“We won’t know until everyone makes it back to Black Veil tonight,” said Allison. She turned towards Nicky. “Do you think the Butcher’s Men are allied with your father?”

Nicky shook his head. “Not openly. And he wouldn’t want them anywhere near Kevin.”

“I guess everything just got even more complicated,” said Erik.

*How did I end up here?* Nicky asked himself as he followed the others to safety.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

Andrew reached out to fist his hand into the front of Neil’s shirt and dragged him close. “What happened?” he demanded.
Chapter Summary

In which Andrew and Neil are finally reunited.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Andrew relocked the filing cabinet and then glanced around the office, using his photographic memory to ensure that everything was in the same place as when he’d entered. He then sent a dark look towards the window. Why was it that all his plans recently seemed to involve him on roofs or dangling from ropes?

He hadn’t even wanted to be here; putting Aaron into a dangerous situation and leaving Neil’s retrieval to the others were not high on his list of desired activities. But his plan to get the money they were owed and to punish Luther required someone to break into his private office at his residence in the Financial District. Andrew was one of the only Foxes who could manage the heavy duty locks and he had a perfect alibi - as far as Luther knew he was currently standing on Goedmedbridge.

Guard presence here was reduced, with most of Luther’s attention currently lavished on getting his mistress back and trapping Andrew. He was fairly confident that the mini-riot that had been instigated would allow for the Foxes to escape, but he wouldn’t rest easily until he could actually touch Neil in order to prove to himself that he was safe.

He moved to the small window on the side of the room; the front of the room had large windows overlooking the street below, but the side one was above an alley. He cracked it open and gave a short whistle, prompting a rope to be lowered from the roof. He grit his teeth as he secured the rope to the harness he wore and closed his eyes as he gingerly climbed out the window. It took him slightly longer than usual to lock the window - his hands were shaking slightly - and then began the climb. Robin was helping by reeling in the rope. He was pretty sure that she was aware of his dislike of heights, but she was tactful enough not to give any indication that she could tell that he was uncomfortable.

She helped him across the rooftops to where they had left their supplies; they had a ladder propped against a nearby building and were dressed as chimney sweeps. Andrew descended the ladder - Robin preferred to make her way around the city on rooftops, like an actual crazy person (Neil), so he made his way alone to the rowboat he’d left in the nearby canal. Shucking his coveralls, he pulled on a coat that would make him appear to be nothing more than a common messenger. Even though he wished to head directly to West Stave to see what had happened, he forced himself to take slow, even strokes as he meandered his way to the Warehouse District, rowing almost all the way along the outskirts of the city.

He walked with purpose through the district making his way to the Foxes’ safehouse where he’d instructed Aaron to bring Neil once they’d escaped from whatever trap Luther had attempted to lay. The safehouse was empty when he entered and his breath caught. It was almost five bells, so they should have arrived long ago. He paced the floor, reviewing his options. He didn’t know if Luther had captured them or if they’d been waylaid somewhere else. He supposed there was also the chance of Aaron and Neil fighting each other and Aaron storming off angrily. Despite his desire to start
hunting the city for them, he knew that it was ludicrous to start searching at random. He would have to wait until nightfall to return to Black Veil in order to learn what had happened. Even if everyone had been caught, Robin would have information for him.

It was after six bells when he heard scuffling and the sound of treads heading up the stairs. He had a knife in his hand and was on his feet in an instant, moving automatically to the top of the stairs.

Aaron was the first up the stairs. Andrew stared at him. His hair was dark and he had a bruise at his temple and spatters of blood on his clothes. Neil wasn’t far behind him, carrying Andrew’s cane and looking like a murder victim. His hair was a disaster, he had a ring of dark purple bruises around his throat and his clothes were soaked with blood. Andrew reached out to fist his hand into the front of Neil’s shirt and dragged him close. “What happened?” he demanded.

“Drake,” said Aaron.

Andrew wheeled around to face Aaron, not letting go of Neil. He sheathed the knife that he was holding in his free hand before he reached out to the bruise on Aaron’s face. His mind felt like static.

“Did he touch you?” he asked. It was the only thought that mattered. If Drake had gotten to Aaron, after everything Andrew had done to keep him away…

Aaron looked shocked at his obvious concern, but he’d never understood Andrew’s motivations. “No, Andrew,” he said quietly. “He hit me and grabbed Neil by the throat, but I used your cane to bash his head in.”

Andrew exhaled in relief. “He’s dead?” he asked. “You killed him?”

Aaron shrugged angrily. “I didn’t have much of a choice, with your Shadow -” he spat the word as if it were a curse “-sticking his nose in everyone’s business and getting attacked.” He retreated to the far side of the room, where he sat with his back to the wall, his head on his raised knees, arms hugging his legs.

Andrew flicked his eyes back to Neil and started trying to catalogue his injuries.

Neil just rolled his eyes. “Drake was having a suspicious meeting in the Warehouse District,” he rasped. “I was just doing what Wymack pays me for.”

“You sound like you gargled with gravel,” said Andrew. “Where else are you hurt?”

“I’m fine,” said Neil. “It’s Drake’s blood.”

“And Luther? Did he hurt you?”

Neil’s eyes flickered almost imperceptibly. “…No. I’m fine.”

“Don’t lie to me,” said Andrew.

Neil gave a pointed look to Aaron and Andrew relented. He would drag the truth out of Neil eventually, but he wouldn’t make him spill any secrets in front of Aaron. Andrew could feel tension fill his form as his mind started spinning, imagining what Neil was hiding from him. “Andrew,” said Neil firmly. “I’m not hurt.”

Andrew decided to drop the subject for now, so he dragged Neil over to where his clothes and knives had been stashed earlier. Neil returned his cane, which had been hastily cleaned, then took his clothing and a bucket of water to go wash up in an adjoining room.
Andrew did not want to let Neil out of his sight, but he wasn’t about to deny him his privacy. He gripped his cane tightly to reassure himself, then drifted over until he was looming over Aaron and waited for him to look up. He raised his eyebrows expectantly. Aaron grumbled a little, but it didn’t take him long to tell Andrew what had happened - he and Neil had escaped in the Mister Crimson chaos as planned, he’d prevented Neil from turning back at an unexpected explosion, Neil had taken off after spotting Drake where he wasn’t supposed to be, Neil had spied on a meeting between Drake and jurda cartel representatives, Drake had surprised them and attacked, Neil had Tailored him after his death, they’d left his body by the canal.

Neil had slipped back into the room during Aaron’s monologue, but had just sheathed his knives and kept his silence. “Cass didn’t know about the meeting,” he said after Aaron had finished. “No one knows he was here and no one knows he’d dead.”

The possibilities sparked in Andrew’s brain. He’d refrained from killing Drake as long as he heeded Cass and left him alone. The Foxes could not afford a full-blown gang war with the Ravens and Cass would surely retaliate horribly for the death of her son, the only person in the world that she seemed to care about. He’d always known that disposing of Drake was an essential part of his revenge plot against Cass, but he hadn’t planned on it being so soon. He’d have to take advantage of this turn of events - Cass was suddenly without any of her top lieutenants, but Andrew was disadvantaged because of his conflict with Luther.

“He said…” said Aaron, pulling Andrew from his thoughts. “He said that you killed the woman who was planning on selling me to him.”

Andrew blinked. “We have told you this,” he said. Not long after Neil had joined the Foxes he had alerted Andrew to the fact that Drake had been meeting with Tilda, the twins’ mother. She again found herself in debt and Drake seemed keen on buying Aaron. It was then that Andrew knew his vendetta against Cass was beginning to work - she would only allow Drake to do that if she wanted leverage against Andrew. He knew that she’d been wary of the Foxes’ rise to power. In order to stop the plot, Andrew and Neil had killed Tilda and had had Wymack recruit Aaron, offering to pay for his medik training in exchange for service to the gang.

Aaron’s reaction to Tilda’s death had surprised him, especially his insistence on blaming Neil. As far as Andrew could understand, Aaron’s belief was that if Neil had just minded his own business, if he hadn’t discovered the deal between Tilda and Drake, that nothing bad would have happened. Andrew was still sometimes surprised by other people’s ability to bury their heads in the sand. Now, as he watched Aaron’s face, he could tell that Aaron hadn’t truly believed that Tilda would have sold him until Drake confirmed it.

“She willingly sold me when I was seven,” he growled. “Why wouldn’t she sell you when you were seventeen?”

Aaron just shook his head wordlessly and Andrew felt rage rise within him. He’d only ever tried to help his brother - keeping him out of the gang life when he’d thought he was living happily with their mother, protecting him from her terrible parenting when he’d found out he wasn’t, preventing him from having to perform any of the more distasteful tasks that came up as a gang member.

“Andrew,” came Neil’s voice quietly from across the room, distracting him from his rising anger. He crossed the room quickly, leaving Aaron behind.

He observed Neil critically, now that he was clean and dressed in his own clothes. He grabbed Neil’s chin, maneuvering his head so he could get a better look at his bruises. Once satisfied he ran his hands down his arms and across his chest to check for any injuries that Neil was hiding. “You lost weight,” he commented, noting the slight bagginess of Neil’s clothes. He handed over some food
that had been stashed with the clothing and knives. “Didn’t they feed you?”


“Then why do you look like you haven’t slept, either?”

Neil rolled his eyes. “I didn’t eat the drugged food. I’m not new.”

“Yes, you’re an experienced hostage,” said Andrew dryly. “That’s something to be proud of.”

Neil smiled at him. “I made some friends,” he said.

“Unlikely. No one likes a smart mouth.”

Neil smile grew into a grin. “Except you.”

“Can you two stop your disgusting flirting?” said Aaron acidly from across the room.

“Fuck off, asshole,” replied Neil, without missing a beat. “I don’t say anything when you’re making your pathetic moon eyes at Katelyn.”

“Don’t talk about her!” Aaron snarled, rising to the bait instantly. “I shouldn’t have to deal with this, I just saved you from Drake!”

“So we’re even then,” said Neil coolly.

Aaron blinked, as if just realizing the truth of that statement. “I still don’t like you,” he grumbled, glaring.

“The feeling is mutual,” replied Neil loftily, matching his expression.

Andrew snorted, breaking the glare-off. “Yes, I can see how your captors were enchanted by your charming personality.” He reached out to grab the collar of Neil’s shirt and tugged just hard enough that he could feel it. “Stop talking,” he said to curtail Neil’s retort. “Your voice sounds awful.” He gave another little tug. “We have a couple hours before we can leave. You should sleep.” Neil started to shake his head, but Andrew was firm. “You’re going to be busy for the next couple nights because of my plans for Luther and I can only assume that Matt and Kevin and the others will want your attention. Sleep. I’ll keep watch.”

Neil slumped a little, obviously exhausted, before curling up against the wall. Andrew breath caught as he realized, not for the first time, how completely Neil trusted him. He sent Aaron a quelling look when he scoffed as Andrew set himself up beside Neil like a guard dog, stroking his hand soothingly through Neil’s hair. He could feel something deep inside of him unknot - Neil was back and safe.

***

It was late when they returned to Black Veil. Andrew had let Neil sleep for several hours, before shaking him awake. They’d talked quietly, Andrew going over his plans for Luther and what to do about Drake’s death. He was not letting himself dwell on the fact that Drake was actually dead. He’d allow himself to react to that later - for now, he needed his focus. The hushed conversation with Neil had settled him more than he wanted to admit; falling easily into their regular partnership, Neil listening and offering suggestions, soothed him immensely. Neil was fine. Neil was here.

He’d wanted a couple moments alone with Neil, without Aaron pretending that he wasn’t listening to
their conversation, but he should have guessed that that would be impossible once they’d returned. Shouts of happiness from the Foxes marked their return and Neil was grabbed and folded in with them. Andrew clenched and unclenched his fists, telling himself to calm down, that Neil was allowed to be grabbed and hugged by his friends. He watched curiously as Neil singled out Nicky, passing him a piece of paper and telling him something quietly. Nicky looked queasy afterwards, but hid the paper away in his pocket.

Once they’d settled a little, Erik turned serious and turned towards Andrew.

“‘We have a big problem,’” he said.

“When don’t we have a problem?” asked Aaron.

“Were you two away from West Stave when those last bombs went off?” asked Renee.

“Yeah,” said Neil. “I wanted to go back, but Aaron pointed out how stupid that would be.”

“It’s good you didn’t,” said Allison. “They were set off by the Butcher’s Men. They were hunting known Grisha - they were after Renee.”

Neil went pale so suddenly that Andrew looked for a wound to explain the blood loss. It took longer than it should have for him to notice that Neil had stopped breathing. He gripped the back of Neil’s neck and forced him to the ground, pushing his head between his knees.

“Breathe, Neil,” he ordered. Neil gave a few futile attempts to inhale, little hiccups that weren’t useful at getting any air into his lungs. “Stop this,” Andrew commanded in a low tone.

Neil gave a little huff, or a scoff, but it resulted in him taking a shuddering breath in. After a few more deep breaths, he fell limp, folded in half.

Andrew looked around at all the concerned faces watching them. “Get out,” he barked. Several people wanted to argue (Matt, Dan, Kevin), but they either thought better of arguing with him in his current mood or were ushered out by others that had more sense (Renee, Thea). They were alone in moments. Andrew peeled Neil off the floor, letting him slump against his chest, while keeping his hand on the back of his neck to ground him. Neil buried his face in Andrew’s neck, but kept his hands clasped in his own lap.

“Andrew,” Neil whispered. “Andrew… I… I have to leave.”

Andrew felt a bolt of fear. “You’re not going anywhere,” he said steadily, squeezing Neil’s neck.

“My… my father…”

“Is a Butcher’s Man?” guessed Andrew. He’d eventually gotten Neil to admit that he was running from the Butcher’s Men, but he’d never mentioned his father. He had thought that Neil and his Ravkan mother had been running from the slavers because they were Grisha, but now that he knew that Neil had Kaelish heritage, he suspected it was more complicated than that.

Neil made a strangled sound. “He’s the Butcher,” he said, sounding like he was forcing the words out. Well, Andrew hadn’t expected that. Being the Grisha son of a man who notoriously hated Grisha did explain quite a lot about Neil, he supposed. He was also less impressed than ever with Neil’s mother.

“Andrew, he’ll kill me. I have to go.”
“I won’t let him,” Andrew growled.

“She’ll kill everyone in his way to get to me. I can’t put the Foxes in that much danger.”

“He doesn’t know you’re here. He’s here for Kevin.”

“I can’t, Andrew.”

“Neil,” said Andrew sharply. “Trust me.”

Neil peeled his face away from Andrew’s skin and sat back in order to make eye contact. “I do,” he said earnestly. “I know you’ll hold up your end of our bargain. But what if I can’t?”

Andrew was confused. “Why couldn’t you?”

Neil avoided eye contact and twisted his hands together in his lap. “It’s… Luther… I-”

“What did he do?” demanded Andrew.

Neil met his eyes defiantly. “He threatened to sever the tendons in my legs and shatter the bones in my legs.” Andrew felt sick. Neil needed his mobility: for his peace of mind he needed the ability to feel like he could escape. “Would you have come for me then?” Neil asked as a challenge. “If I couldn’t be your Shadow? If I was broken and useless?”

“You’re so stupid,” said Andrew. He could tell that this had been bothering Neil - that Luther had struck a chord, that Neil actually believed that Andrew would ever abandon him. “I would come for you. No matter how bloody, how broken you were, I would come. If they broke me, too, I would crawl to you. And then we’d fight our way out together, because that is what we do. That is who we are. You are mine and no one will ever, ever take you away from me.”

Neil stared at him with wide eyes but Andrew just tugged his head forward until their foreheads were pressed together.

“Stay,” he commanded.


Chapter End Notes

Next time:

The hairs on the back of Renee’s neck stood up as soon as the door clicked shut behind them. Glancing around at the unfriendly faces, she realized that this was a trap.
It wasn’t long before Andrew let them all back inside the crypt. Matt made a beeline for Neil, who was sitting up against the wall with a faraway look in his eyes. Matt dropped down beside him and slung his arm around him, ruffling his hair. Dan sat on Neil’s other side, also fussing over him, while Allison even offered him some of her hoarded cookies. Everyone else arrayed themselves around the room to hear what Andrew had to say.

“Are we going to do anything about the Butcher’s Men?” Erik asked.

“Like what?” said Allison, scornfully. “Despite everything recently, we’re not really equipped to mount a vigilante campaign against them.”

“We should help Grisha out of the city,” said Renee. She was still unnerved from being trapped in a net. She wouldn’t leave other Grisha to that fate. “Most of them are Indentured servants; they’re guarded because they’re valuable. But the others are in danger.”

“We are not a charity,” said Andrew.

“Andrew,” said Neil quietly.

Andrew briefly glanced at the ceiling, as if appealing to a higher power that Renee knew he didn’t believe in, before sighing. “How many Grisha are we talking about?” he asked Renee.

“About thirty?” she guessed.

“They have a way of communicating through the Ravkan embassy,” said Neil. “Safety in numbers.”

Renee nodded. “I’m part of that network,” she admitted. She’d begun keeping track of the city’s Grisha as soon as she’d arrived; it was second nature to keep track of possible enemies and allies.

“Okay,” said Dan. “Renee can send them a message and we can find passage for them to get out of Ketterdam.”

“Not so fast,” said Robin. “Access to the city has been restricted.” Everyone stared at her in shock.
“The Council of the Tides does not seem happy about the influx of people looking for Kevin Day or with the Butcher’s Men. Water levels have been lowered so that some of the visiting ships are beached and the mouth of the harbour has narrowed. Everybody’s stuck here.”

“They can’t just completely close the harbour,” argued Allison. “That would stop trade and no one in Kerch would stand for that.”

“You’re right,” agreed Robin. “The harbour’s not completely closed. But all ships either entering or leaving Ketterdam are being searched.”

“You can bet that that’s Luther’s doing,” said Matt. “He has enough sway with the Merchant Council and the stadwatch to convince them that it was necessary.”

“Probably sung them a song about trying to find his missing son,” scoffed Erik.

“We need a ship that won’t be searched,” said Andrew.

“She just said that all ships are being searched,” replied Allison.

“Unlikely,” said Andrew. “Luther wouldn’t be searching his own ships, nor those of other members of the Merchant Council. That would inconvenience them to an unreasonable degree. He only has so much leeway with the city; he won’t be allowed to hamper trade.”

“Then we’ll have to get the Grisha onto one of Luther’s trading vessels heading to Ravka,” said Renee.

Dan whistled. “We’ll need a new manifest marked with Luther’s seal,” she said. “Also probably a personal letter from Luther to the captain of the ship requesting that he keep his mouth shut about the political refugees on board. That will ensure that the captain’s curiosity about the last minute changes to the manifest is sated and will reduce gossip.”

“Can we get those things?” asked Nicky.

“I can forge a manifest and a letter no problem,” shrugged Dan. “I still have a sample of your father’s writing from the last forgery I did for Andrew. But the seal will be a problem.”

“He keeps it in the safe in his office,” supplied Nicky.

“I saw that safe today,” said Andrew. “I don’t think I can pick that lock.”

“Dynamite?” suggested Erik.

“That might draw some attention,” said Allison dryly.

“Auric acid could cut through the steel of the safe,” said Kevin idly. “The bug that Nicky and I designed is a more stable version.”

“Bug?” asked Erik.

“For the sugar,” said Kevin, as if he had explained everything.

When it became clear that Kevin wasn’t planning on elaborating, Nicky sighed deeply and explained. “Andrew asked us to develop something that would consume sugar. We managed to make something that was similar to cane blight - but it’s just a chemical mixture. It can convert an entire silo of sugar into useless mush in a matter of days.”
“Congratulations,” said Erik, baffled. “Why?”

“After Neil was taken, I asked Bee to sell my share in Fifth Harbour to Cass in exchange for cash,” said Andrew, provoking shocked gasps from the long-time Foxes. Renee knew that Andrew’s stake in Fifth Harbour was worth quite a lot of money, but he’d never showed any willingness to sell before. Cass must have been desperate for it, since it provided such an advantage to the Foxes. “Using the money, I bought everyone who was owed money for the Evermore job shares in sugar under false names.”

“My father owns six sugar silos in Sweet Reef,” said Nicky, looking suspicious.

“He owns three fifths of the sugar trade?” exclaimed Allison. At Renee’s confused expression, she elaborated. “All of Ketterdam’s imported sugar is stored in ten silos at Sweet Reef, in the Warehouse District.”

“He only owns the silos,” explained Nicky. “Other merchers rent space from him. He employs the guards and the Squallers that ensure low humidity in the silos and in return he gets a percentage of the sale of the sugar.”

“The shares I bought were for the merchers whose sugar is not housed in Luther’s silos,” said Andrew. “Right now they’re worth the same as I paid. But soon, three fifths of the sugar supply will be destroyed and there won’t be another crop until the end of summer. Share prices will skyrocket with the increased price of sugar.”

“I thought that we were going to also ruin Luther’s reputation? How will this reflect badly on him?” asked Matt. “Yes, they’re his silos, but won’t it just look like an accident?”

“Yes,” admitted Andrew. “Except that I also bought sugar shares in Luther’s name, only for sugar that is kept in the silos which he doesn’t own. This will be suspicious and damning when people begin investigating the loss of product. Proof of purchase can be found in his lawyer Waterhouse’s office. And there is a paper trail in Luther’s office that indicates he purposefully sabotaged his own silos.”

"You've been planning this all along?" asked Nicky. "You planted the papers in Waterhouse's office when we were there?"

"Yes," said Andrew, with an indifferent expression.

Allison looked impressed. “That amount of interference in the market will ruin him,” she said. “The Merchant Council will have to throw him out and he’d be imprisoned for breaking some of Kerch’s most sacred laws.”

“How do we get the bug into the silos?” asked Dan. “They must be pretty heavily guarded.”

“The actual guard presence at night isn’t too bad,” said Robin. “The locks are impossible to pick, though.”

“There is another door at the top of each silo for air circulation,” said Andrew.

“Who’s going to climb the silos?” asked Matt.

“I can do it,” offered Neil quietly, still not looking at anyone in the room.

“No,” said Andrew. “You’re staying with me.”
Neil looked up and he and Andrew made eye contact. A whole conversation seemed to pass between them in seconds. Neil nodded, having received whatever message Andrew had seemingly sent by their strange telepathy.

“I can do it,” said Renee, clearing her throat to get their attention back. “Heights don’t bother me, and I’m small and stealthy enough to escape notice.”

Dan nodded. “I can, too. I spent a lot of my childhood climbing rigging on ships.”

“There are six towers and rotating guards,” said Robin. “They take twelve minute circuits. You will have to start your climb and reach the top in under twelve minutes. Then you’ll have another twelve minutes to put the bug in the sugar. Your descent can happen after their next pass. There will have to be someone on the ground signalling when you can begin climbing down.”

“It will be Katelyn,” said Andrew, “because she can probably flirt her way out of trouble if she’s caught.”

“Just Katelyn?” asked Aaron. “What will everyone else be doing?”

“You’ll be heading out to get the Grisha from the Ravkan embassy and escort them to the boat. They might have need of a medik.”

“ Alone?”

“Volunteers?” asked Andrew.

Erik and Allison were the first the put their fingers on their noses. “Take Thea and Matt, then,” offered Andrew, before turning to Erik and Allison. “You two just volunteered to stay and guard Kevin, before taking him to the boat as well.”

“You’re letting me go to Ravka?” asked Kevin. “You said that I could only go there if I were dead. You said you were going to sell me.”

“We’re already getting our money, and I’d prefer you to be far away from the Butcher’s Men. Try not to start a war,” replied Andrew.

“What about me?” asked Nicky.

“Kevin said something about auric acid. Can you handle that?”

“Yes,” said Nicky slowly. “It’s corrosive, but can be contained by balsa glass.”

“Where can we get it?” asked Dan.

“I can get one of the ingredients in the ironworks in the Warehouse District,” answered Nicky. “But the other I need to get from a quarry.”

“Actually,” started Kevin.

“There’s a quarry in Olendaal that would work,” Nicky interrupted him, while shooting him a quelling look.

“Okay,” said Andrew slowly, after sharing another look with Neil. “Renee, tomorrow you take Abby or Bee and go to the Ravkan embassy; they still have contacts there and can help you get the word out to the Grisha that we have a way to send them to Ravka. Nicky, you take a companion and go get your ingredients. Everyone else stay put. We shouldn’t be walking around with both Luther
and the *stadwatch* searching for us and the Butcher’s Men at large.”

“Isn’t it dangerous for Nicky to be looking like Kevin, then?” asked Matt.

Andrew considered. “Luther accused us of kidnapping Nicky, so the *stadwatch* will be looking specifically for him. It’s probably safer if he stays looking like Kevin for now. If Neil could remove that tattoo from his face, it will afford him more anonymity.”

“Alright,” sighed Nicky. “But I don’t want to look like Kevin forever.”

“The Tailoring will wear off by itself in another couple weeks,” said Neil, as he levered himself off the floor to go remove Nicky’s tattoo. “How about you, Kevin? Ready to get that mark off your face?”

Kevin clapped his hand protectively around his tattoo, effectively answering the question. Neil simply shrugged before removing Nicky’s.

“Anything else?” asked Andrew, surveying them all. When they shook their heads no, he motioned for Neil and Robin to follow him and started to leave.

“Where are you going?” asked Dan. “You just said that we shouldn’t go anywhere!”

“We have some urgent business to take care of,” said Andrew. “Get some sleep while you can. Tomorrow’s going to be a busy day.”

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“You’re looking well,” said Abby as she and Renee meandered through the streets on their way to the Ravkan embassy. They were both disguised, trying to appear harmless as opposed to two well-known Grisha. Renee could also tell that they were being shadowed; it didn’t worry her, Wymack wouldn’t have let them go without some sort of guard.

“Liar,” chided Renee, fondly. She knew her recent illness had taken a toll on her appearance.

“Better than expected, then,” corrected Abby. “I’ve been worried about you since Betsy told me what happened in Shu Han. It’s been driving me crazy knowing that you’ve been unwell but that I’ve been unable to take care of you.”

“It was not something that you could cure.”

“Still,” argued Abby. “I may have been able to alleviate some of your symptoms or at least provided care during your convalescence. You know how hard it is for me not to be able to look after one of my Foxes.”

Renee displayed an unconscious smile while looking down. “Allison’s been looking after me.”

“Oh!” Abby said, after catching her expression. “Has that progressed then?”

“Sort of,” said Renee. “We’re together now.”

“How is that going?”

“Well right now we are sharing a small space with nine other people, so privacy is nonexistent,” replied Renee. “The last time we managed to be alone together, we were still on board the *Palmetto* and she was holding back my hair as I vomited.”
“Romantic.”

Renee laughed. “So I’d say it’s going slowly. At this point I’m almost ready to take down Luther single handedly, just so I can get some alone time with my girlfriend.”

“Understandable,” said Abby with a wink. “Hopefully everything will work out soon. I’m very worried about what that awful man is trying to do to my Foxes. And this new threat from the Butcher’s Men isn’t helping anything.” She paused briefly. “I heard that you were almost captured?”

Renee shuddered. “In a net,” she confirmed. “I… I killed the man to free myself.” She shot Abby a look from under her eyelashes. “I don’t regret it.”

“Renee,” said Abby kindly, “why are you acting like I would condemn you? I would happily kill anyone who threatened one of mine. Are you forgetting that I helped Betsy poison the King of Ravka? I support your desire for non-lethal solutions because I know it’s important to you; I’m not your judge and jury.”

Renee relaxed minutely. “He wasn’t the only person I killed lately,” she admitted quietly. “I killed someone by accident at the lake house. And Allison had to stop me from killing all the Evermore guards.” She explained to Abby what had happened to the guard during Kathy’s kidnapping; how she’d grabbed on to something, how afterwards she had felt that inner glow that came from using her powers, how Kevin had no answers for her questions. She then went on to explain what had happened when she’d used the amplifier. Abby listened attentively, sometimes interrupting with questions, but mostly keeping quiet. After her recitations, Renee felt lighter - confessing her actions had always lifted a burden from her shoulders.

Abby hummed thoughtfully. “Well something strange is definitely going on with your powers; we’ll have to figure out what once everything calms down a little. You killed that guard without the intent to do so, it was an accident. You’ll have to find a way to forgive yourself for it.” She smiled at Renee. “As for what happened in Shu Han, thoughts aren’t actions. Although you would have gone through with them if Allison hadn’t stopped you, that doesn’t make you weak. Everybody needs help now and again. And now you know that Allison has your best interests at heart.” She nudged Renee with her elbow. “I’m very proud of you,” she said sincerely.

Renee blushed and ducked her head so Abby changed the subject to something lighter. They were close to the Ravkan embassy now, and the street vendors had many Ravkan wares. Abby pointed out the things she recognized and missed from her time at the Little Palace. There were also stalls selling Saints’ bones. Renee knew that it was common practice in Ravka to adorn themselves with the bones of Saints for luck. She found the superstition strange; especially since the likelihood of the bones actually belonging to the Saints was almost negligible. They were probably bones from animals.

Abby stepped forward to speak to one of the stall owners next to the tavern that served as a meeting place for the city’s Grisha. His stall advertised genuine Sankta Kayleigh relics, which earned a distasteful look from Abby. She spoke quietly with the man, giving the code that she was a friend of Ravka. He pointed them into the tavern, saying that someone from the embassy would be with them shortly.

The hairs on the back of Renee’s neck stood up as soon as the door clicked shut behind them. Glancing around at the unfriendly faces, she realized that this was a trap. They were surrounded by people pointing guns at them. Abby raised her hands placatingly, with her palms facing in, but Renee reached out with her power. Again, like at the lake house, she was able to find something at the edge of her awareness. It was bigger - sharper, colder - than what she’d found before, but again she pulled. The glass at the front of the store shattered as the bones from the cart outside flew towards
“We’re under attack!” cried one of the tavern’s occupants.

