

# 1



The distinctive sound of impacting flesh snapped Toby's head around. The yelp that followed the slap was sharp and familiar. It meant trouble. Frowning, he broke into a run down the dirty alley, wishing his short legs would hurry up and stop aching and get to growing.

Slippery foul-smelling muck squelched underneath his boots, making the rough stone treacherous. Taking the turn too sharply, he swore as he slammed against the side of a building and bounced off.

Somewhere up ahead, Dani screamed again, her voice defiant and filled with outrage. It was her battle cry and it made Toby run faster, muttering prayers for speed to uncaring gods.

Stumbling around the next corner, Toby spotted them in another, narrower alley. There were three of them, all well-built boys — nay, men — whose trousers were clean and free of the patches that decorated his own. Toby's heart sank as he recognized the leader as Dale Coleson, the mayor's son and a vicious sort. He was flanked by two of his friends — Reg and Marsy, who sported a livid red mark on his cheek.

And there was Dani, spine arched like a furious cat — and, if he didn't mistake the smear on Dale's cheek, she'd been spitting like one too. They had her pinned, the largest one behind her with his hands clamped around her biceps, holding them back. She didn't struggle, just glared.

Toby didn't pause long enough to question what was going on.

Lowering his shoulder, he slammed into the nearest one. It was like hitting a brick wall and he bounced off, but Marsy grunted and grabbed his side.

“Get out of here, Toby,” Dani snapped, and Toby heard the boy who was holding her yelp as she drove the heel of her sensible boot down on his foot.

“I ain’t goin’ anywhere,” Toby said, getting to his feet just in time to tumble over when Dani got thrown onto him. They went down in the filthy street in a tangle of limbs, her elbow finding its way into his gut. Pain slapped at him, and he shoved her off.

“No one is going anywhere,” Dale said, and his mean eyes glittered as the others cut off their avenues of escape. “Would have let you go, Runt, but now you’ve done hurt Marsy’s feelings by running into him, didn’t he, Marsy?”

“That he did,” Marsy said. Toby noticed that Reg still favored the foot that Dani had hurt. He’d be weak there, Toby thought desperately. Might be the only place he was weak; guy was built like a bull, his neck as thick as one of Toby’s legs.

“I think he should apologize,” Reg said from behind Dani, keeping his distance. For now.

“No one apologizes to animals,” Dani said, her brown eyes narrowed. “And only animals attack women in the street.”

The two laughed while Dale merely smirked, calculating green eyes flickering up and down her. “I don’t see no women here. Just a bitch who don’t know when to bare her throat.”

Dani shrieked and threw herself forward, swinging blindly. Swearing, Toby charged a step behind her. She went high, so Toby ducked low, coming up on Reg’s weak side. One good thing about being short — all the good punching places were at fist level.

His second punch found Reg’s crotch, making the larger boy bellow in pain. Toby wasn’t able to dodge the wild slap and it clipped

him on the side of his head, spun him around and into the side of the building.

Dale screamed, his voice higher than usual, and he caught a glimpse of Dani with her teeth sunk into his arm. Toby tried to get to her, but something slammed into his back. His forehead bounced off the wall; stars exploded in front of him and everything swam.

Whoever hit him smashed into him again, crushed his chest and face into the rough brick wall. Blindly, Toby thrashed and kicked, felt his elbow smack into something soft. The pressure let off, letting him suck air back into his lungs.

Someone grabbed his arm and Toby barely managed to pull his punch when he saw it was Dani, yanking him toward the alley's entrance. "Come on," she gasped, blood running down from a cut in her lip. The sleeves of her shirt had been shoved up and Toby caught a glimpse of ugly dark bruises on her upper arms.

His stomach rolled and he tried to jerk away, tried to pull back toward the bastards who had done that to her. "Don't be a fool," Dani hissed, her grip on him stronger than he was, and they stumbled into the main street, narrowly missing a spotted goat. It scolded them and sprang away.

"I'm gonna kill them," Toby said, and Dani laughed, pushing him down a side street. They cut through it, then into another. Toby ducked into a pile of old crates, barely managing to squeeze into the small space. Dani wedged herself in behind him.

