

Constantinople, some years later

THEY ARE not quick enough to catch me. Jesu, but it's hot up here. A dusty heat haze hovers above the city, blurring the great dome of Santa Sofia. The sea beyond glitters like cloth-of-gold. A pearl of sweat slides from beneath my head scarf and down my cheek. Swallowing a bubble of laughter, I slip into the shadow of a church. From this rooftop, I can see all the way back down to the street market nibbling at the walls of the hippodrome. There they are: two city guardsmen pushing through the heaving crowd. It is like looking down on a carpet seething with moths.

Too slow, my friends, too slow.

The Greens and the Blues are racing at sundown, and already folk are spilling into the circus quarter from every street, square, and slum. Unlike me, they do not know which charioteer will be the faster tonight. A lot of them

will lose money on it, some more than they can afford. *They should not be so free with their coin, then*, I think, but then am annoyed with myself. Why should I feel sorry for them? The choice is theirs.

I squat in the dust and bite the last pink, glassy pomegranate seeds from their bitter skin, watching the crowd flow around my two guardsmen. All this fuss for a mangy fruit. It is not often a stallholder sees me, and ill luck it was that the guards were only paces away. I shall have to be more careful. I laugh again — softly, though, for I can hear voices coming from the room below this rooftop — feel them, almost, shaking up through the sunbaked red tiles.

Time I was away. There is work to do.

Demosthenes is in the circus stables, leaning over the stall gate and murmuring something into the pricked-up ear of one of his horses — Helen, she's called. Demosthenes races a pair of grays, matched so well that they hardly take a step out of time. The other he calls Paris. Demosthenes reads too much; if I were a charioteer, I would not name my horses after a pair of doomed lovers.

Leaning into the shelter of a barrel stacked up by the far wall, I breathe in the warm, round stink of oats, straw, and horse dung. I watch Demos lean farther over the gate, rubbing Helen between her black-tipped ears as he whispers to her. He talks to Helen as if she were a woman rather than a horse. He loves her. He does not know I am here; I am good at not being seen. I smile, resting back against the sun-warmed barrel. Demosthenes the Great may love

his horses, but it will not stop him from losing this race. *You are the greatest chariot rider this city has ever seen, I think, but you are really bad at dice.*

I step out of the shadows.

The charioteer turns to look at me. "You again, boy," he says. Demos is a slight man, not much taller than I am, with black hair that curls back from his forehead. But the muscles on his lean arms are knotted like leather cords and I know he is not a man to bait. His pride is wounded, for a start. That always makes them worse: madder than snakes in a barrel. "You're like a ghost, the way you creep around." Demos frowns. "How came you to be in here?"

I smile, fixing my eyes on his, and for a moment he looks as if he has lost his senses or cannot remember who he is nor why he's standing in this stable. "My master sent me to remind you," I say. "About the race."

Demos shakes his head, running his hands through his hair. "Tell the Emperor of Thieves not to fret—the Blues shan't win tonight, and my debt'll be paid off. Let me tell you one thing, brat: never play dice. Or not for money, at least." The charioteer stares at me, eyes narrowed. "What age are you, anyhow? Should you not be at home with your mother?"

But I don't have time to spare for foolish questions. "Hear this," I tell him. "If you win tonight, before sunrise the whole city shall know you've been fixing races for gold. But if you lose, as we agreed, no one will ever know of it. Do not forget."

Demos sighs, and the fine lines around his eyes seem to grow deeper. He looks so tired, and I know why. Once there was a churchman who spoke out against the True God, and I saw him borne through the streets by a great tangled throng of men and women—even some children younger than me. They were baying and screaming, tearing out his beard, gouging at his eyes. I remember my mother: *What manner of place is this, where they treat men like lumps of meat?* she cried. My shoulder ached by the time she had dragged Elflight and me home. This was before Tecca was born. Oh, but it hurts in my belly to think of Tecca, even now. We heard that when the mob had finished with the bishop, the corpse was missing an arm and that his tongue had been ripped out.

