

The only remarkable thing about the rest of the day was the detour to City Hall, where the baroness of Carlisle was shown the impressively large map of the combined municipalities that made up the city-state of Fernwall. It took a few enthusiastic young clerks a half-hour of searching on her behalf, but when she finally left the building, even Iris was gratified. The unplanned detour had saved her several hours of beating around South End in the cold.

Those streets were in what the locals had begun to call “Near-Thieves,” and not-so-coincidentally near River Trap, too.

*Don't make any plans tonight, Baroness. We've got to get to Raven.*

Later that night, legs and arms and lungs pumping in time like a furnace bellows, Iris cut across the darkened stable-yards at the end of Little Farthing Lane and jumped for the lowest branch of the sturdy old oak that anchored the far end of the yard. Devoid of all its leaves, it made for an admirable emergency escape; she hoisted herself up, then lay prone on the branch, out of the light. Her three pursuers pelted heedlessly into the yard and slipped on semi-frozen piles of shit for their trouble. Two of them lost their footing completely and ended up rolling around in it a bit before they managed to lurch back up to their feet.

Iris suppressed a grin as they cursed and shouted at one another, then agreed to search the stables. Or rather, they agreed that they *should*. The stable boy, who'd been sleeping on his shift rather than shoveling piles of horse dung from the yard, awoke to the racket and piped up with a squeaky, tremulous challenge. The leader pushed the lad back into the shelter of the overhanging awning while the other two knocked semi-frozen horse turds from their clothing. Stammering in his fear, the lad could barely spit out any kind of answer. The two rejoined their leader then, brushing the filth from their jackets and trousers and forming a menacing semi-circle around the lad, whom they'd trapped.

Iris sighed in frustration. *Why are they always bullies?* Seeing an opportunity in that unemployed shovel, she let herself down to the ground, then hefted it a few times to get the feel of it. The boy had just started to sob when, with a certain satisfaction, Iris swung that shovel like a club and smacked a few more smelly turds into their backs.

They were semi-solid, and *splatted* gratifyingly when they hit.

“Gardammit!” a familiar woman’s voice shouted. She wheeled to catch sight of Iris standing there at the edge of the lamplight, shovel-handle resting on her shoulder.

“Oh, it’s you again,” Iris said, recognizing the large woman and her padded coat from their previous encounter. “Look, it’s not the boy’s fault you’re all stupid—”

There was no time to finish baiting them. The three rushed her, and Iris had to drop the shovel and bolt toward Three Lions Bridge, hoping for a head start on those thugs for the run toward Halmore’s Mercantile. The three plunged after her, but Iris easily outpaced them, striding toward the

south end of the bridge and the city beyond, where the buildings were taller and closer together, shifting the odds of the chase in her favor. She darted into one of the numerous unlit side-streets, hurdling over a trash midden and only just managing to dodge a couple making “the two-backed beast.”

Badly off-balance, Iris shouted a jaunty, “So sorry, there!” and twisted herself for a leap up to the bottom rung of an iron fire escape. Without warning, her boot slipped out from under her.

*Black ice!* Her knee twisted beneath her as she fell, and she cracked her head against bricks and paving stones in quick succession. Ears ringing, blinking her eyes to get them to refocus, she scrambled for footing nonetheless when her three pursuers entered the alley at a dead run and caromed into the coupling pair. Amid the renewed cursing and shrieks, two of them fell into the trash heap while the third was trying to divest himself of an armful of a half-naked woman, and an all-angry man.

“So much for Louis’ ‘concern’ about Angelique’s health. Or mine.” Iris clung to the rough surface of the wall and got to her feet, staggering into the courtyard just beyond the alley. She found a sheltered archway to use for cover while she assessed her injuries. Her knee ached, but her head was clearing, which meant it was time to put these clods behind her. She heard the big woman shouting orders at her companions and decided that her situation required a change in elevation.

Another nearby tree provided a route to the rooftops, and a handy escape from her trio of pursuers, and she dismissed them from her mind. She had weightier things to concern her. Louis’ plans, whatever they were, had obviously progressed to the point where he felt safe confronting Angelique in public, while her own efforts were having to be split between finding a way to Raven that wouldn’t cause him to distrust her on sight, and finding the dirt she needed on Louis. Even with Angelique’s help with pattern analysis and Angel’s extensive knowledge of Louis, this city was simply too big to tackle alone. Raven might have decided that he hated Carlisle’s guts, but Iris had to admit that was going to need his help to have any hope of finding what she sought.

