

THE EMPEROR'S EDGE

by

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Smashwords Edition

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Chapter 1

Corporal Amaranthe Lokdon paced. Her short sword, night stick, and handcuffs bumped and clanked at her thighs with each impatient step. Enforcer Headquarters frowned down at her, an ominous gray cliff of a building that glowered at the neighborhood like a turkey vulture, except with less charisma.

Amaranthe drew her pocket watch and checked the time. Where *was* her partner?

At the soft squeak of boots on snow, she looked up. A narrow side street expelled a squat, burly man in enforcer grays. Morning light glinted against the large brass rank pins crowding his collar: four bars under two crossed swords, the mark of a district chief.

Amaranthe fought back a grimace and straightened, heels clicking together. The chief's dark gaze latched onto her from beneath shaggy gray eyebrows that crashed in the middle when he scowled. He was scowling now.

She swallowed. "Good morning, Chief Gunarth."

"Lokdon," he growled. "Does the city pay you to loiter in front of headquarters? Because if the capital city of the Turgonian Empire, the most powerful nation in the world, pays its enforcers to loiter uselessly in front of *my* headquarters building, I'd think somebody would have mentioned it to me."

Amaranthe opened her mouth to give him an obedient "yes, sir." Or was it a "no, sir"? She had lost the question in his diatribe. "I'm waiting for my partner, sir."

"It's five minutes into your shift. Where is he?"

"He's..." *Hung over, still asleep, trying vainly to find a uniform that isn't wrinkled....*

"Investigating some suspicious activity at Curi's Bakery."

The chief's already-lowered eyebrows descended further. "Let me explain something to you, Lokdon."

"Sir?" Amaranthe tried to look attentive.

"Your first loyalty is to the emperor." He reached above his head, demonstrating a lofty plateau. "Your second is to the city, and your third is to everyone above you in the chain of command." His hand descended in increments as he spoke until he finished with, "Way down there by your boot is your loyalty to your partner. Understood?"

“Emperor, city, you, boot. Got it, sir.”

“Is that a joke, Lokdon?” His tone made it clear it had better not be.

She sighed. “No, sir.”

“If you can’t remember where your loyalties lie, better you take up a shop like the rest of the women in Turgonia.”

Amaranthe forced her face to stay neutral, ignoring the heat warming her cheeks. “Yes, sir.”

“Now, I ask you again, where is your partner?” The chief’s tone had grown soft, dangerous.

She lifted her chin. “Investigating suspicious activity at Curi’s.”

Furrows like canyons formed across the chief’s forehead as his scowl deepened. “I see. I’ll remember this when I’m filling out the extra duty roster.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Start your patrol without him. And when he catches up, tell him if he can’t arrive at work on time, you can both sleep here. In one of the cells.”

“I will, sir.”

Amaranthe trotted away before the chief could spout further threats. She crossed the wide boulevard in front of headquarters and jogged around a lumbering steam tractor obscuring ice with sheets of salt. Snow piles framed the ancient cobblestone alley she entered, its walls close enough to touch with outstretched arms. She almost bumped into a man and woman coming out of a temple that had been turned into a bookstore. Bundled in fur caps and parkas, they saw her uniform and stepped out of the way, joining a headless statue in one of the recessed nooks by the door. At the turn of the last century, Mad Emperor Motash had declared atheism the state religion and ordered all statues depicting deities beheaded. A hundred years later, the locals still called the seat of the empire, “Stumps.”

Amaranthe smelled the scrumptious scents of Curi’s Bakery as she came onto the next boulevard, and she cast a longing gaze at the building. Paintings of apple pastries, glazed fruits, and spiced breads adorned the windows for those unable to read the sign. A gangly university student ambled out with a pastry stuffed in his mouth. Warm frosting dribbled down his chin.

Someone tapped Amaranthe’s shoulder. “Buy one. The city won’t catch on fire if you indulge occasionally.”

“Can’t.” She glanced at her partner, Corporal Wholt, as he fell into step beside her. She wanted to yell at him for being late again, but it would change little, and she had yet to meet the man who appreciated unsolicited criticism. “Enforcers are supposed to be fit. I’d have to run the whole lake trail tonight if I ate one of those pastries.”

“You probably will anyway. To punish yourself for being tempted.”

Amaranthe did not consider diet advice from Wholt worth much. Though he stood several inches taller than her five and a half feet, his slouch made the difference negligible. A fledgling pot belly slumped over the belt of his rumpled gray uniform. The double-bar rank pin on his left collar flap was skewed at a different angle than the pin on his right. She reached up, unfastened the backs, and adjusted the pins so both sides matched.

“Thanks,” Wholt said dryly. “You know you’re the most grandmotherly twenty-five-year-old woman I’ve met, right?”

“That’s because most of the women you know work at brothels.”

“The best kind. Very amenable ladies.”

“You missed a spot shaving.” Amaranthe’s hand dropped to her utility knife. “Want me to...?”

“No!” Wholt sidled away. “Don’t you ever grow weary of being the ideal enforcer? Perfectly pressed uniform, gleaming weapons, not a single hair out of place in that unflattering brown bun.”

Frowning, Amaranthe touched her hair. It was neat and out of the way. That counted more than beauty.

“You come to work early,” Wholt continued, “stay late, precisely follow every regulation, and where’s it gotten you? You’re still a corporal after six years.”

“You’re still a corporal after six years too,” she said.

“Actually,” he said, tone growing calm, and a smile coming to his lips, “I came up on the list for promotion. It’ll be sergeant next month.”

“You? *You’re* going to make sergeant? You don’t know half the regulations and you’re late for work every other day.”

Wholt looked away. “You’re my partner, Amaranthe. I figured you’d be happy for me.”

She stared at the snow edging the cracks in the sidewalk. He was right. She should be happy for him, but it was all too unfair. “Congratulations,” she managed, though she doubted it sounded sincere.

“I’m sure it’ll be your turn next month,” Wholt said.