The back door slammed open and a short, stout, balding man strode through the door, his hands outstretched. Renee could already feel her heart rate slowing: the man must be a Heartrender.

“Stuart,” said Abby breathlessly.

The man did a double take and Renee felt his grip on her recede. “Abigail?” he asked incredulously. “What are you doing here?”

“We’re here to help,” said Abby. “So I would appreciate it if you stopped attacking us. Is this the new standard greeting in Ravka?”

“My brother-in-law and his band of vultures are in the city,” said the man called Stuart angrily. “We have to take precautions with strangers.”

“What are you doing in the city?” asked Abby.

“Same thing as everybody else,” answered Stuart. “We heard that Kevin Day was taken from Evermore and found his way to Ketterdam. We figured we owed it to Kayleigh to bring him safely to Ravka.”

“We?”

Stuart shook his head and then motioned Abby to follow him back through the door he had emerged from. Renee followed.

“Who’s she?” Stuart asked, jerking a thumb towards Renee.

“One of mine,” replied Abby serenely.

“Betsy still around?”

“Yes.”

He led them through the back room, opening up a hidden doorway that led to a staircase heading down. At the bottom, they found themselves in a small room, obviously designed to hide people. Renee assumed it was used to hide Grisha before they could be smuggled out of Ketterdam.

There was a man inside, flanked by guards. He stood tall, with a regal bearing.

Abby blinked in surprise, before dropping into a curtsey. “King Rhemann,” she greeted him. “I was not expecting you to be in Ketterdam.” Renee was shocked. This was the King of Ravka; the son of the man who Betsy and Abby had poisoned, the man who had exiled them from Ravka, the hero of the Ravkan civil war.

“Abigail,” he said, giving her an even look. “The threat from these amplifiers and the safety of Kevin Day could not be ignored.”

Abby nodded. “I have no information about Kevin, but we are here to protect Grisha from the threat from the Butcher’s Men.”

The King watched her impassively. “Are you sure you know nothing of Kevin? His mother would have wanted him in Ravka.”
“His mother was my friend,” said Abby sharply. “Do not presume to tell me what she would have wanted… your highness,” she tacked on, belatedly.

Rhemann appeared amused. “You haven’t changed much, Abby,” he said. He cocked his head to the side. “You seem angry with me.”

“You exiled me from my home.”

“I couldn’t let an assassination attempt on the King’s life go unpunished. You poisoned my father.”

“He raped someone I love.”

The King’s eyes went hard. “I’m not dismissing or forgiving that. I exiled him, too.”

“Good,” said Abby mercilessly. “You’re a much better ruler.” She waved her hand dismissively. “We’re not here to rehash the past. The Grisha of Ketterdam need to be taken to Ravka.”

King Rhemann nodded. “I agree, but our ships are trapped because of the Council of Tides. No foreign ship is permitted entry or exit from Ketterdam without the express permission of the Merchant Council.”

“We have a plan,” said Renee, speaking up for the first time. “We need to get everyone here and ready to go by this evening and then we can sneak them to safety.”

He gave her an appraising look. “You’re the reason that the windows upstairs are shattered,” he finally said.

“Yes,” she agreed.

“What are you?” he asked.

Renee considered. There were many things that she had been that she wasn’t anymore: a Heartrender, an assassin, a loyal Shu Han citizen. There were things that hadn’t changed: she was still dangerous, and resourceful, and talented. And there were things about her that were new: she was somebody’s girlfriend, she apparently had some sort of previously unknown Grisha power, she had a family that she would protect no matter what.

There was only one word that she could use to even attempt to encompass all of that. “I am a Fox,” she said.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

“Please,” said Nicky again. “I want my mom back. I miss her more than you know.”
NICKY

Chapter Summary

In which Nicky’s parents are both terrible.

Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter: homophobic language from Nicky’s parents

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nicky took his place at the railing of the browboat and tried not to think of the last time he’d been on board a boat such as this. Luckily, this wasn’t the Belendt line, but the market line. Ketterdam had to import almost all of its goods; food came in on the browboats from the farms that surrounded the city.

The boat was packed - mostly with non-Kerch natives, those who didn’t want to work in the city’s factories or warehouses and were looking for farm labourer jobs. Erik had wanted to travel on the Belendt line: that boat was usually less crowded and was nicer, but Nicky had pointed out that they’d be less conspicuous disguised as foreigners looking for work. Also this boat was less likely to be searched by the stadwatch since delaying labourers would delay production which would impact commerce, which was the number one priority in Kerch. Not even the search for a kidnapped Councilman’s son would be allowed to seriously hamper trade. It was bad enough that foreign ships were being searched in the harbours.

Nicky’s heart was pounding in his chest and his stomach was squirming. This was a very, very bad idea, and he felt guilty for dragging Erik into it.

He slid his eyes towards his companion. Erik was standing with his eyes closed, taking in the feeling of the breeze on his face. Nicky felt his mouth go dry and quickly averted his gaze. He should have brought someone else.

“So,” said Erik suddenly, jolting Nicky. “Where is the quarry where we can find this mineral we need?”

“Actually,” said Nicky, and gave a little cough. “We can find it in any corner store. It’s present in most paints and enamels.”

“But,” Erik appeared at a loss for words. “You lied to Andrew?”

Nicky shoved the piece of paper that Neil had given him yesterday into Erik’s hands. It had been folded and refolded all night as he had reread the words. “I needed an excuse to come to Olendaal.”

Erik unfolded the letter and read it quickly. “Nicky…” he said hesitantly.

“I know it sounds like a trap,” cut in Nicky. “But I had to come see her. I had to. If there’s any chance for us to have a relationship… she’s my mother, Erik.”
“She’s married to your father, Nicky.”

“I know he’s evil, but she’s not,” protested Nicky. “Please let me do this.”

Erik gingerly handed the note back to Erik. The one that asked Nicky to meet his mother at the Olendaal church of Saint Hilde. Neil had whispered that Roland had passed it to him before the hostage exchange. Nicky had thought at first that it would be some kind of message from Roland, but had been thrilled at an invitation from his mother. He wanted to see her again.

“Please,” said Nicky again. “I want my mom back. I miss her more than you know.”

“Nicky, I know you’re hopeful about this,” said Erik cautiously, “but even if it isn’t a trap, from what you’ve told me your mother has always agreed with your father. I don’t want you to get your hopes up.”

“Let’s just watch the scenery,” Nicky snapped, reacting harshly to Erik voicing the doubts that were welling up inside of him. Erik sighed, but didn’t push it. He reached out to fix Nicky’s collar, brushing his knuckles against Nicky’s neck and causing him to shiver. Nicky resolutely ignored the feeling, staring at the passing fields without really seeing them.

It didn’t take them long before the browboat reached the small farming community of Olendaal. The church was located on the far side of the village. They walked in tense silence: Nicky could almost feel Erik’s trepidation.

Nicky’s doubts flew out of his mind as soon as he saw his mother’s profile on a bench outside the church.

“Mom!” he called, rushing towards her.

She looked up with a startled look on her face. “Nicky?” she asked in bewilderment. “Your father said you’d fallen in with criminals, is that why you’re disguised to look like someone else?”

“He tried to kill me, Mom.”

“He just had a ship destroyed,” argued his mother. “Killing you would have been a side effect.”

“Mom,” said Nicky despairingly. “He tried to kill me. When he sent me to Belendt last time he had his guards try to kill me.”

“You can’t blame him for that, Nicky,” said his mother. “He was frustrated and you were being uncooperative. And now you’ve joined a gang! How can you have fallen so far?”

“How can you be defending him? He’s openly disrespecting you by keeping his mistress in the house!”

“That’s my fault!” she snapped. “I couldn’t provide him with an appropriate heir.” She looked down, shamefaced.

“Mom, that’s not true,” said Nicky. “Please tell me that you know that that’s not true. His opinions don’t matter. He’s a bigot and a racist.” Nicky felt his heart beating wildly. He’d never dared say anything negative about his father before. But how could he earn his regard now? And did he even want it anymore, after everything his father had done?

“He’s not racist!” he mother protested. “He married me, despite my lower birth.”
“And then spent your lives together telling you how inferior you are,” said Nicky tiredly. “Mom, please.”

“No,” she said harshly. “I sent you the note to meet me so that you could try to fix this! Why are you so ungrateful to us? After everything your father has done for you?”

“He tried to force me to be someone I’m not.”

“He tried to fix your… your abnormality. He should be commended for trying.”

“There’s nothing wrong with me!” Nicky burst out. “Why can’t you see that?” he asked in a quieter voice. “Why can’t you just love me for who I am?”

“Because who you are is disgusting and wrong,” parroted his mother. “If you’re not willing to change, then why did you come?”

“I wanted to see you. I miss you.”

“Then fix yourself and come home!” she cried desperately.

He could feel the tears gathering at the backs of his eyes and a large lump entered his throat. He didn’t want to cry in front of her, so he wordlessly shook his head.

“You won’t even try?” she asked.

“I did!” he said. “I tried so many times but it wasn’t good enough. And it was so awful, pretending to be someone I’m not, Mom! I wanted to die.”

“Maybe that would have been better,” she said.

He gasped in shock and struggled to keep his emotions from overflowing. His mother stood from the bench they were sitting on.

“Goodbye, Nicholas,” she said sadly.

“Mom…”

“Don’t call me that. I no longer have a son.”

He was able to contain his sobs until she had walked out of view, but then crumpled off the bench. His head hit his knees and he grabbed handfuls of his own hair as he gasped for air.

Strong arms encircled him, which he tried to fight off at first. He didn’t want anyone else to see this. Eventually he gave in, slumping against Erik’s hard chest. Erik stroked up and down his back as he cried, mumbling soothingly in Fjerdan.

“Why don’t they want me?” Nicky asked despondently, after his sobs had tapered off.

“Because they’re fools,” Erik answered quietly, his face in Nicky’s hair. “They can’t see how amazing you are.”

“I’m not amazing.”

“You are,” insisted Erik. “Remember when we were being chased by those Butcher’s Men yesterday? You saved us with that purple bomb. How’d you make it purple, anyway?”
“Potassium chloride,” answered Nicky, snottily. “It looks better in the dark.”

Nicky could feel Erik smile against his head. “Lots of things are better in the dark,” he said suggestively, before continuing to speak earnestly. “Remember when we were leaving Ketterdam and we were ambushed? You saved us with a flash bomb. And at Evermore you managed to dismantle the gate. And you came up with a way to sabotage the sugar in the silos. That’s brilliant.” He nudged Nicky. “You’re brilliant.”

“I’m not.”

“I know that your terrible family has convinced you that you’re nothing special, but they’re so, so wrong. I’m never going to let you forget how truly amazing you are. I will tell you everyday, multiple times a day if I have to. We all want you, Nicky. Forget the idiots who can’t see what a great person you are.”

Nicky had stopped crying now, so he sat up and wiped his eyes on his sleeve. Erik’s hands slipped from around him to rest on his shoulders. “I wish I could have been what they wanted,” he said.

“No,” said Erik sharply. “This is not your fault. Parents are supposed to love their children unconditionally. They don’t get to decide to get rid of them because they didn’t turn out the way they wanted. Your father is nothing but a lunatic in an expensive suit.”

“That may be,” admitted Nicky. “But that doesn’t make me feel any better.”

Erik shook his shoulder a little. “How about this? Andrew is going to destroy your father’s life.”

Nicky was going to argue that that didn’t help either, but he paused. Andrew was probably the most brutal man he’d ever met. He’d seen him pull out a man’s eye and slice his throat, he’d seen him drop a man from a lighthouse, all without expression. He’d seen the look in his eyes when Neil had been taken. If anyone deserved his full attention and ire, it was Nicky’s father. Thinking about Luther’s life coming apart because of his own actions while he stood by powerless to do anything lightened Nicky’s heart a little.

“Actually, that does help,” he said, pulling himself up off the ground.

Erik smiled proudly. “Nothing like a little revenge to get the heart pumping. What do you say we go pick up that mineral and head back to town?”

“Yeah,” said Nicky. “Let’s go ruin my dad’s reputation and steal all his money.”

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

Allison huffed. “You’re a sad, annoying cactus.”
Neil and Andrew came back to Black Veil around midday, carrying sheets of paper. Neil’s hair had been dyed back to the muddy brown it had been when Thea had first met him. He started posting the papers he was carrying around the crypt under Andrew’s watchful eye.

The papers were wanted posters. Andrew, Neil, Matt, Dan, Erik, and Nicky were all represented. Luther was smart enough not to plaster Kevin’s face all over the city and he’d never met Allison or Renee or Thea.

“What?” cried Matt, incredulously. “I’m only worth thirty thousand kruger? That’s tied for the least!”

“We could sell the Monster,” said Allison thoughtfully. “He’s apparently worth one hundred thousand.”

“Try,” said Andrew, sliding a knife out of his right armband. He toyed with it for a couple seconds, before replacing it and walking over to where Dan was working on the forged documents they needed.

“You find a boat to Ravka?” Dan asked.

“Luther has a shipment of molasses heading to Os Kervo at eleven bells,” answered Andrew. He and Dan started to discuss what paperwork would be needed.

Meanwhile, Neil was giving Allison a look while fairly obviously avoiding looking at the picture on his own wanted poster. “Don’t call him that,” he said quietly.

Allison’s shoulders slumped and she made her way over to where Neil was standing. “Do you think they’ll give us the reward if we bring them Aaron instead?” she asked.

“More likely they’ll pay us not to give them Aaron,” said Matt.

Allison reached out to ruffle Neil’s hair. “Are you feeling better, my beautiful, talented tropical fish?”

Neil’s lips quirked. “You’ve called me that before,” he said.

She gave a dramatic gasp. “I have not!”

“Sure you have,” said Neil. “You’ve begun repeating yourself. You’re no longer unique.”

Allison huffed. “You’re a sad, annoying cactus.”

Neil laughed. “That one’s new.” He leaned against Allison, knocking his shoulder into her arm. “I missed you.”
“There’s a simple solution to that, Neil,” said Allison. “Don’t get kidnapped.”

“It wasn’t my choice,” replied Neil.

“I distinctly remember you willingly disarming yourself,” said Matt.

“ Doesn’t mean there was a choice. I’d always pick being kidnapped over you getting shot.”

Kevin had made his way over to where Neil, Allison, and Matt were clustered and he hovered awkwardly, shifting from foot to foot behind them. Thea watched in amusement.

“What, Kevin?” Allison demanded once she couldn’t ignore him any longer.

“Stop hogging Neil,” he said. “I want to show him my journal.”


“My Fabrikator journal,” sniffed Kevin haughtily, as he dragged Neil over to where his books were stacked neatly, ready to be packed for their journal that evening.

“So charming,” remarked Katelyn, from her position sitting beside Thea. They were passing the time by playing cards.

“Likewise,” said Thea, inclining her head towards where Aaron was sitting as far away from everyone as possible, ignoring them while reading an anatomy textbook.

Katelyn wrinkled her nose and stuck out her tongue, so Thea just took another card.

They passed the afternoon quietly - Thea tuned out Kevin’s increasingly desperate pleas for Neil to travel to Ravka with them, and Matt and Allison’s rowdy conversation. Renee returned mid-afternoon, bringing information about the number of Grisha that were at the embassy and the news that the King of Ravka and one of his top Grisha were in town.

“Stuart Hatford?” asked Neil, sounding surprised.

“Your uncle?” asked Thea, remembering when Kevin had identified Neil on board the Palmetto.

The rest of the Foxes stared at Neil incredulously. “You have a family?” demanded Allison.

“Did you think I’d just grown, like a potato?” asked Neil.

“More like you’d come from another planet,” replied Allison.

“You know,” said Matt, thoughtfully, “it wouldn’t actually surprise me if you were flora or extraterrestrial in origin.”

Neil rolled his eyes. “Sorry. I’m human.” He deflated a little. “Apparently one who is about to have a family reunion.”

“You’re not going anywhere,” Andrew spoke up suddenly. Thea hadn’t been aware that he was paying attention to the conversation, engrossed as he was with Dan and Renee. He looked over towards Neil and held eye contact, causing some of the tension to leak from Neil’s small frame. Kevin then caught Neil’s attention again, pointing out something in the book he was holding.

It would be good when they reached Ravka, Thea reflected. Having other Fabrikators around to
bounce ideas off of would be good for Kevin, even if he spent most of his time complaining about their inferiority. His neuroses would probably also likely calm a little once he was truly outside of Ichirou’s reach. She wasn’t sure what was in store for herself, however. She’d had a conversation with Kevin about it; he’d been hopeful that she’d be able to find a place with Ravka’s guards, but she wasn’t as confident since she was a foreigner. And she wasn’t even sure that she wanted to join another guard force. She hadn’t even realized how unhappy she’d been until her return trip to Evermore left no desire to ever return to that life.

She’d always been a soldier and this uncertainty about her future left her feeling unmoored. She was free from obligation and responsibility - except for her devotion to Kevin which she had chosen for herself - for the first time in her life. If she didn’t want to go backwards, what was on the path ahead?

Erik and Nicky returned looking a little worse for wear around six bells. Erik immediately found his wanted poster and was similarly outraged as Matt about his thirty thousand krugeworth. Nicky’s worth was much more, since his father had convinced the stadwatch that he’d been kidnapped. He was also the only one where the reward was only available if he turned up alive.

“Have a good meeting with your mother?” Andrew asked. Thea was not the only one surprised about the question. She thought that Nicky had been collecting a mineral from a quarry?

Nicky goggled. “You… you knew?”

Andrew shrugged. “Neil told me. He wasn’t about to give you an unscreened letter from our opponents. We figured it was best to let you get your hopes of reconciliation out of your system before they caused us problems.”

“Well. They’re gone now,” said Nicky in a small voice.

“And we got the supplies we needed,” said Erik, trying to sound upbeat. “Praise us for our multitasking.”

“No,” said Andrew. He gave a bored look around the room. “Luther is having a meeting with the Merchant Council at his home at eight bells this evening, probably hoping to get them agree to give him more resources for his search for his ‘kidnapped son’. Nicky and I will sneak in during the meeting to steal the seal, since it will help cover our presence.”

“The boat leaves at eleven bells,” said Dan. “So everyone needs to be on the dock no later than ten bells. The group going to the embassy should leave at around nine bells, and Kevin should be escorted from here at around nine bells and half chime.”

Andrew nodded. “You and Renee and Katelyn should head over to Sweet Reef earlier; the evening shift starts at eight bells and you should leave before the night guards arrive at twelve bells.”

Dan looked around the room. “Everybody clear on their tasks tonight?” At everybody’s vague nods, she broke up the meeting.

Kevin’s anxiety skyrocketed after Andrew, Neil, Nicky, Dan, Renee, and Katelyn left the graveyard. He was not looking forward to leaving his safe haven, even if it meant that he’d eventually get to Ravka. Thea sat with him, letting him vent out all his worries. From experience, she knew that allowing him give voice to his dire thoughts was better than telling him not to worry and that everything would be okay.

Eventually, though, she too had to leave.

“Stick close to Erik and Allison,” she told him. “They won’t let anything happen to you, and I’ll see
you at the docks, alright?” She tapped on his tattoo. “Cover this up. It’ll make you too noticeable.”

He nodded frantically and she brushed a hand through his hair. “No mourners,” she said to him, surprising herself.

He gave her a baffled look and a faint smile. “No funerals?” He sounded unsure, having only heard the saying a couple times.

“You’re one of us now,” said Erik, giving Thea a wink. She left to the sound of Kevin beginning to lecture about how that was blatantly untrue.

Aaron was carrying a dark bag containing medical supplies and she and Matt were armed to the teeth as they made their way through the darkened city, avoiding stadwatch patrols. It was eerily quiet.

“It’s too quiet,” whispered Matt, as if reading her thoughts. “It’s too early for there to be so few people.”

“Maybe the presence of the Butcher’s Men has caused people to stay in?” suggested Thea.

“Or that,” said Aaron, pointing ahead to a stadwatch checkpoint they were being funnelled towards.

“Fuck,” said Matt with feeling. “Fuckity fucking fuck.”

“Learn a new word,” said Thea.

Matt made deliberate eye contact with her. “Balls,” he said precisely.

Half of Thea wanted to laugh but the other half wanted to punch Matt so she compromised by glowering at him.

He grimaced in return and turned to their left, attempting to appear as if he’d always been planning on veering off, not as if he’d seen the checkpoint and immediately bailed. Aaron and Thea turned to follow him, making their way into a side alley. Matt led them farther away from the checkpoint, shaking his head.

“I wish Neil was here,” he lamented. “He could let us know where the stadwatch checkpoints are so we could navigate around them.”

“We’ll just have to keep our eyes open and avoid them,” said Thea.

“Even assuming we can make our way to the Ravkan embassy, how are we going to get thirty people to the docks without being seen?” asked Aaron.

“Halt!” cried a voice from behind them.

Thea turned and saw a group of stadwatch guards in their purple uniforms striding towards them. A quick check forwards showed that another group was closing on them from the other direction, which verified that escape was next to impossible.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” said Matt under his breath, as the man who had shouted reached them.

He puffed up, trying to assert his authority. “Andrew Minyard,” he said imperiously, causing Aaron to groan in annoyance. “You are a suspect in the disappearance of Councilman Luther Hemmick’s son. You will submit to us and come for questioning. Any resistance will be met with force.”
Thea did a headcount and caught Matt’s eye. He nodded, having come to the same conclusion that she had. They couldn’t fight off so many. She raised her hands in surrender.

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The guards hadn’t taken them far. They’d been locked in an upper room of a nearby guard post. Thea had been surprised that their cell was a simple room that even had a window (albeit a small one near the ceiling that had an impressive lock) but Matt had explained that this wasn’t the city’s jail. A prison wagon would be sent to collect them to the main stadwatch building, where they would be interrogated. Once complete, they would be taken to Hellgate indefinitely. Thea felt queasy at the thought. So far none of the guards knew who she was, but the Hellgate staff would recognize her.

“You’ve got the wrong Minyard!” Aaron was shouting at the locked door.

“I don’t think they care,” said Matt, wryly. Aaron had been yelling himself hoarse for almost an hour now. Thea wasn’t even sure if there were guards posted outside the door, or if they could hear them. The door was incredibly thick.

“I’m not going to prison because of a case of mistaken identity,” said Aaron hotly.

Matt shrugged. “You can try to convince them during your interrogation, but I’m pretty sure they’re not going to fall for you telling them ‘it wasn’t me, it was my evil twin’.”

“It’s too bad you aren’t your evil twin,” said Thea. “I’d bet he could break open this lock.” She’d spent her time examining the lock on the window and for the first time wished that she had some of the skills that the criminal Foxes possessed. The window was small and placed close to the ceiling and had some kind of metal running between the panes that would prevent them from breaking it.

Almost as soon as the words were out of her mouth, a small snick sounded and the window opened outwards.

Robin’s head popped into the room. “Hi,” she said with a shit-eating grin, dropping a rope through the open window. “You guys look like you could use a rescue.”

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

“So this is new,” said Dan dryly.
The streets in the Warehouse District were quiet and dark. Renee felt almost unnerved by the lack of bystanders: almost all of her evenings in Ketterdam had been spent in the Barrel, among the crowds and revelry. It struck her incongruous that these dark, silent, empty streets were only slightly west of the noisy, colourful, barely controlled chaos.

The streets here were not well lit, unlike the quiet streets in the residential areas of town. Only the blue corpselight - which marked the areas by the canal where the bodymen could empty their wagons and the flatboats could pick up their gruesome cargo - and the lanterns that adorned guard posts provided any light.

Renee did not know what fuel made the corpselight burn blue: she had only ever seen the blue lights marking the wagons, flatboats, and drop off locations used by the bodymen. Kevin had given the three of them small lights in order to signal each other. He’d called them bonelights - made from the crushed bones of deep sea fishes (bioluminescent, he’d called them), they glowed an unearthly green. Renee’s was tucked deep into her pocket, lest it draw attention to them. She wondered if corpselight was made of something similar.

She and Dan were dressed in tight fitting dark clothing supplied by Robin. Easier for climbing and melting into the shadows, she’d claimed. Katelyn was dressed as a traditional Ravkan peasant woman. Renee had laughed when she’d seen her getup, remarking that it looked incredibly similar to the costume of a Ravkan peasant in a play that she’d seen with Allison.

Katelyn had given her a strange look. “It probably is the same costume,” she said.

Renee expressed her confusion and Katelyn shrugged. “Haven’t you ever wondered where we get all the costumes we use? Andrew and Dan secured a route into the basement of a playhouse years ago. All their costumes are stored there, so we just drop by and borrow them as required. That way we have what we need without spending a lot of money and if the Foxhole is ever raided there won’t be a lot of suspicious costumes to be found.”

Sometimes Renee was still surprised about the thought and effort that was required to successfully run what was essentially a criminal organization.

Renee felt an odd spark inside her that she didn’t understand as they silently passed a bodyman’s wagon just outside of Sweet Reef. The wagon had stopped next to a corpselight and the workers
were neatly laying the corpses beside the canal to wait for pickup by the flatboats.

“There,” said Dan quietly, distracting Renee from watching the dead. She was pointing at a small guardhouse, located beside the gate into Sweet Reef. The area was surrounded by a fence topped with razor wire. Robin had also provided gloves and advice on how to avoid getting hurt. Renee and Dan were strong enough climbers to follow Robin and Neil’s instructions.

Katelyn, on the other hand, had a different task. Leaving Dan and Renee in the shadows near the fence, she made her way over to the guardhouse. When she walked into the pool of light made by the lantern, it was as if she’d transformed into a completely new person. Her regularly confident posture disappeared and was replaced by a cowering, fearful set to her shoulders.

“Hello?” she called, infusing her Kerch with a Ravkan accent. “Hello? Please to help?”

The guard came out of the guardhouse, prompting Renee and Dan to silently climb the fence behind him, as Katelyn continued to distract him.

“What do you want, miss?” he asked gruffly.

“Is wanting job?” said Katelyn, in her broken Kerch. “To make sugar?”

Renee caught the elbow of her shirt on the razor wire as she went over, tearing it a little. Dan made it over without any incident. Once inside the fence, Renee took off into the shadows, while Dan quietly unlatched the gate and propped it slightly open with a rock.

“We only store the sugar here,” the guard was saying. “You want to go to the refinery to get a job.”

Katelyn was incredibly effusive with her praise, causing the guard to blush and rub the back of his neck. “You be careful by yourself out at night, now,” the guard was saying as she started to leave. “Your husband will be awfully upset if anything were to happen to you.”

Dan had crept up to share Renee’s hiding place and she rolled her eyes expressively. “Subtle,” she muttered.

“No husband,” said Katelyn, coyly. “All alone.”

“Well, then,” said the guard. “Maybe come back to see me sometime?”

“When I get job, I return to thank you,” said Katelyn with a laugh, turning away.

The guard returned to the guardhouse, smiling stupidly to himself. Dan mimed vomiting and then took a small cylinder out of her pocket. She twisted it until a small pop sounded and then threw it to the far side of the guardhouse, away from the gate.

They waited, their gazes locked with wide eyes. Time stretched out, until it seemed that the explosive may have been a dud. Dan shook her head sharply and then there was a deafening bang and a flash of light.

The guard was out of the guardhouse almost instantly, rushing to check out the disturbance with his rifle held out in front of him. Katelyn slipped from the shadows and eased through the gate, kicking the rock out of the way and closing the gate behind her. She rushed over to join Dan and Renee in their hiding place near the first sugar silo.

“Can’t even ask about employment without getting propositioned?” Dan whispered teasingly.
“Hey,” replied Katelyn with a crooked grin. “I can’t help being beautiful and charming, can I?”

“And I imagine the flirting is out of your control, too?” Dan muttered.

“Don’t underestimate her,” said Renee. “Given the chance I’m pretty sure Katelyn could flirt all of Ketterdam into submission.”

Katelyn’s grin turned sharp, but any reply she may have had was cut off by the guard’s return. He was still glancing around suspiciously and rattled the gate forcefully to ensure that the latch was still in place. With a final narrow-eyed survey of his surroundings, he returned to the guardhouse.

Katelyn and Dan took this as their cue. They moved farther into the shadows; Dan made her way over to the second silo while Katelyn found an out-of-the-way vantage point from which she could keep an eye on the guard movements.

After several minutes of tense anticipation, Renee saw a short greenish flash from the direction that Katelyn had gone. She took a deep, steadying breath before making her way to the far side of the silo where narrow metal handholds formed a ladder to the roof. She took a firm grip and began climbing as quickly as she could without slipping. The silos were not short and she concentrated her eyes on the top, not letting herself look down. She has spoken truthfully when she had claimed that heights didn’t bother her, but she didn’t want to tempt fate or risk vertigo by looking down.

She made it to the top in what she felt was good time and let herself rest and catch her breath for a few moments. She took a glance over to the silo where Dan was. She thought she could see slight movement in the dark, but it could have been her mind playing tricks on her: showing her what she expected to see.

The opening into the silo was directly in the middle of the roof; a circular door that opened outward with a wheel on it to control the lock. She grabbed the wheel with both hands and rotated. For a second nothing happened, but then, with a screech of metal, the wheel began to turn, flooding Renee with relief. There hadn’t been a plan for if she couldn’t physically open the door, which struck her as foolish in hindsight. It wasn’t like Andrew not to have contingency plans. She was slightly worried that his focus on revenge was clouding his judgement in a way that she had never witnessed.

Once the door was opened, she liberated one of the vials from her pocket that contained the necessary chemicals to destroy the sugar. She upended the vial into the silo, causing a hissing noise and a sickly sweet smell to emanate from the sugar. She shook her head in amazement that such a small thing would destroy the entire silo’s worth of sugar in such a small amount of time. Although, she thought with amusement, her time with the Foxes had definitely taught her that sometimes the smallest things were the most dangerous. She had no illusions how impressed Andrew would be if she ever expressed that sentiment to him.