She limbered her shoulders and hips briefly, then began to run, attempting to quiet her mind so her body could find the rhythm of it. Each run was unique, and she’d discovered that the secret to covering long distances with relative ease was in discovering what that rhythm was and losing herself in it.

Her injuries were troubling her, and she had to work harder at it than she should. She therefore missed the repetitive flashes of light that were signaling just behind her.

Circling overhead, hidden by the inky black sky, Raven had seen most of the encounter. He followed as the object of pursuit made her way deeper into Docktown via the main branch of the Caspian River, and took pains to stay well out of sight, above the glow of the street lamps and not coincidentally, any chimney stacks that might impede his flight. The weather wasn’t great

for this kind of work. A freezing haze had hung over the city most of the day and had coated everything in ice before sundown. The haze made it difficult to see for any distance unaided, and the Owlsight goggles weren't helping much.

However, if it made things difficult for him, it was making conditions on the ground downright treacherous. The icy streets, roofs, and hand-holds had slowed his target down, too. She— from that distance he was reasonably certain it was female—darted in and out of sight, vaulting alleys and narrow streets in display after display of strength and grace, power and control, scampering up and down drainpipes with the casual flair of a street rat. Every move brought her closer to Fairmile Road, the Morrissant Bridge crossing, and so to River Trap.

She was really quite good, he decided, as he watched from the hot air plume of a chimney stack he was circling. The warm air was managing to thaw his frozen cheeks, and he had just resolved to spend as much time as possible watching her from its relative comfort when he saw a series of flashes from near the courtyard Iris had just left. He twitched the “feathers” on the ends of his wings to steepen his roll just in time to see an answering flash from ahead her.

*Signal flashes? Maybe.* Fliers and ground control teams used small hand-held flashes equipped with spring loaded shutters to communicate during the war, as had special forces units. If he was right, Iris was running right into a trap, a trap set by someone with enough brains to have thought things through at least a little bit.

It was time to move. If it was a trap, they'd cut her off and he needed to be closer, though he had no idea what he should do. Should he help Iris? Should he just watch and let her take her lumps—or not—as skill and chance would determined? Was she important enough for him to risk getting involved? If the people signaling did, indeed, attack, was disabling them the right thing to do? From the air, he knew, his weapons were just as likely to kill as stun. Roland had given him an unwritten license to kill, and had even smiled knowingly at his quip about preparing a few body bags, but unwritten permission was dangerous. If he killed the wrong people, even for the right reasons, he knew how quickly that permission would be disavowed, and how certainly he'd end up being a convict cop for life, afterward.

Iris drew up as she reached the roof of Halmore's Mercantile, a single, four-story building that comprised an entire city block there on the island. It had become a nexus point among the routes she'd painstakingly constructed since she'd begun living and working in Fernwall. Her head was aching, and the frigid night air made her knee ache regardless of how hard she worked to stay warm, but the many chimneys, peaks, water tanks, and entrance sheds made easy concealment for aggressors. It was just too cluttered for her to feel comfortable staying long. It was a place to rest, regroup, and reroute, but not a place to linger.

“ello, ducks.”

The arrogant drawl gave her just that precious moment of warning. Iris dove toward one of the water storage tanks just as a two-meter rope net hissed through the air to cover the surface where she'd been.

"You stupid prick! Now look what you've done!"

"Stow it! Ess-Pee-See, Now!"

Iris winced. If the "SP" part of that stood for "search pattern," her troubles had just multiplied exponentially. These weren't stupid amateurs! Two sets of heavy boots land on the roof nearby, then all three of her pursuers went quiet. She took a quick glance around to orient herself. There was only the weak, partially occluded light of the moons for illumination, but she knew this particular stretch of the thieves' highway as well as anyone. She sprawled flat and rolled beneath the vast expanse of the tank. The roof level dropped a meter on the other side, and she prepared to let herself down quietly, focusing on a dash to the iron railing on the far side of the roof. If she could make it cleanly, she could vault from the top of it to reach the sharply sloped roof of three-story Monmouth Hotel next door.

