

BUILDING A TRADE EMPIRE: CHAPTER 2 – OLD WHARF (EXCERPT)

This Old Wharf Quay must have been a grand place once, Shaw thought. She had shoved her eye patch up as she inspected the building. Seatome wasn't known for its architecture, but these buildings looked different, warm and graceful beneath the grime and the bluewing droppings.

'They're beautiful,' she said aloud.

'Yeah,' Nate said, staring narrow-eyed at the two steel derricks on the pier. 'Rusty, though.'

'What? Oh, those cranes.' Shaw sighed. 'When we've cleaned it up, this place will be a proper home for the PTC.'

For a moment she watched the play of the setting sun on the slim pillars lining the front, with the city wall as a grim, solid background. To the left, Mariner Tower watched; a big, square tower with loopholes and a large flagpole on top. Beyond it, sweet-scented honeysuckle turned the city wall in a living bulwark of pink-flowered greenery.

'Yes!' Exhilaration clutched at Shaw's breast as she walked to the main door. To her surprise, the lock opened without a sound and the ever-intriguing smells of a big warehouse greeted her. With pounding heart, she stepped inside.

Nate got out his matches and began lighting the gas lamps. 'We need mage lights, like we have in Smalkand,' he said. 'This isn't efficient.'

'Those stains!' Callogan said, and his voice sounded uneasy.

'Blood,' Keena said with a careless wave. 'That captain guy said there's been a battle here.'

Shaw glanced at the large patches of dried blood, the dropped weapons and a plumed slouch hat. Then she turned her attention back to the tall shelves; many still stocked with old trade goods.

'Ample space,' she said.

'Look, canned fish-bombs,' Nate said, pointing at a cluster of swollen food tins.

'Don't touch them,' Shaw said absently. 'We will clean it all out, keep the good stuff and dump the rest.' She walked into the second room.

'Must have been quite a fight,' Callogan said, goggling at the bloody trails everywhere.

'They were pirates.' Keena had picked up the hat and smoothed out the dents with her hand before donning it. 'Those deserve ten deaths.' She struck a pose. 'Well?'

'Fearsome,' Shaw said, inspecting her friend.

Keena smiled. 'Then I'll keep it.'

Past the empty loading space, where incoming and outgoing goods would be sorted and packed, they walked through the repair workshop. Several workbenches waited for damaged goods, though the tools in their racks looked old and worn.

Then they climbed the wooden stairs to the entresol with the offices.

A clerks' room with two standing desks, a cafeteria that could seat fifty, and a restroom, dirty but strangely modern with its flush toilets. Beyond that a boardroom with a large table and chairs, and at the end the manager's office, wainscoted in redwood, with several paintings of dubious quality and a nice wooden desk.

'Yes,' Shaw said. 'I like the place.'

'I wonder who owned it,' Callogan said. 'It's not at all a Vanhaari building.'

'Whoever it was, they made a special place,' Shaw said. She spread her arms wide. 'Our place.'

'Now we need people,' Nate said as cheerfully as she felt. 'Let's go to the Labor Exchange.'

Callogan pulled a fat timepiece from his pocket. 'It's seven o'clock. Are those guys still open?'

Nate laughed. 'They never close. Much of their business is done at night, when employers have time.'