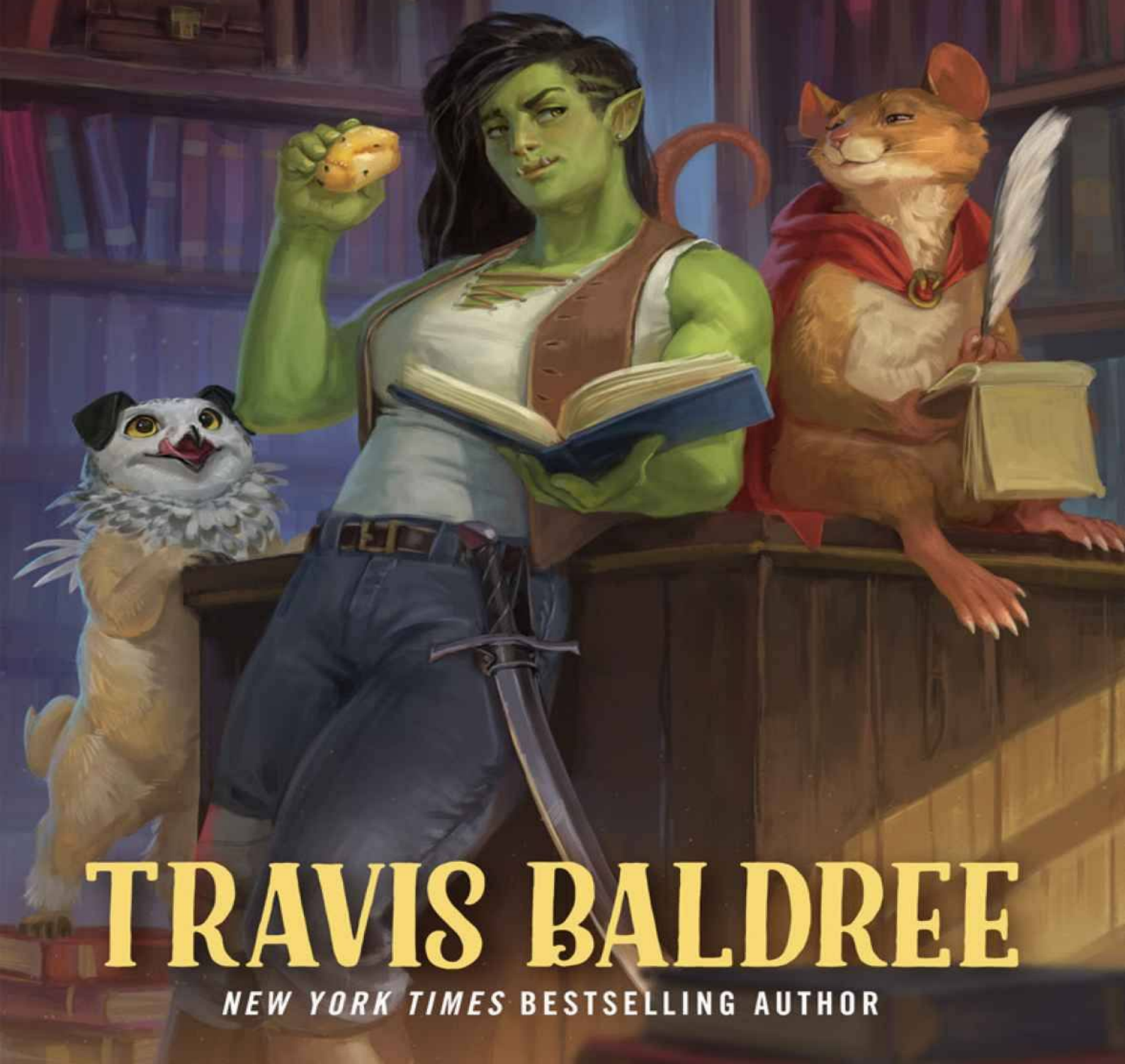


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BOOKSHOPS & BONEDUST



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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Because right things happen at the wrong time.