They both held their breaths as the dark shapes of their pursuers charged by. Even after the footsteps faded they stayed motionless, barely daring to breathe. Dani was smashed up against his side, a strand of her sweat-damp hair tickling his nose.

He swiped at it and she elbowed him, so he stayed still. Moments turned into minutes until finally, Dani sighed and he could feel her relax against him. "I think they're gone."

Even then, Toby didn't want to move. The air was crisp enough to make Dani's warm body feel good, like Dem's did when they curled up together at night for warmth. Thin woolen blankets weren't enough for a Cold Harbor night, not if he wanted to keep the sickness away.

Now that they were safe, Toby realized that his heart was racing and against him, Dani trembled. "Why are you shaking?" he asked gruffly, giving her a nudge.

She elbowed back. "I ain't. You are. You alright?"

"Yeah, I'm good." His ribs protested when he squirmed to look at her. Her lip was swelling quickly, but it didn't look like she was going to bruise from the blow to her head. "You don't look so good."

"You're no Ouraen's prize yourself." Dani grinned and cuffed him lightly on the side of the head. "What were you thinking, charging in like that? I'da been fine."

"Hardly," Toby grunted, scowling. "Why were they messin' with you anyhow?"

She shrugged and started to ease out of the cramped hiding place. "I dunno. Bored, I reckon. You know how they are."

Toby did. Dale, Reg, and Marsy had a reputation back in the North Learning House where they'd attended classes. So far, Toby and Dem had managed to avoid them, but he'd heard talk just the same. The girls avoided them whenever possible, and the whispered reasons why had always stopped before Toby could overhear them.

No one wanted to be caught spreading filth about the Mayor's son, not even if it was true. Mayor Coleson was a good sort, and he'd been in office ever since Toby could remember, but that didn't mean he'd tolerate that sort of thing, or hear anything bad said about his boy.

Still, it wasn't right what he'd done to Dani. Girls weren't to be hit and pushed around, whatever the excuse. Just wasn't right.

With a groan, Toby stretched out his limbs, feeling his muscles

try and seize up. "You should tell your Da," Toby said with a jerk of his head. "I'd like to see Dale talk back to him."

Dani flinched, then wrinkled her nose. "Naw. Won't trouble him with it." She reached up to gingerly touch her swollen lip.

"You should. Look what the bastards did to you!" He pointed accusingly at the bruises on her arm.

Dani glared at him, tugging her sleeves down again. "You mind your own business, Toby. I handle my own problems and I won't go hiding behind no man, you hear? What were you doing around here, anyway?"

Toby blinked. "Oh, that. I'm lookin' for Dem. You seen him?" When she shook her head, he sighed and slouched back against the wall. His ribs protested, but he ignored them, figuring he'd best not be in the habit of letting his body boss him about. "He left the Learnin' House before I got there. Now, I gotta go all over looking for the pest. I was headin' over to look by the Peach. Sometimes a pack of dogs hangs about there 'n he likes 'em. Wanna come along?"

"Might as well," Dani said easily. "I don't feel like going home looking like I just got jumped in an alley."

That was probably best, Toby decided as they jogged through the cramped city streets. Their fathers worked together, which meant that if Mr. Thatcher saw that Dani had been fighting, Toby's Da would find out too. Best put that talk off for as long as possible.

"Watch where you're going," Dani hissed, giving him a shove to keep him from running into a small goat-drawn cart. Luckily, its owner wasn't around to yell at them and Toby tried to pay more attention.

It was a beautiful day to be out, he decided. The sky was overcast and dark, but if it took the sun to make a day worth living, they'd never be happy. He could hear the angry roar of the ocean's waves smashing against the cliffs that lined Cold Harbor. When you got close enough, the spray and salt was more noticeable, but even now

he could smell it on the cool breeze.

They headed toward the sea, the buildings getting taller around them as houses and shops gave way to warehouses. All of this was either owned by a few of the wealthier merchants or the city, which leased them out according to need and desire. His Da had talked about getting a small corner one day to clean out the creepy cellar into, but that took either time or coin in payment and they never had it to spare.