Amaranthe was sure it would not, even if the chief forgot to mark her file with a demerit for that morning’s lie. She knew of no female sergeants in the Stumps force. The empire did not permit women to join its armies, and it was only in the last generation that it had begun allowing them to join the city law enforcers—grudgingly.

“Wholt.” Amaranthe looked him in the eyes and touched his arm. “Try to...be a good sergeant. You represent the empire when you wear that uniform. And you represent yourself. That should matter.”

He actually stood taller. “I will. I know. It does.”

“Good.”

His attention shifted over her shoulder. “Is that smoke?” He pointed toward the blocky buildings crouched alongside the lake. “Or just factory haze?”

Down the hill, dozens of men and machines toiled on the frozen water, hacking out blocks of ice that would be stored for summer use, but smoke blurred the scene. Amaranthe pinpointed the source.

“There’s not a factory there.” She grabbed Wholt’s arm and tugged him forward. “Fire!”

They took a trolley toward the waterfront and hopped off at the nearest stop. Smoke thickened the air, and they slipped and skidded as they negotiated the slick sidewalks. They ran around a corner, almost crashing into the back ranks of a gathering crowd.

In a residential district, where wooden structures were more common, people might have raced back and forth with buckets to help, but this dilapidated wooden building was an island surrounded by brick, stone, and cement. The onlookers appeared more fascinated than concerned about the flames spreading, and the Imperial Fire Brigade had already arrived with one of the city’s self-propelled fire pumps. Black smoke poured from the stack, mingling with the plumes rising from the building. A thick hose was attached to the pump and to a fireplug up the street. Water streamed onto the flames flickering through the broken windows of the old building. Only one corner, which was dominated by a multistory brick kiln, was not burning.

“You mentioned something about the city not catching on fire today?” Amaranthe asked as she and Wholt pushed their way through the onlookers.

“Did I say that?”

Heat flooded over them, dry and powerful. Charred flakes of wood and paper floated through the air.

“We better help with crowd control,” Amaranthe said, but as they advanced, she glimpsed a merchant standing at her counter in a tea-and-coffee import store. Other shop owners had joined the gawking crowd. Two men loomed in front of this woman. Customers? Given the proximity of the fire, shopping seemed unlikely. “Or we could help this lady who I believe is being robbed.”

“Huh?” Wholt turned his head. “Oh. It wouldn’t hurt these businesses to be looted once in a while. Merchants are practically running things around here anyway.” But he drew his sword.

“I’ll go in the front,” Amaranthe said. “You go around back.”

“Be careful.” Wholt trotted down the street toward an alley where he could cut over.

Amaranthe strode through the front door. Barrels and canisters cluttered the aisles, and stuffed shelves rose from floor to ceiling on each wall. The scent of tea leaves and coffee beans from distant parts of the world soared above the pervading smell of smoke. Her strongbox open, the merchant was clutching a stack of bills. Her eyes brightened when she saw Amaranthe’s uniform.

Amaranthe focused on the two men towering over the shopkeeper. The huge brutes were only a couple feet shorter than the floor-to-ceiling stack of coffee tins fronting the aisle behind them.

“Well, well,” one man said, nudging his cohort, “it looks like a girl enforcer. We’re very concerned.”

His comrade snickered. Scars lined the faces of both men. Swords hung in belt scabbards, the hilts’ sweat-stained leather wrappings evidence of frequent use. One thug shifted to reveal a flintlock pistol aimed at the merchant. Apparently, he did not consider Amaranthe enough of a threat to warrant switching his target. Indignation flared and her hand twitched toward her sword. She caught herself before she acted foolishly. After all, it was better not to have a weapon pointed at her chest.

“Gentlemen,” Amaranthe said, “this robbery is over. If you put down your weapons and submit to being detained, perhaps I can speak to the magistrate on your behalf. Your possession of firearms, which, according to Imperial City Code seven-four-three dash A, are for military use only, will elevate your crime from simple theft to aggressive larceny.”

“Darn.” The thug waved a negligent hand at her, then leered at the merchant. “Give us the money, lady.”

Amaranthe drew her sword. The thugs displayed less concern than men chattered at by irate chipmunks. Probably rightfully so. They outnumbered her, and they had the miens of ex-soldiers. While she had undergone weapons and unarmed combat training at the Enforcer Academy, that was mediocre compared to the constant drilling military men endured. And they knew it. One of the robbers assumed a bored ready stance, lips canted in a knowing smirk.

A glance at the back of the building revealed no one charging in to help. What was keeping Wholt?

The thug shifted his weight to advance.

Amaranthe bent her legs, drew her shoulder back, and hurled her sword with all her strength. Reflexively, both men lifted their blades to block. As soon as they realized her weapon would not touch them, they burst into chortles.

The men were not her targets.

Her sword crashed into the ceiling-high collection of coffee tins behind them. The stack exploded, full canisters pummeling the robbers. Metal thudded against skin and bone, and the men cursed as they flailed, tripped, and inevitably toppled. One hit his head on the counter as he went down and did not move when he landed. The other fell, scrambled to rise, slipped on a canister, and cracked his chin on the tile floor.

Amaranthe picked her way through the mess, stepped on one man's back, and collected their weapons. She handed the pistol to the merchant who pointed the weapon gleefully at the prone robbers while Amaranthe cuffed one and found twine to tie the other.

"Nicely done, Corporal," a quiet voice said from the direction of the front door.

"Thanks." She started to look up to identify the speaker when Wholt burst in through the back. "Where have you been?" she demanded. "Did you get lost?"

"There was a third one out back. I had to...uh...uhm..." Wholt's mouth dropped open as he stared past Amaranthe. "Good morning, Sire," he finally managed.

Sire? Amaranthe slowly stood and turned. Crowded at the entrance, six tall broad men wearing black gold-trimmed uniforms—the color of the emperor's elite bodyguard—framed a smaller man of eighteen or nineteen. He had pale brown hair, gentle dark brown eyes, and yes, his *was* the same face that adorned the currency in the merchant's strongbox. Emperor Sespian Savarsin, in power this last year since reaching his majority.