That's what shall happen to Demos if anyone finds out he fixes the races for coin, I think, and I can tell by the weariness in the charioteer's eyes that he knows this, too.

"I've chosen my path. I'll go where it takes me," Demos says, and his courage makes me feel ashamed; I'll never be like him. My path is the quickest road to riches, and may the devil take anyone who gets in my way. It is not an honorable choice, but this is the first time I have cared. Demos walks across the stable toward me, moving swift and catlike. "There's something about you, boy," he says. "I've been trying to catch at it for weeks. Who are you?"

Mary, Mother of God. It is time I was gone.

Out of the stables, back into the heaving marketplace of the hippodrome. The great bulk of Santa Sofia looks

down on me as if in judgment; her walls glow pinkish in the dying light. Smoke from a thousand cook-fires blues the air, and I suck in the scent of grilled meat: chicken and tiny quails with sweet flesh nestling under the blackened skin, fish drawn silvery and flipping from the Sea of Marmara just this morning. I'm hungry, despite the pomegranate, but there's no time for my kind to fill our bellies while people swarm into the hippodrome for the race. Shutters are left open, doors unlatched; this will be a ripe evening for the Emperor of Thieves' children. There are so many empty homes, so many trinkets and baubles. The emperor takes most of it, but not all—enough to keep us coming back for more. I am learning from my master. One day I shall be greater than him, and I will be King of the Underworld, lord of smuggling, gambling, pickpocketry, bribery, and theft.

I move through the throng like an eel weaving through weeds at the bottom of a slow green river. A gaggle of young men in blue armbands shove their way past, and I step back into a narrow doorway to let them by. They are loud and drunk, steeped in wine already, which makes me smile. They shall be none too pleased when Demos the Great loses the race in the last lap. If they've any luck, they'll spend most of their gold on wine before they have time to place any ill-fated bets. I think of Demos, alone in the stables with his horses. How strange it must be for him, running through the race in his mind, working out when to lose instead of how to win. Poor Demos. But I'm being softheaded, a fool.

Demos is right: he chose his path the moment he laid more money on dice than he could borrow.

I slip west down near the Great Palace and turn into an alley darkened by tall houses with balconies and windows blistering out of their walls. Even here, there is a throng. A girl is selling sugared lemons from a tray hanging around her neck, and men are sitting on the steps of the houses, drinking wine and arguing about the race.

"It'll be Demosthenes again," says a fat man, gesturing wildly with his wine cup so that dark liquid splashes out and stains the dusty street. "And don't try to tell me otherwise, Mikos, because you only make yourself look like a fool. Temon can't beat Demosthenes. He doesn't have the speed."

I leave the raised voices behind. Little do they know. At the end of the alley lies a secret hole, hidden behind a tangle of warm green vines and a heap of decaying brick. My city is old beyond time, and she has many hide-away, crumbling places—I know them all, and I love each one. Drawing in my breath, I clear my mind and think of nothing, knowing that although the street is heaving with people, no one will see me as I slip into the darkness. Already my skin feels damp. It is cold down here. Someone has left a torch alight farther down the passage, and it casts a dim, oily glow on the stone walls. There is a smell of stale water that reminds me of wet metal, of rain drying on my father's sword out in the courtyard, long ago. *Don't think about him.*

Smoke hits the back of my throat. Someone has the fire going in the tin cook-pot I stole from that one-eyed

stallholder up on the Mese. Who is it? Who's here? Surely most are on their way to the hippodrome, already busy liberating coin from the money bags of foolish people. Soon the cold passageway opens out, and I see a forest of vast stone pillars reflected in the long, dark pit of water spreading out before me. They are like trees turned to rock by a witch man. In places, daylight streams down through holes in the vaulted roof where the paving slabs on the streets above have cracked, worn by many thousands of human feet. Tendrils of tangled weeds hang down, twisting in the slanted light.

Some say that this flooded underground palace was once the home of a wicked empress, that she was cast beneath the earth, along with her rooms and all her riches, as a punishment from God for her sins. Some say she walks among her chambers still, her hair knotted with slime, her skin whiter than bone. You may never be sure when she will come. I know that all this is untrue—because I made it up. The Kingdom of the Ghost is nothing but a big old underground lake that keeps freshwater flowing in the Great Palace. But it pays to have my subjects leery and afraid.