Especially not with the way he and Dem ate, Toby thought with a little pang of guilt as his stomach growled. It seemed he was always hungry these days.

The Golden Peach was another few minutes' run when Toby slammed into someone darting out of an alley. He yelped and tried to twist, but something snarled up his legs, making him hit his sore side. Pain shot through him, leaving him gasping like the fish he'd seen the fishermen throw onto the bottoms of their boats.

"Dem, what's the matter?" Dani asked above him. "Toby, get off of him, he's white as snow."

Favoring his side, Toby rolled away and found himself blinking at his little brother. Dem's normally lightly tanned skin was pale which made the freckles splashed across his face stand out. His sky blue eyes blinked and Toby saw the moment he was recognized. Dem squealed and threw his wiry arms around Toby's neck, his grip made strong by fear.

"Easy now," Toby said, trying to pry his brother off. "What are you doin' here, Dem? You know you ain't supposed to be on this side of town without me. Not safe 'n all."

Dani cuffed him on the back of the head. "Lay off. He's terrified. And look, his knees are bloody." He didn't need her to point — she was right. Somehow, Dem had torn out both the knees from his trousers, blood crusted on fabric and skin. His shaggy mess of hair

had bits of something in it and dirt streaked thick on his pale face.

“Whered you get into?” Toby demanded, pushing Dem away so he could get a better look at him. Dem looked up, then burst into tears.

“Hey, what you doin’ that for?” Toby gasped, stiffening as Dem flung his arms around him and smashed his face into Toby’s chest. From the wet sounds his brother’s nose was making, Toby’d probably have to clean this shirt too, unless he wanted snot marks making it sludgy.

“Are you okay, Dem?” Dani asked gently, squatting down to bring herself to eye level with him. Dem shook his head, nose rubbing against Toby’s ribs as the boy refused to let go. “What happened? You can tell us.”

Dem just shook his head again, sniffing as he tried to stop crying. “You’re bein’ a girl,” Toby grunted, trying to peel his brother’s arms off of him. “Stoppit.”

“Am not,” Dem said softly, sniffing again. He pushed away from Toby and swiped at his nose with a rather dirty sleeve.

“Are too.”

“Stoppit, both of you.” Dani glared at Toby, then looked back at Dem. She produced a square of cloth and dabbed at his face, taking the tears away and smudging the dirt tracks they’d left on his cheeks. “Now do you want to say what happened? Why not?”

“Don’t want to,” Dem said, his nine year old face drawn into a stubborn pout. He still looked scared, Toby thought. Which was strange; Dem wasn’t a coward. Besides, what was there to be scared of in town? Everything worth running from was outside of the walls, unless another shadowcat had gotten in again.

“We won’t laugh, will we Toby?”

Toby grunted when she elbowed him for taking too long. “Sure won’t, Dem. Come on now, what’d you see?”

Dem sighed, some of the color back in his face. “I saw a ghost. I

did!” he exclaimed when Toby burst into laughter.

“Ain’t no such thing as ghosts, dummy! Youch! Why’d you hit me?”

“Cause you’re being a wool-headed idiot,” Dani snapped, glaring at Toby as he rubbed the back of his head. “Dem don’t lie, do you Dem?” The boy shook his head.

“Alright then, I’m sorry I laughed, Dem. You gotta admit it sounds funny, though, don’t it?” Toby sighed and chewed on his lower lip. Dem couldn’t have seen a ghost. The dead were dead, like Ma was, and there wasn’t any escaping going through Afallon’s gates. They’d shut, locking the dead away from the living. That’s what Travis Lane of Iustyn’s Hand said, anyhow, and everyone knew that the Hand never lied.

If it wasn’t a ghost, then, it was probably something else. “Where were you? Go on then, tell us.”

“I hurt my knees,” Dem whined pitifully, playing on Dani’s sympathy like he always did. Sometimes Toby thought that Dem wanted her to take Ma’s place, which was stupid ’n hateful. Even if she was marryin’ age, no way Da would have her and Toby sure wasn’t gonna hitch her.

“You sure did. Let’s get you home and cleaned up. You can be brave on the way, can’t you?” Dani stood and looked at Toby pointedly.