A flash a green light was visible as Renee made her way back over to the ladder, so she swung her leg over the side of the silo and started to make her way down. She judged that she had made it about halfway down when everything went wrong.

The sound was far away at first but it steadily got closer; the raucous chatter of a group of people up to no good. She was confused at first as to why Barrel revelers were making their way through the Warehouse District, but once she was able to catch a glimpse of them from her location she could tell from their dress and weaponry that they were no revelers. They were gang members, Ravens if she wasn’t mistaken, out on some errand.

The single guard had now exited the guardhouse, lighting a lantern that signalled for reinforcements. Yesterday’s riot on West Stave would have left them all on high alert. The guard met the Ravens
head on, but one of the Ravens handed over a sealed document. He read the document, shrugged, and opened the gate to allow the Ravens access to Sweet Reef.

Renee was frozen. Cass Spear did not have the clout to allow her gang into such an economically important location. No, only Luther Hemmick had the power to grant access. And if Luther and Cass were working together…

Renee shook her head to clear it. She could worry about the larger implications of this later, now she had to focus on getting them out of here safely. She had no idea where Dan was - if she had even begun her descent of the second silo or not - but Katelyn was down on the ground with a conspiracy of Ravens.

“Word on the street is that a Heartrender is hiding out in Sweet Reef!” called one of the Ravens.

Renee blanched. Had they been followed? Did the Ravens and Luther know about Black Veil? Did they know about the Grisha? Stop, she told herself fiercely, save yourself first, then worry about the others.

The Ravens had spread out in a search pattern. Renee saw with fear that they’d cornered Katelyn in her hiding spot. Just as she realized this, Katelyn stepped out into the light and cocked her hip.

“I’m usually called a heart breaker, actually,” she drawled.

The Ravens circled her. “What are you doing out in the dark, little whore?” their leader asked.

“Oh, I’m just out for a pleasure stroll,” Katelyn replied flippantly. “I’m also not ashamed of my past, so you can fuck right off.”

“You’ll definitely be giving me pleasure,” said the leader, lewdly. “But first, where are your friends?”

“Rape threats?” asked Katelyn, with a giant sigh. “Classy. Why is it that guys like you always default to rape threats?”

“It’ll be more than a threat if you don’t tell us where the Heartrender is.”

“I would be careful if I were you,” said Katelyn evenly. “Just because you can’t see her doesn’t mean she can’t see you. I imagine that having your heart explode would be unpleasant.”

The Ravens shifted uneasily, glancing around themselves. Renee’s thoughts whirred, desperately trying to come up with a plan. She wouldn’t be able to make it to the ground before Katelyn was attacked, and even then they were greatly outnumbered. If only she could make their hearts explode.

The lead Raven reached out to run his hand down Katelyn’s cheek. She slapped it away.

“Maybe you’re bluffing,” the man said. “Maybe you’re just a foolish Fox who’s going to suffer the consequences of being where you should not.”

“I’m fairly certain the Ravens have no business in Sweet Reef either,” said Katelyn.

“Cass has friends in high places,” the man smirked before his expression dropped to something threatening. “You have ten seconds to tell me where to find the Heartrender or things will go very badly for you.”

Renee seethed, the feeling of helplessness running through her. She grit her teeth. She was not
helpless. She refused to be helpless. She was a Grisha, and a warrior, and a Fox, and she had never been helpless.

Instinctively, she reached out with her power. Just like at the lake house and the Ravkan embassy she was unable to sense the people below her. But if she reached out a little farther... there. It was deep and cold and lit the spark inside her that she had felt earlier. It was the bodies, she realized, the bodies that had been piled waiting for the bodymen’s flatboats. Setting aside her panic at this discovery, she pulled at the cold. *Come to me*, she thought desperately.

She closed her eyes and concentrated, sensing the coldness as it drew closer. She could hear the distant sounds of shouting from below her, but didn’t let it distract her. There was the rattling sound of the gate and fence near the guardhouse and panicked cries and gunshots. She ignored it all and directed the cold shapes to stand guard around Katelyn. When she eventually opened her eyes, a ring of corpses surrounded Katelyn, the fence was destroyed and there were no guards or Ravens in sight.

She quickly made her way to the ground and over to where Katelyn was standing rigid with wide, frightened eyes.

“*Are you* doing this?” Katelyn hissed, as if she didn’t want to be overheard by her undead guardians.

“*Yes*,” said Renee simply, feeling overwhelmed.

“*How?*” demanded Katelyn, sounding on the verge of hysterics. “*I thought you lost your Grisha ability. Are you using another one of Kevin’s amplifiers?*”

“No,” said Renee shaking her head. “*I think that…*” she trailed off and tried to get her thoughts in order. “*I didn’t lose my power, it just… changed.*” Using this power didn’t make her feel the same way that using her Heartrender powers had, but it was similar. A feeling of calm, of being connected to something, was spreading through her. Before, it had been the power of life flowing through her veins. This was cold and static, but still empowering.

“So this is new,” said Dan dryly, joining them.

“Renee can make zombies now,” said Katelyn, recovering her usual unflappable attitude. “Maybe she and Neil can finally have their apocalypse?”

“Let’s pencil that in for later,” replied Dan, rolling her eyes. “*Right now we have to worry about the fact that Cass and Luther are working together. We have to get out of here before reinforcements arrive.*”

“We have to get to Black Veil,” said Renee. “*If they know about us then they probably know about them.*”

Dan shook her head. “*It’s too risky. They could have already attacked there, and we’ll be no help if we also walk into an ambush. We have to regroup.*”

She took off briskly, headed towards the destroyed gate with Katelyn and Renee following closely.

“*Uh, Renee?*” said Katelyn, timidly. “*Are your new corpse friends going to follow us everywhere? That may be a little conspicuous.*”

Renee turned, and sure enough the bodies were shuffling after them. *Rest*, she thought at them, directing them back to where they came from. The bodies slowly lumbered away towards the corpse-light.
Katelyn shuddered. “I’m really grateful that you can do that,” she said to Renee. “But fuck is it ever creepy.”

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

“Hello Cass,” said Andrew without emotion.
ANDREW

Chapter Summary

In which Cass makes an appearance.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

For the second time in two (three? Between the lack of sleep and running errands both during the day and night Andrew had completely lost track of time) days, Andrew was on Luther Hemmick’s rooftop. Again, he promised himself that after this was finished he was going to stick to the ground for an extended period of time. Unfortunately, instead of a sure-footed companion he was with Nicky, who was gasping and wobbling and whining about the height. Neil was also with them, there to help them across the sloping roof and to lower them down to the same window that Andrew had previously infiltrated.

Andrew had to be lowered first so he pinned Neil with a look, pointedly eyeing the dark purple bruises that circled his throat. “Keep to the rooftops and disappear if you’re threatened,” he ordered.

“I usually do,” answered Neil.

“No being captured.”

“I’ll try.”

“No being stabbed.”

“It’s not like I enjoy being stabbed, Andrew.”

“No antagonizing anybody.”

“No promises.”

Andrew made sure that his facial expression expressed his lack of amusement at Neil’s flippancy. “All of those things happen with alarming frequency whenever I allow you out of my sight.”

“I’ll be careful.”

“You don’t know the meaning of the word,” Andrew snorted, before approaching the edge of the roof. “Do not drop me.”

“I would never ,” said Neil, with false affront.

Andrew was carefully lowered until he was outside the office window and made quick work of unlocking it. It was slightly more difficult in the dark than it had been during the daytime, but still simple for a man of his talents. He swung the window open and gingerly made his way into the office, detaching himself from the rope and unwinding the rope ladder from around his waist, freeing his cane in the process. Although they were able to enter from the roof they wouldn’t be leaving that way; Neil had his own tasks to complete this evening so Andrew and Nicky would be climbing
down into the back garden where a gondel was waiting in the canal for them.

Nicky swung through the window, puffing and grunting. Andrew had not been keen on working with Nicky again, but since he knew the Hemmick house best (he had grown up here, after all) and could handle the auric acid he was the obvious choice to help Andrew get the seal. Nicky looked around the small office and his expression shuttered a little.

Voices and the clink of silverware could be heard coming up through the floor and the smell of roasting ham permeated the house. The meeting with the Merchant Council clearly involved dinner and was obviously in full swing.

Andrew moved to the painting that hung over the safe. He’d never understood these rich merchers’ obsession with hiding their safes behind paintings; they were almost always as obvious as if the safe hadn’t been covered at all.

Nicky carefully extracted two vials from his pockets and tentatively mixed them together. There was no reaction, which Andrew supposed was better than an unexpected explosion or the acid eating through the glass vial. Nicky then took out an eyedropper made from balsa glass and very, very slowly transferred several drops of the liquid onto the safe.

The reaction was immediate: a hissing sound preceded the metal slowly dissolving. Nicky repeated the procedure.

“Can you do that any faster?” asked Andrew as the minutes ticked away.

“If I spill even a drop of this it will eat through the floor. The dining hall is below us; don’t you think they might notice sudden holes appearing in the ceiling? What if it landed on someone who was in the middle of eating their dinner?”

Andrew considered. “Take your time,” he concluded.

Drip after drip the metal slowly corroded away until an opening wide enough for his arm appeared. The inside of the safe contained important documents, piles of kruge, and a small velvet bag. Andrew reached into the safe, flinching his arm away from the metal on either side of the hole; it was incredibly hot due to the auric acid. He grabbed the velvet bag and emptied the contents, finding an ornate, obnoxious ring with Luther’s initials. He showed it to Nicky who nodded to indicate that it was his father’s seal, before pocketing it and reaching back into the safe to grab several stacks of kruge.

Nicky made a strange huffing sound.

“Do you not approve?” asked Andrew. “You knew why we were here. Besides, this is your inheritance.”

“I’m sure my father has already removed me from his will,” answered Nicky, although he helped pocket the money which Andrew was extracting. “So this is just stealing.”

“Are you unclear about our plans? Do you disagree that your father owes us because of the deal he made?”

“I… no,” said Nicky. “It’s just a little difficult to tell myself we’re the good guys when we’re taking money out of his safe.”

“We’re not the good guys,” said Andrew sharply. “There are no good guys. There are only two groups of people: marks and those who are exploiting them.”
“How very mercenary of you, Andrew, dear,” said a sickeningly familiar woman’s voice from across the room.

Andrew turned slowly towards the dark corner that housed a bookshelf. It had been pushed aside to reveal a small secret room. He was annoyed at himself that he hadn’t noticed the cheap deception.

“Hello Cass,” said Andrew without emotion, staring at the slight woman who stood with two of her Ravens flanking her. “You’re working for Luther Hemmick, I see?”

Cass smiled darkly. Andrew was always surprised how small she was when he saw her now - the large impact she had had on his life had left her a giant in his memories - but unlike her brute of a son, she was barely taller than he was. Her dark hair was wound in intricate braids around her head, and she was dressed in her impractical finery despite being well armed. “I am working with Hemmick, darling,” she said. “He was a little hesitant to cooperate with a Barrel gang, for obvious reasons, but after your little stunt with his mistress I managed to convince him that you were always going to be able to stay a step ahead of him because he is an honourable mercher while you’re an amoral monster.”

“Yes, Cass, we all know that you’re incredibly concerned with morals,” said Andrew. He was cursing himself internally. He hadn’t thought that Luther could get the best of him for that very reason: he thought like a businessman. He would never be able to out-plan, out-think, or outsmart someone who had made his way up through the Barrel gangs.

“Don’t be so bitter, dearest,” Cass practically crooned. “You brought this on yourself. You were too greedy.”

“Greedy?” asked Andrew, trying to keep Cass distracted and talking as he attempted to come up with a plan. The door was the only acceptable exit and it was now surrounded by Ravens.

“Thirty million kruege?” said Cass incredulously. “Your greed didn’t allow you to see the obvious trap.”

Andrew shrugged, privately agreeing with her. With his right hand he removed Hemmick’s seal from his pocket, flipping it in his hand. He hoped that would distract from what his left hand was doing. “I seem to remember that you also sent a team in hopes of getting that reward,” he said.

“Did I?” she asked. “I don’t recall doing so.”

“Then you have less control of your gang than you think,” he said. “Since Proust definitely had a team there. Don’t worry; they won’t be returning from Evermore.”

An ugly look passed over her face, before it smoothed out and she waved a hand dismissively. “It was your greed that led to that disaster on Vellgeluk,” she continued. “And now, instead of taking what you have and leaving, you’re here for revenge. Remember darling, I’ve been around for much longer than you. It didn’t take me long to find your hiding place and to track your comings and goings. I knew you couldn’t resist coming here to show off how smart you are. I’ve sent my men to round up your wayward Foxes and the unimaginable prize that you have hidden on Black Veil.” Nicky gave a low distressed moan at her words.

“And you expect that Luther will honour any deal he made with you?” asked Andrew.

She laughed. “I got my payment upfront. Unlike you, I struck a reasonable deal. He gets Kevin Day, while I get a Heartrender and to get rid of you. And,” she dropped her voice conspiratorially, “I’ll finally get to rid the Foxes of your pesky Shadow. You know, the Butcher’s Men were incredibly
interested in learning all the information I could offer about him.”

Andrew couldn’t help the squeeze his heart gave at that, but kept his features placid. He had liberated the vial of auric acid from Nicky and held it in his left hand. “You’ll find he’s slippery,” he said, forcibly keeping his voice even. “Many others have found that out to their detriment. Speaking of, tell me, how is Riko these days?”

Annoyance flashed over her face. “I warned him that it was a trap; he kept insisting that his sources had heard it straight from your mouth that you were leaving for Evermore. All I asked was that he slow you down.”

Andrew felt himself pause, wondering if she were lying. “Well, as usual, he failed.”

“Yes, it’s clear now that you and I should have been working together from the start. After all, I made you.”

Andrew scoffed. “You tried to break me and failed. The only people you have made have been dangerously incompetent arrogant thugs.”

“Come now, dear, don’t be difficult,” said Cass sweetly. “I have you surrounded. You can’t go out the window, my Ravens are in the hallway and Luther has stadwatch out on the street below. You are trapped.”

“So I am,” he agreed. “That’s never stopped me before.” Even before he finished speaking, he tossed the seal in his right hand directly at Cass’ face as a distraction and smashed the vial in his left hand onto the floor.

The acid made contact with the floor with a loud hiss, and Andrew smashed his cane into the weakened floorboards to make a hole. Grabbing Nicky’s hand he jumped through the hole.

“Stop them!” shrieked Cass from above, as Nicky and Andrew landed in a heap on the dinner table. Shocked faces stared at them as Andrew dragged himself off of the plate of ham. “Run!” he shouted at Nicky, taking off towards the back of the house.

Luther Hemmick was the first Council member to recover from his shock. “Guards!” he cried.

Andrew and Nicky burst through the back door and sprinted through the back garden into the waiting gondel. Bullets hit the water around them as Andrew dipped the oars into the canal and started to row away.

Nicky rooted through his supplies on the boat and then let everything loose. Lights and heat exploded around them as Nicky’s small arsenal of firecrackers and bombs were aimed back at shore, occupying their pursuers.

Andrew rowed steadily away, trying to get them into canal traffic as soon as possible. With their distraction and their head start, the stadwatch wouldn’t have time to catch them.

Nicky was panicking. “We have to get to the others!” he exclaimed. “We have to help them!”

“Quiet, Nicky, I have to think,” snapped Andrew. He was having trouble focusing on anything beyond the fact that Cass had specifically threatened Neil. He wasn’t sure what he would do if Neil was captured but he knew that it would end with entrails spread throughout the Barrel. Fuck his carefully crafted revenge plan; Cass would die quickly if anything had happened to him.

“We’ll head towards the Zelvar District,” Andrew finally said.
“Will we be safe there?” asked Nicky desperately. “You said we’d be safe in Black Veil. You said-”

“There is nowhere safe,” Andrew cut him off sharply. “Not in the Barrel, not anywhere in Ketterdam.” He shook his head in anger. “Now grab an oar and help me row, or I’ll throw you out of this boat and you can fend for yourself.”

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

“Is it the *stadwatch*?” asked Kevin, sounding almost hysterical. “Is it the Butcher’s Men?” He gasped. “Is it the Shu?”
Erik

Chapter Summary

In which there is another ambush and several explosions.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As soon as Thea left Black Veil, Kevin’s anxiety spiralled up an unreasonable degree. He was worrying and complaining and obsessively checking his belongings, giving Erik and Allison dire warnings about how they would probably all be killed. Erik could see trouble brewing almost instantly as Allison’s ire mounted. Kevin’s unshakable belief about his own demise might very well prove to be true if Erik let the situation devolve any further.

“Kevin,” he said, firmly but not unkindly, “you have to calm down. If you don’t, Allison is liable to willingly give you to the Butcher’s Men.”

“You have no worth to us anymore,” put in Allison, less diplomatically. “We’re only helping you leave the city out of the goodness of our hearts. So sit down and shut up.”

“If you at least pretend to be calm until we reach the boat, you can drink an entire bottle of vodka once you’re on board,” bargained Erik.

Kevin stared at both of them, aghast, but he did finally sit down quietly, only wringing his hands together from time to time.

Allison glared at Erik. “How in Ghezen’s name did I end up babysitting Kevin again?”

“You didn’t want to go with Aaron,” he reminded her.

“I can’t believe that escorting that bitter asshole around suddenly isn’t the worst task I could have.”

Erik shrugged. “Once we get the Grisha out of Ketterdam and destroy Luther, I imagine everything will go back to normal and dealing with Aaron will be the worst thing asked of us.”

Allison gave him a considering look. “Will it?” she asked. “Go back to normal, I mean. The money we earn from our sugar shares will be enough that we can all buy out our Indentures.”

Erik paused thoughtfully. He’d been trying not to think about the future since he couldn’t imagine what it would look like. All of his friends leaving him was not a possibility he wanted to consider. “Do you think everyone will leave?” he asked.

Allison shrugged. “I don’t think the Monster or Neil will, but that’s mostly because I can’t imagine them doing anything else. And neither Katelyn nor Aaron will have enough to buy their contracts out; they’re getting less money because they didn’t go to Evermore. But we know that Dan and Matt are looking to buy a ship and that Renee wants out of the life of crime.”

Erik nodded. “Nicky isn’t Indentured and is only working with us in order to earn enough money to get away from his father,” he put in, feeling like his heart was in his throat. “What about you?”
Allison looked uncomfortable. “On the way back from Evermore, Renee and I made some plans. But I’m not sure how serious she was about them. It may have just been her reaction to the fact that she thought she was dying. I’m not sure I’m what she actually wants.”

Erik watched in amusement as Allison fidgeted. “With the way she looks at you, I’d wager that you’re exactly what she wants. What’s wrong? I don’t think I’ve ever seen you anything but one hundred percent confident in your relationships.”

“This is different,” said Allison with a huff.

“Because she’s a woman?”

“Because she’s important,” she snapped.

Erik silently watched as she put her thoughts together. He and Allison had been friends for a long time, but serious discussion about their feelings and relationships had never been something they had shared. Of course neither of them had had relationships that went beyond casual; acting as each other’s wing man was as far as they needed to go.

“I’ve never had a serious relationship,” said Allison, voicing Erik’s thoughts. “Except Seth, and even then we were just kids who were having fun. I wasn’t thinking about forever. But that’s changed, and I guess I’m just scared that I’ll screw this up somehow.”

Erik stood in awe, because Allison admitting fear was something that he’d never thought he’d see. “Okay,” he said slowly, rolling his shoulders. “I’m going to say something heartfelt and sappy—” Allison made a displeased face “—which is going to be super awkward for both of us, but we’re just going to power through. Okay? Okay.” He took a deep breath. “You are the strongest and most amazing person I know. You are fierce and completely terrifying. There is nothing that you’ve ever put your mind to that you’ve failed. So if you want this relationship to work, I believe that nothing will stop you from achieving your goal.”

“Gross,” said Allison, with a small smile. “That’s embarrassing, Erik.” She paused slightly and then sighed. “You’re okay, too, I guess,” she mumbled. “And I’m pretty sure you and Nicky are going to be fine since he looks at you the same way Andrew watches Neil.”

Erik felt a deep stab of pleasure and couldn’t keep a grin from breaking across his face. “That intense, huh?” he asked.

“Well, no,” Allison backtracked. “Nothing is that intense. But it’s like a more subdued version of that.” She let out a little whine. “Can we stop talking about feelings now?”

“Djel, yes,” said Erik fervently. “This was weird and unsettling.”

“Let’s never speak of this again,” said Allison with finality. “We can now return to our regular banter of perfectly crafted insults and terrible jokes.”

“I’m guessing that in your mind I’m the only one telling bad jokes?”

“Speaking of something that you’ve done often but that I’ve never done…” said Allison, looking a little shifty.

“Excellent segue.”

“Thank you, I try. Anyway, do you have any tips for having sex with women?” Across the room, Kevin choked a little and gave Allison an incredulous look. “I’ve been chatting with Katelyn, and
She’s been giving me advice,” Allison continued, oblivious to Kevin’s reaction. “But I was wondering—”

She was cut off by a little plink sound, followed by hissing. A gas grenade had been tossed into the crypt. Erik reacted quickly, grabbing a nearby blanket and smothering the canister, then throwing it back out the window. Allison had pulled out her pistol and was crouching by the window observing their surroundings.

Erik joined her and peeked outside. They were surrounded. At least thirty people, many of them holding torches, were waiting in the graveyard.

“Is it the stadwatch?” asked Kevin, sounding almost hysterical. “Is it the Butcher’s Men?” He gasped. “Is it the Shu?”

“Shut up,” said Allison shortly. She shared a glance with Erik. “Looks like Ravens.”

“That is… not good,” Erik said.

“Understatement,” said Allison, under her breath. “There’s only one exit and they have that covered.” She began shooting out the window, dropping a small number of their attackers before they managed to retreat to cover.

“Come out of there with your hands up!” cried one of the Ravens. “If you surrender we’ll take you alive.”

“We can’t hear you!” Erik called back. “Come closer!”

The man who had shouted took a step out of cover and opened his mouth before Allison managed to shoot him. “That’s it, idiots,” she muttered. “Line up for me.”

“I don’t think that’s going to work more than once,” said Erik. “Even the Raven thugs are that stupid.”

“What are we going to do?” wailed Kevin.

“Stop panicking,” Erik commanded at once. “What assets do we have in here?”

Kevin started searching frantically, while Erik continued peering out the window. A sound from the far side of the crypt distracted him and, turning, he saw another gas grenade pouring greenish smoke into the small room. He covered his face with one of his arms and dashed forwards, picking up the smoke bomb and lobbing it back out the window. He coughed wildly. “They’re distracting us,” he said. “Keeping our attention out front and then attacking from the side, trying to force us through the front door. Kevin! What did you find?”

“We have several of those purple bombs that Nicky and I made,” said Kevin. “Plus several other explosives and all the components that we used to make the fireworks.”

Erik nodded, coming up with a plan. He wasn’t a schemer like Andrew, but he had been trained as a soldier and was capable of coming up with combat scenarios. “Pass me one of the purple bombs and pack everything else up. Allison, keep those guys away from the door as long as you can.”

Kevin tossed over one of the bombs and Erik set it up away from the door, underneath one of the windows.

“Okay, hand me the flint so I can light the fuse,” he told Kevin, joining him and grabbing the bag full
of explosives and powders.


“There’s no time to question me!” snapped Erik. “Do you know where the monument with the large, black angel is?”

“Over near the willow tree?”

“Yes,” he nodded. “As soon as that bomb detonates, I want you to get out the door and make your way there as fast as you can. Keep your head down.” He took a steadying breath. “Allison. Ready?”

“Ready,” she agreed as she took another couple shots through the window. Erik was filled with a sudden, immense affection for her and her ability to behave as if nothing affected or impressed her. He lit the fuse, watching as it sizzled away towards the bomb. He took cover near the door, blocking Allison and Kevin as much as possible.

“Three, two, one,” he counted under his breath and then hid his face as the bomb exploded.

“They’re escaping out the side!” cried a voice from outside as Erik yanked open the crypt door and used his rifle to lay down covering fire as Kevin made a dash for the willow tree. He and Allison covered each other as they followed Kevin.

“Why are they shooting?” hissed Kevin as soon as Erik and Allison had made it to his hiding spot. “I thought they wanted me alive!”

“They’re mercenaries, not soldiers,” replied Erik. “Even if their bosses want you alive it doesn’t make them disciplined.”

“What now?” asked Allison. “Being surrounded out in the open is probably better than being trapped in a crypt, but I really don’t see us getting out of here easily.”

Erik swung the bag off his shoulder and started pulling out the explosive powders. He pointed at the shore line, indicating the group of about ten gondels in which their attackers had travelled to Black Veil. “If Kevin and I distract them, can you rig their boats to blow?” he asked Allison. She glanced into the bag to take stock of what she had available.

“I don’t have a fuse that’s long enough to blow them up without getting caught in the explosion,” she said.

“Is there black powder?” Kevin asked. At Allison’s nod he straightened his shoulders. “Then I can make a fuse. Just make sure that the explosives are linked together so that they’ll all blow at once.”

“Also, leave one gondel untouched; we’ll need to escape in something,” supplied Erik.

Just then one of their attackers rounded the nearest mausoleum and opened his mouth to alert the others to their exact location. Kevin grabbed up Allison’s pistol and fired haphazardly, barely aiming. To Erik’s surprise the bullet struck the man directly in the throat. He stared at Kevin incredulously.

“What?” asked Kevin. “I’m a Fabrikator. I can affect the bullet’s trajectory.” He looked at them with raised eyebrows. “Isn’t Neil a suspiciously good shot?”

“That lying, cunning gremlin,” grumbled Allison, with exasperated affection. “I can’t believe he’s been hiding that. No wonder he keeps winning our shooting contests.”
“As much as I agree with your outrage, there’s no time right now, Allison,” said Erik, pointedly.

Allison took the bag and ran off towards the boats, still grumbling and keeping low to the ground. Erik was glad that she had already been dressed for stealth: her bright hair was hidden under a dark hood.

“What do you want me to do?” asked Kevin.

“Well, this island’s haunted, isn’t it?” Erik asked rhetorically. “The ghosts are probably mad at the interlopers.”

He handed Kevin several bags containing the powders that had been used to make fireworks. Kevin looked baffled at first, before his face cleared. He took one of the bags of powder and dumped it out into his palm. Stretching his hand forward, the powder swirled into the air as he controlled it, until three blobby shapes were floating above the ground. Kevin pushed his hands out towards the torches that they could see bobbing around the graveyard - the Ravens were systematically searching for them. Erik could hear shrieking and swearing as the powdered ‘ghosts’ approached their targets. Kevin flicked his wrist and the powder came into contact with the torches that the men were carrying, causing them to ignite in a display of flashing lights and sharp crackling sounds.

“Ah,” said Erik, admiring the dark violet light show. “Potassium chloride. My favourite.” He hoped Nicky was okay.

Kevin repeated the process several times while Erik took shots at anybody who got too close to them, but the number of opponents was simply overwhelming. He and Kevin were being steadily driven back towards the shore.

He heard Allison give a birdcall - albeit one that sounded more like an angry goose than any of the unobtrusive ones usually employed by the Foxes - and he turned and pushed Kevin towards the gondel.

“Into the boat!” he cried. “Go!”

He and Kevin sprinted towards the shore, bullets pinging the ground all around them as they hurried into the boat that Allison was pushing into the water. Kevin hopped in first, before dumping out the bag of black powder. Erik shoved the boat out as far into the canal as he could before heaving himself on board and grabbing the oars. Allison got in and started laying out suppressive fire to prevent the Ravens from hitting them.

“Any time, Kevin,” said Erik.

“It’s not like this is simple,” snapped Kevin. “It would be much easier if one of you were an Inferni.”

“Sorry,” said Allison sarcastically. “We already reached our quota of secret Grisha on this adventure.”

Erik rowed steadily as he watched Kevin manipulate the black powder to form a trail between the bombs that Allison had placed and their attackers. They could see the trail of powder slowly creeping towards the closest torch. Inch by inch it moved forwards until one of the Ravens exclaimed in shock when it touched him and dropped his torch. The black powder instantly ignited, the fire racing towards the boats.

The explosion was immense; a giant ball of purple, green, and yellow fire expanded outwards, rocking their boat and singeing their clothing. Erik kept his steady rowing pace, even while staring in awe at the destruction they had wrought.
“Go team,” said Allison dryly. Erik began to laugh helplessly.

“What?” asked Allison testily as Erik’s laughter continued.

“I knew putting the two of you together would have explosive results,” he managed to choke out.

Allison punched him in the arm. “What did I say about terrible jokes?” she demanded.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

“Why’d you run, Baby?” Lola cooed. “Your daddy’s been looking for you everywhere.”
Neil stifled a yawn as he made his way across the rooftops of the Barrel towards the House of Spears. Despite the hours of sleep he had managed to catch this morning, he was still exhausted after his confinement and the excitement of the last several days.

Early this morning, after breaking into Drake’s rooms at the Nest, he’d managed to convince Andrew to sneak into their own room at the Foxhole. He’d coaxed Andrew onto the roof, despite his grumbling, and gotten into their attic room without any of the other Foxes being aware of their presence. He knew that Andrew would not have been sleeping well crowded into the crypt on Black Veil and so cajoled him into sleeping for a few hours in the safety of their shared space. Andrew had crawled into his bed as usual, curled up with his back against the wall, but had pulled Neil down beside him instead of letting Neil retreat to his pallet across the room. Andrew had fallen asleep quickly, not letting go of his death grip on Neil’s wrist and Neil had followed him into slumber almost instantly. It had been the most restful sleep he’d gotten since before they’d left Ketterdam for Evermore.