PROLOGUE



“Eighteen!” bellowed Viv, bringing her saber around in a flat curve that battered the wight’s skull off its spine. She laughed and rammed her shoulder through its body before it could begin to fall, shattering bones in all directions. In two more steps, she’d already brought the blade back in an upswing, catching another in the ribcage. Splinters sprayed like woodchips from a felling-axe.

“Nineteen!” She grinned savagely, baring her fangs and forging ahead with massive strides.

Every breath sang pure and clean in her lungs, her muscles bunched and released in perfect rhythm, her blood roared in her veins. She was youth and strength and power, and she meant to push all three as far as they would go.

Varine the Pale’s army of gaunt, skeletal soldiers crowded amidst the bastion oaks, nimble despite their desiccation. They battled in deathless silence, short-swords and pikes snapping toward Viv, and she dodged or hacked them aside, relentless as the tide.

She was far ahead of the rest of Rackam’s Ravens, leading the charge. Old warhorses, the lot of them. Old and *slow*. They’d tried to keep the new blood in the back, but that wasn’t what she was built for.

Somewhere ahead, the necromancer lay in wait, and Viv meant to reach her first. When the stragglers finally caught up, they’d find her with her blade at ease and their quarry in a heap at her feet.

Her count increased with every stroke as she laid about her with her

saber. Still not fast enough. She yanked her maul from its loop and went to work with both hands, crushing and shearing through the skeletal ranks with hammer and sword. Their shields were bashed aside. Their ring mail tore like paper. Their skulls collapsed like winter melons.

Harsh cries echoed behind her as Rackam's crew dealt with the chaff she left in her wake or the wights that tried to flank them. Someone shouted for her to slow down. She huffed a scornful laugh.

And then her leg lit up with a cold fire that turned hot in half a second. She staggered and pivoted on the other foot just as a pike's rusty head withdrew from a long wound in her thigh. It darted forward again, and she stared disbelieving as it disappeared through her trousers and into the meat of her leg in a perfect parallel slice. Then the blood came. A lot of it.

She roared, knocking the pike aside with her maul and following with an upward slash of her saber that ripped the wight in half. Its horned helm spun skyward in an absurd twirl. Viv would have laughed if agony hadn't overtaken her when her weight shifted from the swing. Her wounded leg collapsed under her like a cornstalk.

Suddenly, she was on her side in the moss and muck, bleeding everywhere.

Another skeletal revenant loomed above her, curls of blue light flickering in its empty sockets. On its forehead Varine's symbol burned bright—a diamond with branches like horns. It hauled a rusty tower shield into the air, preparing to bring the edge down in a crushing blow. The only sounds were the creaking of its sinew and Viv's own ragged breaths.

She just caught the edge of the shield with her maul, knocking it to the side, but she lost her grip on her weapon. Tears of pain blurred her vision. Viv hadn't managed to disarm the thing, though. Implacable, the revenant raised the slab of metal once more. This time, the angle was all wrong to shift the saber between her and the falling edge. In shocked disbelief, she could only watch as the steel dropped toward her neck.

A ragged cry, but not her own.

Rackam barreled into the creature with his shoulder. As the wight staggered back, the dwarf obliterated the thing with a single swing of his flanged mace.

He glanced down at her, and the disappointed grimace on his lips made her nausea double. "Hells-damned fool. Clap a hand to that. Stay put, and try not to die, if you can."

Then he was gone, and Viv was breathless with shock as Rackam's Ravens charged past in a line of blades and bows and arcane fire that leveled the foe before them.

They disappeared into the mist, and she was alone, staring in disbelief as her life pumped out of her leg.

★ ★ ★

“Still with us, hey?”

Viv groggily regained consciousness. She felt like she was going to be sick. Maybe she already had been.

The first things she saw were Rackam's flinty eyes, glittering above the braids of his muddy salt-and-pepper beard. Viv shook her head and looked around; the edges of her vision seemed smeared with grease. Somehow, she'd braced her back against one of the oaks. She'd apparently also had the presence of mind to tear off the bottom of her shirt and bind her wound around a handful of moss. The cloth was soaked through, and the earth underneath was a churn of mud and blood.

At the sight of it, she began to drift, and Rackam brought her back with a surprisingly gentle slap to the cheek.