“What?”

“Piggyback,” she said.

“What, for you?” Toby asked, startled.

“No, idiot. For him! Lands, sometimes I swear you got nothing ’tween your ears.”

“No need to get snarly, you ain’t a dog, though you may be a b—” Dani hit him again, making Toby yelp. “Fine! Come on Dem, up you go.”

His brother climbed on, heavy enough to make Toby grunt, and



they took off. The people in the streets gave them a funny look and a few boys playing Ring pointed and laughed, but they shut it when Dani glared at them. Dem stayed quiet until they were home, gingerly climbing onto his stool in the small common room.

“Let me clean your knee,” Dani said, pouring some water from the heavy pitcher onto a scrap of cloth. Dem winced and clutched Toby’s hand bravely, trying his hardest not to cry. It made Toby proud all over again, seeing him grow up.

“There, bet it don’t sting as bad as when you scraped ’em,” Toby said, inspecting them when Dani was done. They were all cut up, but the bleeding was done. “What’d you do, fall down the cliffs?”

Dem grinned back, shaking his head. “Nuh uh. I fell when I was runnin’ from the ghost.”

“Good on you. Go on, where were you?”

“I was playing over by the warehouses, ya know, the ones by the docks? I heard a noise inside one of them and so I slowly peeked in. I was hopin’ it was a cat. We don’t get many of those anymore.”

That’s because the dogs ate them all, Toby thought, but didn’t want to stop Dem from actually talking. “Was it?”

“Naw. I peeked my head up all careful and slow-like. It was all dark inside, which is why I saw the light. It was over by the wall, past some crates, and the glow grew and grew.” Dem’s face was getting pale at the memory. Dani reached out and gave his shoulder a squeeze. He grabbed onto it, knuckles going white as he held tight. “A face appeared right outta the wall, blood all splattered on it. The ghost came through it like it weren’t there. That’s how I knew it was a ghost. Anyhow, I fell off the crate I was perched on ’n scraped my knees, then I got the hell outta there.”

He peered up at Dani and then Toby’s face. “You believe me, right?”

“Course I do,” Toby said, ruffling his brother’s hair in the way he

hated. “Was it the ghost of anyone you know?”

Dem shook his head, which made Dani sigh. “Well, I think you were very brave. Did you see anyone else before we found you?”

“No, but Dani...I think it saw me. The ghost. It looked right at me. That’s why I fell. Will it find me?”

“Nope,” Dani said confidently with a shake of her head. “Ghosts don’t look for people. They just hang around the same ol’ place.”

“Anyhow, you shouldn’t be playin’ round there,” Toby broke in before Dani could fill his brother’s head with more reassuring nonsense. “You know that’s not a very safe place to be.” Cold Harbor didn’t have much crime, but that was partly because of the large Peacekeeper force, and the two organized gangs that quietly fought for control of smuggling and theft. It was one of the worst kept secrets in town, one that anyone who bothered to listen could figure out. The warehouses were disputed territory, but that just meant more folk hung around there.

“I know,” Dem sighed, hopping off of the stool and testing his knees. “I just really thought there’d be kittens.”

“Well, there ain’t.”

Dani sighed and glanced out the window. “I’d best be goin’,” she said, making a face. “Pa’ll be home soon ’n I got stuff to get done before he does.”

“Anything I can help with?” Toby asked, hoping he sounded casual enough.

“Naw. Got nothin’ for kids to do.”

“Just thought you might want a man’s help with stuff.” Toby gave her a good-natured punch on her arm. It wasn’t a hard punch and Dani was tougher than most guys he knew, so he was surprised at the pain that flickered across her face. Idiot, must have hit one of her bruises. Eil knew that his ribs hurt like no one’s business.

“Sure I do,” she said, recovering quickly. “Let me know if you see

anyone with a man's belt buckle around."

Toby looked down guiltily at the piece of string that served as a belt to hold his pants up, his face flushing. It'd be another two years till he'd reach his majority at fourteen and get a proper belt. "I'm grown enough ta do what needs doin'. You helped me."

"Yeah," Dem put in. "I can help too. Pa says I do better work than most."