When I first came here, the water was so low that I could wade from pillar to pillar, but then it rose, and last year we built rope paths. That was a lot of rope we stole from the docks. Days and days it took to get it all. I leap onto a rope path now and run—it bucks and sways beneath me, but I haven't fallen yet. Who is down here, sitting by my fire, while all the rest are out harvesting riches for our master?

This is *my* place. When I am here alone, I feel like I am lord over it all; the thought of someone else claiming my rightful kingdom makes me cold and shivery.

Don't be a fool, I tell myself. *It's probably just Iskendar or Niko waiting for you*. Yet I cannot help it: I've a sense that there's something sorely amiss down among the pillars of my dark, watery palace. I almost see the intruder now — it's gloomy here. He's big, whoever it is. Bigger than me. Who? My master's older subjects rarely visit my kingdom. I am like a spider in their soup, a thorn in the soles of their feet. I have always known it riles them, seeing that the master trusts me more, that he uses me for his more interesting and delicate tasks even though I am younger by far. Well, it is not my fault that I am better. The best thief in Constantinople.

It is Thales. Thales the Knife.

He is sitting on the ledge by my cook-pot fire, legs dangling down toward the water. His toes graze the surface. He is not frightened of the dark, glassy depths. Unlike the others.

"Why so quickly, little Ghost?" Thales says, turning to look at me in the shadows. Thales is taller than me by a head and a half — he must have fourteen summers at least — and his limbs are knotted with muscle. Everyone knows how he got his name. No one plays games with the Knife. I wish now that I had crept up on him instead of bounding in like this. A foolish mistake. My second of the day, after nearly getting caught by the guard for stealing that pomegranate. If Iskendar and Niko knew of that, they would never let me forget it.

I shrug, stepping off the rope path onto the ledge. "It is not often you delight us with your noble self down here, Thales the Knife."

Thales lifts one eyebrow. Everyone is always so fawning and slimy toward him that he cannot tell if I'm mocking or not. *Surely the brat wouldn't dare?* I see the thought flash across his mind as clearly as if it were my own. "I don't concern myself with children — that's why," he says.

I lean back against the wall and it chills my skin, but at least I can look down on him like this. "I'm all the more honored, then," I say. "How may I serve you, Thales? It better be quick. It's time I was away to the circus."

Thales smirks. "There'll be no circus for you tonight, my boy," he says.

I have to think about Tecca to stop myself from laughing at him. I'm so full of sin, using poor Tecca like this, but I'm sure she would not mind.

"You're wanted," Thales goes on. "You're to go up to the villa before the sun is down. Do you know where it is?"

We both know that I have been admitted into the chambers of our emperor more times than he has. *Fool!* I tell myself. *Don't let him see that you think he's not got the brain of an ox.* I smile, saying, "I think I know it well enough."

What does our emperor want? I wonder, feeling a tiny flicker of fear. It pays ill to get on the wrong side of our master, and he does not like us to forget this. I cannot help thinking of Black Elias. Till last summer, he was our master's golden angel-thief who could do no wrong. And then

word got out that instead of tumbling his stolen prizes into the lap of the Emperor of Thieves, Elias had been selling them to traders out of Chalcedon. Elias has not been seen for many a long month. They say he was found floating in the harbor with both hands missing. The Emperor of Thieves does not make a quick end for his enemies.

But what am I thinking? I've done no wrong; I'm not like Elias. All that I steal, I hand over to my lord.

"I hope you've been behaving yourself, little Ghost," Thales says. "I wouldn't want to be in your place if you haven't. Better go directly to Master, shouldn't you?"

Thales is boring me now. And he is right. It's time I was away. The emperor does not like to be kept waiting, and besides, I'm curious. What can he want? But before I find out, I must teach the Knife a lesson.

It happens quite easily—all thought, all color drains from my mind as I step away from the leaping shadows of the cook-pot fire.