He sighed and shook his head.

The battle was done. If his presence hadn't been enough to tell her, then the unhurried movement of the warriors behind him would have.

“I figured it when you signed on. Hoped I'd be wrong, but nah, I knew this was the way it would go. Younger is always dumber, and wising up takes blood and time.” He looked away, as though into some other possible future, then back at her. “Every new prospect, I give them even odds. I look at the hands, the arms. No scars? Then it's even odds that the first one they get kills them.”

With one gloved hand, he patted her massive forearm. Corded with muscle, but the skin unblemished. Viv stared past it to the wreck of her leg.

Rackam stood, and she still didn't have to look up far to meet his eyes. “Is this the one that kills you, then?”

Viv swallowed down her nausea and narrowed her eyes, feeling stupid. Feeling stupid made her feel resentful. And resentment was only a half step from angry. “No,” she said through clenched teeth.

He chuckled. “Don't guess it will, at that. But you're done for now.”

She blinked. “Did we get her?”

“We didn’t. Wasn’t even here, near as we can tell. Only a little trouble she stirred up just for us. We’re heading north. We’ll find her.”

Viv struggled to push herself to standing against the trunk with her left leg. The other felt too big by half, and every pump of her heart was a dark drumbeat all through it. “When do we leave?”

“We? Like I said, you’re done for now. They tell me it’s only a few miles to some sea town. I’ll send you that way. You’ll heal up, and we’ll pass through when we’re done. If you’re still around and able when we roll through, we’ll take you back on. Probably a few weeks. If you’re gone when we show ... ?” He shrugged. “No shame in calling this the end of it.”

“But—”

“It’s done, kid. You survived a stupid mistake today. If you want to make another so soon after, well ...” His gaze was hard. “Want me to tell you the odds I give on that?”

But Viv wasn’t a stupid orc, so she shut the hells up.

1



Viv lay on the floor of the tiny room. Well, almost on the floor. The place hadn't been built with orcs in mind, and the bed was too short by at least two feet. Someone had wrestled the strawtick mattress onto the floor, and though her legs still went off the end, they'd positioned her pack so her foot was propped, keeping the wounded leg elevated.

It hurt like all eight hells.

She'd caught a fever while bouncing along in the litter behind a pack mule, coughing through all the dust it could raise. Which was a *lot*.

Viv might've been bedbound for two days, in and out of consciousness, a muddle of circular dreams and throbbing agony. The surgeon had come and gone multiple times. Or maybe he hadn't, and she'd just been hallucinating it over and over. She half remembered the man's face, tangled up in a shame she couldn't identify.

Now, her head was clear. Which mostly meant she could also *feel* everything with complete clarity. It was a debatable improvement.

What's more, she was absolutely ravenous.

Staring around the room, the place was mostly barren. A crude bedframe and a tiny table with a lantern and a basin on it. Gray, raw wood for walls. A small, slatted window. She smelled the sea, and dry beach grass, and fish. An old sea chest sat opposite. Her saber leaned against it, alongside a crude wooden crutch. Her maul was missing. There wasn't much else worth considering.

The building was absolutely quiet. The only sounds came from outside—the hissing of grass, the remote grumble of waves, and the occasional call of a seabird.

Viv had been lucid for less than a single hour, and she thought the

view might drive her insane if she had to endure another.

Her leg was cleanly wrapped at least, splinted so the knee wouldn't bend. Her trouser leg had been cut away. The bandages showed some discoloration where she'd oozed through, but it was a big step up from moss and a dirty wool shirt.

"Well," she said. "Shit."

She made it up by degrees, hauling her butt onto the bedframe and sucking air through her teeth as she swung her damaged leg around. Her left boot fit, but the right foot was so swollen, it would have to stay bare. Tottering to her feet, she made it to the basin of tepid water, where she scrubbed herself as best she could with the rag she found there. Feeling less foul, she limped toward the door, but each thud of her heel against the floor pulsed black at the edges of her vision. Gritting her teeth, she changed direction and grudgingly seized the crutch.

It galled her to admit how much better that was.

While she was there, she belted on her saber out of habit.