"Shut it, shrimp."

"Well, he does." Dem stuck his tongue out, proof that he was feeling better, so Toby put him into a headlock to show that there were no hard feelings. Even if he had broken the rules. Dem squealed and squirmed, wriggling out of his grasp.

"I'm serious, Dani. I know you're avoidin' your chores or somethin'. Let me help 'n we can get 'em all done before your Da comes home."

She sighed and, for a second, Toby thought she was going to give, but she closed her mouth and shook her head. She was the most stubborn person he knew, which was one reason they got along so well. That and she was more boy than girl; even if she was technically a woman grown, she still climbed trees, and spit, and fought with boys twice her size. If not for the dress she hated wearing and her long hair, she'd look like a boy too, though maybe a pretty one.

"Fine, suit yourself. I got work of my own to get done." Toby turned his back to her. "See you later."

"See ya," she said and he heard her leave. Turning, he caught sight of her long braid slapping against her back as she ran.

Fine then, let her do her own chores 'n get yelled at if her Da came home early. Toby and Dem had their own work to do anyhow. It'd be a sad day when he needed a girl around.

And it wasn't that he wanted her here either, he thought as he and Dem got to work scrubbing the pale tubers they'd be mashing

for supper. The only reason that they got along was that she'd never acted much like a girl was supposed to. It made her the same as him — no one liked them. That was fine by him.

He and Dem managed just great on their own. Toby glanced over at his brother who scowled as he worked on a particularly dirty parsnip, the muscles in his arm straining. As much as Toby gave him guff, he was a good boy. Honest, hard-working, and usually dependable. Which is why, Toby realized, Dem's story bothered him so much. It wasn't like Dem to make things up, or jump to conclusions.

There was no doubt that he'd seen something in the warehouse, but it couldn't have been a ghost. What else could it have been, though? A normal man? But who could walk through walls? No one that Toby knew of.

It was possible that the man had come up from a cellar in the warehouse. Some of them had basements and the like, but if that had been the case, Dem wouldn't have just seen a face appear. He would have seen the light rising up from the ground and, surely, he'd have known what was going on.

And what about the blood?

Toby shook his head, frustrated. There wasn't any good explanation for what had happened, but what of it? Likely, it was one of the few homeless men in Cold Harbor, wine stains on his face from a morning of foolish depravity. That's how his Da would explain it, anyhow. Which is why they didn't need to go bothering him with the story. It'd just get Dem into trouble for wanderin' off and, well, if thinking he saw a ghost made him stay closer to home, that wasn't really a bad thing.

Satisfied, Toby pushed the last parsnip onto the cutting board and got out a knife. The work put Dem and his story of ghosts out of his mind.

By the time Da got home, they'd finished cutting the parsnips and had dumped them into water. Toby swore underneath his breath as he tried to get the cooking fire lit. It'd gone out, somehow. His fault, probably.

Toby heard the heavy steps of his da before the door opened. Geol was a stocky man with short dark hair that matched his eyes. He'd ripped his old shirt, Toby noticed, making a mental note to try and get it patched before it was needed again. Should be one of Ma's old dresses or shirts of a color like that still left. He saved the more colorful patches for his own clothes, used to the looks they drew.

Geol looked tired, too.

"Hard day?" Toby asked, going back to work on the fire.

"It was a day," Geol sighed, and he stooped slightly and grabbed Dem in mid-charge, swinging him up and over his shoulder. "I've got a bag of food right here. Do you have the knives?"

"Yup." Toby grunted as the damned stuff finally took to the sparks and carefully put the flint down.

"I'm not food!" Dem squealed, trying to squirm free.

"Did you hear something?" Geol clomped over to the pot and leaned over, threatening to dump his wriggling cargo into it.

"Naw." Toby carefully fed a piece of kindling into the fire; they didn't have all day to wait for it to boil. "You wanna chop it up first?"

"Oh, I don't think so," Geol said, dangling Dem's head close enough to the pot for his hair to swish the water's surface. "Might as well mash it with the rest."

"You won't like it," Dem giggled, jabbing at Da's stomach. "I taste all stringy. Like pigeons."