Thales shakes his head; if he a friend with him, he might try to not look scared, but he's alone—he cannot help it. "Where've you gone, you little witch? Your tricks don't scare me, brat," he hisses.

Just because he cannot see me, he thinks I cannot hear him. He is wrong: there is no ungodly magic here. I am just quiet and quick, but it fills people with fear when the next moment I am just not there anymore. Up the wall I go, digging my toes into gaps, curling my fingers over crumbling ledges, gripping at plants creeping out of cracks.

I'm climbing up to the light — there's a hole in the vaulted roof where a paving slab's fallen down into my underground lake.

I feel the breath quicken in my body; I want to laugh as I climb.

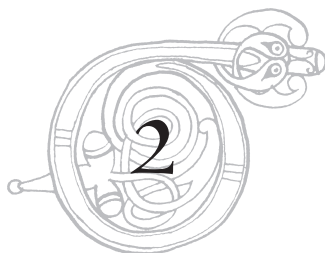
Thales is standing now, holding on to one of the rope walkways, looking around. "You think you're so cunning, don't you?" he says. "But one day soon you'll get what's coming to you, you and your barbarian witch father. He's a traitor now, or haven't you heard the news? Don't think I don't know who you really are, Ghost. You have no place in the Empire of Thieves."

My father. A cold, empty feeling washes over me. What does Thales the Knife know about him? But I don't stop climbing. That's what Thales wants. He wants to goad me into coming back, so I will try to fight him. As if I'd be that foolish. He'd love an excuse to finish me off.

Who does he think I am?

I'm nearly there, nearly out into the street. I can feel the light warm on my face. Up, up. I'm out. Out on the street, pressing my face against the sunbaked pavement. A woman nearly trips over me and looks back, cursing. She cannot see me. It is a skill I have. I can go anywhere without being seen; I can do anything.

It is why they call me the Ghost, and it is why no one can stop me.



In the garden of the Emperor of Thieves

I GO OVER the rooftops, thirsting with the need to leap, silent and quick, through the night. It is dark now, but the shadowy city is festooned with firelit windows like so many winking, blinking jewels. To the west, the sea shimmers, a silver path laid across it by the moon. There is just a faint, fine line of purply light across the horizon, and as I watch, that too disappears. The sun has gone; it is night.

What does Thales know about him? I am thinking of my father—a sport I ought long since to have given up. He's a traitor now, is he? I will never believe that. Father is so stuffed full of barbarian notions that he has honor and loyalty coming out of his ears. He is so true to the empire that he has forgotten his own kin. I spit as I leap from one rooftop to the next, imagining my spittle landing right in his black, glittery eye. I hear word of him almost every day in

the marketplace — how could I not, when everyone knows who he is? If there is not some girl cooing over his great beauty, a pack of brainless young men will be telling the latest tale of how he slayed five Arabs with one sweep of his sword. He's in the desert now, they say, bargaining with the Caliphate. Sometimes my father rides out with tribes who wander the wilderness and live all year in tents, and he listens to secrets whispered along the trade paths from a great land far to the east. God's Fire, they call him, for his skill in sending the enemies of the emperor off to the next world. Not my emperor, the Emperor of Thieves — Father has a different lord, Constans the Second, Imperial Master of the New Roman Empire.

But I'm not going to think about my father. What is the use?

I have never gone into my lord's house through the front door. The first time I tried this trick, everyone thought I had lost my senses. *He'll have your throat cut as soon as look at you*, Iskendar said. *There are rules*, Niko told me. *Ways of doing things. You have to go up to the door and knock five times, and if you're let in, you have to drop on your knees straightaway.*

I do none of those things. I go over the garden wall, like I'm doing now. There's an old peach tree growing right up it, and over I go. The Emperor of Thieves is the one person in this city who may leave his doors unlocked, his windows unshuttered for days and nights on end. Who would be so mindless as to steal from here?

The garden is heavy with the scent of jasmine and rosemary, lavender and mastic sap. It makes me feel dizzy, but the emperor likes his garden to sing to him, or so he says when he's in a confiding mood.