Unfortunately, she discovered that the room was at the top of a flight of narrow stairs. She fumbled down them, catching herself every other step with the crutch. The saber did nothing to make things easier. With every impact, she found a new, more colorful epithet for Rackam. Not that it was his fault, of course. Still, it was a lot more satisfying to curse someone by name, even if that name should've been her own.

She could smell the ghost of bacon as she descended, which was plenty of incentive to carry on.

The stairs opened into a long, rough-timbered dining area in an inn or tavern or whatever they called it around here. A big, stone hearth crouched cold along one wall, yawning like a disappointed mouth. An iron chandelier hung askew, entombed in candlewax. Glass floats and storm lanterns were strung or nailed up in the rafters, alongside netting and weathered oars with names carved into them. The handful of scarred tables were unoccupied.

A long bar ran along the back wall, and the tavernkeep leaned against it, idly cleaning a copper mug. He looked as bored as the place warranted. The tall sea-fey's chin was grizzled gray. His nose was a hatchet, his hair hung kelp-thick past sharp ears, and his forearms writhed with tattoos.

"Mornin', miss," he rumbled. "Breakfast?"

Viv couldn't remember anyone *ever* calling her *miss*.

His gaze sketched over her, brows rising as he spied the saber, then returned to the mug he was polishing.

“Bacon?” asked Viv.

He nodded. “Eggs, too? Potatoes?”

Her stomach grumbled aggressively. “Yeah.”

“Five bits ought to do it.”

She patted at her belt for her wallet, looked toward the stairs, and swore.

“I’ll get it next time. Worst case I climb those stairs myself.” The man smiled wryly. “Don’t think you could outrun me, could you? You’d better fall onto one of these stools while you still can.”

Viv was so used to her very existence being an obvious threat that it was honestly startling to hear a casual joke at her expense, even such a mild one. She supposed clunking around on one leg tended to dull one’s fearsomeness.

As she accomplished the suggested maneuver, he disappeared into the back. Viv dragged another stool close enough to prop her bare foot on one of its low supports.

Drumming her fingers on the counter, she tried to distract herself by studying the interior further, but there *really* wasn’t much else worth marking. The sounds and smells from the back were all her mind could dwell on.

When the tavernkeep brought out a skillet and set it on the counter along with a fork and a napkin, she almost seized the hot handle with her bare hand in her hurry to drag it closer. The hash of potatoes, crispy, fatty pork, and two runny eggs was still sizzling and popping. She almost burst into joyful tears.

Viv caught him watching her devour the food from the other end of the bar and tried to slow down, but the potatoes were salty and rich with the egg, and it was hard not to shovel it in without pausing. The noises she made as she ate were not polite, but they were definitely sincere.

“Feel better?” the sea-fey asked as he slid the empty pan off the bar-top.

“Gods, yes. And thanks. Uh, I’m Viv.”

That wry grin again. “Heard when you came in. We’ve met, actually, but I’m not surprised you don’t remember. Not with all the commotion.”

She didn’t *remember* the commotion, but his amused tone made her

wonder. “So, did the Ravens pay up my stay?”

“Hoped I’d see Rackam himself,” said the barkeep. “Still, the fellow he sent to put you up was practically a gentleman. Paid four days. Said you’d be able to foot it past that. I’m Brand.”

He held out a hand, and she shook it. They both had hard grips.

“Back to your ease then?” he asked.

“Hells, no. I’d go crazy. Um. Where exactly *am* I?”

His wry grin went all the way to amused. “Let me be the first to welcome you to Murk, jewel of the western coast! A very *small* part of the western coast. And this here is The Perch, my place.”

“Seems awfully quiet around here.” She’d almost said *depressingly* quiet.

“We have our loud moments when the boats are in. But if you’re looking to rest and recover, most days you’re not going to be bothered by the noise.”

She nodded and hopped onto her good foot, easing the crutch back under her. “Well, thanks again. Guess I’ll be seeing a lot of you.”

With hot food in her belly, Viv felt more herself. The thought of hobbling her way around a little of the town was a lot more attractive than it had been a few minutes ago. She rapped a knuckle on the counter. “Think I’ll take in the sights.”

“See you in ten minutes then,” said Brand.