"Good morning," the emperor answered.

Amaranthe stammered a greeting. *What's the emperor doing down here? Shouldn't he be somewhere safe, doing emperorly things?* She ransacked her memory for the proper protocol and found...nothing. Emperors did not traditionally saunter through the waterfront shops. They certainly did not mingle with people of the labor class.

The merchant, equally flustered, curtsied deeply and said, "Sire, I must apologize for the state of disarray infecting my store."

The emperor arched his eyebrows. "I should be apologizing to you, madam. For allowing this—" he gestured toward the fallen thugs, "—in the city. Fortunately, our enforcers are quite competent." He bounced a little at this and smiled at Amaranthe, more like a young man hungering for a friend than a leader over millions. *Don't be presumptuous, Amaranthe.*

"Yes, Sire," she said. It felt like a safe answer.

"What's your name?" he asked. "Both of your names?" He waved to include Wholt.

"Corporal Lokdon," Amaranthe said. "And this is soon-to-be Sergeant Wholt," she added when Wholt did not manage to utter anything intelligible.

A ponderous man with flapping jowls thundered through the doorway. Beads of sweat gleamed on his face. The emperor sighed like a boy whose tutor had caught up with him.

"Sire, there you are. They've got the fire under control. Do you want to finish the inspection now?"

"Not really." The emperor smiled wistfully.

"Commander of the Armies Hollowcrest will be expecting our punctual return."

"I suppose." The emperor cast a mournful gaze at Amaranthe as he trooped out the door flanked by his guards.

When the entourage had departed, Wholt shuffled through the tins and elbowed Amaranthe. "I think he liked you."

She snorted. "Yes, I'm surely destined to be the next empress."

"That might be ambitious, but you could have asked him for a promotion."

For a moment, Wholt's words enticed her. If the emperor told the chief someone should be promoted to sergeant, surely it would happen. And she deserved it, didn't she? She worked harder than Wholt. But no.... "If I get promoted, it'll be because I earned it, the same as everyone else. Not because I begged someone for a favor."

"You *have* earned it."

* * * * *

The bodies were charred into anonymity and still smoldering. Eight, Amaranthe counted as she walked around the pile, sodden floorboards creaking ominously beneath her feet. It was a dangerous spot, since the fire had also charred the support posts and beams in the basement. Several boards had already given way and plunged below. A great hole in the floor marked the spot where a worktable had stood. Yet she stayed, breathing air thick with the stench of fire and death, seeking answers from the carnage.

The corpses had been there, piled just like this, when the first firemen walked in. They had left the bodies untouched for the enforcers. The flames had seared facial features, clothing, skin and hair color into indistinguishable black lumps. Amaranthe could not even tell gender for certain.

"Definitely arson, sir," a rookie enforcer reported to Wholt, who stood near a window. The flooring was more stable next to the walls. "We found empty kerosene tins downstairs."

"Thank you, ah..."

"Quets," Amaranthe supplied the name, looking up from the bodies to focus on the younger enforcer. He and his partner had been nearby and had also responded early to the fire. "What else is down there?"

"Just some tools, a bunch of pots stored on shelves, and the biggest kiln I've ever seen," Quets said.

"One wonders why they didn't just cremate the bodies in the kiln," Amaranthe mused. "Why torch the whole building?"

"They?" Wholt asked.

She could only shrug, having no idea yet who 'they' were nor why anyone would choose a pottery studio for a mass murder. Of course, the corpses could have come from anywhere and been brought here and arranged like this for...what? She shook her head.

"Quets," Amaranthe said, "take the trolley back to HQ, tell the chief what we've found and that we need a steam wagon. The Sawbones will want to take a look at these corpses."

The smell of singed flesh was turning her stomach. Amaranthe picked a path around puddles and over to the window where Wholt stood. Soot stained the panes that were not broken. Snowflakes flitted in through burned holes in the ceiling, mingling with water dripping from the rafters.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"It's a mess."

"Very perceptive, thank you."

"It's obvious, isn't it?" Wholt asked. "Someone killed a bunch of people and wanted to cover it up by rendering the bodies unidentifiable. They probably meant for them and the floor to burn completely. The Fire Brigade was just too good."

“Hm,” Amaranthe said. “I want to look in the basement. Then we’ll have to interview the artists who work here, see if anybody—eight anybodies—are known to be missing and if anything odd has been going on around here. We should find out who owns the building too.”

“We?” Wholt raised his eyebrows. “We’re patrollers, not detectives. The chief will send a lieutenant down to oversee the investigation.”

Amaranthe grimaced. He was right, of course. This case would make the papers, though, probably the front page. Working on it might be just the opportunity she needed to stand out and earn her promotion. Maybe she could get herself put on the investigation team.

“I bet it’s Sicarius,” Wholt said.

Amaranthe blinked. “What?”

Wholt was staring at the charred corpses. “You know, Sicarius, the assassin, the only criminal with a million-ranmya bounty on his head. The only criminal with a bounty signed by Emperor Sespian himself.”

“I know who Sicarius is,” Amaranthe said. Thanks to that bounty, everyone in the empire knew who he was. “But why would you think he’s responsible for this?”

“He’s back in town. I just heard last night. One of the gymnasium pickpockets we’ve been after all winter turned himself in. Seems he was in the baths, doing his looting circuit, and he touched Sicarius’s towel before realizing whose stuff he was trolling through. The thief spent half the day looking over his shoulder and then showed up at HQ wanting to be arrested so he could hide out in a cell.”

“Did the chief send some men to the gym?” Amaranthe asked, annoyed at the idea of a criminal daring to exercise and bathe in public facilities.

“He claims he doesn’t believe the pickpocket,” Wholt said. “I don’t blame him. The last time Sicarius was in Stumps, we lost thirty men trying to get him.”

“I remember.” A couple of men from her class at the Academy had been among the slain. Still, the idea of looking the other way for a criminal did not sit well with her. Throwing men at someone so dangerous might not be the answer, but surely there were alternatives. If she were chief, there was much she would do differently. Amaranthe sighed. “I’m checking the basement.”