From the black sky above the Monmouth Hotel, Raven watched three armed soldiers—from the look of them—close on the water tank under which Iris had just dove. The one with the net was gathering it back up for another throw, while the other two tried to cut off her escape. One lifted an arm and held up something he angled toward a lamp, and Raven saw it flash. Again he banked hard, just in time to catch a quick reply from further east. *Whoever they are, these people are damned serious!*

Suddenly the man with the net went down, and was immediately partially tangled in his own net. Another flew back from what looked like a water-tank as if he'd been struck by a ballista bolt. Raven heard the cursing then, as Iris shot from her hiding place and ran for the edge of the building, diving off the edge with what seemed like reckless abandon, arcing across the span of empty air between the buildings, then tumbling onto the flat porch at the edge of the Monmouth's roof. She was right below him then, rolling with her momentum and using it to spring up the side of one of the brick chimneys, and from there to the long ridge atop the peak. She landed on her booted feet, then erupted once more into a dead run.

He was close enough that he could see her clearly now. The Owlsight goggles let him see through the night as though it were day, and with more detail than he ever expected, but the price was loss of color. She seemed to be about average height, and extraordinarily fit. Her hair was rendered black through the lenses, which only told him it had to be dark. But, if it was black, and if that strange, mottling effect in the fabric she wore were any indication of a pattern, then, he thought, this might indeed be the Iris, at last.

She was as lithe as any cat, he thought, as she jumped between peaks in her route across the Monmouth roof. From behind, he could hear her perusers. The weren't cursing, as thugs might have, but rather organizing. The orders were curt and sharp, and they weren't argued. Once again, he

saw flashes from one that were answered by another, now only a few buildings away from where Iris was heading.

This time, Iris saw the flashes. Her heart would have sunk, had it not been pushed to bursting by her recent sprint across a steep slope, crusty-frozen rather than slippery, but still treacherous. She took quick stock, then half-shrugged and plunged over the side of the Monmouth. It was a three-meter free-fall to catch the sail-cloth banner advertising something called the “Riverwell Court,” and she winced to hear the iron supports creaking in protest as it broke her fall, but it was enough to get her onto the covered second-story balcony that surrounded the Monmouth on three sides. She dashed toward the colonnaded courtyard she knew was just beyond, with vaulting, ivy-covered archways of the River Walk, hoping the dodge would confuse her pursuers.

The River Walk was a beautiful place in the summer sunshine. Angelique’s wistful memories of her time there with Vincent Sultaire had begun to interfere with Iris’ tactical analysis, and the hammering thunder between her ears made everything more difficult. She pushed sentiment aside and leaped from the balcony railing to the top of the nearest arch, using the tenacious, woody ivy vines to haul herself up to the wide, timbered trellises that stretched between each archway. Under other circumstances, running them lengthwise wouldn’t have been any more of a challenge than running down a hallway. This night, however, she knew it was going to require all the concentration she could muster.

Iris took a deep breath, and began her run, forcing herself to focus on the surface just under and in front of her boots. By the time she was up to full speed, it seemed she could just make out the entrance to the park at the foot of the massive Morrisant Bridge. With a last surge of determination, she pushed herself into an arcing leap, and with a stretching *reach* caught one of the iron poles that supported floral displays in season, but before her grip could close something stuck her in the back of the shoulder with such force it sent her sailing through the air to crash into an empty vendor’s cart, left just beyond the park’s entrance.

*Dammit!* The situation was making his choices for him.

One of the men pelting after Iris had stopped just long enough to throw something, and it had hit her. It was four against one, and she was obviously injured, and that was all Raven needed to make his choice. Whatever it was that Iris knew that was so damned important to these people, he was fairly sure it was going to be important to him, too. He dove after them, swooped overhead, then banked hard to circle back around from a better angle—and flinched in time to feel the long, curved throwing stick crack off the armored surface of his Raven Wing. It rebounded, striking him a glancing blow to the thigh before falling to the ground. He hadn’t managed to level out before he saw another streaking up at him.

*Shit!* Raven rolled and collapsed the wing just as the stick streaked by, then threw his arms out with all his strength to deploy it again. It worked! The stick had missed, but the dodge had cost him precious altitude. He was now no higher above the river than the bridge, still several hundred meters up river.