Unfortunately, they’d been woken after only a couple hours by a knock on their window. Andrew had been awake and tense almost instantly, blinking sleepily and looking incredibly endearing with his hair sticking up in tufts. Neil had rolled out of bed and let Robin into the room. She’d left them shortly after they’d left Black Veil in order to get some sleep herself, but had apparently been up and about bright and early that morning. She’d brought them their wanted posters which Neil had found amusing, except for how accurate his likeness was. He’d made a beeline to his Tailoring kit to change his noticeable hair back into a muddy brown colour.

Robin had been in contact with the Foxes that she had tasked with surveying the guard rotations at Sweet Reef and relayed that information, while Andrew had instructed her with shadowing Aaron, Matt, and Thea and their rescue of the city’s Grisha that evening. She’d also brought a bit of breakfast and they shared it gratefully, cementing their plans.

Robin had slipped out gracefully as soon as Andrew and Neil had disagreed about what Neil would be doing while Andrew broke into Luther’s safe.

“I don’t want you out of my sight,” said Andrew, poking his fingers into the bruising around Neil’s throat. Neil had squawked and batted his hand away. He could have healed the damage, but he
wasn’t particularly skilled at Healing and it required a lot more energy than he currently had. He generally waited to be patched up by Abby or a medik unless his injuries were threatening his life.

“I know that I haven’t always been the most trustworthy,” said Neil, bristling under the thought that Andrew didn’t trust him not to run, “but I told you that I would stay. I’m not going to disappear.”

“I trust you,” said Andrew simply, as if he were not giving Neil a gift. “That’s not why I want to keep an eye on you.”

“What’s the problem then?”

“I promised to keep you safe.”

“You can’t keep me within arm’s reach at all times. That’s ridiculous,” argued Neil. “Look, I promised I’d stay. And I will. But you have to let me stand on my own, or else I’ll never learn to stop running and fight for myself.”

“With your father in town, now is not the time for that.”

“Now is the best time to learn. Stop weakening yourself unnecessarily by not sending me to do what I’m best at.”

“What you’re best at is getting attacked as soon as you’re alone,” retorted Andrew grumpily.

“Andrew,” said Neil, trying to be as gentle as he could, which was not overly gentle at all, “there’s an opportunity here to throw Cass off balance. You can finally start tearing her down like you’ve been planning for so long. And if that isn’t enough, keeping Cass distracted instead of focussing on us is important. We have enough enemies right now.”

Andrew had grumbled a few more times, but had eventually relented. “I will be angry if anyone breaks your face,” he told Neil. Neil was almost certain that nothing short of his revenge on Cass could have convinced him to allow Neil to head off by himself.

After helping Nicky rappel down into his father’s office, Neil had made his way across the rooftops to the Barrel, moving as quickly as he could in the dark while keeping his senses alert. A few times he thought he saw something out of the corner of his eye, but when investigating found that his paranoia about his father being in town was getting the best of him.

Once he reached the House of Spears he spent some time on surveillance from several different vantage points before concluding that Cass was not in. Once he’d determined that, it was almost child’s play to break into her office and leave the two forged letters he’d had Dan prepare that afternoon: one from Drake detailing his deal with the Zemeni jurda dealers and the other from those same dealers demanding a ransom for Drake’s safe return. Hopefully, trying to track down and retrieve Drake from people who didn’t have him would keep Cass running in circles and out of their business until they had time to deal with her.

After successfully exiting the House of Spears he made his way back across the Barrel to the Foxhole. He was planning on going down to the docks to make sure that Kevin and all the Grisha made it onto the boat to Ravka, but first he wanted to grab his Tailoring kit since he was planning on disguising all of the Foxes to ensure that the wanted posters didn’t lead to their capture.

Neil had just landed on the Foxhole roof when a voice spoke to him from the shadows. “Hello, Junior.”

Neil didn’t hesitate. He liberated one of his knives and threw it towards the voice. He didn’t need to
see her to know her: Lola, his father’s favourite and second in command of the Butcher’s Men. A nightmare from his childhood, here in flesh and blood.

Neil could hear swearing and deranged laughter coming from her as he turned and ran. He had to get off the rooftops and into the streets below; as much advantage as the roofs generally provided, he was also visible up here and she could follow him with ease. When his feet hit the ground he felt a sharp cut along his left arm that he shied away from. Apparently Lola had decided to return his knife. He scooped it up from where it had fallen after grazing his arm, and took off running through the streets he knew like the back of his hand. He could hear mad cackling following him as he made sharp turns and avoided all stadwatch patrols.

He blamed his panic on the fact that it took him so long to realize that the stadwatch were strategically placed to funnel everybody headed east onto Zentsbridge. He paused, trying to get his bearings, when a sharp pain stung his left side. He looked down in confusion and found a spiked, silver star embedded underneath his ribs. He turned to find Lola advancing on him, several more silver stars in her left hand.

“Why’d you run, Baby?” Lola cooed. “Your daddy’s been looking for you everywhere.”

His heart stuttered at the mention of his father and the fear that washed over him stuck him to the spot. Lola took advantage of his momentary lapse and threw another one of her silver stars at him. He reached out toward it with his power, directing it away from himself.

Lola stared at him in shock and then a sadistic smile spread across her face. “Oh, Baby’s got a few tricks inherited from mummy, then, does he?”

He froze in terror, feeling the ghosts of his mother’s fists. *Never show them your power, Abram!* Like at Evermore, he could hear rushing in his ears and he couldn’t move. Matt wasn’t here to carry him away this time, though.

Lola walked forwards casually, brandishing a strange looking gold medallion on a silver chain in her right hand.

“See this, Junior?” she asked, swinging the gold medallion on its chain. “It’s a new toy that we got for hunting your kind. It’s too easy, you see, for dangerous people like you to live among us normal people. You need to be *marked* in a way that can’t be rubbed off so that everyone can know how unnatural you are.”

She swung the medallion at his face. He flinched away, but it still hit him on the cheek and stuck.

The pain was instant and blinding. He thought his head was going to split and he could barely hear his own screams through the sound of blood rushing through his skull. He reached up and managed to pry off the medallion, his climbing gloves protecting his hands from whatever caused the burning sensation. He flung it away from him, just as Lola started talking again. “You’re marked forever now, Junior. That mark can’t be healed or Tailored away.”

His panic-induced immobility was overcome by the extreme pain and he managed to lash out, punching Lola in the throat. She made an inhuman choking noise and Neil’s feet finally started moving again. He blindly spun and ran away.

He ran through the pain, even though it felt like all of his body’s blood was dripping down his face. Despite knowing it wasn’t safe, he made his way towards Zentsbridge. Better with the stadwatch than Lola.
There was a hulking man guarding the west side of the bridge, causing Neil’s heart to sink. He recognized the man from his childhood; a giant brute who had featured in many of Neil’s nightmares and who even his mother had been afraid of. He dug the star that was still embedded in his skin out of his side and threw it, reaching out with his power to direct it: making sure that it buried itself into DiMaccio’s throat. He went down with a gurgle, spurting blood from his severed carotid artery.

This time Neil breathed through the sudden nausea brought on by using his powers in public. He wrenched his thoughts away from his mother and thought of the Foxes instead. They know what you are and they would never hurt you, he reminded himself.

He heard footsteps in pursuit and Lola let loose a screech behind him when she saw that DiMaccio was down. The stadwatch on the bridge took notice of the commotion and started yelling and coming toward him. Neil tried to focus on escape. He climbed up onto the railing of the bridge, taking out his knives to keep everyone back.

“Junior, there’s nowhere you can go,” called Lola. “There’s nowhere we can’t find you. Come quietly and I’ll promise that he’ll make it quick.”

Neil’s eyes darted around looking for an exit and not finding one. “Take a step closer and I’ll put this through your eye,” he threatened, twirling one of his knives.

Lola’s eyes narrowed. “Have it your way,” she sneered, before throwing a handful of the silver stars. He tried to direct them away, but there were too many and they pierced his stomach, his chest, his arms. In his attempts to dodge he lost his footing and fell backwards into the canal below.

He gasped in pain as the water covered his injuries, inhaling a lungful of canal water.

Andrew is going to be so angry, he thought dazedly, as he sunk into the inky blackness.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

Dan was watching Andrew with a wrinkle in her brow before glancing around. “Is Neil not back yet?” she asked.
Chapter Summary

In which the Foxes regroup.

Chapter Notes

Last chapter seemed to result in a whole lot of angry/worried screaming. Thank you all for sharing with me :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It seemed like hours that Andrew led Nicky stealthily through the city. After they first escaped his father’s house, on the canal, they had joined the regular traffic, rowing at a constant pace so as to not attract attention. But soon Andrew had maneuvered them onto the smaller waterways, keeping to the shadows, pausing under bridges as groups of *stadwatch* rushed overhead. Eventually they had abandoned their *gondel* and made their way through the Financial District on foot, ducking into doorways and down alleys to avoid the increased guard activity.

“It will be even worse in the Barrel,” Andrew muttered. “It will take Renee and Dan ages to get here, assuming that they got away from the Ravens.”

Nicky’s heart caught in his throat. Were their friends even still alive? Had the Ravens caught them? Or was Erik lying dead on Black Veil while Nicky crept his way obliviously through the city?

*No*, he thought fiercely. He couldn’t imagine that Erik - bright, loud, vibrant Erik - could possibly be dead. He’d seen all of the Foxes rebound from terrible odds. He just had to keep believing that all of them were alright and on their way to… wherever it was that Andrew was leading him.

“How would they know to come here?” he asked in an undertone.

Andrew snorted. “The Foxes all knew where to regroup should anything get fucked up. And all of them - barring Aaron - know the city well enough to avoid the guards.”

Andrew continued to make his way through the Financial District until Nicky recognized where they were: the large courtyard outside the Church of Barter. They were quite close to Nicky’s father’s house, actually, but had travelled in a truly circuitous route to reach their destination.

Andrew led him into the back entrance of an ornate building. He took a couple turns and then opened a door which led to a dark, narrow staircase. They climbed to the top of the staircase and let themselves out into a richly decorated hallway, dotted with a beautiful door, a single room taking up the entire floor. Nicky gaped: this was the penthouse suite of the Geldrenner hotel, the most expensive rooms in the city.

Nicky followed dutifully as Andrew strode to the door and rapped smartly. It wasn’t long before a Zemeni woman with her hair in a long braid opened the door. Her eyes appeared tired and sad, but
Nicky recognized her as Matt’s mother.

“The others are inside,” she said quietly, letting Andrew and Nicky enter. Nicky’s heart sped up in excitement, and he tried not to feel crushing disappointment that only Matt, Aaron, and Thea were inside.

Matt got up to come greet them, giving Nicky a hug and explaining in a soft voice that they’d been detained by the *stadwatch* but Robin had broken them out. She’d then gone back out into the city to try and get more information; it wasn’t like *her* face was on any wanted posters.

Andrew nodded mutely and then took a seat on by the window, staring blankly out into the night.

Nicky tried to make small talk with Matt and Thea, but gave up shortly and resigned himself to a silent vigil, waiting to hear from their friends.

It was after eleven bells when there was another knock on the door. They all perked up and watched as Randy went to answer the door. Allison, Kevin, and Erik followed her back in. Thea made a relieved noise and went to greet Kevin while Matt enthusiastically hugged Allison and Erik, one in each of his arms. Nicky made his way over, feeling the absurd urge to cry. They were fine, they were here. There was no reason to think of the might-have-beens. He blinked several times and tried to focus; he had no desire to fall apart in Erik’s arms again.

Erik gave him a searching look and then wrapped him in a hug. Nicky felt some of the night’s tension fall off of his shoulders as he returned Erik’s hug, perhaps gripping slightly too tightly.

Allison looked around. “No word from Sweet Reef?” she asked. At Matt’s head shake, her mouth flattened into a line. She turned towards Nicky. “Where’s Neil? I thought he was with you.”

Nicky shook his head. “He helped us break into my father’s office, but he left to go do something else while we were inside.”

“Something *else* to put the rest of us in danger?” asked Aaron acidly.

Andrew blinked once and turned to look at Aaron. Nicky took a step back from the dark anger that he radiated. “Now is not the best time for you to complain about putting others in danger,” he told Aaron, before turning back to the window. Aaron looked like his was going to argue, but apparently the emotion in Andrew’s eyes had given him pause. He shook his head and didn’t say anything more.

“But where did Neil go?” Erik finally asked after a brief period of awkward silence.

Allison and Matt both swiveled their heads to look at Andrew. “Something to try to distract the Ravens,” he said without inflection or without turning away from the window again.

“Seems a little late for that,” replied Allison with false sweetness. Andrew didn’t react and surprisingly Allison let it go. She sat heavily on one of the sofas and started telling Matt what had happened at Black Veil.

Although Nicky was feeling relieved that Erik had made it alive, he was worried about the still-missing Foxes. Erik was clearly trying to be jovial and distracting in order to keep Allison and Matt’s spirits up, but the tension in the room mounted steadily as the clock kept ticking onward.

Nicky thought he was going to succumb to the atmosphere in the hotel suite and just start screaming wordlessly when there was another knock at the door. The time was well past midnight now. Allison stilled like a dog that had caught a scent, and even Aaron looked interested instead of bitter and
miserable.

Dan, Katelyn, and Renee entered looking disheveled and exhausted, but also bright-eyed and alive. The three of them were pulled into hugs by Matt, Aaron, and Allison respectively, and Aaron even seemed to choke back a sob. Erik came over to put his arm around Nicky's shoulders as they happily watched the emotional reunions. Andrew looked up enough to nod a greeting to Renee before he resumed his blank stare out the window.

There was a flurry of conversation, then, as everybody tried to explain what had happened.

“We blew up Black Veil,” Allison said nonchalantly, to Dan’s dubious look.

“Andrew broke a hole in my father’s house and we landed in the middle of his dinner,” Nicky said.

“We tricked the Ravens into thinking there were ghosts on the island,” Kevin was saying.

“We only managed to sabotage two of the sugar silos before the Ravens showed up,” complained Dan.

“Aaron got mistaken for Andrew and he was not happy about it,” laughed Matt.

“Renee can raise the dead,” said Katelyn, bringing everyone else up short.

“What?” said Allison after several beats of silence.

“I can’t raise the dead,” said Renee. “I mean, I can control them, and make them get up and walk around, but they’re still dead.”

“Is that why you were asking me if your powers could change?” asked Kevin.

“At the lake house I accidentally killed a guard with dust, and when I was at the Grisha embassy I attacked the building with bone shards.”

Nicky paused to think for a second. “There used to be a graveyard next to my father’s lake house before he renovated. Maybe the dust you controlled was, you know, full of people bits.”

“Huh,” said Allison thoughtfully. “That’s new.”

“That’s what I said!” cried Dan excitedly. “Renee seems less thrilled about it.”

“It’s not natural,” argued Renee.

“Well the Corporalki are the Order of the Living and the Dead,” said Kevin officiously. “And the amplifier obviously burnt out your Heartrender power. What if it just turned it inside out instead of being erased completely?”

“It’ll take some getting used to,” Renee said quietly.

“Well I think it’s great,” said Allison. Everyone stared at her. “What?” she asked. “Renee looks healthier than she has since she used that fucking amplifier. Obviously I’m in favour of anything that could make her feel better, even if it is controlling corpses.”

Everyone shrugged and nodded. Dan was watching Andrew with a wrinkle in her brow before glancing around. “Is Neil not back yet?” she asked.

They all abruptly sobered as they realized that not everyone was yet accounted for. They quietly
returned to their vigil.

Several of them dozed on the couches and Randy ordered some food to be brought up to the room as they waited for news. Andrew did not move or talk to anyone until a knock sounded on the door shortly after dawn.

He made a beeline for it and yanked it open, but it was only Robin on the other side. Nicky saw Matt’s shoulders slump in dejection as Robin had an urgent conversation with Andrew. She spoke quickly in low tones before leaving again. Andrew turned towards Randy. “Does this floor have access to the clock tower?” he asked.

Covering her surprise, she pointed out a small door on the far side of the hall. Andrew took the stairs up into the clock tower, with the rest of them following him curiously.

“What’s going on?” Dan asked.

Andrew motioned with his hand toward the window. In the early morning light they could see stadwatch boats and wagons were dotted throughout the city, concentrated in the harbours. “They’ve closed the harbours and stopped the browboats. All access points to the city are under guard. No one can get in or out.”

Allison scoffed. “The people of Ketterdam will never stand for that,” she said.

“They won’t blame my father,” said Nicky, with revulsion. “They’ll blame us.”

“We’re caught in a trap that’s slowly closing,” said Andrew. “Robin says that wanted posters for Kevin have now joined ours.”

There was a slight disturbance on the far side of Zentsbridge, a large group of brightly coloured people marching towards the Financial District.

“Is that a mob?” asked Renee.

“A parade,” said Andrew dryly.

They watched as the group marched into the square outside of the Church of Barter.

“Those are the Ravens,” said Matt pointing at a group of people.

“Terrapins, Bearcats… Trojans,” Erik listed different Barrel gangs. “I see all the Barrel gangs. What’s going on? What are they doing here?”

“They’ve been deputized,” answered Andrew. Peering out the window, Nicky could see that the gang members were wearing a stadwatch -purple ribbon tied around their upper arms. “With Cass advising him, Luther would have known that the stadwatch locking down the city would never contain the Barrel gangs. Instead, he’s got them as a second army.”

Dan gave a gasp, sounding as if she’d been stabbed. “Foxes,” she said sadly, pointing towards a group of orange-clad people. Matt reached out to stroke his hand down her back consolingly.

“They had to, Dan,” said Renee softly. “Can you imagine how bad it would be if every other gang was deputized? The Foxes would be torn apart.”

Dan nodded dejectedly and turned her gaze back outside.

“What do we do?” asked Allison. “Can we give Kevin to Luther?”
“Hey!” interjected Kevin.

Andrew just shook his head. “It’s too late for that. Cass will want to use this chance to take me out with the full support of the rest of the Barrel gangs, and there’s no way the Luther will let us go free after everything that’s happened.”

“So what now?” asked Nicky.

“The Barrel gangs and the *stadwatch* tear apart the city until we’re found,” said Andrew. They all waited for more.

“That’s it?” Erik finally asked incredulously. “That’s your plan?”

“I could turn myself in,” offered Andrew.

Everyone stared at him in shock for several moments before, “No!” said Aaron vehemently.

Andrew shrugged. “The Merchant Council approved this lockdown because Luther told them I kidnapped Nicky. I could turn myself in and tell them I killed him. Then the *stadwatch* and the Barrel gangs would have to stand down and the rest of you could quietly leave the city.”

“They’ll have you hanged,” argued Matt.

“They don’t have a jail cell that can hold me,” said Andrew.

“And Luther knows that,” said Allison. “You’d be killed before you could reach a jail cell.”

“I could probably escape,” said Andrew, sounding bored.

“No,” said Aaron again, more firmly this time. “That’s a fucking stupid plan. We’re not hiding here while you give yourself up in some uncharacteristic act of martyrdom.”

Half way through Aaron’s speech, Andrew’s face had gone slack and he stood staring into the middle distance. Nicky felt a thrill inside him. He’d seen Andrew look like this a couple times now, and great things always followed.

“Do you think he has a plan?” Dan asked quietly.

“Definitely,” Matt whispered back.

“I know how to do it,” Andrew said slowly, after several minutes of tense anticipation. “I know how to get our money, get Kevin and the Grisha to Ravka, discredit Luther, and destroy Cass.”

“Good,” said a new voice, coming from the direction of the stairs. Nicky wheeled around to look at the newcomer. Neil was sopping wet, with a wicked looking burn mark on his face and several tears in his clothing that were leaking blood. “Because those assholes are not going to chase us out of our city.”

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

“Neil, yes or no?”
There was an explosion of sound in the small clock tower room. Andrew heard the exclamations of surprise from the Foxes: shouts of “Neil!”, and “What happened?”, and “Where have you been?” being the most common, although Allison had demanded why he was all wet and Erik had lamented the state of Neil’s ‘beautiful face’.

Andrew couldn’t speak at first, the relief of seeing Neil alive and whole flowing like a river of warmth through his body. During the long hours of the night, as he’d waited, seemingly in vain, for Neil to return, he’d convinced himself that he had failed. That his promise of protection to Neil had been a lie. He thought that he’d allowed his desire to ruin Cass to have lost him something irreplaceable and precious.

“You were stabbed?” he asked, his gravelly voice easily cutting through the chatter. He couldn’t quite keep the slight waver out of his voice, but he doubted that anyone here, save Neil or maybe Aaron, would be able to detect it.

Neil rolled his eyes. “I was lightly stabbed,” he said, indicating that, true to form, he wasn’t taking his injuries seriously enough. “And does it even count as stabbing if it wasn’t a knife?” He took an object shaped like a silver sun out of his pocket.

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“Someone threw that at you?” asked Matt.

“Old friend,” said Neil shortly.

“Are you sure you know the difference between friends and enemies?” asked Allison sardonically.

“What happened to your face?” inquired Erik.

Neil swallowed and looked down. “She hit me with something. She said it was used to brand Grisha - to ensure that everyone would know what they are.”

Andrew had been drawn inexorably towards Neil since his arrival and he’d made it into arm’s reach. He grabbed him by the collar before grimacing.

“Why are you wet?” he asked, moving his hand to curl around the back of Neil’s neck.
“Escaped in the canal.”

Aaron gave a little noise of horror behind them. “You went for a swim in one of the city’s canals with open wounds?” he hissed.

“I didn’t really have a choice,” protested Neil.

“You may have well gone swimming in disease,” spat Aaron. “You need to clean those wounds out, now.”

“I’ll be fine. I’ll go see Abby later,” said Neil, but Andrew was already steering him down the stairs towards the hotel suite’s washroom.

“Stay away from us,” he told the rest of the Foxes as they tried to follow. “I will explain what I have planned after Neil’s patched up.”

Aaron ignored his command and followed them, muttering about reckless idiots and how if stab wounds wouldn’t kill them then infections would. He rushed to get his medical kit. Andrew ushered Neil into the washroom and then turned and blocked Aaron’s access to the room.

“Andrew, get out of my way, I have to take care of those wounds.” Despite everything that could be said about Aaron, he was dedicated to healing people. No matter how much he disliked Neil he would treat him to the best of his ability.

“I do not want you anywhere near him,” Andrew told him.

“Now is not the time for your overprotective shtick, Andrew! His wounds need to be cleaned.”

“Maybe I just don’t trust you.”

Aaron’s face slackened in shock. “Why wouldn’t you?”

“Something Cass said tonight confused me. She said that Riko found out about our planned departure to Evermore from sources who had apparently heard it directly from me. I know that I am not stupid enough to give out that information to anyone reporting to Riko, but there is someone walking around with my face, complaining about everything.”

“I didn’t say anything!” Aaron protested. “I didn’t! I-” he cut himself off and paused, thinking. “I may have said something about taking a holiday trip to Shu Han, but not to any of the Ravens!”

“Yet that information got back to them.”

“Look, I was just annoyed that you were taking a trip while I had to stay here and pretend to be you! I didn’t mean any harm.”

“Because of you the Ravens ambushed us and could have killed any one of us. Only my justifiable paranoia and my insistence on decoys and backup plans saved us. Regardless, Riko almost killed Neil. All because you couldn’t keep your mouth shut.”

“Hey, this isn’t easy for me like it is for you! I never asked for this life!” Aaron exploded.

Andrew blinked, surprised. “You think my life is easy?”

“That’s not… that’s not what I meant,” said Aaron, calming down and backtracking. “But this life? Being a Fox? That’s something that you wanted and worked for. I don’t feel like there’s any place in this life for me.”
“I did not have much choice,” Andrew pointed out. “I have tried to make a place for you.”

“You left me with our mother.” Andrew gave him a dark look, so Aaron expanded, “Not when she sold you, but after Wymack bought your contract.”

“I thought you were happy. As soon as I found out you weren’t, I acted,” Andrew pointed out. “Which you have held against Neil and me for years. I offered to protect you from the other Foxes, to prevent them from toughening you up like they do to most other recruits. Yet you continue to provoke them and take out your bad mood on everyone around you. I talked Wymack into offering you a deal to allow you to become a medik. Did you think that he offers to let everyone follow their dream while performing as little as possible for the Foxes? Even with almost no responsibilities you’ve still managed to jeopardize all our lives. Everything that I’ve tried to do for you you’ve thrown back in my face.”

Aaron was staring at Andrew as if he’d never seen him. It was probably the most that Andrew had ever said to him at one time.

Andrew could feel the deep well of anger within him threaten to boil over. “And now I’ll have to protect you again. If I tell the others that Riko’s ambush was your fault, do you think they’ll let you off lightly? How do you think they’ll react when I tell them that you thoughtlessly put their lives in danger and almost lost us Neil?”

Aaron deflated slightly. “What do you want from me?” he said in a small voice.

Andrew shrugged helplessly. “I don’t want anything.”

“Andrew…”

“Just… do better,” Andrew suggested. “Stop treating us like we’re your enemies.”

“I’ll… I’ll try.”

“Don’t try,” growled Andrew. “Just do better.”

He took Aaron’s medik’s kit before closing the door in his face.

“Remember to use antiseptics!” Aaron called through the door, before his footsteps retreated.

Andrew turned towards Neil who had a too-blank look on his face.

“Do we need to talk about it?” Andrew asked, referring to the fact that Aaron was responsible for Riko’s ambush. He stalked towards Neil.

Neil appeared to think about it. “Do you need to?” he asked.

“No.”

“Then no,” he concluded.

Andrew reached out and caught Neil’s chin in his hand, tilting his head to examine the burn. It was circular and had a spiral pattern, centred just below Neil’s left cheekbone. “Who?” he said harshly.

“Lola,” said Neil, shuddering, sounding as if he’d forced the word out. “My father’s favourite. She was waiting on the roof of the Foxhole.” He looked despondent. “She was at our home, Andrew.”

“Cass sent them after you.”
“Does your ingenious plan include a way to get rid of Lola and my father?”

“Not as such, no,” admitted Andrew. “We’ll just have to kill them.”

“That easy, huh?” said Neil wryly, as Andrew began to strip off Neil’s shirt.

“It is,” said Andrew. At Neil’s scoff, he grabbed the back of Neil’s neck. “Listen to me. I do not know this woman or her abilities, but I know you. As you said upstairs this is your city. You have the advantage. She caught you off-guard this time, but you know she’ll come after you again. You’ll be ready for her and you’ll use your knowledge of this city against her. The only thing that’s in her favour is your fear.”

“I can’t just turn off my fear,” said Neil, his blue eyes boring into Andrew’s.

“No, but you can master it,” replied Andrew. “You’re not a helpless child any longer. You were the one who wanted to take a stand. Do you take that back?”

Neil shook his head. “No,” he said. “I can’t run and hide forever.”

“Then the only option is to beat them,” said Andrew.

Neil stared into his eyes for another couple moments before nodding sharply and then stepping, naked, into the bathtub.

The room was the most opulent washroom that Andrew had ever seen. The tub and all the fixtures were a burnished copper and Andrew knew that the pipes would bring hot water. He began running warm water into the tub and wondered if he’d ever live someplace where he could take advantage of this type of luxury every day.

He wet a washcloth and began carefully cleaning Neil with the provided soaps. Neil hissed a little as the soap reached his puncture wounds, but spent most of his time silently gazing at Andrew’s face. Andrew, feeling exposed, wanted to push his face away.

“All right,” he said.

“Don’t look at me like that,” he said with a growl in his voice.

“I want to,” said Neil simply. “I like looking at you.”

Andrew just huffed and yanked Neil up and out of the bathtub, drying him briskly with a towel. He wrapped the towel around Neil’s waist and then steered him towards the closed toilet, forcing him to sit. Grabbing up Aaron’s medik kit, he placed it on the counter and started rifling through it, looking for the antiseptic cream and bandages.

He started on the lowest wound on Neil’s belly, kneeling on the floor, carefully applying the cream and then covering the wound with a bandage. He let his fingers trail across Neil’s warm, scarred skin and watched in fascination as goosebumps broke out. He made his way up Neil’s body, taking care of each wound, until all that was left was the burn on his face.

Andrew stood between Neil’s knees, using both hands to tilt his head up. He wasn’t a gentle person, but he tried to be as gentle as possible cleaning out the burn. Neil couldn’t control all of his reactions, wincing and gasping periodically, but he mostly remaining placid and trusting under Andrew’s hands.

Finally, after taping the bandage in place, he kept his hands cupped around Neil’s jaw. He looked down into Neil’s eyes and let himself feel.
“I want to kiss you,” he said quietly, finally admitting it. “Neil, yes or no?”

“Yes, Andrew,” Neil said on an exhale.

It was not a gentle exploratory kiss: it was a fight with their lives on the line, intense and all-encompassing. Neil kissed with shy hesitance, obviously unskilled. Andrew had kissed other people consensually before, after he had joined the Foxes. Those kisses had been diversions, experiments. They were nothing like this. This kiss made him feel that his world stopped and started with Neil’s mouth; the hot slide of their tongues together the only thing of importance.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Neil’s hand reach for him, before Neil balled it into a fist and started to lower it. A bolt of something - affection, maybe? Appreciation? - hit his stomach, because Neil knew him. Neil had proven time and time again through their long association that he would never take more than Andrew was willing to give.

Andrew caught Neil’s hand and transferred it to his hair. “Just here,” he said against Neil’s lips. Neil hummed in response and threaded his fingers through Andrew’s hair, pulling him back into another kiss.

Andrew felt something within him settle - something that had broken into shattered pieces when Cass had cornered him - that hadn’t been satisfied simply by seeing Neil alive, by putting his hands on him. It was like something snapping into place, a puzzle piece that he hadn’t known had been missing. When he had imagined this he had thought that kissing Neil would be revelatory, life changing. It was, to some extent, but mostly it felt safe and comfortable. It felt like quiet nights together, smoking out their bedroom window; like hot cocoa with Bee; like sparring with Renee; like when he shared a whiskey with Wymack; like coming up with an impossible plan. It felt like home.

