

## CHAPTER 4

### *Present Day*

The streets of Harrow were still bright and busy as I left the office, adjusting my hatpin and fighting back a wave of frustrated exhaustion.

My need to leave Harrow loomed before me, still out of reach and yet closer than ever, and all of it too momentous to contemplate. I wished I were already back in my apartment, sequestered beneath blankets and silencing my overburdened mind with a generous supply of chocolates and the kind of novel that would have made Pretoria cackle and Madge bristle with indignation.

The thought nearly made me smile. That, I determined, was precisely how I intended to spend the rest of the evening. As soon as the sun was up, I could face the future. I would return to Mr. Stoke's office to retrieve my pay from the safe, then go right to the docks and book passage out of Harrow. I would meet with Pretoria to see her one last time, turn down whatever her latest scheme was, and with any luck, I would be at sea before Mr. Stoke returned from his trip.

I would already be on the path to freedom.

And I would not have to say goodbye.

The city bustled around me as I wove through pedestrians, avoided carriages and the occasional bugling motor car. I caught the end of a tram heading uphill towards

the hub of Communion Square, riding like a coachman on the backboards until the conductor approached to extricate a fare.

I landed lightly back on the cobblestones before he could reach me and walked over the rise to the square, the beating heart of New Harrow. The tram diverted in front of me with a warning cling of its bell, electricity snapping on the lines and wheels grinding in their well-worn grooves as it passed storefronts, cafes, and fine hotels.

There were people everywhere. Every shop seemed to have placed tables outside, every café was bursting with patrons, and policemen and soldiers were out in force.

The reason for all this rapidly became clear. The opening bars of a rousing song soared above the retreating rumble of the streetcar, and the passive clamor of humanity became a roar.

Thousands of people gathered in the center of the square. Many waved white and green flags of the City States, while bunting of the same colors girded temporary barriers and ran between lampposts.

In the center of it all was a stage, where the orchestra sat. I stopped, watching as a man joined them above the heads of the onlookers, lifting his military cap as they thundered again. His uniform was a bold, rich blue, trimmed with gold braid and glistening with pips and medals. His hair was an admirable chestnut, refusing to grey despite progress into his fifties. It was slicked back with not a hair out of place, and his moustache and sideburns were perfectly trimmed.

I felt my mouth dry. When a woman jostled past me, I hardly noticed. When a young boy tried to sell me a newspaper, I ignored him, not out of any ill-will, but because my mind simply refused to move past the sight of the man on the platform.

“Good people of Harrow!” Grand General Baffin, Arrent’s conqueror and king in all but title, called over the square. A cavalry saber hung at his hip, light and of impeccable craftsmanship. It was no ceremonial sword and, if the papers were to be believed, had seen a great deal of use. “What a pleasure it is to return to you. There truly is no finer city on this island, no more industrious and admirable folk.”

The crowd cheered.

"You will have, no doubt, heard of my recent exploits in The Sarre," Baffin continued. "But this news, I tell you, is fresh. We have evicted the Seaussen and their allied rebels! The Sarre is free, once more a nation unto itself, with the generous guidance and support of our great nation. Hand in hand, we move forward!"

This time I had to cover my ears against the assault of noise. I retreated towards the wall of a nearby café, my skin prickling with gooseflesh. This was news, and whether it was for good or ill, it constituted a drastic shift in the situation abroad. There would be reorganization in The Sarre, changes in personnel, and Lewis might be affected.

I thought of the letter in my pocket and nearly reached for it, but Baffin was still speaking. He recounted the valor of the Arrentian troops and the cowardice and immorality of the Seaussen, who had so fiendishly stirred the Sarren people to rebel against their Arrent-allied monarchy, and forced the flight of Lord Stillwell and many other Arrentians living in The Sarre, tearing them from their homes and possessions. Little was mentioned of the violence and displacement brought upon the locals themselves, but that was no surprise.

"You should move along, Miss Secretary," a voice said in my ear, accompanied by the scent of something strangely metallic. "Quick, like."

I recoiled as the smuggler from the docks, Mr. Harden, shouldered past. He crossed the tram tracks and vaulted over one of the barriers without looking back at me, sidling wolfishly into the crowd in a long coat with popped collar.

He was not alone. I picked out a half dozen, a dozen, two dozen figures weaving through the crowd and passing the barriers with equal focus. Some carried satchels, others wore heavy coats.

My eyes rounded.

A sound like a gunshot cut off Baffin's speech and a flare arced into the sky. Fizzling red and orange rained down.

Chaos broke loose. Shouts and screams tore through the air as more flares went off, blinding and deafening. It was so

loud, so overpowering, that when the bomb exploded, it was almost obscured.

Someone crashed into me. I slammed into the wall and muffled an exclamation as a stampede broke out, men and women shoving past one another with confused abandon. A man fell, bellowing, and rolled to avoid thundering feet. The newspaper boy I had ignored hit the wall next to me, eyes wide and terrified as his newspapers scattered, ground, and slid under the feet of the mob.

The terror in his eyes cut through my shock. I grabbed him by the arm and, sheltering him with my body, dragged him through the door of the café as the patio was overrun, tables and chairs toppling and porcelain shattering.

“You can’t come in here!” an aproned man protested, already trying to shove us back out the door. The café’s staff and a handful of patrons pressed towards the back of the establishment, as distraught as the crowd outside.

“Oh, shut up!” I shot back, shoving the newsboy further inside. I turned on the door and slammed it closed. “Help me!”

He braced the door next to me as more panicked pedestrians tried to get in. The door half opened, slammed again, and shuddered. A panicked woman met my eyes through the glass, but just behind her, I saw another woman, her face hidden beneath a hood, pull something from her pocket.