The immense Morrisant bridge was a study in stone arches. Three main arches, each three quarters of a kilometer each, spanned the wide, southern fork of the river. The central arch was highest, and rose an amazing twenty meters above the river at high tide. Above the three main arches were smaller arches that reached up to support the road deck as it arced up and over the river. Guard rails, also ornately carved in stone, guarded each side of the bridge.

“Two can play that game, gentlemen!” He pointed a tow plier at the man plunging toward where Iris had fallen, and fired. The lead weight caught the man in the chest and hurled him into a nearby wall. Before the other men could react, Raven had retrieved his line and shot it at the bridge, letting it pull him skyward once more.

The blackness was clearing from the edges of Iris’ vision just as the man approaching her—armored and armed—disappeared off to the side with a loud *crack!* She shook her head, catching only a glimpse of an enormous black shape as it banked hard overhead and vanished into the night skies.

*Lady’s garters, they’ve got a flyer, too? That’s just cheatin’!*

*That flyer was not allied with them, Angel! Is someone else after us?*

Heart hammering once more, Iris ignored the commentary and tried to lever herself out of the wreckage of the wooden cart, but her left arm had gone numb and would not obey her. She shifted to one side and rolled to her feet, then cradled her left arm in her right to put some distance between herself and the attackers on the ground. She emerged onto the surface of the bridge, mostly devoid of traffic at this late hour, and her pursuers were right behind her. It was only one direction left to her. Without the use of both arms to change elevation, and knowing the chances of surviving a jump into the river were too slim to reckon, Iris ducked her head and lengthened her stride into an all-out, best-speed sprint for the other side.

Wounded as she was, she wasn’t going to make it. From his vantage point, Raven could see that the three remaining soldiers would catch her before she reached the middle of the bridge. Worse, as he dove for the river once again he saw four *more* emerging at the southern end, waiting for her.

*Hounds to hunters.* It was one of the oldest tactics in anyone’s book, because it worked. Another club whizzed by Raven’s head, and he banked hard and roared northward across the river again, line plier in hand. As he approached the north end, he aimed and fired. The lead weight sailed between two stone stanchions in the railing right in front of the three soldiers. He opened the grapnel, locked the line, tucked the Raven Wing, and hung on as the line came tight and sang, vaulting him up, over the railing, and onto the bridge. He flared the Raven Wing at the last moment to stall momentum, landing right between Iris and her three pursuers, who

tripped on his line to land almost at Iris' feet.

"I've heard of falling for a woman," Raven drawled, his line hissing back into the line plier's housing, "but boys, boys! That's just bad form!"

The lead weight snicked back into the plier, and he stowed it. "Evening, Iris! I had no idea you were so popular."

She staggered back, still holding her injured arm to her body, instinctively not trusting help she hadn't requested. "Yeah? Who the fuck are you?" she gasped, even as Angel's thoughts in her mind sang out *By th' Lady's love—it's Raven!*

The three fallen soldiers were struggling to regain their feet. "Introductions can come later. You have more friends arriving from the sound end of the bridge. Your expertise must be 'trouble,' because it looks like everybody's trying to bring you some." He drew his sword and readied himself for the first attack.

It took a single look to tell her what he said about the new trouble was just fact. They were trapped, or she was, at least—if that strange-looking cloak he was wearing explained his ability to fly—and he was drawing a sword?

"I hate to break it to you," she said, adding Angel's teary-eyed excitement to the list of detriments she had to manage, "but we're pretty badly outnumbered here, considering. Are you good enough with that thing to kill seven?"

"If you'd rather have dinner, I could arrange that," he replied, backing away from the three who had fallen. They were spreading out, apparently more intent on capturing them—or her—than fighting. "We can talk about where, later," he added hastily. "Right now, I'd say anywhere will soon be better than here."

"Oy! Iris! Enough, I'm out of breath. Give us a truce, love. Let's talk this out like adults, eh?"

It was one of the four approaching from the south, and he didn't look as if he'd been overly exercised any time recently. The bridge was fairly well lit—city ordinance—and she could see that he too was wearing some kind of armor, and a weapons belt with quite a few dangerous-looking pieces of armament. There were three others behind him, all garbed similarly, though their kits looked different. They walked a few paces behind the speaker, fanning out as they drew near.