Viv laughed, but she had to force it.

2



As Viv lurched off the porch, grabbing one of the newel posts for balance, she glanced back. A battered sign hung under the shingled awning, bearing an indifferently carved fish, with THE PERCH chiseled above it and stained dark.

A light sea breeze teased her curls into her face, and she gazed out over what she could see of Murk.

The ocean was visible for three-quarters of the horizon, until it was obscured by a tall, chalky bluff to the north. She could discern the barest sketch of some small structures and fences, but not enough to identify their purpose. Dunes swelled back from the shore in flattening waves, crested by shaggy fringes of beach grass.

An old stone fortress wall surrounded most of Murk proper, marching uphill, with the town tucked inside. The Perch wasn't within its protective encirclement but on a sandy upslope beside the southern road, affording a view over the ramparts.

Outside the walls and nearer to The Perch, long ranks of narrow buildings curved in dwindling arcs toward the beach. Their clapboard sides were bleached pearly gray by sun and salt mist, burnished silver in the late morning light. Uneven boardwalks stitched them together, and old, sparsely cobbled roads wound between, sifted over with sand in places.

Four long piers extended out into the sea, jumbled with crates and rigging. Fishing boats nibbled against the pilings like minnows after bread, while bigger ships plied the waters beyond. A few tiny figures moved on the piers, and their faint calls rebounded across the water.

The whole city seemed half asleep. She doubted it ever woke up.

A sudden, powerful sense of being left behind swamped Viv. Rackam had dumped her in these misbegotten borderlands, and a wild certainty crawled up from her gut that he never planned to come back this way. It was all a convenient excuse to be rid of a troublesome kid.

She gritted her teeth and wrestled that feeling back down into the dark.

As Viv limped out of the shade, the full weight of the sun fell upon her. Not noon yet, but getting close. She closed her eyes and soaked it in for a moment, trying to enjoy the heat on her skin.

Drawing in a huge breath of the sea air, she let it out slow. "Well," she said to herself. "Let's get this over with."

Navigating the cobbles with the crutch was tricky, but she was glad they were there, because sand alone would've been far worse. Her progress was glacial, but methodical, and her underarm was already chafing at the unfamiliar crutch. She'd have to wrap it in something until she could get rid of the damned thing entirely.

The slope was downward, but slight, which was a blessing. Gulls startled from the dunes that climbed on either side of the road.

For a wonder, the first person Viv saw was another orc. He tromped stolidly toward her, dragging a wagon behind him with the traces tucked under his arms. His chest and head were bare, and his shoulders crisscrossed with old scars. Bundles of driftwood and split kindling were stacked in the wagon.

"Morning," she said, offering a joking salute with her unoccupied hand.

He nodded as he passed, his eyes flicking to her sword, and she stopped to watch him go. He didn't look back, which vexed her for some reason.

The first buildings she reached were a series of shops that led down to the beach, where a network of wooden causeways made the sand more navigable.

Viv maneuvered up onto the boardwalk connecting the shopfronts. Every impact of her crutch on the salt-blasted wood was like a hoofbeat.

Most of the shops were tall and narrow and seemed to be leaning away from the breeze off the ocean. Up close, the clapboard and shingles were shaggy with splinters.

The first few businesses were closed. Permanently, judging by the cracked glass with tarps or paper pinned inside. Then a bookshop of some sort. Through a pair of narrow front windows, she spied chaotic piles of books, charts, and miscellaneous junk. She could almost see the smell of mildew. The door had once been red but was now streaked with nothing but the memory of a color.

A little sign to the left read THISTLEBURR BOOKSELLERS.

Viv shook her head and hobbled on.

A sail-mender's. Then a junk shop crammed with shells, sand dollars, glass floats, and nautical flotsam and jetsam. Viv couldn't imagine why anyone would want any of it.

She caught a whiff of baking on the breeze, cutting through the pungent odors of brine and seaweed. Not surprisingly, she was already hungry again. The effort of getting around and the demands of a healing body notwithstanding, Viv burned hot, and her late breakfast was nearly consumed in the furnace of her belly.

At the very end of this strip of shops was the first real sign of life she'd seen, unless you counted the stone-faced orc hauling firewood. Which she didn't.