Unfortunately they couldn’t stay barricaded in the washroom trading kisses forever. The rest of the Foxes were waiting (most likely impatiently) to hear his plan, and then they had to get to work. He would have to let Neil out of his sight again, despite how poorly that had gone before.

He pulled back from the kiss and rested his forehead against Neil’s, panting a little. He tried to get his breath under control quickly, trying to show that he was completely unaffected; although he knew that his cheeks were flushed and if his lips looked as kiss-swollen as Neil’s then he was fighting a losing battle.

Neil looked up at him, his pupils dilated and a slightly dazed look on his face. Then he smirked and Andrew braced himself for his usual nonsense.

“You must be a broom, because you just swept me off my feet,” he said. Then he lowered his voice. “I have so many pickup lines from Allison that I never got around to trying.”

“Stop talking,” said Andrew, moving his hands to grasp the back of Neil’s head.

“Make me,” replied Neil, his eyes smiling and happy.

Andrew kissed him into silence.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:
“So far we have been playing into Luther’s hand,” Andrew said. “By remaining hidden we have allowed him to dictate the narrative. It’s time for us to take control.”
The Foxes congregated in the main sitting room of Randy’s hotel suite. They pushed the couches and loveseats into a semicircle facing the chair that Andrew had claimed and crammed themselves into the available space. Neil sat outside the crush of bodies, perching on the windowsill.

His mind was still spinning from the kisses that he’d shared with Andrew. He knew now why his mother had been so violently against him having any romantic interests: this was distraction and obsession. He felt almost dizzy and it took effort to concentrate - although the analgesics he had taken to ease the pain from his burns may have also contributed to his cloudy-headedness.

He watched as everybody else got comfortable. Matt sent him a questioning look so Neil saluted him, calling “I’m fine,” which caused Matt’s face to split into a wide grin, Allison to roll her eyes, and Dan to shake her head with fond exasperation. Neil passed his gaze over to where Aaron was sitting with Katelyn. He was watching his brother as if he’d discovered a new species. Neil had heard their argument earlier; Andrew’s exhaustion and frustration had led to him sharing more of his thoughts than he usually did with Aaron and Neil thought that maybe Andrew had finally gotten through to him. Aaron had been more thoughtful and slightly less abrasive since Drake’s death and Neil hoped for Andrew’s sake that the twins’ long miscommunications caused by Andrew’s unwillingness to share and Aaron’s unwillingness to listen could at last begin to be resolved.

Once the Foxes had settled, staring at Andrew in anticipation, he began outlining his plan.

“So far we have been playing into Luther’s hand,” Andrew said. “By remaining hidden we have allowed him to dictate the narrative. It’s time for us to take control.”

“If we don’t stay hidden, we’ll all be arrested or killed,” pointed out Erik.

“Unless we get offered protection,” replied Andrew.

“Right now everyone in the city is trying to find us,” argued Allison. “Why would anyone offer to protect us?”

“We have to use the city’s most sacred secular and religious laws against them,” said Andrew. “What’s the most important thing in Kerch?”

“Trade,” replied Nicky.
“Exactly,” continued Andrew. “And what right does both the Merchant Council and the Church uphold for every person who steps onto Kerch soil?”

Everyone made confused faces and looked around to see if anyone had the answer, focussing on those native to Kerch.

Neil decided to help them out. “The right to sell their services,” he provided.

Allison pointed at him with dawning realization. “As soon as someone legally announces their decision to sell themselves into indentured servitude, the Merchant Council, the stadwatch , the Church clerics, and even the Council of Tides are required by the strictest laws in this country to protect that person until the auction has taken place,” she explained to the rest of them.

“So we’re all going to sell ourselves into indentured servitude?” asked Thea, sounding extremely skeptical.

“No,” said Andrew. “Kevin is.”

Kevin sputtered immediately. “I am not ,” he said. “Anyone could buy me. What’s to stop Ichirou or the Butcher’s Men or the Fjerdnans from getting me?”

“Clearly we’re going to rig the auction,” said Dan patiently. “Right, Andrew?”

“Something like that,” Andrew agreed. “I’m sure the Ravkans will be happy to have you.” Kevin frowned, but nodded hesitantly.

“He’s going to sell for tens of millions of krug ,” Renee pointed out. “Do we know that Ravka has enough money for him? Or the willingness to spend that much?”

“They probably do not,” said Andrew. “Which is why the Merchant Council is going to bankroll them.”

“The Merchant Council is responsible for running the auction,” said Nicky. “It’s unlawful for them to be financially involved with any of the bidders. The laws prevent that as much as they protect the auction.”

“They will not be aware of their involvement,” replied Andrew. At everyone’s blank stares, he continued. “Kevin wrote to the Kerch Merchant Council asking for help, yes? And they decided to do nothing, frightened about compromising their neutrality. Only Luther decided that acquiring Kevin would be profitable enough to outweigh the risks. He knows that once the secret of the amplifiers is widely known coral will be in high demand. The Merchant Council knows this, too. Once Kevin announces his intention to sell himself, they would finally be free to act.”

“By investing in coral fisheries?” guessed Nicky.

“Precisely. We set up a consortium representing a group of coral fisheries looking for investors. All we have to do is present the opportunity and their greed will do the rest.”

“And we take the money they invest and funnel it to Ravka?” asked Erik.

“More or less,” said Andrew. “We’ll take a percentage, of course. Like a bank.”

“Won’t they be suspicious about the sudden appearance of a coral fishery consortium?” asked Dan. “And we need a representative. Who could it be? Luther knows most of us.”
“There is someone,” said Andrew cryptically. “Someone from Novyi Zem who came to town a few days ago, who’s been staying in the most expensive suite at the Geldrenner hotel.”

It took a few moments before Matt caught on. “No!” he cried. “You’re not using my mother like that.”

“I already said I’d help, Matty,” said Randy from where she’d been quietly listening, leaning against the wall.

“I’m pretty sure even the dimmest Council member would be able to connect Randy Boyd to Matt Boyd, the criminal who has wanted posters up around the city,” said Matt hotly.

“But there is no Randy Boyd staying at the Geldrenner,” said Andrew with false innocence. “Randy Boyd came to town and stayed in a small hotel in the University District and booked passage on a ship out of Ketterdam the day after being ambushed with her son in broad daylight. Stephanie Walker, on the other hand, a Zemeni representative of the Reddin Coral Consortium, checked into the Geldrenner a few days ago and has been seen dining in the hotel.”

“Stephanie Walker?” asked Renee.

Surprisingly, it was Dan who answered. “It’s one of Abby’s aliases. She and Betsy and Wymack have multiple aliases in case they ever needed to disappear suddenly, from when we were still privateers and worried someone might come after them.”

“I told you he wanted to use you,” Matt said bitterly to his mother.

“And I told you that I’d always willingly go into danger for you,” she replied. “Besides,” she continued with a smile, “I’m already harbouring fugitives. May as well aid as well as abet.”

“How is this even going to work?” asked Erik.

“Randy asks for a relatively low buy-in to the fund, say two million krige,” replied Andrew. “But there will be the option of investing more. We won’t demand anything, but they’re not stupid. The Shu want Kevin, the Fjerdans, the Kaelish. All those groups will be interested in making amplifiers. In fact, as long as the Ravkans don’t win the price of coral is going to be going up. The council’s greed will win. I expect we’ll get at least five million from each Council member.”

“There’s thirteen Council members,” said Nicky. “That’s sixty-five million krige.”

“At least,” said Allison.

“Even assuming that this works,” said Thea. “And the stadwatch and the Council of Tides agree to protect Kevin, can we really guarantee his safety?”

“Of course we can’t guarantee it,” replied Andrew. “Unless we put him in an impenetrable bubble there’s always going to be a risk. It’ll be safer than waiting to be caught like a rat in a trap.”

“I also wouldn’t count of the protection of the Council of Tides,” said Katelyn. “They haven’t made a public appearance in, what? Twenty-five years?”

“The threat of their intervention is enough,” said Andrew shortly.

“So what? We’re just sending Kevin to the auction alone and hoping that he’ll be fine?” asked Thea.

“No, we’ll be going with him,” replied Andrew.
“And what’s to stop the **stadwatch** from arresting us? Only Kevin will be protected under the law,” Matt pointed out, but Nicky shook his head.

“The Merchant Council will be appointed as Kevin’s representative during the auction, but he has the right to name his own protectors. They, too, are under the protection of the law until after the auction ends.”

“Erik, Thea, and I will be accompanying Kevin to the stage,” said Andrew.

“Stage?” asked Renee.

“Auctions are held at the Church of Barter, under Ghezen’s watchful eyes,” explained Allison, sounding contemptuous.

“You want me to be on stage in front of all those people?” asked Erik. “If the Fjerdans recognize me they could demand my extradition. And I don’t think the Shu are super happy with Thea right now.”

“They cannot touch you until the auction is over,” said Andrew.

“And then?” asked Thea.

“And then they will be distracted.”

Dan frowned. “Even if we can distract them, they’re not going to disappear. After the auction we’ll still be up against all the Barrel gangs, the Butcher’s Men, Cass, the Shu, the Fjerdans, Luther, and the **stadwatch**.” She looked overwhelmed as she ticked off their opponents on her fingers.

“It really is an impressive list of enemies,” said Erik. “Do we get a prize?”

“Death, probably,” said Allison.

“There is one thing that Ketterdam fears more than the Barrel gangs, the Butcher’s Men, the Shu, the Fjerdans, and the **stadwatch** combined,” said Andrew. “One thing that scares the people of this city more than anything else. And Renee is going to give it to them.”

***

It was dark again by the time Neil left the hotel. The Foxes had spent the morning peppering Andrew with questions and hammering out the details of his plan. The afternoon had been spent napping. Neil had managed to get a couple hours of rest before silently picking his way through his friends who were sprawled out throughout the suite.

He made his way to the clock tower where Andrew was having a cigarette by the window.

“Robin just left,” Andrew said without looking at him as soon as he reached the top of the stairs. “She carried my messages to Wymack and the Trojans.”

“Oh,” said Neil quietly. When Andrew didn’t say anything else, he continued, “I’m off now.” Andrew continued to sit silently while Neil waited. Eventually, Neil said, “I’ll be careful.”

“You said that last time,” Andrew replied.

“My father’s men do not have the resources or political capital to attack an embassy,” said Neil. “I’ll stick to the rooftops. I’ll be fine.”

Andrew didn’t reply but reached his hand out towards Neil. Neil walked towards him and allowed
Andrew to reel him in and kiss him fiercely. “This time do not let anyone break your face,” he said.

Neil smiled. “I’ll be back soon,” he promised, before swinging himself out into the night.

It was not far to the tavern outside the Ravkan embassy where Renee and Abby had spoken to the Ravkan king, but Neil moved through the night much more slowly and cautiously than he usually did. He’d spoken the truth when he’d told Andrew that it was unlikely that his father’s men would be waiting for him, but he kept seeing Lola’s form within every shadow.

Finally, he made it to the tavern and sneaked in the back door. He was instantly challenged by several guards, but he spoke the pass phrase that had been given to Renee. He was escorted underground, into a large circular room where he found Abby and Betsy (who he hadn’t been sure would be here, but he wasn’t surprised: Wymack would want them in a more defensible location with the Butcher’s Men in town), a man with a regal bearing who must be King Rhemann, and his uncle Stuart.

Stuart gaped at him for several long moments before he reacted. “Bloody hell,” he swore. “Nathaniel?”

Neil managed to subdue his flinch. “Neil, now,” he said.

“Neil, what happened to your face?” asked Abby with worry, as she came towards him with her hands outstretched.

Stuart ignored her. “Where is Mary?” he asked harshly.

Neil swallowed heavily and shook his head at his uncle. “Three years ago,” he said, sounding as if the words had been scraped out of him, before turning his attention to Abby. “I was attacked by one of the Butcher’s Men. She hit me in the face with a medallion; it was coated in some kind of substance which burned like acid. She said that healing wouldn’t work, that they wanted me branded as a Grisha.”

He saw Abby falter slightly in surprise when he admitted what he was, but Betsy looked unperturbed. He’d always avoided her for precisely this reason: her sharp intelligence would allow her to discover his secret easily.

Abby shook off her surprise and reached for his face again. He felt the telltale itchiness on his face that signified a Healer’s power, but Abby continued frowning. “I’ve only know of one substance that can prevent healing like this,” she said slowly, turning to look at Betsy over her shoulder.

Neil looked at Betsy’s scarred face and eyepatch and understood. He, himself, was covered in scars, but that was because his own skills at healing were rudimentary and he would never have trusted another Grisha to heal him. He could Tailor them away, but he rarely bothered since it was difficult and they were hidden under his clothes. Betsy’s scars could not be Tailored away. Her scars had been made by nichevo’ya, giant, winged demons that had come from the Shadow Fold, a swathe of impenetrable darkness that had infected Ravka until Kayleigh Day had destroyed it.

“The Shadow Fold has been gone for over twenty years,” King Rhemann said sharply once he understood what Abby was implying.

“But it stood for over a hundred years before that,” said Betsy calmly. “We know what the Darkling was doing with his monsters during the civil war—” she gestured to her own face, still bearing the marks of the torture that the Darkling had commanded “—it is not impossible that their venom was collected.”
The King frowned deeply. “And now it’s being used to mark Grisha?” He turned towards Stuart. “Is there a black market supply? What can be done?”

“You could kill the Butcher’s Men,” said Neil dryly. Then, when he noticed the looks leveled at him by his uncle and the King of Ravka, he cleared his throat. “Uh... I mean... you could kill them, your highness?” he corrected.

King Rhemann appeared vaguely amused by his fumbling more than anything, while Stuart grumbled. “For sure I’ll kill your father next I see him,” he threatened.

“Good,” said Neil shortly. “In the meantime, we have an idea for how to make sure that the secret of Kevin’s amplifiers is buried forever, but we’ll need your help.”

The King raised an eyebrow and leaned forward. “I’m listening,” he said.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

“No,” said Renee immediately. “Allison, you can’t go back there.”
Chapter Summary

In which the bait is taken.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thea stood at attention at Matt’s mother’s shoulder, trying not to appear as bored as she was. She was acting as a guard for 'Stephanie Walker' as she took meetings in the Geldrenner’s lavish dining room with various members of Kerch’s trade and banking community, while Katelyn pretended to take notes. Katelyn was acting as Stephanie’s assistant and lending her ability to flirt and charm when Stephanie’s fell short. The meetings were mind-numbingly dull; discussions about the fishing conditions and military movement in the Southern Colonies, or import taxes and market rates. They sat far enough away from the other tables to ensure that there could be no eavesdropping and Thea’s glare kept interested parties away.

They were keeping up appearances, trying to convince any Merchant Council spies that Stephanie Walker was the real deal.

They’d sent out an announcement several days ago: proclaiming that Kevin Day was, under the supervision of the Merchant Council and the Council of Tides, offering his services to be purchased in a free and fair auction.

The response in the city had been immediate and immense. The Merchant Council had locked themselves away, debating whether they would uphold the city’s laws or deny Kevin his rights. The Foxes had waited breathlessly in the clock tower, watching the square until the Merchant Council had appeared and announced that they would sanction the auction.

Exhaling a sigh of relief, Matt asked, “What now?”

“We cannot approach them directly,” Andrew replied. “Those men are both rich and smart, which will work in our favour. They will believe that their intelligence means that they cannot be duped. We have to whisper news of this investment opportunity into several ears. Their greed will make them come to us.”

“Whose ears?” asked Dan.

Andrew pointed down towards the Council Members still in the square. “Whittier is always looking for investment opportunities, Andritch is running a deficit and is looking for a get-rich-quick solution to his troubles, and Reynolds is looking for more power by bringing something lucrative to the Merchant Council.”

Allison stilled and looked at Andrew before giving a completely humourless laugh.

Thea did not understand what had caused Allison to react in such a manner, so she decided to steamroll over it. “How do we get to them?” she asked.

“Whittier has a mistress who is friends with Katelyn and works in one of our taverns; Andritch
employs George Waterhouse to represent him; and—" he paused, and turned his intense look towards Allison “-Reynolds has a daughter he wants back.”

“No,” said Renee immediately. “Allison, you can’t go back there.”

“Yeah, weren’t you disowned?” asked Erik tactlessly.

Allison tilted her head downwards, staring with blank eyes at the floor as she tightened her right hand into a fist. “I can go back,” she said slowly. Then, louder, “My father said I can return just as soon as I thank them for killing Seth.”

Silence rung within the small clock tower room. Thea didn’t know the background information so she tried to appear as inconspicuous as possible and watched Kevin to make sure that he wasn’t going to interject something inappropriate. He did not even appear to be listening, watching the council members outside with a determined expression. He was unhappy and afraid about Andrew’s plan, but he had grudgingly agreed to it.

“You don’t have to do it,” Dan finally told Allison.

“No, I’m going to do it,” Allison immediately argued. “I’m going to let them think that they won - that they waited out my stubbornness - and go home with my tail between my legs and tell them that they were right. That I have no place in the Barrel, that it was too hard for me, and that I’m sorry I ever doubted them. I’ll tell them that I didn’t realize that the Foxes were actual criminals but that recent events have opened my eyes. Then I’m going to let it slip that I overheard Mr. Hernandez—” her voice took on a sickly sweet tone “-you know, that minor mercher who works out of the Zelvar District? He’s at the House of White Rose sometimes and drinks at some of the Foxes’ taverns. Anyway, I heard him talking about meeting with a representative of a coral consortium, isn’t that weird? Who cares about coral?” Allison sneered and her voice became hard again. “I’m going to let them invest their money, and when this is over? When they learn that their money’s gone and that they’ve been tricked? I’m going to rub their faces in it. They think they can hurt me? I’ll hurt them twice as much. I’m stronger than they are; they can not break me.”

She was breathing heavily after her rant and Renee approached to offer comfort. Allison turned towards her, soaking in as much reassurance as she could. Dan smiled proudly at her and Erik rubbed her back.

“Told you that you were fierce and terrifying,” he said.

Allison looked up and squared her jaw. “What about Whittier and Andritch?” she asked.

“Katelyn, you know Whittier’s mistress, yes?” said Andrew.

“Marissa?” Katelyn clarified. “Yes, we’re friends. You want me to drop some information about the Reddin coral consortium that she can feed him?”

“Yes. Make sure that she doesn’t know that she’s feeding him information, just sharing gossip.” Katelyn nodded. Andrew continued, “As for Andritch, I have an idea.”

The idea was to plant information about investors meeting with Stephanie Walker at the Geldrenner in with correspondence that Andritch had with Waterhouse, his solicitor. Thea wasn’t privy to the exact details, but she trusted that her companions knew what they were doing. She surprised herself with that thought and went still. Huh, she thought with realization. She trusted the Foxes. Apparently their multiple near-death experiences together had softened her opinions of them without her consciously noticing.
Since she, Renee, Allison, and Katelyn were the only Foxes who didn’t have wanted posters hanging around them, they would have to be the public face of the consortium along with Randy. Allison went home to her parents and couldn’t be of further help. Thea was relegated to pretending to stand guard while ‘Stephanie’ held her boring meetings while they waited for the Merchant Council to approach them.

Before that morning, Thea had been starting to get nervous. There were only two days before the auction and they’d seen neither hide nor hair of the Merchant Council. What would happen if they didn’t take the bait? However, that morning a note had been sent to Stephanie that representatives of the Merchant Council would be calling on her during the day. Now, waiting for their appearance, she could see the first hint of Randy’s nerves. She’d been extensively coached on negotiating by Andrew and on charm by Katelyn and had been playing the part of Stephanie Walker admirably so far. Thea had been impressed with how sanguine she had been about the whole operation.

“You’re doing so well,” Katelyn said quietly. “Relax. Chat with me about something.”

“What about?” Randy asked, chewing her lip.

“Anything,” said Katelyn soothingly. “As long as you look relaxed and comfortable we can discuss whatever you like.”

“The weather’s been foggy,” said Randy tentatively.

“And cold,” encouraged Katelyn, somehow sounding interested in the topic. “I imagine it’s different where you’re from.”

Thea tuned out their chatter and directed her attention back to watching the exits. It wasn’t long before Andritch and Whittier appeared, followed closely by Allison’s father and Luther Hemmick. They walked straight for their table confidently, showing that they had been receiving some kind of information about Stephanie Walker’s appearance and habits. Thea cleared her throat to alert the others to their approach.

“You’re going to be great,” Katelyn said in an undertone. “Don’t look so frightened. Look at this paper instead.”

“Excuse me, Ms. Walker?” said Mr. Whittier as he approached the table. “My name is Charles Whittier, I sent you a note this morning? Might we have a minute of your time?”

Randy looked up from where she’d been intensely studying whatever paper Katelyn had put in front of her and frowned. “Yes, I got your note,” she said. “But I’m sorry, my day is fully booked.”

Thea did not really understand how trying to blow off the council members would help, but Andrew had explained that seeming uninterested in dealing with them would keep them off guard and have positive results.

“It won’t take but a minute,” said Luther. “We have no wish to waste your time, or ours.”

“Very well,” said Randy politely. “Please have a seat.”

“We understand that you are here representing a consortium of coral fisheries,” said Luther, getting right to the point.

Randy looked around as if being concerned about being overheard. “That is a possibility,” she said slowly. “How did you come by this information?”
The men exchanged glances. “Not everyone who you’ve spoken with has kept your identity and business completely confidential,” admitted Whittier.

“I see,” said Randy, with a disapproving look. The men shifted nervously.

“We are interested in investing in your consortium,” Andritch said.

“I couldn’t possibly take on any more investors right now,” said Randy. “In the last few days I have been approached by a great number of people, it’s really quite unexpected.”

“Yes,” said Luther. “It’s very strange how you happened to have arrived here just in time to take advantage of an increased demand for coral. Why is it that you chose now to create a consortium?”

Andrew had predicted this question, Luther was trying to put Randy on the defensive. An answer for this question had been prepared. “About a month ago, someone began buying up as many coral fisheries as he could, but no one could discover his identity. Several of us owners didn’t want to sell to someone we didn’t know, so we decided to band together and start our own enterprise,” explained Randy.

“An unknown buyer?” Reynolds asked. Luther made a face like he had smelled an unpleasant odor.

“Yes,” Katelyn said, with a smile. “Ms. Walker and her associates were unable to discover who he is, but there was evidence that he was from Kerch. Maybe you could look into it?”

Randy nodded along. “If you find out who it is, you could maybe buy into his fund? Perhaps he’s still looking for investors?”

Luther looked ill. The Council looking into who was buying coral fisheries was the last thing he wanted. “No,” he said sharply. “Why would we waste our time and energy on searching this fellow out when you are already here, ready to represent our interests?”

“All the same,” said Andritch carefully, “wouldn’t it be good to know if this person knew about Kevin—” he was silenced suddenly by sharp looks from all of his companions. The Merchant Council did not want anyone to know about Kevin’s letter for help.

Luther hummed thoughtfully. “Perhaps you are correct,” he said slowly. “It is certainly worthwhile to accumulate all possible information. I will personally investigate this other buyer.”

“Perhaps we should wait until that investigation is complete?” suggested Whittier.

“Allright,” said Randy agreeably, as Robin signalled to Katelyn from across the room.

“Ms. Walker, your next appointment,” said Katelyn politely. “Gentlemen,” she nodded at the men and began to rise.

The men turned as one to see Renee leading a group of men into a nearby conference room. Among the men was Phil Higgins, one of the wealthiest non-council investors and, according to Andrew, one of the only honest men in Ketterdam. As soon as the message from Whittier had arrived that morning, invitations to many of the city’s top investors had been sent out, inviting them to a seminar about jurda futures.

The Council members paled as one, believing that they were going to miss their opportunity to invest. Thea was just wondering how Matt was going to give a credible presentation to actual financial professionals. He’d been working on it with Dan for several days. She wondered if it was going to be as absurd as she imagined.
“Well thank you for your time,” Randy said as she started to get up.

“What if we invested together?” asked Luther, almost desperately.

“Together?” asked Randy, retaking her seat, her attention on Luther.

“What about the investigation?” Whittier interjected.

“The Merchant Council represents thirteen of the oldest and most established families in Kerch,” said Luther, ignoring his companion’s remarks. “We have experience and plenty of capital. We’re the best partners that you could possibly find. What if you made us the lead investors in your fund? Nay, what if you made it our fund exclusively?”

Randy hesitated. “I don’t know,” she said dubiously. “It sounds promising, but we’d need some serious security. If the Merchant Council backed out we’d lose all our investors at once.”

Reynolds bristled. “No one on the Merchant Council would ever break a contract. We’d each put our seals to it and have it presided over by the judge of your choosing.”

“Give us forty eight hours to put together a case for taking over the fund,” said Luther.

Randy was shaking her head. “I’ve booked passage for tomorrow evening. All my business must be concluded before then.”

“The harbours are closed,” said Luther.

“Are you threatening her?” Thea asked, with an edge to her voice. “You don’t have to give in to bullying, Ms. Walker.”

“Of course we’re not threatening her!” exclaimed Andritch.

“We’ll have our proposal ready in twenty four hours,” said Whittier, in a conciliatory manner while shooting a dark look at Luther.

“I can’t make any promises,” said Randy. “I really must do what’s best for the consortium.”

“Of course,” said Luther, with a wave of his hand. “We just ask that you don’t make any final decisions before you hear our offer.”

Randy stood up, and glanced in the direction that Higgins had gone. “I can do that,” she said. “Now I really must be going. Good day, gentlemen.”

As everyone prepared to leave, Katelyn suddenly reached out to grasp Luther’s wrist.

“Oh, Mr. Hemmick,” she simpered. “I was so sorry to hear about your son! You must be so worried. How did that evil Andrew Minyard manage to make it past your security?”

Luther looked distinctly uncomfortable, eyes flicking to his fellow council members. “Nicky was not at home, he was visiting friends in Belendt.”

“Have you had these friends investigated?” Katelyn asked.

“No,” Luther replied, clearly aware that his companions were watching him with curiosity. “They were just as caught off guard as the rest of us. There’s no reason to believe them involved in any way.”
“So you think it’s personal?” Katelyn pressed. “Did your son cross that monster?”

Luther huffed, taking offense at the slight to his bloodline. “Nicky wouldn’t-”

“No, of course not,” Katelyn interrupted with a guileless smile. “How silly of me. Only a fool would cross the Bastard of the Barrel.”

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

Nicky shook his head. “Why do you like me?”
It was just before dawn on the day of Kevin’s auction and the penthouse suite at the Geldrenner hotel was a flurry of activity. Soon everyone would disperse to their separate tasks but first they had to erase their presence from these rooms. Stephanie Walker would have to disappear into the ether in case anyone came looking for her after today’s events.

Nicky mostly felt like he was getting in the way, so he picked a quiet corner of an empty room and tried not to dwell on what the day would bring. Hopefully it would end with the downfall of his father and all of Nicky’s friends safe, but he couldn’t drown out the dire warnings of what could go wrong that echoed through his mind.

“Hey,” said a soft voice from the room’s entrance. “You okay?”

Nicky looked up and found Erik watching him, a concerned look on his face. Nicky had seen that look on his face numerous times since they’d met and it had always made him bristle. He didn’t need Erik’s pity. But watching his face now, Nicky thought he may have been mistaken. He saw no pity there, only care and affection. Maybe he’d been willfully blind since the beginning.

After escaping his father’s thugs, Nicky had been stranded in the Barrel with almost no belongings and a dwindling money supply. He wasn’t sure what his plan was, but he wanted to leave Ketterdam. For that he required money, so he would need shelter and a job. He’d found a boarding house that was dirtier and more violent than he was accustomed to, but still acceptable compared to other lodgings in the district. Then he’d set out to find work.

He’d asked around for appropriate work opportunities. Most people had suggested that he was pretty enough to find work on West Stave, but he’d shut them down quickly. Eventually he found a job at a dye factory. Using his knowledge of chemistry he quickly ingratiated himself with management. He’d been there about a month when he met Erik.

It had been late in the day, and Nicky was a sweaty, filthy mess after his day of hard labour when Erik, wearing a ridiculous bright orange and yellow shirt had waltzed into the factory with confidence. He was like the sun and Nicky couldn’t help but stare at the most attractive man he’d ever seen, but caught himself quickly and averted his eyes.

Erik had told him that Andrew Minyard wanted to see him. Nicky had tried to keep to himself since
he’d arrived in the Barrel, but even he wasn’t sheltered enough not to have heard of the Foxes’ Monster. He knew refusing would be suicidal. Erik had escorted him through the streets, chatting happily while Nicky tried to keep his answers succinct. His father had taught him that he would be shunned or exiled because of his sexuality and he couldn’t afford to leave the Barrel yet. He would lock down that part of him and never let it see the light of day.

Erik brought him to meet Andrew and Neil. Andrew had offered him membership in the Foxes and when Nicky turned him down he offered to pay him for jobs where his skills were useful. Nicky had accepted, since his intermittent work with the Foxes would pay more than his factory job and he had the ability to turn down work that he didn’t like. Erik had been assigned to work with him, and even though he spent an inordinate amount of time grumbling about babysitting useless newbies, they’d worked well together.

Then there’d been the break-in at Evermore, his father outing him, his mother’s rejection. Erik had stood with him and offered support through it all. Nicky didn’t think he could continue to keep a lid on his feelings anymore.

Erik’s brow furrowed when Nicky didn’t answer his question and he crossed the room and sat facing him.

“No nervous about today?” he asked. He reached out to tuck one of Nicky’s curls behind his ear and gave a little laugh. “It’s still a little strange to have you looking like you. I forgot how much I like your stupid face.”

Nicky ducked his head and blushed. Neil had Tailored him back to his natural looks a couple days ago and Nicky was still not used to seeing his own face reflected in the mirror.

“What if everything goes wrong?” he asked, voicing his fears.

“It won’t,” said Erik confidently. “And if it does, we’ll regroup and try something new. You may have noticed that we’re pretty resilient.” He smoothed his thumb across Nicky’s cheekbone. “Just like you.”