"And just who the fuck are you?" she demanded, trying not to wince openly as she let her left arm hang free.

"Name's Willis. me girl. Squad leader for Lucky's Lads. Maybe you've heard." It was a suggestion, not a question, and he was prudently holding his hands away from his weapons as he approached.

Raven had heard of them, not that he put much stock in *what* he'd heard. The rumor mill said Lucky's Lads were former SAS troopers turned mercenaries, after the war, but from the look of Willis, they weren't exactly wearing out the parade grounds keeping in shape.

"I wouldn't trust this any further than we could pitch fat boy, there," he whispered to Iris.

"No shit," she muttered, growing angrier by the moment. "Stall them."

"And what the fuck do you want with this woman, Willis?" Raven demanded, maneuvering, as Iris was, in an attempt to keep all seven soldiers in view.

"Oh, you *must* be the Raven." Willis' tone was one of ease. He clearly was certain he had the upper hand in this engagement. "A con that got collared and sentenced to be a cop. I can appreciate the irony, by the way—but I've got business with the lady. It doesn't involve cops."

"It doesn't involve me, either," Iris said, spitting the words like bolts. "I don't care who you are. I'll jump the rail over there before I'll let you take me anywhere."

Willis laughed. "Ah, so y'do know who sent us, then?"

She spat at him. "I know he's a fool for hiring you."

The mercenary laughed again. "He didn't tell us you were such a delightful conversationalist! Look now, you don't need to make this any harder on yourself. Just ditch your pretend-cop there, luvvie, so's we can go cuddle someplace warmer, shall we? Be nice to me, and I won't even have to tie you up for the trip."

"Unless you've got a warrant and a badge, if you attack this woman again, you just might have an unscheduled appointment with the inside of Commissioner Roland's jail," Raven said, hoping it might at least give the idiot pause. "The one on the right has another of those damned nets," he went on, pitching his voice for Iris' ears. "If we're lucky, maybe he'll throw it at us."

She did a double-take, sure she'd misheard him. "What?"

"Oh, do be reasonable, Chief Inspector," Willis was saying, sidling to his left as he spoke. "I've got orders, you know, and there's just the one of you. You can walk away from this alive and whole, Raven. Just say the word. The lads'll let you pass. There's an ale barrel just down river there, with your name on it, ain't there?"

Iris snorted, but regardless of Raven's words and no matter how often she looked around, she couldn't see a way out that didn't involve the aforementioned plunge over the side of the bridge, into the icy waters of the Caspian, far below.

"Go on," she told Raven, as calmly as she could manage in the circumstances. "Get clear. You're no good to Roland or anyone else if they take you too. I'm too banged up to be sure I could rescue us both."

Angel's thoughts raced over the end of the spoken words like pebbles cast across glass. *He won't leave us, he cain't, not Raven—*

"There. See? The Iris is capable of reason after all. Of a sort." Willis laughed, and so did his men.

*Capable of love, too.* Iris hadn't time to decipher what Angelique meant before Raven's rejoinder made Angel begin to weep tears of joy.

“But we haven’t even *kissed* yet,” Raven protested outrageously. The tears were in Iris’ eyes too, of a sudden, but only she knew that they weren’t entirely from the throbbing pain behind her eyes.

“See?” he said, turning back to Willis, in mockingly tragic tones. “I can’t leave yet, and you’re sort of interfering with our evening. So, if you’d be so kind as to either leave or attack, I’d be much indebted to you,” he went on, pressing his mocking display. “We’ve got a lot of other things to do, tonight.”

Willis sighed in open disappointment, and shrugged. At that signal, one of his men hurled that net. It was what Raven had been awaiting. He grabbed Iris and threw his cloak over them both. They ducked the net, which then neatly landed on top of them.

“Shit!” Iris squealed, working hard to stay conscious. He’d grabbed her by the left arm, and there weren’t words for what was going on in her shoulder.

“Finally!” Raven whispered. “Thought he was going to yammer all night. Put your good arm around me, here,” he said, ignoring the names she was calling him. “Grab my waist with your legs, and hang on tight!”