Grass brushes against my ankles; I catch the reek of roses, of thyme. It's not so dark that I can't see the house, and my eyes are good at night, anyhow. All the windows are lit—the Emperor of Thieves has no cause to skimp on lamp oil. The window I want is on the upper floor. Up the trellis I go; waxy vine leaves brush at my face, stickying my fingers with the juice of summer's last grapes. One hand on the ledge. The other. Nearly there. I wait, listening.

I can hear low voices—just two—and the scrapings and chewings of men eating their supper. I have caught my lord at table. So much the worse for him; if he did not want me, he ought not to have asked for me. Arms straining, I haul myself over the window ledge and drop onto the cool tiled floor, crouching immediately in the shadows. Who's here? At the far end of the room is a table; my lord sits there with Narxes, his eunuch. No one loves my emperor more than Narxes, and no one's madder or more dangerous. Apart from maybe my father. Narxes is not from the empire. He is pale-skinned, and his cheekbones are high—Black Elias told me once that Narxes was taken as a slave from Slavic lands and served in the Imperial Guard up at the palace. Narxes has got that softness about his face that all eunuchs do. Not quite a woman, but not quite a man.

He's pouring my lord more wine, leaning forward across the table. The lamplight glints off his shaven head.

"That will be enough," says the Emperor of Thieves, holding out one of his long, delicate hands. "We have a visitor."

Narxes jumps slightly and looks vexed with himself for doing it. Seeing me, he says, "It is usual, boy, to knock."

My lord laughs, and, quick, quick, I come forward to bow my head before him. I glance up and see Narxes sitting back in his chair, frowning slightly. There's a big platter on the table heaped with what looks like stuffed kid; it smells of garlic and fish sauce and has that rank, goaty stink about it, too. Narxes does not seem delighted that I've gotten in the way of their meat. He is fiddling with the stalk of a half-eaten pear by his plate. He is twitchy. Why?

"So," says my lord. "The race is now begun. How went your little chat with Demosthenes, Ghost?"

"He has not forgotten, my lord. He swears he shall not win."

My lord smiles, and the skin creases around his ruined eyes. I cannot help staring, sometimes, wondering what it would be like to lose my sight, to have my eyes scraped from my skull. No one knows what crime the Emperor of Thieves committed, long ago, but I've heard he was born to the Purple, that he is close bound to the Emperor Constans by blood, and that his eyes were taken from him so that he might not be a challenge to the throne. I've heard that Narxes was the only member of the Imperial Guard loyal

to him, and that is why Narxes serves the Underworld now instead of the empire. But you never know what's true and what's made-up. For all I know, the Emperor of Thieves was nothing more than a pickpocket with a good head for trade.

I'm burning to ask him what he wants, but I know I cannot. I may come in through the window — he likes that; he admires the cheek of it — but I'm no fool. There is only so far I can go. Narxes gives him a look, one eyebrow slightly lifted, and I can tell he's not going to like what the emperor's about to say —

"You have done well," says my lord. "There are not many I could trust to deliver my messages to Demosthenes. Now there's something else I want you to do."

Narxes' eyebrow lifts even higher. He likes this very ill. It must be something good.

"Your wish is my command, O lord," I say.

"Come closer, child."

I go and sit at his feet as if I were a tiny stripling and he my dearest papa. I look up but not quite at him, my eyes lowered in respect. My lord cannot see, but he feels everything, I swear it. He can feel the way you look at him. Narxes' mouth is pursed as if he smells something bad, and now he's gazing out the window. He is probably trying to pretend I'm not here.

My lord smiles. "Do you know the house of Achaicus Dassalena?" he says to me.

Achaicus Dassalena? Achaicus *Dassalena*? I know where he lives, all right. He is the prefect of Constantinople, second

in command only to the Emperor Constans himself. The Emperor of Thieves rules the Underworld, Achaicus very nearly everything else. "I know his house," I say. "It's the big villa with the blue door down near the palace." I hold my breath for a moment. "What would my lord have me do?"