“I’m not-” Nicky protested immediately, but Erik cut him off.

“You are. You’ve been beaten down time and again, but you’re still standing strong. Consider this my daily reminder of how amazing you are.”

Nicky shook his head. “Why do you like me?”

“What?”

“You’re gorgeous and strong and supportive. You could have anybody you wanted, why would you waste your time with someone like me?”

Erik pulled back and looked at him incredulously. “One day I’m going to spend a lot of time enumerating all your positive aspects and why I like them,” he said. “But for now the answer to that question is simple. I like you because you’re you.”

Nicky watched Erik’s face for a couple beats, at the naked honesty displayed there. He thought about his father’s anger and his mother’s cold dismissal. He thought about the teachings in Belendt how he’d been told that he was unnatural and a disgrace. He thought about what they were doing today, how any errors could result in their deaths. He had been a coward for most of his life, trying to live up to his father’s wishes and hiding his true feelings. He decided that it was finally time to be brave.
He leaned forward and caught Erik’s lips with his own. Erik didn’t waste any time before kissing him back. All the doubts and worries that plagued Nicky’s mind all morning quieted. This kiss was fireworks in the dark and the joy of solving a puzzle. Oh, he thought stupidly, oh.

Inevitably they had to pull back from each other, short of breath and smiling.

“What are your plans after this?” Nicky burst out, knowing that he was getting ahead of himself but unable to care.

“Um...?” said Erik, obviously confused. “Like... what am I doing this evening?”

“What are your plans for the future, once we beat my father and get our money?” Nicky clarified. He wanted to burst with happiness, he was having trouble keeping his smile under control.

“I hadn’t-” Erik started, but Nicky’s excitement couldn’t be contained.

“Because if everything goes to plan then I’ll be in charge of my father’s businesses. I could use help running them.”

“I have no experience with that,” said Erik slowly. “Are you sure you want me?”

“I want you with me for as long as you want to be there,” said Nicky confidently.

Erik pulled him back into another kiss. “Nicky,” he said seriously when they finally pulled away from each other. “I really hope we don’t die.”

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The sun had only been up a short time when Nicky left the hotel through the back exit in the company of Randy and Dan. Dan led them through a series of complicated turns until they reached a bakery that fronted onto the square outside of the Exchange. Nicky kept his head down: it wouldn’t do for anyone to see Councilman Luther Hemmick’s missing son wandering around the city.

Nicky could see the Church of Barter on the far side of the square and shivered. Dan picked the lock on the bakery and ushered them inside. Usually at this time of day the bakery would be busily preparing for business, but most businesses in the area had closed for the day; the spectacle of Kevin’s auction was being treated like a holiday.

Dan fussed over them a little, obviously averse to leaving them to hide alone, but she had her own part to play today so she finally made to leave.

“No mourners,” Nicky called to her.

She turned with a grin. “No funerals,” she replied, before shifting her gaze to Randy. “Good luck, stay safe,” she said, and then she was gone.

Randy and Nicky moved into the dark of the shop, staying as far away from windows and doors as possible before settling against some cabinets. They were tense and quiet, occasionally making small talk in whispers, but mostly keeping their peace.

Nicky had fallen into a light doze when there was a sound from the back of the bakery. He got up to go investigate.

“Stay hidden,” he whispered to Randy, before creeping past the ovens to the delivery area. He looked around, seeing no disturbances.
*False alarm*, he thought, turning away just as the delivery door was kicked in.

Hands grabbed him, holding tight despite his struggles. A gag was forced in his mouth and a bag was roughly shoved over his head. He kicked out wildly.

“Careful little merch,” said a deep voice he didn’t recognize. “Your daddy wanted you alive, not undamaged.”

He was yanked out of the bakery and propelled forward. He stumbled over the cobblestones, but rough hands steadied him.

“This way,” said a new voice, this one female. “Cass is at the south entrance of the Church.”

Nicky could hear the sound of a crowd and tried to figure out where he was exactly. Before he could, a door opened and he was dragged through it; it then slammed shut.

“What is this?” asked another new voice, this one officious. *Stadwatch*, probably.

“Go get the Councilman,” said the man holding Nicky’s arms. “Tell him that the Ravens have brought him a present.”

Silence followed, only punctuated by the restless shifting of bodies and Nicky’s pointless struggles.

“What do you have?” asked a voice, this one familiar and sending a cold bolt of fear down Nicky’s spine.

The bag was unceremoniously torn from his head, and he found himself blinking in the sudden brightness. He glanced around the room to try to get his bearings. Over the past few days he’d been working with Neil to create an accurate map of the Church of Barter. It was shaped like a hand, representing Ghezen’s guiding hand in commerce. The main cathedral was housed in the palm, but smaller chapels were located in each of the fingers. He was in the smallest chapel, found at the end of the pinky.

There were three gang members standing around indolently, two men and a woman, none of whom Nicky recognized; all of them wearing the purple ribbon around their arms that indicated that they’d been deputized, and all of them marked with Raven tattoos. His father was also present, looking at him with deep disgust.

“I really thought that you couldn’t shame me any further,” his father spat. “But here you are cavorting with criminals and other degenerates.” He turned to the Ravens. “How did you find him?”

“Cass had us searching the area,” one of the men answered. “He was hiding in a bakery. Minyard probably wanted him nearby in order to use him to cause trouble during the auction.”

“No doubt,” his father answered. He pointed at Nicky. “Listen,” he said sharply. “The Shadow was seen around the Ravkan embassy; I know that Minyard is working with the Ravkans to upset this auction. You are going to tell me his plans.”

He removed Nicky’s gag and Nicky took the opportunity to spit in his face. “I am going to tell you nothing,” he growled.

His father pulled out a handkerchief and wiped off his face, before backhanding Nicky. He turned to the assembled Ravens. “The auction starts in slightly less than an hour. Use whatever means necessary to get the answers before then.”
Nicky turned to face his captors, determined to remain defiant in response to their abuse and cruelty. He tried to think of the Foxes, but he wasn’t Thea who survived a year in Hellgate and emerged fighting, he wasn’t Renee who had fought off her sickness and come out stronger, he wasn’t Andrew who ignored his own pain, he wasn’t Neil who took his blows and kept going. No, he was Nicky Hemmick, a soft mercher's son who, until recently, had lived a life of luxury. It wasn't long before his courage cracked.

He told them everything.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

Lola’s already maniacal grin took on an even more unhinged edge. “You should have run, Junior,” she grunted.
NEIL

Chapter Summary

In which Neil exorcises some demons.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Neil made his way to the Church of Barter before sunrise so that he could get onto the roof before the stadwatch presence made it more difficult. He strapped his rifle to his back and touched each of his knives before leaving in the predawn darkness.

The roof of the Church of Barter had long been one of his favourite places in Ketterdam. It was rickety and in poor repair, but there were hardly any guards and the spire in the middle of Ghezen’s palm was the highest point in the city. He made his perch about a quarter of the way up the spire now: a location that would give him a direct view of the stage in the cathedral below as well as a good vantage point of the surrounding area.

He took a deep breath and watched the sunrise, making sure to keep an eye on his surroundings. He felt in his bones that today would bring Lola back into his orbit.

Stadwatch guards started showing up shortly after sunrise, securing the Church for today’s events. He’d never seen them out in such force, even if he didn’t count the Ravens who pompously strutted among them, proudly showing off their purple bands. The stadwatch was clearly uncomfortable seeing Barrel thugs with so much power, but Luther Hemmick had made this bed and now they’d all have to lie in it. Neil knew that Cass would not be relinquishing the power she had been granted easily.

The guards began securing the area, guarding the doors and patrolling inside the Church. No guard patrol made it up to the roof. Neil would have been offended about how much Cass and Luther devalued him if he wasn’t certain that they had other plans for him.

The auction was set to begin at three bells, but people began arriving just after noon. First it was Ketterdam citizens come to observe the spectacle. The Merchant Council arrived next, taking their places on the stage as the city’s representatives. Neil saw Allison, dressed more finely than he was used to, entering with a group of Councilmen’s family members.

The Fjerdans were the first foreign group to arrive. The ambassadors were dressed in white finery and accompanied by drüskelle. They were mostly big and blond and buff, like Erik. Neil wasn’t sure if any of these men had known Erik but his wanted posters around the city would have alerted them that a defector was in town.

The Zemeni delegation were the next to arrive: dark-skinned men and women in colourful clothing. Even in this group of his countrymen, Matt stood taller than anyone. Hopefully his flattened hair and subdued clothing would disguise him from the stadwatch.

The Kaelish arrived to little fanfare. Neil’s breath caught in his throat and he felt nausea well up when he caught sight of his father. Neil didn’t recognize any of the other dignitaries as Butcher’s
Men, but that didn’t mean that they weren’t around. He took deep breaths and counted to ten in all his languages to try to stop his fear from disabling him.

The Ravkans showed up then, much to the displeasure of the Fjerdans. Fjerda and Ravka had been at war for centuries and their fundamental disagreement about Grisha meant that they were unlikely to find peace soon. King Rhemann strolled casually into the Church, flanked by soldiers of the First Army as well as Grisha from the Second Army. Neil’s Uncle Stuart was on his right side. The drüskelle started spitting vitriol at the Ravkans and Neil noticed his father quietly exiting the cathedral in the hubbub. He took a side door so he was still in the Church, just not in Neil’s line of sight. Neil’s pulse skyrocketed. His father was likely leaving to avoid the attention of his angry Heartrender brother-in-law, but now he was somewhere in the Church that Neil couldn’t monitor.

The members of the Merchant Council were attempting to calm the Fjerdans.

“Kerch is neutral territory, leave your war away from our shores,” Charles Whittier was saying.

“Anyone who violates the sanctity of our Church will not be allowed to bid,” Louis Andritch added.

Grumbling and complaining, both the Fjerdans and the Ravkans took their seats near the stage, continuing to send dark glances across the aisle.

Prince Ichirou and his Shu soldiers were the last to arrive. He was dressed all in black, a sharply tailored suit, and walked as if he owned everything around him. His soldiers were dressed in olive green and all bore the Moriyama ‘M’ on their left cheekbones. Ichirou stopped short after his entrance, demanding that the Ravkans or the Fjerdans be moved. They had an advantage, he argued, of being closer to the stage.

“If you wanted to sit near the stage,” said Luther Hemmick sourly, “you should have arrived on time instead of delaying in order to make a more impressive entrance.”

Ichirou eventually gave up the argument and sat, but allowed his expression to convey that he wasn’t happy about it. For the first and probably last time Neil found himself agreeing with Luther who was expressively rolling his eyes.

Once everyone was settled, the city appointed auctioneer made his way to the podium. It was Phil Higgins, one of the investors that had attended Matt’s ridiculous presentation and one of the only honest men in the city. He rapped his gavel and gestured to a guard at the anteroom to the side of the stage.

The door banged open and Kevin, surrounded by Andrew, Erik, and Thea, strode out into the cathedral. The response was loud and immediate. Several groups jumped to their feet and Neil could hear the word “Traitor!” being spat in Fjerdan at Erik and in Shu at either Kevin or Thea. The Ravens in the room all booed and shouted abuse at Andrew and the stadwatch guards twitched nervously. The most wanted people in all of Ketterdam were before them, but there was nothing they could do.

Neil flicked a look towards Luther and saw the smug greed that glittered in his eyes. He watched Kevin with such hunger that Neil was surprised that no one else seemed to notice. All of his plans were in his grasp; as long as the Ravkans didn’t win the auction then Kevin would be forced to making his amplifiers, increasing the demand of coral.

Higgins banged his gavel three times on his lectern. “You will come to order!” he demanded, sending stern, reprimanding looks at the delegates. Order came slowly, but eventually everyone was quiet and back in their seats. Higgins nodded with satisfaction. He waved over the university medik
that was waiting on the sidelines. The medik, a short man with dark hair, made his way to Kevin and performed a cursory examination.

“He is in good health,” he declared.

“Do you consent to this auction and its outcome?” Higgins asked Kevin.


“We may begin,” said Higgins, turning back to the crowd. “Kevin Day freely consents to these proceedings and offers his services to the highest bidder. All bids will be made in \textit{kruge}. Ghezen’s hand will guide us. Any interference in this auction or false bids will be punished to the fullest extent of Kerch law. Please remain quiet unless you are making a bid. Bidding will start at one million \textit{kruge}.” He paused to survey the room. “Let the auction begin.”

The bids came in fast and furious. Ichirou kept jumping the price up quickly, but the Zemeni and the Kaelish were acting to slow down the pace of the auction. King Rhemann was quiet, letting the price rise just as he had discussed with Neil when they decided strategy.

There was silence after Ichirou had bid forty million, causing everyone to look around in anticipation.

Rhemann finally raised his hand. “Fifty million \textit{kruge},” he said precisely.

A jump of ten million had shocked gasps rising from the gallery, but Ichirou just scowled. “Sixty million,” he snapped.

“Sixty million two hundred thousand,” said the Fjerdan delegate, trying to slow the pace of the bidding again, but it was no use.

“Eighty million!” cried Ichirou, temper beginning to boil over.

On the dais Neil could see the colour leaching out of Kevin’s face. The bidding was too high, too fast, and Ichirou seemed set on reclaiming Kevin.

“Eighty million five hundred thousand,” said Rhemann calmly.

One of Ichirou’s advisors tried to whisper in his ear, but he just shook them off and jumped to his feet. “One hundred and ten million!” he shouted.

After a few beats, Higgins spoke. “One hundred and ten million \textit{kruge} from the Shu delegation,” he said. “Do I hear a counter offer?”

Rhemann looked around and shrugged, giving a dry laugh. “One hundred and twenty million.”

As soon as he had spoken the giant entrance to the Church was thrown open with a boom. Fifteen figures wearing blue cloaks entered. Their cloaks whipped around them as if moved by an unseen wind, and their faces were obscured by mist.

“We are the Council of Tides,” said the lead figure in a booming voice. “We declare this auction a sham.”

There was shocked silence within the Church and Neil leaned forward a little, before abruptly pulling back. He’d seen movement in his peripheral vision and flattened himself in order to avoid
Lola’s projectile. She laughed and rushed towards him as he made his way off of his perch. She avoided his foot as he kicked her, but wasn’t able to avoid the butt of his rifle swinging up to catch her on the chin.

She swore and staggered back a few steps, letting Neil get his feet under him. He aimed the rifle directly at her; it only had one, specially made bullet so shooting Lola wasn’t an option, but she didn’t know that. He advanced, sending her scrabbling away from his aim. Too late he realized that she was drawing him forward: they’d made it to the chapel in Ghezen’s thumb. There was a broken window in the circular dome, indicating where Lola had accessed the roof. She lunged then, catching him in the knee and sending him tumbling. She stripped him of his gun and threw it down into the chapel.

She took out a knife and smiled at him. “No fair, Baby,” she said. “It’s cheating to bring a gun to a knife fight.”

He emptied his mind of fear, telling himself that Lola wasn’t anyone special - she was just another thug come to hurt him and the Foxes and he had to stop her. Rolling to his feet and unsheathing two of his knives, he attacked.

He’d caught her off guard, but the element of surprise didn’t last for long. She countered his attacks with strength and skill. She’d obviously had formal training while Neil had learned his skills on the streets.

Lola’s already maniacal grin took on an even more unhinged edge. “You should have run, Junior,” she grunted, as he cut a gash down her ribs.

“Not this time,” he replied, dodging her return thrust but catching her elbow in his side. He gasped and backed up a few steps, trying to formulate a plan to beat her. Although he'd gotten a few hits in, she'd gotten more. She would beat him in a straightforward fight, he knew. But Andrew had said to use his knowledge of the city. Neil had spent hours on this roof; no one knew it like he did. He had the advantage of knowing the terrain, but Lola wasn’t stupid. He’d have to distract her.

“It was stupid of you to come to my city and act like you owned it,” he said conversationally, as she attacked again. Pushing off of her, he retreated towards the edge of the roof, wincing as she got under his guard and nicked his arm. “How many have you lost to my father’s hubris? I know that I took out DiMaccio, but who did my friends kill along West Stave? Jackson? Romero?” he taunted. From their descriptions he was pretty sure that it had been Lola’s brother Romero who had been shot by Renee.

Lola’s wordless roar of rage confirmed his guess. Her movements turned angry, more erratic. He took advantage of her distraction to reach out with his power and crack the tile she was standing on. He knew from experience what happened to cracked tiles on this roof.

Sure enough, the tile slipped. Lola’s mouth opened in an almost comical display of surprise as she lost her footing. She fell hard, slid down the roof, and disappeared over the side.

Neil cautiously made his way to peer down to the street below. Among screams and swarming people, he could see Lola’s crumpled body on the ground, her blood expanding in an increasing pool of crimson staining the cobblestones.

He let himself have two minutes to react, curled into a ball, grinning and shaking uncontrollably. Then he pulled himself together. The auction would have continued below, everybody inside the Church ignorant of the fight that had occurred on the roof. He had to get that gun.
He hurried up the slope of the roof until he reached the broken window, swinging himself down to get to his rifle that he could see lying on the ground. Without looking around, he bent to retrieve it, which turned out to be a mistake.

The blow hit the side of his head and he staggered, turning towards his assailant. His father was standing before him, murder in his eyes.

Neil froze. He tried to tell himself that this was no one special, but he couldn’t make himself move. His father grabbed him by the throat in one hand and divested him of the knives he kept at his hips and back with the other. He slammed Neil back against the wall.

“Hello, Junior,” he said. “My greatest disappointment.”

Neil grasped at his father’s wrist with both of his hands and tried to form words but was unsuccessful. His father shook him. “I said ‘hello’,”

“Hello,” said Neil so quietly that he could barely hear himself.

“Lola was supposed to take care of you,” his father said. “I’m surprised she didn’t manage.”

“She’s dead,” Neil croaked.

Rage filled his father’s eyes, but before he could say anything a shout reverberated through the chapel: “Neil!” cried Matt.

Neil’s father’s attention shifted for a second before coming back to Neil, but that was all the time he needed. Matt’s voice had shocked Neil out of his stupor. The sound of one of Neil’s family in close proximity to his father catapulted him into action. Neil’s father’s eyes widened in shock as he let go of Neil to clutch at his throat and the small knife protruding from it.

“Sankta Mary,” whispered Neil. “The dagger up my sleeve.” He reached out to claim his knife back, watching as his father fell like a marionette whose strings had been cut while his life bled out of him. A loud keening sound echoed in the small room: it took several moments for Neil to realize that he was the one making the noise.

“Neil!” cried Matt again, rushing towards him. “Are you alright? Andrew asked me to keep the Butcher in sight, so I followed him.”

Neil was too busy staring at his father’s corpse to answer, feeling his grim smile overtake his face. He couldn’t believe that it had been that easy. His father was dead. He was free.

“Neil? Neil!” said Matt, trying to get his attention.

Neil was brought back to the present by a sudden clamour of an alarm. He widened his eyes. “I’m late,” he said, crossing the room and picking up his rifle. He couldn’t take time to process his father’s death right now. He also had no time to find an appropriate vantage point. He would have to take the shot now.

Other than Healing and Tailoring, shooting was the one skill where his mother allowed him to use his Grisha powers. She had trained him relentlessly, making sure that his aim was always true.

He closed his eyes and visualized his target, then opened them and pulled the trigger, reaching out with his power and guiding the bullet around a ninety degree turn. He had no choice but to make this shot.
Kevin Day had to die.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

Luther’s face darkened in anger. “Minyard is behind this,” he insisted.
“We are the Council of Tides,” said the blue-clad woman leading the group of Grisha Tidemakers. “We declare this auction a sham.”

A wave of seawater punctuated her declaration, crashing to the ground in the cathedral, frothing along the pews, before disappearing into a cloud a mist.

Erik watched as everyone inside the Church collectively lost their minds. Even Cass, who had purposely positioned herself along the wall of the cathedral in Andrew’s direct line of sight, appeared alarmed.

He tried to control his own reaction, hoping that he managed the bored indifference that Andrew displayed or the calm puzzlement of Thea, but he had a sneaking suspicion that he appeared more like Kevin, who was very visibly fighting a panic attack.

When they had discussed this plan the possible intervention by the Council of Tides had been brought up and then summarily dismissed. The Council were almost like mythological figures in the city; only their periodic control of the harbours proved their existence. Their last public appearance had been twenty five years previously when the Merchant Council had voted to demolish one of their towers and replace it with docks. The Council of Tides had appeared, destroyed the Merchant Council’s chambers with a tidal wave, and had departed knowing that their message had been received. Their tower had not been touched.

“You have no right to disturb this lawful auction!” Prince Ichirou cried.

The Tidemakers raised their hands and another wave of water approached, hanging over the spectators’ heads.

“Silence!” the woman leading them commanded. When there was no further argument, the water evaporated. “This auction has been compromised.”

Erik slid his gaze towards the Ravkan delegation. King Rhemann appeared politely curious, but not overly worried. Erik was impressed with his poker face.

“Compromised how?” asked Higgins from his place at the podium.

“Neither the indenture nor his representatives are permitted to affect the outcome of the auction. That rule has been violated.”

The Merchant Council jumped to their feet, demanding answers. All of them appeared confused and outraged, except Luther Hemmick. He looked smug and expectant, giving Andrew a triumphant look.
“I thought that I would have to expose your collusion with the Ravkans myself, but this is much better,” he said.

Andrew flicked him an inscrutable look. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Nicky took quite a beating before he divulged your scheme,” Luther replied. Erik’s hands balled into fists and he saw red. “Such a display of spine was unexpected.”

The lead Tidemaker began speaking again, cutting off any ill-advised remarks that Erik could have made. “A false fund was set up to swindle money out of honest merchers,” she said. “The profits were funneled to one of the bidders.”

“What treachery!” cried Luther dramatically. “Andrew Minyard has been working with the Ravkans!”

All the delegations reacted to this accusation. They were out of their seats, yelling about punishments and consequences; the Ravkans were proclaiming their innocence.

Again a wave appeared, quieting the angry shouts into disgruntled murmurs.

“If you have evidence against the Ravkans—” Higgins started.

“The Ravkans have nothing to do with this,” the Tidemaker interrupted. “The money was transferred to the Shu.”

Erik, Thea, and Kevin all sent confused glances at Andrew who just gazed back with calm indifference. Erik shook his head ruefully. There were always plans within plans when dealing with Andrew.

Prince Ichirou immediately proclaimed his innocence, while Luther blinked in surprise. “Well then Minyard is working with the Shu.”

“No,” the woman argued. “The fund was set up by Stephanie Walker and Luther Hemmick.”

There was stunned silence as the Merchant Council turned to face Luther, whose face had turned bone white.

“No,” he said. “That’s not right.”

“Stephanie Walker represents a consortium of coral fishery owners,” Councilman Reynolds said. “Charles, Louis, Luther, and I met with her ourselves.”

“It was an honest business arrangement,” supplied Whittier.

“Higgins, you were there. You met with her as well,” said Luther.

Higgins shook his head. “I don’t know this woman.”

“We saw you!” said Andritch. “At the Geldrenner.”

Again Higgins shook his head. “I was at the Geldrenner,” he admitted, “but I was attending a seminar about jurda farming. It was slightly strange, but nothing to do with this Ms. Walker.”

Luther’s face darkened in anger. “Minyard is behind this,” he insisted. “He must have been working with that woman to swindle our money.”
“We all invested in that fund due to your encouragement,” said another Council member. “Are you saying we’ve lost it all?”

“It was Minyard!” Luther deflected, gesturing expansively towards where Andrew was watching the argument without expression. “He’s been attacking me personally, trying to humiliate and discredit me. He’s responsible for the kidnapping of both my son and the mother of my unborn child.”

“I am not,” said Andrew simply.

“You were seen by several members of the guard on Goedmedbridge escorting Kathy back to me!”

“Of course I was,” said Andrew smoothly. “Just as you asked. I retrieved her from the market square where her kidnappers had left her. Unfortunately, she told me that she never set eyes on her kidnappers.”

Luther opened and closed his mouth a couple times before recovering. “You are lying! You were the kidnapper. Kathy!” he called back to where Kathy was sitting with the family members of the other Councilmen. Erik could see the uncomfortable shifting of the Council as they realized that Luther’s mistress was being flaunted in public.

Kathy looked around nervously and whispered to Maria Hemmick. “She says that she never saw any of her kidnappers’ faces,” Maria provided.

Luther huffed angrily. “But Minyard was the one who set up the meeting on the bridge,” he argued. “He left a note at my lake house.”

“Can you produce the note?” asked Higgins.

“Yes,” said Luther hesitantly. “But it wasn’t signed.”

“So you have no proof that it was left by Minyard?” said Higgins angrily.

“Of course it was him!” said Luther. “He was the only one who wanted to trade for my hostage.”

“You had a hostage?” asked Higgins. “You unlawfully detained someone?” His patience was obviously at an end. “So you have no concrete proof against Minyard? You have been using a large portion of the city’s resources and hampering trade to search for your son. I hope that you have more than this flimsy evidence to justify the expense.”

Luther bristled. “My son is missing—”

“I’m right here, father,” said Nicky’s voice from the right of the stage. All eyes turned towards him. He was covered in bruises, obviously having received a hell of a beating. Erik automatically took a step towards him, before Thea grabbed his arm. He clenched his jaw but remained where he was.

“For Ghezen’s sake,” muttered Luther, lowly enough that the other Council Members couldn’t hear him. “Can’t anyone do their job?”

“You mean the Ravens you had guarding Nicky?” asked Andrew casually. Luther looked at him in surprise. “Are you sure they were actually Ravens? I know that one Barrel thug is interchangeable with another for you respectable merchers.” Realization dawned in Luther’s eyes as Andrew continued. “A purple band and a quick tattoo and anyone can ‘Trojan’ their way inside. Did you not look your gift horse in the mouth?”

The Foxes had known that there was no way that they could sneak Nicky into the Church without
the **stadwatch** finding him, despite the fact that he was needed for this confrontation with his father. Any of them would have been recognized by Luther, and Cass was keeping Wymack and the other Foxes under close supervision, so they needed outside aid to go undercover as Ravens. Andrew had sent a letter to Jeremy while Thea had sent one to Jean. Erik was not sure what the letters promised - he assumed that Andrew offered payment and to leave the Trojans out of whatever retribution he had planned for the Barrel gangs that had sided with the Ravens - but they had been successful, and Jeremy and Jean and Laila had agreed to help. They’d disguised themselves as Ravens and staged the capture of Nicky, making sure to stay far away from any actual Ravens. Luther and the **stadwatch** wouldn’t be able to distinguish them from Cass’ lackeys. Erik wished they’d made the beating less convincing, though. Maybe Nicky should have pretended to give in earlier.

Higgins was gaping at Nicky’s injuries. “Are you alright?” he asked, drawing Nicky forward and calling over the medik. “Nicholas Hemmick?” he asked. At Nicky’s nod, he continued. “We’ve been tearing apart the city trying to find you.”

“I got free as soon as I could,” said Nicky.

“From Minyard?”

“From Cass Spear,” replied Nicky. Erik glanced around, but Cass, having read the atmosphere, had made herself scarce. “The Ravens took me hostage weeks ago.”


Nicky gave a deep sigh. “I’ll say whatever you want me to, father, just please don’t let them hurt me anymore.” The gathered Council members let out shocked gasps.

Erik had to suppress a smile at Nicky’s dramatics. Had he always had this acting ability or was this a newly acquired skill? Erik was incredibly attracted to him. Little pampered merchling, all grown up and excelling at crime.

“Andrew Minyard is a criminal,” said Luther, still trying to turn this around. “You all saw him at my house last week. He broke into my office.”

“I was there by invitation,” said Andrew. “Councilman Hemmick invited me to broker a deal for Kevin Day’s indenture. Instead Kevin and I were ambushed by Cass and her Ravens.”

“We did see Kevin there with Minyard,” said Whittier slowly. Which they hadn’t; they’d unknowingly seen Nicky, but Nicky had still been disguised as Kevin.

“Did you violate a good faith negotiation?” Reynolds asked Luther, angry judgment colouring his words.

“It was also Luther who pushed for us to invest in the false fund,” said Andritch, thoughtfully.

“You were all just as eager!” cried Luther.

“I wanted to investigate the mysterious buyer,” argued Andritch. “But you insisted we invest with Walker.”

Whittier gasped. “You are the secret buyer!”

Luther backed up a couple steps, raising his hands placatingly. “You can’t possibly believe that I would conspire to deceive you, my friends and neighbours,” he said. “I also invested in the fund; I had just as much to lose as the rest of you.”
“Not if you’ve been colluding with the Shu,” said Reynolds.

“Enough,” said Higgins, banging his gavel. “Luther Hemmick, you have squandered the resources of this city in your personal vendetta and you have possibly acted to defraud your colleagues and to impact the integrity of this auction. This auction is compromised and is declared null and void. It cannot go on until your guilt is determined.”

The Church erupted into chaos, screams echoing off the vaulted ceiling. Several people tried to rush the stage and were pushed back by the *stadwatch*. Others were evacuating quickly, trying to escape the escalating violence.

Then, above all the noise, a shrill, unignorable siren began to wail. Erik’s blood went cold.

It was seven years since the city had experienced their last major plague: the Queen’s Lady plague, named for the ship that had brought the sickness to the city. The dead had piled into the streets faster than the bodymen could collect them, giant swaths of the city were quarantined, whole quarters had been wiped out. Stories of this plague were still told in hushed whispers. Of his friends, only Allison, Katelyn, Aaron, and Andrew had lived in the city then. Aaron’s desire to become a medik had originated during the plague, and Allison would only shudder whenever it was discussed. Katelyn told horrifying stories of the diseased lining the streets of the Barrel.

Even knowing that the sounding of the sirens was part of their plan, Erik felt instinctive terror. Fear of the plague sirens was hammered into everyone who made Ketterdam their home. It went against all his instincts to stay put; he wanted to grab Nicky and rabbit them to the safety of the Foxhole. Instead he remained in place on the stage.