Several of the blackened wooden stair treads were broken where the big rookie’s foot had gone through. For once, being smaller than all the men was helpful, for she made it to the bottom unscathed.

Fallen boards, broken tables, and other detritus from above littered the cement floor. When she spotted a soot-covered broom in the corner, she almost went over to grab it. Alas, whoever came to investigate officially would not appreciate her cleaning the crime scene.

Her foot crunched on ceramic as she walked toward the kiln entrance. None of the pots on the back shelves were broken. Why were there shards all over the floor?

She knelt for a closer look.

The first piece she picked up didn’t look like part of a pot at all. Cone-shaped, it reminded her of a cup, but since it couldn’t be set flat, it seemed fairly useless in that capacity. She turned it sideways and then upside down. In the last position it looked a bit like a perked dog or cat ear, though it was far too large to be either.

Other shards she picked up were even less identifiable. It would take someone with a lot of time and devotion to piece together the puzzle.

“There are fresh ashes in here,” Amaranthe called when she reached the firebox.

Wholt dared a few steps down the precarious staircase. “You may not have noticed, but there are fresh ashes *everywhere*.”

“These are from the kiln, not the building fire.” Amaranthe held her hand above the embers. “They’re still warm.”

“Again, you may not have noticed, but *everything* is still warm here.”

“You’re not being very helpful, Wholt. I’m saying the kiln was used recently.”

“I imagine people fire pots here every day.”

She grabbed a poker and overturned gray coal to find still-red embers. “How about in the middle of the night?”

Wholt had no sarcastic answer for that question.

“What if...” Amaranthe chomped on her lip and eyed the broken pieces of ceramic on the floor. “What if the fire wasn’t about covering up the bodies at all? Or maybe that was a secondary reason. What if someone was down here, trying to destroy something in the kiln, but there wasn’t enough room?” That seemed unlikely given its massive two-story size. “Or maybe they were *making* something in the kiln, something they didn’t want anyone to see. Or what if—”

“Emperor’s balls, Amaranthe. What nefarious thing could you possibly make in a kiln?”

“I, well, you’re probably right. I’m just thinking out loud.”

“Well, quit it. The steam wagon is here, and, yup, there’s a lieutenant from the NoDoc District. Better get up here before he yells at you for disturbing things.”

Sighing, Amaranthe climbed the stairs. She eyed the pile of corpses again as she headed for the knot of enforcers gathering inside the front door. Who *were* those people? Victims? Cohorts? Innocents? Colluders?

As soon as she spotted the lieutenant, Amaranthe jogged over and came to attention before him. “Sir, I’m Corporal Lokdon, and I’ve been looking around here. I’ve got some ideas. Are you choosing people for your investigation team?”

“I’ve heard of you, corporal,” the tall, slender graying man said.

He had? She raised her eyebrows. In a good way?

“You have a reputation for fastidiousness,” he said.

Blighted ancestors. *That* was what enforcers in other districts knew about her?

“Why don’t you and your partner head up the cleanup team out here. The whole block is a mess.”

Amaranthe stared. That was a task for a couple of rookies! If she was going to earn her promotion, she’d have to distinguish herself by arresting villains and solving crimes, not poking around on the street with a broom and dustpan.

“Is there a problem, Corporal?” the lieutenant asked.

She stifled the first response that came to mind, one that would only get her in trouble.

“The...cleanup team, sir?” she said instead. “I have a good eye for detail. I believe I could—”

“Yes, the cleanup team,” the lieutenant said, a warning in his eyes. “It’s a more appropriate assignment. Young ladies shouldn’t be surrounding themselves with gory bodies.” He walked toward the stairs, patting her on the shoulder on the way by. “You’ll do fine.”

Just barely, Amaranthe had the discipline to walk outside, where the crowd had dissipated, before ripping her sword out and hurling it at the closest wall. The point glanced off instead of sinking in with a satisfying thunk, and the weapon clattered onto the frosty sidewalk. She stalked over, grabbed it, and thought about throwing it again. She really wanted to skewer something.

Wholt, who had just come outside, lifted his arms, stepped back, and wisely kept his mouth shut.

Amaranthe stuffed the blade back into its sheath, nicking her hand in the process. “Lovely,” she muttered at the stab of pain.

She would oversee the street cleanup, but then she was going to get herself put on the investigation team. One way or another.

Chapter 2

By the time Amaranthe reached Enforcer Headquarters that evening, she had mentally organized a neat list of reasons she ought to be placed on the investigation. With chin lifted, she thrust open the front door and almost crashed into Chief Gunarth, who was pacing in the hallway.

“What did you do, Corporal?” he demanded before she could mention the arson or her list.

“Sir?”

“Commander of the Armies Hollowcrest wants to see you,” the chief said.

The list evaporated from her mind, and she put her hand on the hallway’s cool limestone wall for support. Commander of the Armies Hollowcrest was the highest ranking military officer in the empire. Each of the eight satrapies’ Commander Lords General answered to him personally. He had also been the closest advisor of Emperor Raumesys for forty years and Sespian’s regent for three. Due to Sespian’s youth, many still considered him the ultimate authority in the empire.

“He wants to see *me*?” Amaranthe cleared her throat to hide the squeak underlying her last word.

“You,” Chief Gunarth said. “Requested by name. You are to go to the Imperial Barracks immediately. Actually the messenger came two hours ago, but you weren’t on your assigned route.” He gave her a cool look.

That was hardly fair. “Sir, Wholt and I were responding to the fire on—”

“Give me your report later. It’s already dark. You better get your arse up to the Barracks before you inconvenience Hollowcrest by delaying his dinner.”

“Yes, sir.”

Crisp twilight air swirled about her cheeks as Amaranthe caught a trolley uptown. She shivered and moved closer to the hissing boiler and the heat radiating through its walls.

Poised at the crown of Arakan Hill, the Imperial Barracks overlooked the city, the frozen lake, and dwarfed even the largest homes on the Ridge. The emperor’s ancestors had rejected the idea of a “palace” and chosen the ancient fortress atop the hill for the imperial seat.