The Emperor of Thieves smiles, pressing his lips together. "Now, listen, little Ghost. The Guild of Thieves has been revered as Keeper of Order in the Underworld since the days of Constantine himself, when Rome had only just been abandoned to the barbarians and the empire was still full of fire. You understand me, Ghost, do you not?"

I gaze down at the floor, wondering what I have done to besmirch this noble history. There is a chicken bone beneath the table with a shiny lump of gristle still attached; Narxes really ought to have a talk with my lord's servants. "Of course, my lord," I say.

This city runs with all the smoothness and mystery of the mechanical angels they have at the palace to confuse barbarian kings. Even the Underworld must bleed tax money into the imperial coffers. The Guild of Thieves pays its dues just as the silk weavers, the silversmiths, and all the rest of them. There is even a Guild of Sewer Workers, and they are probably taxed as well. But not so high as us.

"Well," says my lord, "Achaicus Dassalena has just made a foolish choice."

I let out a tiny, relieved breath. It is not me, then, who has offended the honor of the Guild of Thieves. He goes on: "Achaicus has deemed that our guild is no longer to be

tolerated. I fear that the running of the city has softened his mind: he wants to rid Constantinople of thievery altogether. He wants to close us down."

What an idiot. Where's the use in that? It'll never work, and if there is always to be thievery, bribery, smuggling, and racketeering, why not have some coin out of it in taxes?

The Emperor of Thieves leans closer. I cannot help looking at his eye sockets. The skin is thin, purple, puckered where it healed long ago. He speaks: "Do you recall the name Callias Athenas?"

A chill slides down my spine. Callias Athenas used to be in the army, commander of the Thracians. There was a scandal — everyone heard whispers of it but never the whole tale. While Constans was away out east last year, fighting against the Caliphate over Armenia, there were whisperings that he was not fit to be emperor, that he'd abandoned the capital in her hour of direst need, leaving her like a virgin girl hemmed about by pirates. Then Constans came back, Callias disappeared, and the whispering stopped. It was fools' talk, anyway — if this city were a woman, she'd be a raddled, wise old whore, not a virgin girl.

"Your silence tells me that you know something of this," says my lord. "Am I correct?"

I nod, then recall that he cannot see me and say, "Yes, O lord."

"Callias Athenas was a fool," says the emperor. "The truth of it is that he had a lust for power himself, and when Constans was in the desert, Callias took his chance and tried to

win the nobility and the army over to his side so he could take the throne. Callias had all the eastern army behind him and most of the nobility—but Constans has spies everywhere, and word of the betrayal reached him. That is why he came back in such a great hurry when Muahi'ya the Arab was still razing Armenia."

I nod, thinking, *What does this have to do with Achaicus Dassalena? Unless—*

"Constans's spies rooted out most who'd sided with Callias," says my lord, his voice dry and thin. "But Achaicus Dassalena covered his trail well."

Achaicus Dassalena, prefect of the city, upholder of the law—a traitor? Surely this cannot be true. The law in Constantinople is the will of the emperor, and he rules by the grace of God. To be sure, I am a thief, yet every coin has another face: there cannot be law without disorder. But for the prefect to betray the emperor is just unnatural. They are meant to be on the same side.

I cannot help smiling. This is going to be good. It is going to be a grand old caper, which is just what I like. Narxes takes a swig of wine, still staring studiously out the window, as if not looking at me will make me disappear.

What will my lord have me do? I wonder.

He bends toward me in his chair. I can smell the garlic and kid meat on his breath.

"Somewhere," he hisses, "Achaicus Dassalena left a trace of his betrayal. It will be in his home: he's not fool enough to leave any sign of it in the palace. You are going to find it

for me, and then we'll see about him putting a stop to the Guild of Thieves. Achaicus will be as a newborn kit in the palm of my hand." My lord leans back in his chair, his thin, bluish lips twisting into a smile.

I feel hot with the thrill of it. I have broken into many a fine villa. But never into the house of Achaicus Dassalena, prefect of Constantinople.

This is turning into a fine evening.