Not so the other occupants of the Church of Barter. Soon the siren could barely be heard over the panic as a press of bodies shoved their way towards the giant double doors of the cathedral.

Over all the commotion, nobody could hear the gunshot. Nobody noticed when Kevin went down.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

The panic spread like the plague, infecting everyone nearby.
RENEE

Chapter Summary

In which Renee is the Queen of Death.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Renee adjusted her itchy wig and unremarkable dress as she made her way into her fourth and final destination. She had already made two stops along West Stave before crossing the Barrel and visiting an establishment near East Stave. Her stops had been chosen with care by Andrew. She joined the crowd and let them carry her along. The crowds were smaller than usual - the stadwatch checkpoints deterring some from entering the district - but nothing could keep the tourists and pleasure seekers away from their haunts for long.

She ducked into the chosen gambling hall, avoiding the notice of the bouncers, and made her way over to one of the gaming tables. She surreptitiously checked the glass vial that she carried in her handbag, and joined the game, waiting for her opportunity to cause chaos.

Very early that morning, shortly after midnight, Aaron had taken her, Dan, and Neil to the University morgue. The morgue housed corpses that had been donated to help with the training of mediks. They’d searched through the artificially cool room (a Grisha was employed to keep the temperature low so as to slow decomposition) for what they’d needed and then Neil and Renee had gone to work.

Renee had found a body that had visible decomposition and had reached out with her power. She could feel the same sharp cold that she’d felt every time she’d used her power recently and pulled, collecting the dark cells.

It felt nice to be doing something productive again. These last several days cooped up in the Geldrenner had been even worse than the previous week at Black Veil. At least she’d been able to leave the graveyard almost daily. Only Katelyn, Thea, and Randy had been allowed to leave the hotel suite regularly. Renee had left only once - to help escort guests to Matt’s presentation - but otherwise was required to stay inside with everyone else. They were not even allowed any outside visitors. Even Robin had been prohibited from coming to see them in case anyone was watching.

Dan and Matt had spent all their time working on the presentation that Matt was preparing for some of the city’s top investors; he had to study so as to appear knowledgeable about the jurda market in order to avoid raising any suspicions in his audience. Aaron had secluded himself, studying his textbooks. Renee had socialized with Nicky and Erik from time to time, but they had mostly been wrapped up in each other.

Andrew spent most of his time up in the clock tower, but had descended a few times to spar with Renee. She hadn’t seen much of Neil - as far as she could tell he was mostly nocturnal and was spending his waking hours either with Andrew or on the roof - but he had also come to ask for help coming up with fighting strategies since he foresaw another showdown with the woman who had poked him full of holes and burned his face. He was talented with a knife, and Renee had fought him ruthlessly to help him prepare for his rematch.
Renee had missed Allison keenly. Everything seemed too quiet without her usual sharp wit and acidic commentary, and Renee had spent most of her days worrying about how Allison was faring at her parents’ house.

At least after today it would be over. They’d have their money and be rid of their opponents and their lives could go on. Renee had looked forward to her freedom for as long as she’d been Indentured, but now that it was upon her she was trepidacious. She yearned for the future that Allison had outlined on their trip back from Evermore and she hoped that Allison wanted that too. Hopefully Allison’s stay with her parents wouldn’t make her want a pampered life again. She didn’t think that Allison was fickle enough to change her mind so easily, but it did worry her a little. Mostly she just wanted some good quality alone time with her girlfriend.

A loud cheer wrenched her thoughts back to present. The dealer presented winnings and then prepared another round.

“Any more takers?” he asked.

Renee signalled her intention to place a bet, while opening her purse. With her left hand she put her chips in the pot and with her right she directed the necrotic cells onto the dealer’s hand. Reaching out with her power she spread the cells along his arm. When he turned to spin the wheel, his hand was black.

A few shocked gasps reverberated around the table. Renee spread the cells up to his face, creating a starburst pattern on the side of his neck.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Your hand!” cried one of the other women at the table. “Your face!”

Renee transferred some of the cells to the man closest to the dealer, the black spreading across his fingers. The woman beside him jumped up and backed away.

“You touched him and now you have it too!” she shrieked.

The commotion was beginning to attract attention from nearby gamblers. The floor boss hurried over.

“What’s going on?” he asked sharply, before seeing his dealer’s face and coming to an abrupt halt.

“Help me!” cried the dealer, reaching for his boss. “Something’s wrong!”

His boss jerked back, but it was too late. Renee had moved some of the cells over, causing his arm to start turning a purplish black and then he was screaming, too.

The panic spread like the plague, infecting everyone nearby. Soon everyone in the gambling hall was screaming, grabbing what chips and money they could and stampeding for the door. Renee let the crowd carry her again. Each of her previous three stops had resulted in a similar sequence of events. Authorities could not ignore the situation for much longer.

Even as she had that thought, the plague siren began its high-pitched wail. Tourists looked around in confusion, but sick realization and even more panic overtook the locals.

It had been Neil who had first told her about Ketterdam’s plague measures when they were discussing tactics for a zombie invasion. As a tightly packed island city the two biggest dangers were fire and plague. Renee had only been here a year but she had heard numerous stories about the
Queen’s Lady plague and had had the importance of plague measures drilled into her by Dan.

Dan had arrived with Wymack in the aftermath of the Queen’s Lady plague and, after seeing the devastation of the city, they had ensured that the Foxhole was well stocked and able to house all their Foxes if another plague occurred. All Ketterdam residents were expected to return to their place of residence and remain there until the Merchant Council declared the plague eradicated. Only *stadwatch* and mediks were allowed on the streets: the *stadwatch* were to spread into small groups throughout the city to ensure that the entire city watch couldn’t be infected and disabled at once. There were also street patrols to ensure compliance by residents and to escort mediks - the guards that had this assignment were paid more than triple because of the danger.

Dan, despite never having experienced a plague, was very adamant that all Foxes be prepared. She ran non-optional biannual practice drills that even Andrew and Aaron took seriously. Their experiences during the last plague had obviously left an impression.

Renee had to admit that the atmosphere caused by the sirens was extremely effective. Even though she was perfectly aware that there was no danger (the necrotic tissue that she had transferred to people would not harm them. It would have to be removed by a medik, but it would not spread on its own. The ‘infected’ would probably have to spend some time in quarantine, but their health was not in jeopardy), was aware that she had caused the sirens to sound, she still had the urge to get to safety.

Instead, she hurried down to the canal in order to head to her rendez-vous location. As a side-effect of using her power, she felt strong and refreshed. After her actions in Sweet Reef she had been unsettled, worried about the unnaturalness of her new powers. But they weren’t so different from before. Life connected everything, but so did death. She could live with having control over the dead as long as she could continue to use her powers to keep those she loved safe from harm.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

“Kevin Day is dead,” Thea said.
THEA

Chapter Summary

In which Kevin Day dies.

Chapter Notes

I can't believe that this story has reached 1000 kudos! Thank you for all your support and feedback, I'm very thankful and it keeps me motivated!

Warnings for this chapter: references to blood/gore, more zombies

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Andrew was closest so he made it to Kevin’s side first, crouching down and using his body to shield anybody from noticing the syringe he had taken out and injected into Kevin’s arm. Thea wasn’t far behind him, shifting Kevin so she had his head cradled in her lap.

It was fake; she knew it was fake - Neil had shot a bullet made of wax and rubber into the bladder full of blood and bone chips that had been hidden under Kevin’s shirt, and Andrew had injected him with a solution that Abby had provided that would lower his respiration and heart rate so that he would appear dead - but Kevin was pale and covered in blood and she couldn’t stop her hands from shaking.

Andrew called for the medik, before backing away. It wouldn’t do for anyone to see Andrew and the medik together and look too closely. The medik, who was Aaron in a dark wig, brought his bag over and performed a quick examination of Kevin.

“He’s dead,” he announced, his words loud enough to carry across the stage despite the shouts from the spectators still attempting to leave the Church.

Thea looked up and saw Ichirou’s face twist in rage before he stormed out with his followers, shoving people out of his way. The Rvkans were currently trying to avoid brawling with the Fjerdans as they, too, attempted to leave while the stadwatch was attempting to keep the two groups apart. The Council of Tides was long gone.

Aaron directed several stadwatch guards to get a stretcher and then he and Thea loaded Kevin’s body onto it. Accompanied by a couple guards they carried the stretcher towards the nearest canal. There, they found a pole-boat that functioned as emergency transport and loaded Kevin onto it.

“There’s not enough room for all of you,” said Dan from her spot near the front of the boat where she leaned on her pole.

“I am his protector,” said Thea to the others. “I will be going.”

“I have to take the body to the hospital morgue and fill out paperwork,” Aaron told the stadwatch
guards. “Then I’ll have another assignment because of the plague. You don’t need to accompany me.”

One of the guards nodded as they turned away. “Alright. We are needed elsewhere.”

There was silence on board the boat as Dan used her pole to steer it along the canal.

As they bobbed under Zentsbridge, they passed a large flower seller’s boat anchored to one side of the canal. They paused briefly beside it; Dan jumped onto this new boat, and then Thea helped her move Kevin off his stretcher and onto the flower seller’s boat. Renee arrived, breathing heavily from running to meet them. She held out her hands towards a lump of blankets lying obscured behind some flower pots.

The lump of blankets shifted and moved, resolving into a man in a hood. He stood stiffly and removed his hood, before lying down on the stretcher in the pole-boat where Kevin had lain.

The night before, Neil had tailored a corpse from the morgue to look like Kevin, and then Renee used her strange new power to have it walk itself out of there and to hide on the flower seller’s boat.

Thea suppressed a shiver. Dan jumped back onto the pole-boat, leaving Renee to watch Kevin, and directed the boat towards the nearest hospital.

The hospital they had chosen was very small and understaffed. With the plague measures going into effect, no one would look too closely at the body they brought, especially since Aaron would sign all the paperwork.

Since mediks were required to attend all public auctions, the University provided them from among their students. Dan had simply forged a new duty roster so that Aaron would be assigned to this auction. Aaron, of course, did not attend school under his real name and always wore a wig to classes. It wouldn’t be good for him or his reputation if he were associated with a well-known Barrel criminal.

It didn’t take long before Dan dropped them off on the hospital’s dock. Orderlies took the stretcher that was holding Kevin’s fake corpse, and carried it to the hospital’s front doors. Aaron and Thea followed them.

A severe looking nurse greeted them there. “Why are you bringing a body here?” she asked. “We’re locked down because of the plague, we have no beds to spare.”

“It’s protocol,” argued Aaron. “I need to fill out the death certificate.”

She relented a little. “Fine. Take that body around back to the wagon bay to await pickup by the bodymen. Then you can go inside and finish your paperwork.”

Aaron nodded and led the men carrying the stretcher around the building. By tonight the body would be burned and Kevin Day would be officially dead.

Thea turned away from the hospital, and began walking through the eerily empty streets back towards Zentsbridge. About halfway there she heard rapid footsteps approaching her. She turned and came face to face with Jean, her partner from when she’d been an Evermore guard. Jean, who had helped Renee frame Thea which had led to her spending a year in Hellgate. She had written to him last week, telling him that she would never take her justified revenge against him if he helped the Foxes by pretending to be a Raven and if he persuaded other members of his gang to help as well. She’d told him that if he’d ever cared about Kevin at all now was the time to help him.
Jean stopped in front of her, leaning his hands on his thighs and gasping for breath.

“Is he…?” he managed to say. “Kevin. Is he dead?”

She could see fear and genuine worry on his face. She’d always understood his desire to leave Evermore - Ichirou was not a kind master - but she’d thought that he hadn’t cared about Kevin when he’d done so. She corrected that assumption now.

“Kevin Day is dead,” Thea said, letting her lack of upset speak volumes, “because if he were not then Prince Ichirou would never stop trying to get him back.”

Jean nodded rapidly, his shoulders dropping in relief. “Thank you for telling me,” he said. “I… there’s many things I’ve done in my life that I regret, but I think what I did to you was the worst.”

Thea studied him thoughtfully. She did not forgive him and she was still angry. Her year in Hellgate was a trauma that would affect her for the rest of her life. But she could also understand his point of view; he had been a victim as well. There was no use in wishing for a different past. All she could do now was make a better future.

“It is over now,” she finally said. “If you’ll excuse me, I have somewhere to be and you should get inside.”

“Of course,” said Jean, turning and striding away.

“Jean,” she called after him, before he could take more than a couple steps. She pointed at her left cheekbone, where she no longer wore the Moriyama brand. “You should get rid of this,” she said. “We don’t belong to him any longer.”

***

She arrived back at the boat moored under Zentsbridge just as Abby and Betsy showed up wearing dark cloaks that showed blue garments peeking out. With them were Ravkan king and his right-hand Heartrender. Abby sprung into action right away, pulling a vial and syringe from her pocket before injecting a strange purple-coloured concoction into Kevin. She then spread her hands over Kevin’s chest while muttering to herself.

“Betsy,” she finally said. “I can’t get a heartbeat. The poison has done its job.”

“Sounds like it has done its job too well,” said Thea, coldly. It had taken a lot of convincing before Kevin had agreed to fake his death by being shot with a rubber bullet and then poisoned. His anxiety had been almost unmanageable leading up to the auction, but she had kept him calm enough to go through with it. If he died now she was never going to forgive any of the people involved, including herself.

“Stand back,” Betsy said imperiously while rubbing her hands together. The rest of them took a step back.

“What is she doing?” Thea asked. The hair along her arms was standing on end, and she could smell a storm in the air.

“Is she summoning lightning?” asked Renee.

“She’s going to try to shock his heart into beating again,” explained Abby.

“She could kill him!” Thea argued.
“And herself,” agreed Abby. “It’s very dangerous. But the antidote didn’t start his heart so this is Kevin’s only chance.”

Thea quieted and watched in consternation as Betsy’s hands crackled with a blue glow. She placed them on either side of Kevin’s chest. His body jerked instantly, his spine arching. There was no other reaction.

“Has she done this before?” Renee wondered.

The Ravkan king and Abby exchanged a heavy glance.

“I’ve personally seen her attempt it twice, during the war,” said the king.

“Did it work?” asked Dan.

“The first time it went perfectly,” replied the king. “As for the second… well, let’s hope that Kevin fares better than his mother did.”

“Again,” said Betsy, her palms glowing blue once more. This time, after his full body jerk, Kevin began coughing. Abby rushed forward to help him. Betsy sat down heavily, panting a little.

“Thank you,” Thea said sincerely.

While Kevin and Betsy recovered, Dan was starting to get antsy.

“You have to leave while the streets are still deserted,” she told Thea.

Abby nodded. “Betsy and I will escort the four of you to your ship,” she told the king. “We’ve already sent the other Grisha from the city who wish to go with you to Ravka there.” He nodded, and Thea turned to Dan and Renee.

Dan stepped forward to hug her. Thea tensed a little, but returned the hug. “Take care of yourself,” said Dan. “Try not to murder Kevin.”

Thea grimaced. “Come and visit us sometime.”

Dan stepped back and Renee stepped forwards. “Natalie Shields,” said Thea. “You are nothing like how I expected you to be.”

“Theodora Muldani,” replied Renee solemnly. “You are exactly who I thought you were.” Thea wondered if she should take offense, but Renee just shook her head. “I knew that you were strong and loyal or you never would have been an Evermore guard. I knew that you were clever since you managed to track me to Ketterdam. I knew that you had integrity and focus or else I would have been able to lose you to the distractions in the Barrel. It’s only because you were a true adversary that I had you locked in Hellgate. I knew that the only way to keep Jean safe and away from Evermore, as I had promised, involved incapacitating you.”

“So I should be thankful that you didn’t just murder me?” asked Thea dryly.

“I am sorry that you suffered from my actions.”

“I’m willing to call us even,” said Thea, realizing that somewhere during her time with the Foxes, during the numerous life-threatening situations that they’d escaped, that she’d forgiven Renee. She didn’t understand her, exactly, but she did respect her.

“Saints watch over you,” Renee said, stepping back. Thea nodded her acceptance and watched as
Dan and Renee disappeared into the city before helping Kevin up and following Abby towards their new life in Ravka.

Chapter End Notes

Next time:

“Empty words, Cass,” said Andrew. “I don’t need to fight you. Instead I’m going to offer you a deal.”
ANDREW

Chapter Summary

In which everybody learns that Andrew Minyard keeps his promises.

Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter: references to burying someone alive

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Andrew left Kevin’s body to Aaron and Thea and moved over to where Nicky and Erik were waiting by the edge of the stage. The stadwatch guards were trying to corral the upset and brawling delegations. He caught sight of Neil and Matt pushing their way through the crowds towards him.

Matt was down to just his undershirt, his fancy coat draped around Neil, dwarfing him completely and disguising the fact that his own shirt was covered in blood. Again.

Neil came to a stop before him, his cheeks flushed and his hair tousled. Andrew flicked his eyes towards the bloody mess of his shirt.

“It’s ninety percent not mine,” said Neil. “He’s dead… they’re both dead, Andrew.” His eyes were slightly wild and his hand was shaking as he reached for Andrew. Andrew grasped it between both of his hands. “Andrew, I’m free.” He gave a little hiccup that could almost be a laugh.

“You can be hysterical about it later,” said Andrew, squeezing his hand. “Just hold it together until we’re finished here.”

Neil took a deep breath and then obviously steeled himself, nodding sharply to him. Andrew turned to Matt and Erik who were watching Kevin be carried from the Church. “Stay here,” he told them. “We’ll be back shortly.”

He tugged Neil’s hand once before dropping it and heading to the door that he’d seen Cass slip through earlier, leading to one of the smaller chapels. Cass had been leaning indolently against a pillar for the auction, purposefully keeping directly in his line of sight, challenging him. Her arrogance would not have let her leave without a confrontation.

Sure enough she was waiting for him, surrounded by a handful of her Ravens.

“Andrew, darling,” she said. “If you wanted my attention, all you had to do was say so.”

“It’s been a long time since I’ve ever wanted anything from you except your suffering, Cass.”

“Clearly you want some kind of respect and recognition. So: congratulations. I respect you enough as an opponent to beat you to death with your cane myself instead of having one of my men do it.”

Neil drew his knives, but settled when Andrew shot him a look. “Empty words, Cass,” said Andrew.
“I don’t need to fight you. Instead I’m going to offer you a deal.”

“A free and fair trade offered in the Church of Barter?” Cass scoffed. “I know better than to trust a word you say. I should have smothered you when you were a child.”

“That would have made your life easier,” agreed Andrew. “But for now we’re going to discuss jurda.”

“I have no interest in jurda. There is nothing you could offer me that could make up for all the trouble you’ve caused me.”

“Sorry for not being more specific. I meant that we were going to discuss jurda cartels. Specifically the one that is holding your son hostage.”

Cass whitened and took an involuntary step forward. “What do you know about that?” she hissed.

Andrew gestured at Neil. “Never forget that I know everything that happens in this town.” He hummed a little and then took a handkerchief out of his pocket, using it to polish one of his knives. “It is really too bad that you’re unwilling to trade with me. The jurda cartel was quite interested in what I had to offer.”

He shared a look with Neil. “They were very reasonable,” Neil agreed.

“Where is he?” Cass demanded.

“He was… a little tied up, the last I saw him,” said Andrew.

“I will kill you, you little~”

“And what will happen to Drake if you do?” asked Andrew. “He doesn’t have much time left and you’re wasting it by threatening me.”

“Andrew, please~”

“He doesn’t like that word,” said Neil sharply. “Don’t use it.”

Cass spared him a glance before turning her attention back to Andrew. “Andrew, I’m begging you~”

“What do you know about that?” she hissed.

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Cass spared him a glance before turning her attention back to Andrew. “Andrew, I’m begging you~”

“What do you want from me?”

“I want my share in Fifth Harbour back,” he said.

“I legally bought that,” argued Cass.
“Yes,” said Andrew slowly. “And now I want it back.”

“It’s worth a fortune,” said one of Cass’ underlings.

“Ah, but is it worth Drake’s life?” Andrew asked. He ignored the muttered ‘yes’ from one the Ravens before sending Cass a piercing stare. “If you don’t sign over what I want then he will die: slowly, painfully, and all alone.”

“Fine!” Cass cried. “Fine, I’ll sign it back over to you. Just tell me where he is.”

“Not so fast,” said Andrew, pulling a contact and a pen out of the inside pocket of his coat. “Sign these first.”

Cass took the pen desperately and signed where he indicated. Fifth Harbour was once again his property.

“I buried him,” he told her. “I tied him up and put him in a coffin and buried him alive.”

Cass gasped and made an abortive movement as if to strike him. “Where?” she gritted out.

“Outside the city, I’m afraid,” said Andrew, enjoying the power he had over her. “He’s in the southernmost corner of Tarmakker’s Field, two miles west of Oakland. If you hurry you should get there in time.”

Cass started calling out orders to her Ravens, who appeared slightly hesitant to follow them.

“Make sure there’s a medik,” Cass ordered.

“The plague makes that difficult.”

“Get the one we keep on call for the House of Spears,” she snarled. “We certainly pay him enough! Drag him out of the hospital if necessary. Go!” She turned to face Andrew once more. “You’re going to die for this,” she threatened. “You and everyone you love will suffer.”

“The trick is not to love anyone,” he told her. “And suffering is like anything else: you live with it long enough and you begin not to notice it anymore. There’s nothing you can do to me that I will not return tenfold.”

She looked pointedly towards Neil, making her threat clear, before she turned on her heel and stormed out of the Church, her Ravens trailing in her wake.

“She’s going to be dangerous once she finds that he’s not there,” said Neil mildly.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Andrew. “The city will be closed by then, she won’t be able to return until the plague measures are relaxed. And where would she go? Several of her establishments are going to be closed indefinitely. She’ll be investigated with regards to the plague and all everyone will know is that she fled the city with a medik as soon as the plague started. It will take her awhile before she gathers enough strength to come after me; we’ll have time to discourage her from doing so.”

Neil gave him a small smile. “I didn’t ask, but where did you have Renee start this so-called plague?”

“The House of Spears,” Andrew immediately listed. “The Raven’s Roost, and that new gambling hall that just opened in Fifth Harbour, I forget its name.”

“The Lucky Duck,” Neil supplied. “All establishments owned by Cass and the Ravens. But I thought you said there were four targets?”
Andrew fiddled with his cane. “The Menagerie,” he said.

Neil gave him a brilliant grin for that. “For Robin?” he clarified.

“I felt she deserved a reward for all the good work she’s done lately,” he sniffed. In truth, the Menagerie had a cruel mistress who mistreated her workers; Andrew didn’t care, precisely, but shutting down the site of her past misery was something he wanted to do for Robin.

“See?” said Neil, with an insufferably smug grin. “You’re a good person.”

“I am not.”

“You’re the best person,” Neil laughed.

Andrew considered arguing, but decided to let Neil delude himself if he so wished. It had nothing to do with the happiness that was reflected in Neil’s laugh, obviously.

“Come on,” he said, leading Neil back into the main cathedral.

It was almost empty now; only the Merchant Council, the *stadwatch*, Phil Higgins, Kathy Ferdinand, Maria Hemmick and the Foxes remained.

“Any trouble?” Andrew asked Matt as he and Neil made their way over to them. Allison had also joined their small group.

“The Fjerdans wanted to arrest Erik,” Matt answered. “But it was explained to them that he was on a legal contract of indentured servitude and that they would have to argue for him to be extradited in court. They decided that they’d rather get out of the city before the plague measures prevented all egress from the Harbours.”

Andrew nodded. Plague measures allowed a short time for merchant and foreign ships to leave the city to decrease the city’s population during the plague. The Harbours would be locked down tight tomorrow, but the visiting dignitaries would be able to leave this evening. They wouldn’t want to remain in a plague-threatened city with no exit available for the foreseeable future.

A nervous-looking young man burst into the Church, carrying a stack of papers which bore the seal of the Gemensbank. Those papers would prove what the Council of Tides had said: the Merchant Council’s money had been funneled from a fund belonging to Luther Hemmick into an account meant for the Shu.

“You can’t honestly believe this!” Luther shouted as Higgins reviewed the papers and motioned for the *stadwatch* to shackle him. “It’s all Minyard’s doing! Find Stephanie Walker! Find Cass Spear! They’ll tell you.”

Andrew almost smiled when he considered how difficult it would be to find either of those women.

“Stop embarrassing yourself,” Higgins said. “Calm down. You will be taken to the Stadhall to await your charges. Once you have paid your bail-”

“Bail?” cried Luther. “My word-”

“Is worth nothing!” argued Higgins. “Seventy million of the Council’s money is gone: we should be taking you straight to Hellgate. Do you even realize the damage you have done to Kerch today?”

“I keep telling you, I’ve been set up!”
“Your fixation on Minyard is troubling,” said Higgins.

Luther turned towards Andrew at that. “I will be setting my reputation to rights starting tomorrow,” he snarled. “Once I’m out on bail, I’m able to connect you and Walker, just you wait.”

“I imagine that I will have a long time to wait,” Andrew said placidly. “Your funds will be controlled by the custodian of your estate. Since I don’t imagine Nicky will be very eager to spend a lot on your bail or defense, you’ll have a lot of time to sit around and think about where you went wrong. Here’s a hint: it was when you double crossed me and then dared to lay a hand on what is mine.”

“Nicky!” spat Hemmick. “I wrote him out of my will months ago.”

“Did you?” asked Andrew. “Nicky told me that the two of you had reconciled. But, of course, that was before you had him beaten. I wouldn’t blame him for wanting to distance himself from you now.”

“My will is very clear. He is not mentioned. You will find a copy of it in-” Luther cut himself off, staring at Andrew with his mouth open. “In my safe,” he finished on a whisper. Again Andrew felt like smiling as awareness washed over Luther. “There’s another copy,” Luther rallied, “with my solicitor-”

“George Waterhouse?” asked Andrew. “Lovely security dogs he has; I would get some for myself but with the proper commands anyone can get past them.”

“Have you learned yet?” asked Neil in an undertone, leaning towards Luther. “Not to underestimate Barrel rats?”

“No,” said Luther, paling. “No, this is not over. You have not won this.” He turned back to the Merchant’s Council. “They are just vindictive because I wouldn’t pay them after they liberated Kevin Day from Evermore.”

“Which you contracted us to do,” said Andrew.

“You reneged on a good-faith contract?” asked Whittier.

“You went behind this Council’s back to retrieve Kevin Day?” asked Andritch.

“It was a good plan!” argued Luther. “Maria, tell them.”

Maria Hemmick quailed under the scrutiny of everyone in the room. She looked helplessly at Luther.

“Mrs. Hemmick, you were aware of your husband’s unlawful actions?” asked Higgins. “We will have to take you into custody as well as a possible accomplice.”

Nicky, who had watched gleefully as his father had been handcuffed hid his face to avoid watching his mother’s arrest.

“My father was also aware of Luther Hemmick’s plan to go against the Council and rescue Kevin Day from Evermore,” said a new voice. Allison stood proud and tall, glaring challengingly at her father.

Councilman Reynolds blanched. “I most certainly was not,” he sputtered.

“Strange that I have documentation then,” said Allison, handing a sheaf of papers over to Higgins without turning her burning stare away from her father. Andrew hadn’t known that Allison had
planned this, but he didn’t begrudge her her revenge. She must have coordinated with Dan to get the proper forgeries.

Allison stepped close to her father as he, too, was being handcuffed. “I retract the apology I gave you when I returned to your house,” she said. “I am not sorry for any of my previous actions and I do not forgive you for yours.”

Luther was becoming increasingly unhinged as all of this unfolded. “You will all pay for this,” he spat. “I will ruin all of you! I swear it.”

“Yes,” said Andrew boredly. “Swear it. Make a solemn vow. Everyone here is perfectly aware what a promise from you is worth.”

Luther, Maria, and Reynolds were all led away by the stadwatch, the rest of the Merchant Council and Higgins following at a more sedate pace.

Higgins turned to address Nicky before he left. “Your father’s will will be reviewed and the documents to make you the custodian of his estate will be sent to your residence tomorrow.”

“My residence?” asked Nicky stupidly.

Higgins looked unsure. “Yes, you will returning to your father’s house, will you not?”

“I…” said Nicky, with wide confused eyes.

“Of course he will,” Erik supplied. “He’s a little shaken right now, obviously, from the beating and the shocking revelation about his father’s criminal activities. Don’t worry, we’ll look after him.”

And then they were alone. Nicky was still staring in shock, while Allison had a small, satisfied smile on her face.

“What’s going on?” Kathy suddenly asked innocently. They all slowly turned to stare at her. “Where were they taking Luther and Maria? Is it almost time to go home? I’m hungry.”

***

In the dusk, they made their way through the empty streets to what was now Nicky’s house. The household staff did not have any outward problems with the fact that it was Nicky coming home instead of his parents. They began bustling around, preparing food for the group of them. Kathy retreated upstairs to her bedroom. Nicky was wandering through the house absently trailing his hand along different items with a far-off look in his eyes.

Andrew found Neil admiring the hole in the ceiling of the dining room. “Nice,” he said approvingly before the two of them wandered into the drawing room.

“I still can’t believe that the Council of Tides showed up,” said Erik when he saw them.

Neil laughed. “They didn’t,” he said. At Erik’s confused look, he explained. “Those were the Grisha who’ve been hiding out at the Ravkan embassy. I think there were only a couple Tidemakers among them, but they seemed to make it work. Betsy and Abby were there too; didn’t you recognize Betsy’s voice as the leader?”

Erik goggled. “What if the real Council of Tides had showed up?”

Neil shrugged. “We took a risk. They haven’t been seen in twenty five years and only then because
Erik was still sputtering in shock as the meal was served. They ate in the sitting room, since the
dining room was still out of commission, balancing their plates on their knees. It was still more
luxury than most of them were accustomed to.