There was no trolley stop near the gate—apparently casual visits to gawk were not encouraged—so Amaranthe jumped off as it rumbled by the outer walls. She had performed similar moves dozens of times before, but the combination of slick pavement and watching sentries probably made the slip inevitable. Her feet skidded on ice and she flailed before recovering her balance, if not her dignity.

Snickers came from above. Atop the high stone walls, two musketeers lounged against a cannon, their silhouettes black against the starry sky. Amaranthe limited herself to a brief upward glower as she walked toward the entrance.

In a formidable display of redundancy, two towering soldiers blocked the barred gate. Amaranthe could not help but feel that as an enforcer she only played at being a warrior. Imperial soldiers were intimidating enough; the elite men privileged to protect the emperor's home represented the best.

"Uhm, hello," she said, then cursed herself for sounding like a scared child. "I'm Corporal Amaranthe Lokdon. Commander of the Armies Hollowcrest requested to see me."

"It's late," one of the guards said in a voice reminiscent of boots grinding into gravel.

"I realize that. Could you check to see if I'm on the list?" She had no idea if there *was* a list, but it seemed like the right thing to say.

Both guards offered flat unfriendly stares. Their humorless expressions were so similar Amaranthe wondered if it was part of the training. Disapproving Stares, the Advanced Course. Finally, one reached his arm through the bars and withdrew a clipboard from some inner hook. He stepped beneath one of the two gas lamps spreading wan globes of light on either side of the gate.

Amaranthe fidgeted while he read. Anticipation wrestled with unease in her gut. What was this meeting about? Would it bode well for her, or ill? Either way, why would someone as important as the Commander of the Armies bother with her? The emperor must have said something after seeing her that afternoon. Did he have some reward in mind? It seemed unlikely—she had done nothing beyond what the job called for. Still, the fledgling hope thrived, and she thought of Wholt's words. Maybe she should ask Hollowcrest for a promotion. No, she decided. The possibility of a reward thrilled her, but she would not ask for a favor.

"Huh," the guard said. "You're listed."

The other one said, "Looks like the old man wants someone to keep his toes warm tonight."

Amaranthe fluctuated between anger at their assumption and anxiety at the insinuation. She settled for a curt, "Can I go in, now?"

One of the soldiers shouted to someone in the courtyard. Another man appeared and assumed his post, and the first relieved Amaranthe of her weapons and led her through the gate.

Walkways lined with lampposts sliced through snow-blanketed lawns. Numerous outbuildings adorned the installation, but the guard led her to the main structure. When they reached the polished marble stairs, she had to take exaggerated steps to climb them. On either side of the landing, gold-laced statues of bare-chested men grappled with each other.

"Pretentious architect," Amaranthe muttered.

"What did you say?" the guard asked.

"Such beautiful artwork."

The guard grunted dubiously.

The gold-gilded double doors groaned open of their own accord, powered by some hidden machinery. A single hallway stretched away to a distant exit point with dozens of doors lining either side. The decorating style continued on the inside—gaudy but consistent in its reverence toward the warrior. Periodic alcoves featured more statues of ancient heroes, some naked and locked in wrestling matches, others wearing the weapons and armor of their times. They all had clunky, unrealistic features. Her people might be peerless engineers, but great artists they were not.

Weapons from different epochs perched between gas lamps on the walls. Amaranthe's fingers twitched toward her handkerchief when she noticed one still exhibiting bloodstains. *Yes, let's erase eight hundred years of history with a swipe of a rag.* She stuffed her hands into her pockets and resolutely stared straight ahead as she walked.

Her escort led her a long way before stairs branched off, one set leading up, another down. They climbed to the third floor and stopped before a guarded door. Amaranthe's guide left her to deal with the soldier alone. Fortunately, he must have had orders to admit her, for he pushed the door open wordlessly and gestured for her to enter.

"Thank you," Amaranthe murmured, though she hesitated before going in. A bead of sweat snaked down her ribcage.

Show some fortitude, girl.

Shoulders back, she strode into the office. Her boots thudded on a cold hardwood floor. The room's utilitarian furniture was neatly arranged, but the crooked and curling maps papering the walls made Amaranthe want to start rearranging tacks. A coal-burning stove glowed cherry in one corner. It was the only warm thing in the room.

The white-haired man behind the desk had easily seen seventy years, but he still possessed the fit frame of a soldier. His sharp features were humorless. His black eyes glittered behind glasses that did nothing to distort their iciness.

So, this is the one who teaches the Disapproving Stare class. Amaranthe dropped her gaze to the folders and papers stacked haphazardly on his desk. She clasped her hands behind her back to keep from tidying the clutter. He probably did not approve of people touching his belongings. He probably doesn't approve of people breathing. No wonder such gloom had draped the emperor; with this man as an adviser, there were probably not many laughs at meetings.

"Corporal Lokdon," Commander of the Armies Hollowcrest said.

"Yes, sir."

"Good of you to come so promptly." Spoken by another, the words might have sounded friendly, but the man's sarcastic edge dulled the effect.

Amaranthe shifted her weight. A floorboard creaked.

"You're wondering why I called you here," Hollowcrest said.

"Yes, sir."

He shuffled papers, then opened a folder. "I've been looking over your records. You have a halfway decent education, though you didn't finish the last term at the Mildawn Business School for Women." He pushed the top page over to look at another. "That's the year your coal miner father died of Black Lung Disease. All that money he must have scrimped to send you to that school, and you didn't finish. Instead you lied about your age, took the enforcer entrance exam, and signed up for the academy. Have I got it right, so far?"

"I couldn't afford to finish school, sir," Amaranthe said stiffly. "My father was sick for months before he died, and he didn't get any pay during that time. I worked, and took care of him, and went to school until he passed away, but I couldn't afford to pay the tuition and rent on a flat after that."

"I see."