“Why does this sound like a *really bad* idea?” she asked—rhetorically, for she was snaking her right arm around him, using her body to trap her injured arm between them. As dangerous and stupid as it sounded, it was going to be a lot better than leaving with Willis and company. Assuming they survived it, of course.

They both heard the boot steps approaching. Raven drew both line pliers. “Because it is,” he said, half-apologetically, “but it’s the best I could come up with on short notice. I usually plan much more thoroughly for a first date, I promise.”

He stood up then, pushing up the cloak with one powerful thrust of his shoulders. Light and cold air rushed around her, and she saw the cloak spread out and harden, then slam into three of the men with the force of a hammer, sending them flying. The net had sailed clear with the momentum, but came back down to land on top of Willis and two of his three companions.

“Ha! Gotcha!” Raven grinned fiercely, then whirled to assess their foes. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw one of the three to the north rear back one arm, a curved throwing club in his hand.

Raven pulled a trigger. The lead weight from the end of the line plier caught the man in the chest and hurled him backwards. In the next heartbeat he’d shot the other line to the south end of the river. He had time to shout “Hang on!” to his passenger before they were both jerked upward, leaving Lucky’s Lads in strife and confusion far below. The tow line screamed like an angry wildcat under the strain, but it worked!

Another of the silly throwing sticks ricocheted off the Raven Wing, but they had rolled so that his back was toward the ground, and it rebounded away harmlessly.

“They’re a little slow at times, aren’t they?” he quipped to Iris as he rolled them over.

She’d begun to laugh. It wasn’t particularly loud or vigorous, but laughter it was, and it was her way of coping when life tumbled her over like this

and spat her out to ride a rapids with nothing but her wits to protect her. “Maybe,” she gasped, gripping him tightly, “But they’ll be after us soon enough.”

“Yeah, but this time they’ll be on my turf, not theirs.” Now able to look at the ground rather than the clouds above, he began to scan for a place to land. It wasn’t the best choice he could think of, but still, they would be in River Trap. Here, he knew he could get help keeping Willis and his men busy while he and Iris escaped.

There it was, the stable yard just off the east end of the Fairmile Road. He headed that way and began to flare the wing to land.

Iris kept her mouth shut, reasoning correctly that it added to her chances of living through the landing if she let him concentrate on it. The possibility was good that, if he knew who he was really rescuing, he’d probably drop her and be done with it.

*Iris, that’s just not true. This could be our one chance. Please. . .*

*Hush, Angel. Not now.* Angelique’s voice was so subdued she could barely detect it. *We are not out of peril yet.*

Raven flared the glide wing, stalling them just above the fence line of the stable yard, then let it settle them to the ground. He hadn’t carried anybody with him since Saliah, ten years ago. He was rather proud that he had pulled it off so smoothly, but kept that to himself.

“There. Now we’ve got to get out of here, and find someplace to get that arm looked at.” He helped her to her feet, then pulled off the goggles and jammed them into a pocket and took a quick look around. The side gate let back out onto Fairmile Road, but Willis and company would no doubt be headed that way a matter of minutes, so he opted instead to head for the stables. Hopefully, one of the stable boys would be on duty.

The stable yard was better lit. Iris kept her face averted as he led them both in, but stepped back when he paused so she could lean against a door post. She knew she was vulnerable here. Raven claimed this as “his turf,” and that implied access to allies and resources. It was an advantage, a serious one, as the setting for an encounter that could well turn ugly, despite Angel’s sentimental protestations.

“Thank you,” she said, fishing in her pouch for the vial of alchemically-enhanced analgesic she kept there against need. “You’ve done enough, though. Maybe too much, but I suspect Willis’ boss is smart enough to keep him out of your way, in future. What I don’t understand is *why*.”

“Hullo!” Raven called into the stable. “Why what, exactly?” he asked. A moment later, there was a rumbling and thumping from somewhere in the stable loft. Vial in hand, Iris uncapped it and tipped the contents into her mouth. They were bland enough, but tingled as they went down.

“Why you intervened,” she said then, wiping her mouth with the back of her glove. “You could have just let them take me, you know.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, leading her into the stables. Several horses nickered grumpily at being awakened at such an obnoxious hour, and from the thumping on the stairs, an equally groggy stable boy was coming down the stairs