After a quick meal, all of them retreated into the back garden, watching the abnormally still canals.
Every so often a bodyman’s boat or a medik’s emergency boat cut through the still waters. Dan and
Renee joined them before long; Robin was close on their heels.

“Abby and Betsy got Kevin, Thea, and the Ravkans safely aboard their ship,” Robin reported.
“Wymack and Katelyn are currently handling the other Foxes that are locked down at the Foxhole
and Aaron has medik duties.”

“And my mother?” asked Matt fretfully.

“I made sure she was safely aboard the Zemeni ship. I watched them sail out of the harbour about an
hour ago,” Robin told him.

“So that’s it, then?” asked Dan.

“Not quite,” said Andrew. “We haven’t gotten our money yet.”

“But Luther’s money is now Nicky’s,” said Erik. “We don’t want to steal from him.”

“No,” agreed Andrew. “But I felt that the Shu could make due with only forty million *kruge* .”

There was silence for a couple beats. “So the remaining thirty million…” Allison trailed off.

“Will be laundered through the Foxes’ businesses and placed into accounts for all of us by the end of
the month. Five million for Wymack, Bee, and Abby to share, two point five million for each of us
and Thea, one million each for Robin and Katelyn, half a million for Aaron.”

“Huh,” said Matt, before they all sat in contemplative silence for a couple minutes, until Neil gave a
short, slightly deranged sounding laugh. Andrew squeezed his hand where their fingers were tangled
together between them.

“Neil?” asked Dan, worry creeping into her tone.

“We won,” Neil said, sounding awed.


Chapter End Notes

Next time:

Epilogue!
EPILOGUE

Chapter Summary

In which everyone lives happily ever after. Except Cass. Fuck her.

Chapter Notes

Oh, wow, I can't believe this is finished! I've spent a lot of time and energy working on this, so I would really, really appreciate it if you could take a minute or two to leave a comment to let me know if/why you liked it.

I would like to thank everybody who has left a comment on this work, especially those wonderful people who have left one multiple times. I am so grateful to you, and your comments definitely helped whenever my brain decided that this story should be abandoned or deleted.

This chapter is basically a maple tree in the spring: full of sap. The exception is Cass' section which has warnings for: reference to forced underage prostitution, death threats, psychological horror, zombies. As always let me know if there is anything I should tag.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

DAN

Dan took a deep breath and smiled as she inhaled salty air. She had missed the sea.

She’d practically been born on a boat; she did not remember a time during her childhood that she spent any length of time on solid ground. Her father had been a naval officer before he’d been dishonourably discharged when he’d been found forging leave documents and supply orders. Dan had learned how to forge documents at his knee. Her mother had been the daughter of a sailor who had had the sea in her blood. They had both been experienced, had both respected the ocean and its awesome power. But even the best sailors were subject to the whims of nature. Dan had survived the storm that had taken her parents’ lives, ending up shipwrecked, alone, and penniless in the Southern Colonies.

It had been there that Wymack had found her: a dirty, pathetic thing who was trying to sell her body just to get enough money so that she could eat. Somehow he had looked past her desperate exterior and had seen who she was and what she could do. He brought her into his crew and she’d found a home there - following him and Abby and Betsy when they settled in Ketterdam.

But now she’d returned to sailing. Nicky had offered her a very fair price on a small warship from his father’s fleet - a tiny, sleek, powerful thing. She’d found a crew and departed Kerch, set on disrupting the slave trade that powered the very worst parts of the Barrel.

She was sad to leave the city, but she knew that she would be back frequently. She was still working with Wymack, after all, and she and Matt would have to return to visit their friends.
Their first voyage had taken them to Ravka, following the smaller rivers inland until they reached the capital city, Os Alta. There, they’d been invited to visit with Thea and Kevin at the Little Palace. Thea had looked well; she had found a role teaching the younger Grisha how to defend themselves without using their powers. Dan had been shocked to find her almost relaxed. Kevin had been characteristically caught up in his work. Thea had managed to drag him out of his workshop to dine with them where he had spent most of the meal complaining about wasting time.

Dan had asked how everyone was taking the news that Kevin had returned to Ravka but Kevin had informed her that in order to prevent war (Ichirou was likely to attack if he knew that Kevin had survived) he had adopted a secret identity.

Thea had rolled her eyes expressively. “Go on,” she urged. “Tell them the name you picked so that no one will ever figure out who you are.”

“How I’m known as Devon Clay.”

Matt had laughed so hard that he’d started choking on his wine, while Kevin had just appeared disgruntled. Thea sighed deeply and shook her head fondly.

“I understand your frustration,” Dan consoled Thea. “I let Matt name my ship.”

It had been good to see them, but now she was back at sea, patrolling one of the known slaver routes for the next couple weeks before she planned to head home to resupply.

Matt let out a whoop from his perch in the crow’s nest and then used a rope to swing down to deck.

“Ship at 10 o’clock,” he said, pointing and handing her a spyglass. “They’re flying the Kaelish flag and the Butcher’s cleaver.”

She focused the spyglass and sure enough the small ship was flying both the Kaelish and Butcher’s colours.

She gave Matt a sharp grin. “Time to go hunting,” she said, before beginning to shout orders at her crew.

Taking the wheel, she tried to imagine a better life, but she couldn’t. She was here in a ship of her own, with the man she loved, hunting those who liked to make others suffer. She was exactly where she wanted to be.

She gave the wheel a sharp tug, and *The Shadow* slid through the waves towards her prey.

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**ERIK**

Erik was curled up in an armchair, ostensibly reading but actually dozing, when Nicky got home. He shook off his drowsiness and smiled at him when he entered the room.

“Everything go okay?” he asked.

Luther’s trial had been short and sweet. Nicky had directed a (very small) sum of money towards his defense, but investigators had found indisputable evidence that he had used knowledge gained from his position as a Council member to purchase coral fisheries. He had been found guilty of swindling his friends, tampering with an auction, and kidnapping his own son. There was even shocking evidence that he’d hired a group of people to infiltrate the residence of the crown prince of Shu Han and to sabotage his own sugar silos. He’d been barred from ever owning property or holding office,
and it was unlikely that he’d ever get out of jail.

Nicky’s mother, on the other hand, had been barred from owning property in Kerch but had escaped harsher penalties because she was clearly under the influence of her husband. Nicky had set aside one of the Hemmick properties outside the city and a small allowance for her. He’d been with Waterhouse, signing the final paperwork this afternoon.

Nicky looked upset, so Erik took his hand and dragged him down to sit in the armchair with him. He wrapped his arms around him and nuzzled the side of his head with his nose.

“I had Waterhouse add a stipulation that she would be evicted and cut off from her money if she ever tried to contact me,” said Nicky, to Erik’s surprise.

“Are you sure-” started Erik.

“Yes,” Nicky cut him off. “She burned that bridge. She wasn’t there when I needed her, she’s lost her chance. I’m not a monster; I don’t want her destitute. But I also don’t want to see or hear from her ever again.”

“All right,” said Erik quietly. “As long as it’s what you want.”

“I have all the family I need right here,” said Nicky with conviction, before turning his eyes to the ceiling. “She napping?” he asked.

Erik nodded against Nicky’s shoulder. “The wet nurse got her down about an hour ago.”

Nicky had agreed to honour Luther’s arrangement with Kathy; he’d paid her a large sum of money which, after she had given birth, she had used to attend theatre school in Belendt. But there had been discussion about what to do with the baby. Nicky hadn’t been sure that he wanted to keep her at first.

“She’s half my father’s,” he’d argued.

“So are you,” replied Erik.

“She’s his legacy.”

“She’s an innocent that can’t be held accountable for his actions.”

“I can’t raise a baby alone.”

Erik had looked at him incredulously. “Who said you’d be alone? We’ll raise her together. We’ll raise her to be brave and tolerant and to reject all the awful ideals your father held dear.”

That had derailed the argument and Nicky gave it up for good as soon as he held his baby sister in his arms. She was tiny and wrinkled, with wide blue eyes and downy blonde hair.

“She’s perfect,” Nicky breathed.

Erik had watched the two of them, his little family. I have been made to protect you, he thought. Only in death will I be kept from this oath. He had made that oath once before: when he’d become a drüskelle. This time he planned on keeping it.

If anyone had told him a year ago, even six months ago, that he would find the home he was looking for with a spoiled mercher’s son he would have laughed. But here he was, living with and practically married to the richest man in town, raising a child together. It was not what he had expected from his life, but he would spill a lot of blood if anyone tried to take it from him.
CASS

It had been a month since the plague sirens had sounded, a month since Andrew Minyard had given Cass false information to ensure that she was out of the city in the aftermath. She’d spent hours and hours searching Tarmakker’s Field for any sign of Drake. She wasn’t sure if he was dead or a prisoner, but she definitely would be killing Andrew for that trick.

When she’d attempted to reenter the city, to go find Andrew and beat him within an inch of his life, she’d found that access to Ketterdam was restricted due to the plague. She’d retreated to her country house and began plotting.

The news coming from Ketterdam was devastating. The House of Spears, the Ravens’ Roost, and the Lucky Duck had all been shut down by the stadwatch, doors and windows barred. Several of her other businesses were under investigation since the plague was thought to have originated amongst the Ravens. The Nest had been emptied out and searched, resulting in several arrests and the seizure of some of her property.

During the investigations it had come to light that many of Cass’ employees were working on illegal contracts: all of the boys from the House of Spears had been released from their agreements with her, as well as many of her Ravens.

The rest of the Ravens had realized that they were on a sinking ship and, like the true Barrel rats they were, abandoned her at the first opportunity. Reports from her remaining contacts said that the Ravens were basically no more: all the talent had been absorbed into the other gangs.

Access to Ketterdam had been reopened after only a week; apparently the plague had been a false alarm - some fast growing fungus had caused widespread panic. Cass had calmed a little by then and had realized that marching into the city and forcing a confrontation with Andrew would not be possible right then. Her empire had been decimated, she would have to start over from the beginning. No matter, she thought, squaring her shoulders, I built it once, I can build it again.

She had found herself in the Barrel when she was young: barely seventeen after her parents had thrown her out when her ill-conceived affair with a married Council member had left her pregnant. Penniless, alone, and with a child to feed, she had prostituted herself to make ends meet. None of the reputable pleasure houses would hire a mother with an infant, so she had taken to the streets, plying her trade in alleys or rundown buildings.

In those days she was always after a rich benefactor, someone who would pay her handsomely for her body and would keep her and Drake in comfort. She had ended up finding him, but it wasn’t her body he wanted.

“Want a tumble?” she’d asked a well-dressed man as he passed by her sitting with her toddler son outside of an alley.

He’d barely glanced at her before saying, “No,” but then he’d done a double take. “I’ll pay you ten times your going rate if you let me have the boy,” he’d said.

Cass had looked at Drake for a long moment, seriously considering the offer. But, no. She wasn’t the best mother but she couldn’t do that to her son. Instead she’d looked up at the man. “Not this boy. But I could get you another one?” she offered. The Barrel was full of bratty orphan children; she’d wondered why the man hadn’t just gone to pick one of them.

He considered. “Bring me a boy, maybe a couple years older than this one, and we can make a
deal.” He’d given her an address and a time frame and left her.

It hadn’t been hard to find a starving orphan who was willing to follow her back to the hovel where she was living. She’d fed him and washed him and taken him to meet the man.

She demanded payment upfront and waited outside as the man took his pleasure. When he’d exited she’d cornered him. “Do you have friends that share your proclivities?” she’d asked. “Because I can find boys for all of you.”

He’d agreed and she’d gone back into the room to clean up her first employee.

The man had come through on his promise, bringing her more clients. Soon she had a small group of boys living with her and she’d earned enough money to rent a small property where they could live and clients could visit. Once he was old enough, she’d put Drake in charge of the boys. He had complained at first, he hadn’t liked the other boys who wouldn’t listen to him and were often loud or violent.

“Mom, they won’t do as I say,” he’d whined to her one night.

She’d given him a piercing look. “They belong to us,” she said simply. “Make them.” Drake had given her a look filled with sadistic glee and he’d never complained about them disobeying him again.

Another couple years of good business had allowed her to purchase a hall along West Stave.

At the time she was paying one of the Barrel bosses for protection and to keep the *stadwatch* from investigating her business too closely. It was growing harder for her to snatch up orphans; urban legends warned the boys away from her. She’d started culling her workforce from the slavers: finding any boys who hadn’t hit puberty and signing them to unfair contracts.

Shortly after Drake had hit his teenage years, he’d come home excitedly talking about joining one of the Barrel gangs. She had forbidden him, not wanting his life to be under the control of anyone else. She’d already been chafing under the protection fee that she was being charged and the fact that she had no use for her indentured servants once they had gone through puberty. So she decided to start her own gang.

It had not been easy, being a female Barrel boss. She’d had to be twice as ruthless and twice as successful to gain half as much respect. But she had done it. She’d managed the Ravens, the gambling halls, the taverns, and the brothels.

She’d acquired Andrew Minyard in a fairly straightforward deal. Tilda Minyard was not the first person to agree to sell her son to relieve her debt. If Cass had known what trouble the tiny, blond boy would bring to her she would have drowned him in the harbour.

She stretched and yawned. She’d spent the day going over accounts; she was pretty sure that she could salvage some of her businesses. She’d have to rebrand them and wait for the plague panic to die down, but she could make them profitable again. The House of Spears was a write-off: somehow in the aftermath of its closure it had burnt to the ground. She was pretty sure that the monster that was responsible for all of her recent problems was the source of that as well.

She bid goodnight to the guards that she employed and got ready for bed, mind spinning on what vengeance she would unleash upon Andrew.

She was awoken suddenly, yanked out of sleep by someone sitting on her chest and holding a knife to her throat.
“I’ll kill you,” she growled at the intruder.

“You’ve already tried,” the man said as he sat forward enough for his face to show in the moonlight. It was Andrew’s Shadow, the young Fox who Riko had been obsessed with. “You sent the Butcher’s Men after me. Lola got her brains smashed onto the cobblestones and the Butcher himself got a knife in the throat. What makes you think you’ll do any better against me?”

“How’d you get in here?”

He scoffed. “I am the Shadow, I go where I want. Your pathetic security cannot stop me.”

“Andrew sent you to give me a message?”

“No, I have a message of my own,” he said. “Stay out of Ketterdam. Stay away from Andrew. If you even think of harming him in any way and I’ll carve out your heart.”

“Where is my son?” she demanded. “I’ll kill whoever has laid a hand on him, regardless of your threats.”

“Oh, Cass,” he gave a dry chuckle. His smile in the shadows was terrifying. “There are so many fates worse than death.” He climbed off of her and made his way over to the door. “Come out to the garden with me and see.”

She dashed for the door, slamming it open. “Guards!” she cried.

She was grabbed by the back of her nightdress and crushed into the wall. “They can’t hear you,” the Shadow said, returning his knife to her throat. He propelled her down the stairs and out into the back garden. As soon as they were outside, the wind picked up. It swirled around them and twisted the trees.

There was a groaning sound and then someone lurched forward out of the treeline. Their head was held at a strange angle and one of their legs was dragging.

“Do you remember the night you confronted Andrew at Luther Hemmick’s house?” asked the Shadow conversationally. “How you sent some of your Ravens after our Heartrender at Sweet Reef? Did they perchance happen to tell you why they failed?”

Cass couldn’t take her eyes off the figure moving towards them. “Cowards,” she replied. “They told fairy stories about the dead walking.”

“Are you so sure that those stories were false?” he asked just as the figure stepped into the light. It was Drake. His neck was snapped, his eyes vacant and far away, his arms hanging limply by his sides. He was unmistakably dead.

“What have you done?” she whispered.

“Tell me, Cass,” he replied. “Do you like living?”

“What have you done?” she demanded.

“He’s paying for his sins,” was the answer. “What do you think the punishment for yours will be?”

She could only stare mutely at her dead son who was still walking towards her.

“You will stay out of Ketterdam. You will stay away from Andrew. If you even think of harming him, I will carve out your heart and curse your corpse to walk the earth like I have with your son.”
There was a loud thump behind her and she wheeled in fright. A dead raven lay under her bedroom window. As she watched it, it hopped to its feet even with its head twisted the wrong direction. It flapped its wings and then took off towards her. She shrieked and covered her head.

“The dead are watching you, Cass. Do not think of crossing us.” The Shadow took a step back and sheathed his knife. “Now, before I leave, did you want to give your son a hug?”

The dead version of her son shuffled towards her, his arms now outstretched.

“That thing is not my son,” she spat.

“Mother,” the dead thing moaned trying to reach for her, and she couldn’t handle it anymore. She swatted it away and spun away in a panic, sprinting up to her bedroom and slamming the door shut behind her. She curled up in the corner farthest away from the window and stayed there, shaking, all night.

One of her guards knocked in the morning, cheerfully calling her for breakfast.

“Where were you last night?” she scowled as she opened her door. He looked baffled.

“Last night?” he asked. “Nothing happened last night. It was all quiet.”

“You didn’t hear the windstorm? Or me screaming? Or the intruders?” she demanded.

He looked over his shoulder at the other guard and they both shrugged. She marched out to the garden, but there wasn’t any sign of what had happened last night. She was just about to write it off as a bad dream, when she noticed some freshly disturbed earth in the far corner of the garden. Approaching, she saw a new grave marker. WE ARE WATCHING, it read.

Cass backed away quickly. She did like living, she decided. She had a fair amount of money, she didn’t need to return to the Barrel. No, she was going to go far, far away.

Let the poor fools in Ketterdam deal with the blond Monster and his demon Shadow.

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**RENEE**

It was nearing dawn when Renee led Neil and Betsy back to the lake house. It had taken several hours to get there from Cass’ place. Allison was awake to greet them, somehow looking perfectly put together and not as if she’d gotten up before dawn to greet them.

“Did it work?” she asked, coming straight to Renee.

“I think so,” answered Neil. “We’ll have to keep an eye on her movements and make sure that we don’t let our guards down, but I think she’ll leave Andrew alone.”

Allison reached out to ruffle his hair. “You really are completely terrifying sometimes, aren’t you, vengeful donut.”

It had been Neil’s plan: Aaron procured a body for them, which Neil had Tailored to look like Drake and Renee had controlled. Betsy had created a cushion of air that prevented the guards from hearing them as well as the windstorm. Renee was glad: Cass deserved so much worse than a quick death.

“It wasn’t vengeance,” argued Neil. “I’m protecting Andrew.”

Allison just shook her head. “I remember when I met you and you were just a frightened rabbit. Now
Neil smiled his murder smile. “I would do that and so much worse to anyone who threatened any member of my family.”

They were making enough noise that Abby, who had stayed overnight to help Allison in Renee’s absence, came to investigate.

“Oh, good, you’re back,” she said. “Are we heading out now, or are we staying for a bit?”

“Stay for breakfast,” requested Renee. The kitchen staff would already be preparing food.

It was strange for her to live in a house that employed staff to cook and clean for them, but it was completely necessary. After the House of Spears had been shut down due to Renee’s actions, all the boys that Cass had employed had been homeless. Some, who had been captured by slavers, were able to return to their parents, but the majority had nowhere else to go.

Nicky had offered to sell his father’s lake house to Renee and Allison and they had accepted, bringing all the boys with them. It wasn’t exactly what Renee had expected, a house full of angry and traumatized preteens, but she felt that she and Allison were doing okay. Abby and Betsy both made frequent trips from the city to help out.

Allison’s father had gotten away with a fine and he had responded by writing Allison out of his will. She said that she was completely fine with her and her parents pretending that the other didn’t exist.

Breakfast was a hectic affair, made hilarious by the fact that Neil clearly did not know how to act around children. He watched them cautiously as if they were dangerous animals. She’d seen him fearlessly square off against opponents that were twice his size but was struck dumb by twelve year olds. He gave her a dirty look as she chuckled at him but she just smiled beatifically in response.

After breakfast Abby, Betsy, and Neil left to take a browboat back to town while Allison and Renee tended to their flock. By dinner time Renee was exhausted after her sleepless night and was dragging her feet and yawning widely when they’d gotten all the boys into bed.

“Come on, time for bed,” Allison urged pulling her up the stairs to their bedroom.

She kissed Allison goodnight and settled into bed, letting Allison curl around her.

“What do you think, tired of kissing me yet?” she asked jokingly.

“Never,” declared Allison. “You’re stuck with me until we’re old and grey.”

“But you’ll still be fantastically beautiful, yes?”

“Of course,” assured Allison.

*Thank you, Saints,* Renee thought as she drifted off to sleep. *Thank you for letting me have this.*

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**ANDREW**

Katelyn was coming out of Wymack’s office as Andrew entered the Foxhole. She had been Dan’s clear successor following the mass exodus of the older Foxes and she was taking to her increased responsibilities well.

“Andrew!” she called. “Good to see you.” He raised an eyebrow, wondering why she was acting so
friendly towards him. She’d been seeking him out to chat since Kevin’s auction and he was confused by her interest. Didn’t she used to be scared of him? Couldn’t they go back to that? “Are you coming to Nicky and Erik’s for weekly dinner?” she persisted.

“Did you tell Neil about it?” he asked.

“Yeah, he said he’d come.”

“Then I expect that I’ll be dragged along.”

“Great!” she enthused. “Aaron’s exams are finished this week, so I’ll be able to bring him.”

“I do not care,” he told her.

“Liar!” she said teasingly, before her attention was redirected up to the second floor of the Foxhole. “Luke! What are you doing?” she called, running up the stairs.

Andrew watched her go, reflecting that her words may have a small kernel of truth. Aaron had been different lately. He seemed to have reached some kind of truce with Neil following Drake’s death, and the argument that he’d had with Andrew had left him thoughtful and watchful. He was busy with his winter exams, but he was set to graduate a fully licensed medik in the spring. Andrew could almost feel something tentative and fragile growing between them.

He shook the thought off as useless optimism and made his way over to Wymack’s office.

“What news?” Wymack asked when he entered.

“I found another three establishments that are being sold at rock bottom prices,” Andrew said. The recent plague panic had made several owners desperate to sell. It was a good time to invest in real estate - the pleasures of the Barrel would not be affected for long since people needed their vices. This year may not be profitable but next year the tourists would be pouring back into the Barrel, the plague a long forgotten memory. Andrew had already purchase a gambling hall along East Stave and a small tavern in the Lid.

Wymack sat back in his chair and tented his hands in front of his face. “What’s your plan here, Andrew?” he asked.

Andrew was not completely sure what Wymack was getting at. “Making money,” he answered.

“But with what end goal? When Betsy, Abby, and I took you on we were all worried that you lacked motivation. We’d all seen it before: people with nothing to live for never live long. But then you decided to ruin Cass. I won’t lie, that worked out very well for us since you decided to put your considerable talents into strengthening the Foxes.”

“Is there any reason that you’re telling me my own history?”

“We were all worried about what would happen after you finally had your revenge. Correct me if I’m wrong, but I think you’ve found reasons to live?”

Andrew thought about weekly dinners with people who called him family. He thought about the delicate relationship that was starting with his brother. He thought about how Bee and Renee had dropped everything to willfully help Neil protect him from Cass. He thought about tousled auburn curls and ice blue eyes, of a comforting weight in his bed that let him sleep in safety, of an unshakable bond that had grown from years of trust and consent and understanding. He nodded.
“So I ask again: what’s your plan? You’re not really working as a Fox right now, but you’re not doing anything else. You’ve proven time and again that your brain is an asset. Dan’s gone after the slavers, but they’re not the only problem. I want to take out the customers, the politicians, the bosses who look the other way when human suffering is profitable. Who sign desperate people to illegal contracts. And I want your help. Not because you’ve signed a contract, or that it’s the easiest way to achieve your goals, but because you want to.”

“I do not want anything.”

“We both know that’s not true.”

“Cleaning up the Barrel seems counterproductive. You are a Barrel boss yourself.”

“I’m not one who would sell a human being. You know that or else you never would have agreed to work with me.”

“I always knew that you were a bleeding heart, Wymack. But do not mistake me for a good man.”

Wymack shook his head. “This city doesn’t need a good man. It needs a monster. Something that all the crooked people of this city fear when they close their eyes at night.”

“Saving people is your obsession, not mine.”

“So borrow it until you find something for yourself. If nothing else, consider that you’ll be thinning the city of the type people who are likely to stab Neil.”

“So you are proposing to kill everyone in Ketterdam?”

Wymack gave a dry laugh. “Just consider it, alright?” he said.

Later, as he walked through the winding alleys to where he’d agreed to meet Neil, Wymack’s proposal ran through his mind. It would not be the worst idea, he considered. It would give him something to focus on, and tricking Luther and Cass had been diverting. No one else would likely give him as much trouble, but perhaps it would keep his interest. He wondered what Neil’s plans were. They hadn’t spoken about the future since Neil had promised to stay ‘for now’. But Neil was free now. He could go to Ravka to train his powers or anywhere else in the world without being hunted. Was he still going to stay in Ketterdam with Andrew?

As he walked along a thin canal, thick mist started pouring off the water. After a few moments it was almost too thick to see. His ears picked up movement as he was suddenly surrounded by six hooded figures, in blue cloaks.

He hadn’t been right about the mist obscuring their faces: it turned out that the Council of Tides wore masks.

“Andrew Minyard,” one of the Tidemakers asked, his voice raspy. “Where is Kevin Day?”

“Dead and burned,” he answered.

“Where is the real Kevin Day?” one of the others demanded.

Andrew simply gave them a bored look.

“Do you want us for enemies?” the first man asked. “We could kill you where you stand, destroy all your property, block all your shipments.”
“And I could have your towers condemned,” he answered. “I made the plague sirens go off. What would happen if your towers were suddenly infected? Do you really think that your authority would be recognized in the face of such danger? Even if you convinced the government to leave you be, the general populace would never allow it. They’d burn your towers to the ground.”

One of the Tidemakers flicked a hand, and Andrew felt his lungs fill with water. He was drowning on dry land.

“Tell us what we want to know.”

The water receded and Andrew coughed. “A church of witnesses saw Kevin shot and a medik pronounced him dead.”

“If the secret of his amplifiers ever got out, every Grisha would be in danger.”

“Then it’s a good thing he’s dead,” said Andrew.

“You impersonated us in public,” said the leader. “We are owed a debt from you for not interfering.”

“I’m willing to negotiate,” he said.

“We will find you.” With those parting words, the Council of Tides disappeared back into the mists. Before long the mist had dissipated and Andrew was standing alone.

He’d worry about this development later, right now he had an appointment to keep.

NEIL

Neil hurried through the streets; he was running a little late since the browboat had taken a little longer than he’d anticipated and he’d still had to pick something up before he could meet Andrew. Clutching the small box in his hands, he made it to the nondescript alley where he’d asked Andrew to meet him.

He was already there when Neil arrived, looking slightly disgruntled.

“Sorry I’m late,” Neil said. “Wait, what’s wrong? Why are you damp?”

Andrew’s gaze flicked down to his coat as if he hadn’t realized the state it was in. “Nothing, really,” he said. “Just a little run in with the Council of Tides.”

Neil goggled. “Really?” he asked, but he wasn’t questioning Andrew. Andrew didn’t lie to him. “What did they want?”

“Future favour,” said Andrew nonchalantly. “How did everything go in the country?”

Neil smiled proudly. Andrew had been planning on how to make sure that Cass wouldn’t come after them when Neil had asked him to let him handle it. Their trick with Kevin had given him the idea, but he knew how much trust Andrew was placing in him to allow him the freedom to take care of Cass. “I think it worked. I don’t think she’ll bother you anymore. You’re free.”

“That makes two of us,” said Andrew, with something in his voice that Neil couldn’t identify. “Why did you want to meet here?” he asked, changing the subject.

Neil gestured around. “Don’t you recognize it?” He grinned in response to Andrew’s flat look. “Exactly three years ago today you hit me with a cane in this alley. Then you gave me a home.”
“Feeling sentimental?” asked Andrew. “Your first words to me were ‘fuck you’.”

“Well meeting you had left me breathless.”

“Because I hit you in the gut with my cane.”

“Good times,” agreed Neil, leading Andrew out of the alley onto a nearby bench that overlooked the harbour. He opened the box he carried and extracted one of the cupcakes he’d specially ordered - each one with a yellow grumpy cat on it. ”Happy anniversary,” he said. Andrew gave him an unimpressed look but took a cupcake and bit into it anyway.

“Wymack had a proposal for me today,” said Andrew after finishing his cupcake. Neil made an inquisitive noise. “He wants me to help him on his and Dan’s quest to rid the Barrel of those who make use of slavers and illegalIndentures.”

“Could be fun,” said Neil absently, watching the sparkles dance on the waves.

“Neil,” said Andrew with a seriousness that captured Neil’s full attention. “Stay,” he commanded, although Neil could hear the implied question.

Neil thought about everything that had happened, all that he had lost and gained. He had a home and a family that would never give up on him, he had a place in the world and a purpose, he had Andrew, who provided safety and trust and kisses. It was everything he wanted, everything he needed, and Neil was never letting go.

He moved his hand slowly enough so that Andrew could pull back if he didn’t want to be touched, but Andrew let him thread their fingers together. Neil curled their joined hands up towards his mouth and kissed Andrew’s knuckles.


Chapter End Notes

The End :)

I was trying to decide what to write next and I wanted to write something short and fluffy. Then my brain said, "Let's write a Hunger Games AU!" and I said, "That's neither short nor fluffy." and my brain said, "Too bad for you, I'm going to spend all my time plotting it, even when you're trying to work or something else or sleep!" In conclusion: I'm working on a Hunger Games AU. It should be ready for posting within the next couple weeks. My brain has also let me plot out a short, fluffy Stardust AU. If either of those sound interesting to you, keep an eye out for them. Or I guess you could set up an author alert or watch my tumblr (@gluupor) where I basically only post updates about my fic.

Thank you for reading and I look forward to hearing from you.
Check out this amazing comic of chapter 27!

UPDATE:

Hunger Games AU

Stardust AU

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!