"Nothing wrong with pigeons," Toby said, then frowned. "Da, when did food start talkin'?"

"Don't reckon it does," Geol said, then blinked. "It ain't food at all. Dem, what are you doing making my cooking water all dirty?"

“Takin’ a bath,” Dem said, dropping lightly to the ground when Da let him go. He brushed himself off, then grinned up. “I saw a —”

Toby elbowed him sharply in the side, giving him a quick glare. The last thing they needed was him blabbing to Da. No cause to stir up trouble. “Flower. He saw a flower that was pretty.”

“Your Ma loved flowers,” Geol said, sinking heavily into a chair. “Used to wear them in her hair. You remember that, Toby?”

He did. One of his earliest memories was the scent of flowers coming off of her, and she’d tuck one into his hair and they’d giggle together about it. If he thought about it too much, though, he’d start to tear up, so he scowled instead. “Dem, go into the cellar ’n fetch me another bag of salt.”

“Can I get an apple, too?”

“No, I’m savin’ those.” Toby pointed the knife he was using to chop up a carrot. “Get goin’.”

Dem sighed and rolled his eyes, his steps disappearing down into the cellar. Almost all the buildings in Cold Harbor had a cellar of some kind, though Toby didn’t know how anyone could dig one out of solid stone. Maybe Mr. Thatcher would know, but he just did roofs.

His Da might — the two men worked together, though Toby supposed that his Da worked *for* Mr. Thatcher, which is why they lived in a house half the size as Dani’s.

As he dumped the sliced carrots into the pot, he caught a glimpse of his Da watching him. “What?”

Geol shrugged. “Thought you might want to tell me about it, is all.”

“About what?”

“Whatever gave you those bruises on your face.” Geol laughed, the sound low and rumbling like the storms that broke over the sea. “I hope you kept your brother out of it?”

“Yeah, I did.” Toby drifted over and hopped up onto the table,

his legs swinging as he looked over at his Da. “Got into a fight with Dale and two of his friends. They were roughing up Dani.”

Geol frowned. “You know I don’t condone fighting, Toby. Not to say it was wrong to go to her aid, but there’s always a better way than violence.”

“Not this time. They’re bastards and I hate them.”

“You don’t mean that, son,” Geol said, reaching over and putting a hand on Toby’s knee. The contact was warm and comforting. Toby wanted to lean over against him, but he was almost a man now. Men didn’t do that, only boys did.

“I do,” he said instead.

His Da sighed and stood up, stretching. “You’ll find as you grow older that less and less problems can be solved with your fists. Men don’t have the luxury of brawling to deal with things; that just gets you locked up in a cell, left to cool your temper while those who depend on you go hungry.”

“Dale’s the one who should be in a cell,” Toby said angrily, his chin lifting stubbornly. “Goin’ around, hittin’ girls.” He didn’t want to talk about it; the memory of Dani getting hit made him angry all over again, so he stomped over to the cellar door. “Dem! Whatcha doin’ down there?”

He waited, but there was no answer. Sighing, he opened the door wider, letting more light stretch down the old wooden stairs. From up here, he couldn’t see much except for the edge of a small puddle of dark liquid.

“You’d better not have knocked anything over,” he muttered, going down the stairs, leaving the door open to give himself light. Crates of food and supplies were stacked up, a row of shelves along the far wall holding the smaller stashes of food and tools. It was hard to get things in Cold Harbor, so everything was carefully saved and used.

Blinking in the low light, he frowned. Dem wasn’t down here,

which didn't make any sense at all. There wasn't any way out of the cellar save for the door and he'd have seen his little brother sneaking out.

"Dem?" he called, looking down at the puddle. Nothing was tipped over and leaking, and the few bottles of cider were still sitting up on the top shelf out of Dem's reach. A strange smell rose to his nose and he sniffed, his frown deepening.

"Everything alright?" Geol called down, his shadow darkening the light. "What's he doing?"

A thrill of fear tightened Toby's stomach as he crouched down and touched the puddle. It was still warm and his fingers came away bright red. "Da, it's blood. Dem's not here, all that's here is blood."

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