Amaranthe felt as if she were balancing on the frozen lake. Might a hole open up beneath her and suck her in? It wasn't surprising that Hollowcrest had access to all her background information, but it alarmed her that he had bothered to look into it. What had she done to warrant such scrutiny? Surely she was not here because she had lied about her age seven years ago.

"You chose a hard road," Hollowcrest said. "A female enforcer is rare, even if it's allowed now. Why not work for someone in business or start your own? It seems to be the trend for educated women these days." His last sentence came with a faint sneer.

She supposed a man of Hollowcrest's age remembered the time when women had been free of ambition beyond birthing future soldiers. She knew their growing financial clout alarmed the conservatives, but her ambitions were not business-related. Why would he bring it up now?

"I went to that school because it was what my father wanted," she said. "I never cared much for business."

"No? Your marks suggest otherwise."

"I didn't mind the lessons. Just the ultimate goal seemed...shallow. I want to serve the throne, not my own pockets. I want to be the first female enforcer chief in the empire, sir, to be somebody that history remembers."

Hollowcrest frowned. Wrong answer, but why? Amaranthe shifted her weight again, still struggling to gain her balance in this conversation.

The old man flipped a few more pages on his desk, tendons jumping on the backs of his creased bronze hands. Coals shifted in the stove. Surreptitiously, Amaranthe wiped moist hands on the sides of her trousers.

"Would you be interested in an independent assignment?" Hollowcrest finally asked. "Something that would challenge you?"

The breath caught in Amaranthe's throat. Had all these questions been not an interrogation but an interview? She found herself balancing on her toes. "Sir?"

Hollowcrest leaned back in his chair. "Have you ever heard of an outlaw named Sicarius?"

"Yes, sir. He's an assassin, wanted for crimes against the empire."

"An understatement. In the last five years, he's been responsible for the deaths of some three hundred imperial soldiers, two hundred enforcers from various cities around the empire, half a dozen patriarchs from the warrior caste, thirteen city officials..."

As the list continued, Amaranthe's jaw went slack. Neither the number nor depth of these crimes were listed on the wanted bulletin. Likely it was in his enforcer record, but assassins weren't something a patroller dealt with, and she had never been asked to look him up.

"He's suspected of collusion with both the Kendorians and the Nurians," Hollowcrest said. "And just two months ago, he assassinated Satrap Governor Lumous."

"I'd heard about that death, sir. The papers said it was an accident."

"Yes, Lumous *accidentally* earned someone's wrath and had a dagger stuck in his back," Hollowcrest said. "Our enemies read our papers. Naturally we don't confess details that could make the Turgonian Empire appear weak."

"Naturally, sir," Amaranthe said, trying not to look too appalled. "What was he doing before?"

"What?" Hollowcrest asked.

"You said Sicarius had done all this in the last five years. What was he doing before then? All those nefarious accomplishments don't sound like the work of someone young and up-and-coming."

For a moment, Hollowcrest considered her through half-lidded eyes. Perhaps deciding if she were worthy of some secret he might have to divulge? But all he said was, "I believe he's in his mid-thirties. His origins are unknown."

Amaranthe opened her mouth to ask another question, but Hollowcrest cut her off.

"You may have heard he's recently arrived in the city," he said. "He's known to be hireable for assassinations, so his presence here is disturbing. Sespian's nineteenth birthday celebration is coming up in a few weeks, a massive event with guests and diplomats from all over the world. I fear it might also provide a venue for a showy assassination."

Amaranthe grimaced. The young man she had met in that shop had been so gentle and inoffensive, especially given the number of tyrannical warlords who had preceded him. He had not even had a chance to come into his own authority yet.

“Sespian set a prodigious bounty on Sicarius’s head,” Hollowcrest said, “but the more soldiers we send after him, the more he kills.”

“And enforcers. I know, sir.” What Amaranthe did not know was how this related to her. What could she do?

“Clearly, we need to pursue a new tact,” Hollowcrest continued. “You are an attractive woman, and according to your record, quite capable. All you have to do is locate Sicarius, seduce him, and lead him to some dark room. Once there a feminine smile will allow you to slip in close, draw your dagger, and accomplish what platoons of soldiers have not been able to do over the last few years.”

Amaranthe took a step back before she could catch herself. All she would have to do was *seduce someone*? She was an enforcer, not a prostitute. Besides, she had spent her entire adult life trying to act as tough, strong, and confident as her male counterparts. What did *she* know about seduction? And assassination? She captured criminals and took them to the magistrate for justice. She didn’t kill them. To deliberately seek someone out for that purpose... That was despicable.

“Sir, I’m not—” Amaranthe started.

“Such an accomplishment,” Hollowcrest interrupted, “would gain you great recognition...a promotion.”

She sucked in a breath.

“In fact,” Hollowcrest went on, “Someone who could handle Sicarius would doubtlessly be officer material.”

He was offering her a chance to jump straight to lieutenant? Emperor’s ancestors almighty.

Hollowcrest watched her intently. He was manipulating her, luring her into doing something she found distasteful. Any fool could see that, but what he offered was everything she wanted.

Surely she could eliminate somebody who was a proven criminal. True, assassinations circumvented justice, which made them undeniably wrong, but if this Sicarius was brought in, the magistrate would assign him the death penalty anyway. By killing him in the field, she would save the department time and manpower. It would be for the good of the empire.

Amaranthe rubbed her face. The need to justify her decision was trampling all over her thinking. Still, was this really that bad? Would it truly be a blemish on her integrity? Even if it was, every day people sacrificed a lot more than integrity to get what they wanted. Besides, this was the Commander of the Armies, not a man it would be smart to refuse. She didn’t even know if refusal was permitted.

“I’ll do it, sir,” Amaranthe said.

“Excellent,” he said simply, though she caught a predatory gleam of satisfaction in those dark eyes.

Hollowcrest slid a folder out of a drawer and withdrew a single paper. “A sketch of Sicarius. It’s fairly accurate, at least as of five years ago.”