A grenade.

There was a crack and flash. The front window of the café shattered in a hail of glass and I dropped, covering my head.

Bitter smoke filled the room, searing and thick. A second blast went off, this time close enough that I felt a flush of heat. More smoke came then, carrying the more natural scent of burning wood and cloth. And hair.

From there, my memory skews. The café burned, that much I recall. I fled through the kitchens with other figures and stumbled into a shockingly empty street. Only the prone forms of a few wounded remained amid shattered glass, toppled tables, and fluttering, charred bunting. I did not see the newsboy again.

Ears ringing and mind numb with shock, I did not flinch

as a hand took my arm. I had the vague impression of a man in a long coat, guiding me out of the way as a fire engine clattered past, its half dozen horses prancing and shaking their manes amid wafts of smoke.

"What is happening?" I asked him, my voice sounding terribly far away.

"Stay out of the street," Harden replied, his voice equally distant, and distorted by the ringing in my ears. I felt a hand slap my cheek, firm but gentle. "You hear me? Are you hurt?"

"You." I recoiled, some of my sense returning. "You're a Separatist!"

"Aye." He frowned and searched my eyes as if he suspected I had hit my head. "No Guild, no government, all of it. You look like you need a drink."

"You are a terrorist," I accused, anger sparking. "How will this help us, you fool? You attacked the Grand General! You attacked innocent people!"

"Us?" he repeated. His gaze dropped to my collar, then lifted back to my eyes and narrowed. "Ah, well, I was right. What are you, then? Not a Glim, I see, and certainly nothing so lowly as a Silver."

"Get away from me," I hissed, jerking from his grasp.

"Oi, you!" a voice bellowed. "Leave that woman alone!"

Harden backed away, already half running, and shook a finger at my face. "They'll find you out, secretary. Join or run, you hear me?"

With that he was gone, streaking away down the street with three policemen on his heels.

I stared after them, the shock of the attack now merging with the horrible understanding that I had given myself away. After years of keeping my sorcery a secret, I had revealed myself to the worst class of my brethren. A Separatist.

There was no help for that now, though, and I had to get off the street. I moved, glass crunching beneath my boots. I walked. And, eventually, I sank down on my bed in my apartment, wiping blood and soot from my face, and pulled Hieronymus into my lap.



It was not until the twilight of dawn awoke my threads, drawing me from an exhausted slumber, that I remembered Lewis's letter.

I fumbled blearily in my pile of cast-off clothing. The cat watched me archly through one narrow eye, then returned to sleep.

I found the letter and leaned towards the balcony doors to catch the growing light. Beyond the glass, wisteria pods rustled and one of the neighbors began their habitual morning concert, the low strains of a cello drifting through the courtyard.

I squinted. The paper was gritty, warped, and smudged, but I had received letters in worse condition. The words mattered less than Lewis's magic within them, and my own magic, ready to amplify it. There was a reason the Guild had paired Lewis and me.

I brushed my fingers across the paper. My skin began to prickle with gooseflesh and my threads, already standing out smoky grey against my skin in the twilight, grew cool.

Letters and words, scribed in Lewis's angled, swift script, faded. My room too slipped away as the paper recalled the last thing it had seen before the envelope closed for the long, solitary dark of the journey across the sea.

Lewis sat at a writing desk, pen scratching while a sea breeze buffeted the sun-bleached tent around him. The tent flap was open, letting dawn light pour over his shoulders and ignite his glistening bronze threads, visible just above his collar.

Lewis looked weary and sunbaked, but healthy. His officer's tie was loosened for comfort but only just, and the corners of his eyes, thick with blond lashes, showed premature lines of concern.

He tugged absently at one ear as he wrote. On the paper before him, between his worn khaki pith helmet and a forgotten cup of tea—its flower-patterned, delicate porcelain out of place in this make-shift world—words flowed from his pen, glistening as bronze as his threads before they dried, black and dormant, into the page.

At the same time, back in my room, my magic waned. My surroundings returned to me, and with it, another wash of dawn light.

For a moment two magics were suspended in the play between beams of pink dawn and the last grey shadows of twilight—Lewis’s dawning sorcery of the written word and my twilight gleanings of memory.

Then the twilight yielded. My threads retreated beneath my skin and with them, the height of my power gave way to its usual, more passive existence. Lewis’s magic, however, continued. His words sculpted images before my eyes and emotions in my chest, lending vivid detail to the thoughts and events he had succinctly penned.

The letter was dated for three weeks ago.

*O,  
Forgive the briefness of this letter. I am being  
transferred. The Seaussen have been driven south, but  
I was injured in the push and have been loaned to the  
Settlement Office in Sarre Grand, to sit at a desk and  
recover.*

*If the opportunity to move up our timeline comes,  
take it. I can no longer stand this place. Wait for me at  
the place we agreed. I will meet you soon.*

*L*

In my mind, I glimpsed the intention behind his words; the violence of the recapture of the Sarren capital of Sarre Grand, its ancient stone buildings blurred by smoke and mosaicked streets filled with running soldiers and flashing rifles. I saw Entwined officers, gathering in private conference. Then I saw the Sunrise Isles—our intended meeting place. A Harren foreign stronghold clung to the skirt of one of the smaller islands, ramparts armed with pivoting artillery and her waters studded with warships.

The real world returned to me in a rush of clean daylight, the crackling of a gramophone through the walls, and the

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chatter of children leaving the courtyard with their school bags. The cello clashed with the gramophone and a child laughed.

*'If the opportunity to move up our timeline comes, take it.'*

The opportunity had come, in the form of a stack of money currently waiting for me in Mr. Stoke's safe.

All I needed to do was retrieve it.