Amaranthe accepted the sketch and studied it. She admired the precision of the crisp portrait. The artist was surely not related to the unobtrusive sculptors responsible for the statues on the first floor. In the black ink drawing, the criminal’s features appeared cruel and menacing. Military-style short hair topped an angular face above a lean, muscular torso.

“It’s blond,” Hollowcrest said, startling her.

“What?”

“His hair. It’s hard to tell in the drawing.”

“Oh,” she said. Blond hair was rare in the empire, a nation of people whose blood had been mixed and mixed again via generations of conquering and expansion; most citizens shared Amaranthe’s bronze skin and dark locks.

“Where should I look for him, sir?” She thought of Wholt’s suggestion that Sicarius might be behind the pottery shop arson, but that had been groundless speculation. The man could be anywhere in the city.

“I’ll leave that to your ingenuity,” Hollowcrest said. “Finding him is a feasible task. Sicarius doesn’t travel in disguise and, though discreet, he goes where he pleases. He does have a knack for knowing when our soldiers or enforcers are trying to spring a trap on him though. Then he disappears.” Hollowcrest grimaced. “Or doesn’t. The results are less devastating when he does.”

“I understand, sir. When should I start?”

“Immediately. Speak to no one about this mission. It’s imperative the criminal not find out we’re aware of, and angling for, him.”

“What about my regular duties, sir? I’ll need to report to my superior.”

“I’ll see to it that your district chief is informed. You don’t even need to go home; I have a soldier waiting with money for you. If you decide to buy new clothes—” A crinkle of his nose at her soot-stained uniform implied this was more than a suggestion, “—don’t attend shops you usually visit.”

Not a problem. The shops she visited leaned more toward uniforms and utilitarian clothing rather than whatever it was women wore to seduce men. Not much, she guessed.

“Avoid all your typical haunts until the mission is complete,” Hollowcrest finished.

“Likewise, don’t return home until you’ve reported back to me.”

Amaranthe wondered why was it so imperative she not interact with anyone she knew. Corporal Wholt certainly was not going to find Sicarius and inform him of her intentions if she told him.

“Sir, what—”

“You may go now,” Hollowcrest said. “The soldier outside my door will escort you.”

Amaranthe longed to question the man further. But Hollowcrest had already turned to the papers on his desk. She stared at him for a moment, then turned on her heel and strode out the door. She was not an imbecile; she could find the answers to her own questions.

As promised, a soldier waited in the hallway, an envelope filled with bills in his hand. She followed him through the corridor, toward the stairs that would lead her back to the first floor.

“Corporal Lokdon,” a voice called before they entered the stairwell.

The young emperor jogged down the hallway in his socks. He carried a pad of paper clutched under one arm. His guards, fully armed and armored despite the hour, trailed dutifully behind.

“Hello,” the emperor said brightly. “What are you doing here?” Before Amaranthe could answer, he bumbled on. “Are you on duty? Will you be working at the Barracks?”

“I’ve just received a mission, Sire.”

“Really? That sounds exciting.” He smiled hopefully, eyes eager for details.

“It’s going to be...challenging.” Amaranthe found herself reluctant to provide more information. She had the feeling he might be the type to put a person’s safety above the possibility of achievement, and cancel her mission. If anyone could countermand Hollowcrest, it would be the emperor. *A minute ago, you were dreading the idea of an assassination, and now you don’t want to give up the chance of this assignment?*

Amaranthe was saved from further accusing statements from the back of her mind, when the emperor dug something out of his pocket and extended it to her. She accepted it curiously. It was one of the chain bracelets soldiers wore into battle. A flattened side left room for inscribing one's name in case the body was unrecognizable when it was recovered. This particular bracelet was far more ornate—and valuable—than any Amaranthe had seen. The golden chain was woven in a complex pattern one might expect in thread but not metal.

“Take it for luck,” the emperor said, smiling.

She blinked. “Sire, I can’t—”

“Would you like to see what I’m working on?” He thrust his pad of paper toward her. “It’s the design for an art wing at the University.”

Though she knew little about architecture, the detailed blueprint impressed Amaranthe.

“Until now,” he continued, “there has been no place for students to gather and study sculpture, writing, and painting.” His mouth twisted wryly. “Four military academies in each satrapy though. I’m planning a new science wing too.”

Though his passion spilled out like a refreshing fountain, the differences in their stations left Amaranthe staring awkwardly. What was she allowed to say to him?

The emperor shook his head. “I’m sorry, I’m babbling. What sort of mission are you going on? Who assigned it? Why are you starting here? Not that I mind. It’s nice seeing a new face. These halls are so drab, like a prison.” The wry smile returned. “Babbling again, aren’t I?”

“I...think it’s allowed, Sire,” Amaranthe said. “I just had an appointment with—”

Commander of the Armies Hollowcrest appeared, moving with surprising alacrity for an older man. He draped an arm across the emperor’s shoulders. “Ah, Sire. There you are. Would you mind coming into my office for a few moments? I have some documents I’d like to discuss with you.”

The emperor removed Hollowcrest’s arm and stepped away. He tucked his pad under his arm and turned a frank stare onto the older man. “Documents to discuss this late at night? More dedicated to your work than usual, aren’t you, Hollow?”

If the emperor had seemed a tad simple while speaking to Amaranthe, she realized it probably had more to do with her belonging to the opposite sex than any dullness on his part.

“It’s important, Sire,” Hollowcrest said with a smile that did not reach his eyes. “It’ll only take a few moments.”

The emperor lifted his gaze toward the ceiling, bade Amaranthe goodnight, then trundled back down the hallway in the opposite direction. She frowned at her hand, realizing she still held his bracelet.

“Artonis,” Hollowcrest said.

One of the last of the emperor’s guards dropped out of line and stepped into place before Hollowcrest.

“See that the emperor has his tea. He seems too...perky tonight.”

“Yes, sir.” The guard trotted after the others, mail jangling.

Amaranthe frowned after him. Tea?

Hollowcrest noticed she was still there and waved her toward the door. “I believe you have someone to hunt.”

“Yes, sir,” Amaranthe said.

She allowed her guide to usher her out of the building. This time, with thoughts spinning in her head, she didn’t notice the scenery. That meeting had left her doubting Hollowcrest’s veracity, though it hadn’t been surprising. She had no reason to believe the Commander of the

Armies would tell a common enforcer everything. But if he was keeping secrets from the emperor.... It sounded like the old relic was sedating Sespian. Maybe more. How could she accept a mission from someone who might be betraying the empire?

Yet what could she do? If she made a fuss or disobeyed Hollowcrest, he could destroy her career. Or worse.

If, on the other hand, she cooperated, assassinated Sicarius, and earned her promotion... Well, she could investigate her concerns later, when Hollowcrest didn't have his eye on her. Yes, that's how it had to be. First, she had to complete the mission.

She paused beneath a lamp in the courtyard and eyed the outlaw's picture again. The cold face made her uneasy, and the idea of seduction seemed ludicrous, possibly suicidal. If she was going to take an experienced assassin down, she'd have to do something he wouldn't expect.

Chapter 3

As soon as he entered his suite, Sespian Savarsin, emperor of the most powerful nation in the world, slapped himself on the forehead.

"Babbling idiot." He paced the rug in the antechamber. "She thinks I'm a babbling idiot."

A soft thud came from the bedroom, and an elegant tan-colored cat with a deep brown mask and paws padded into the anteroom. He hopped onto a desk abutting the window.

Too agitated to give the cat his usual pats, Sespian continued pacing. "The most serene, competent, beautiful girl—no, woman—I've met shows up in my hall, and I babble." He pushed his hand through his hair hard enough to dislodge several strands. "And then I let Hollowcrest chase me off like a five-year-old child told to go to bed without supper. Although maybe I should thank him. He probably saved me from further embarrassing myself." Sespian faced the cat. "It was bad, Trog. Very bad."

Trog sat on the desk and swished his tail back and forth. A cobweb hung from his ear. Not surprising. His name was short for troglodyte, a label received due to a penchant for exploring dusty old ducts and passages in the Barracks. The swishing tail sent a sketch fluttering to the rug. Trog had no respect for artistic endeavors, but at least he listened.

"You should have seen her," Sespian said. "She was so unflappable but not arrogant, not at all. An enforcer. Not some stodgy matron devoted to holding up the values of the warrior caste and not some manipulative businesswoman intent on selling you something. Someone who looks out for people. What a wonderful friend and ally she would make. Maybe more." He smiled wistfully. "I made her uncomfortable though. Because I'm the emperor. Stupid social rules. I wonder what it would have been like if I were just some man off the street. What would she have said? Do you think I'm her type?"

Trog yawned and flopped down on his side, tail twitching.

Sespian raised an eyebrow. "It's as if you're trying to tell me that my piddling romantic ramblings, while of vast interest to me, are inconsequential to anyone else." He sat in the chair in front of the desk and ran his fingers through Trog's thick fur. "You're probably right."

Trog purred and stretched his legs out. He always liked being told he was right.

As Sespian stroked the cat, he gazed out the window, where falling snow blanketed the grounds. Amaranthe had been a delightful distraction, but with the event fading, his headache returned. Sespian sighed and tried to ignore it.

“I shouldn’t let him push me around anymore.”

Trog rotated an ear.

“Hollowcrest. When Father died, I had so many ideas. But after three years with Hollowcrest as regent... I guess I got used to following his orders.” Sespian grimaced. “And so did everyone else. I need to change that. *I’m* in charge now, and I need to be someone who can lead an empire—and maybe be someone Amaranthe would like, eh?”

A knock sounded.

“Come in,” Sespian called.

The familiar scent of apple herb tea accompanied the servant, Jeddah, into the suite. Steam rose from a porcelain cup on a silver platter. The man set the tray down on an ottoman.

“Thank you, Jeddah,” Sespian said.

The man bowed and walked out.

When Sespian stood, his headache intensified. He winced. The pain came every day now, a constant and loathed companion.

At least the tea seemed to help. It had been his mother’s favorite. More than a decade had passed since she died, but he still missed her. Father, the great warrior emperor, had been an obstacle to overcome—or avoid—but Mother had loved him and never failed to support him. Every night, when he drank the tea, he felt close to her, as if he were honoring her memory.

Sespian picked up the cup. He inhaled deeply, the pleasant blend of herbs tickling his nose. Not so sweet as spiced cider, it warmed and soothed as it flowed down his throat.

He soon finished the cup.

* * * * *

The next evening, Amaranthe visited the Maze. From the outside, it looked like little more than a warehouse, but the long line she stepped into promised something more entertaining. The establishment had only been around for a few years, but it was already more popular than any other gambling venue in the city. It was more profitable, too, though the question of the place’s legality had come up in more than one enforcer report. This was not her district, though, so she had never visited.

Dressed in parka, ankle-length skirt, leggings, and the fitted jacket of a businesswoman, she was a little out of place amongst the jostling folks wearing factory coveralls or labor uniforms under their coats. She hoped to meet with the owner, though, not mingle with the gamblers.

When the bouncer let her in, a moment of claustrophobia swallowed her. Hundreds of cheering men and women pressed from all sides. Thick tobacco and warkus weed smoke did not quite obliterate the stench of stale sweat and alcohol-swathed bodies.

Since the crowd kept Amaranthe from seeing the layout, she found a support pillar and climbed onto its concrete base. Rows of benches formed descending squares around a fifty-meter-wide pit filled with the ever-changing maze that gave the establishment its name. Even as she watched, a section of the wall detached and started moving. It slid along one of myriad tracks in the floor and clanked into a new slot on the far side of the pit. Two more walls began a different journey before the first finished. Within the maze, a stout fellow wearing a white tunic turned out of a dead-end and hunted for a new path. Four clackers, mechanical constructs with crab-like pinchers, rolled through the maze on treads. In the center of the labyrinth, a tiny alcove held a dais. A small chest rested on top, its lid open to display a pile of gold coins. Spectators cheered or booed for the lone player, depending on which way they had bet.

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