This place was at least double the width of the others, with two chimneys puffing away and folks actually coming and going. SEA-SONG BAKERY was stenciled on the glass, and the letters looked tidy and freshly painted. Not that you needed anything more than your nose to figure out what the shop was about.

Woven baskets crammed with big round loaves, buns, and biscuits showed through the window. A bell over the door tinkled as a dwarf with a sailor's swagger emerged, cramming the last of something into his mouth.

Viv peered inside for a minute, cursing herself again for leaving her wallet in her room. The gigantic, flaky biscuits promised to exceed the lofty expectations the scents had already set. She wiped her lips with the back of her forearm and turned reluctantly away.

Pa had always told her that hunger could be cured with sweat, one way or the other. She began lurching her way determinedly across the sand-washed road. Most of the buildings on the other side seemed to be residences, or maybe lodgings for vacationers. Nobody seemed to be about though.

A long hitching post ran along the road, and that would do well

enough for what she wanted.

She'd spent several days on her back, and her body made sure she felt it. Not that she'd be running footraces any time soon, but you could hardly expect to stay alive slinging steel if you didn't keep your own edges sharp.

Leaning her crutch and saber against one end, she gingerly swung herself under the main beam, gripping it overhand. She stretched her legs out into the street, wincing as pain spiked along her right thigh.

She lowered herself until her elbows nearly locked. Then she pulled herself up, over and over, warmth building in her back, chest, and upper arms. The pain in her leg drifted to the aft of her mind.

When her biceps quivered with the strain and sweat traced her temples, she lowered herself onto her rear, tucking in the heel of her left leg and letting herself breathe heavy and even.

The orc with the wagon of firewood was staring at her, stopped on his way back downhill. His cart was a lot emptier now. A variety of worn tools dangled from hooks along its slatted sides—a maul, a sledge, an axe, a saw.

Viv narrowed her eyes at him. “What're you looking at?”

He shrugged, and when he responded, his voice was deep but surprisingly mellow. “Back at it awful soon.”

“Did I already meet you when I got here, too?”

He shrugged again. “Not a lot goin' on most days. Hard not to notice when somethin' excitin' happens. It was pretty excitin'.” The shadow of a grin. “You almost strangled Highlark.”

“Highlark?”

“The surgeon.”

“Oh,” she replied with a wince. Well, that wasn't ideal.

“Pitts,” he said, indicating himself. Then he ducked his head, hitched the traces higher, and tugged the wagon into motion. He didn't wait for her to offer her own name.

She found that vaguely annoying. “Viv!” she hollered after him. He just nodded without looking back.

“Eight hells,” said Viv. “Great town. I can see why everybody stays.”

She struggled to her feet. Gathering her crutch and saber, she went to the end of the boardwalk, retreating out of sight into a valley between two dunes.

She couldn't see the water, the wind was cut off completely, and the

stillness itched at her so much that she tossed the crutch to the sand and limped to the crest of the beachward dune, hissing in pain the whole way.

The breeze up there was sweeter, and she gave her breath a minute to even out before unsheathing the saber. Viv tried to execute a couple of sword forms, keeping her weight mostly to her undamaged leg. She'd hoped to at least manage a few sets of transitions from high to low to feint, focusing on precision and upper body work, but it was a lost cause. Her leading leg shifted suddenly, and when she rocked back, the weight of the blade forced her onto the weak heel, and then she was tumbling over in a plume of sand and profanity.

Five minutes after her embarrassing flail down the dune, she stumbled back onto the main thoroughfare. Angry, thwarted, and keenly aware of the mix of sand and sweat up inside her shirt, she started the grueling trek up the hill toward The Perch. The gentle slope was more of a trial than it had any right to be, and all she had to look forward to at the end was an empty inn, an empty room, and a set of very narrow stairs.

She should've been shoulder to shoulder with the Ravens. She should've been hacking her way closer to Varine.

She should've been anywhere but here.

With most of her attention fixed on the sand-covered cobbles and where she'd next place the crutch, she was startled when a shadow stepped into view.

Glancing up, she found herself staring into the slitted serpent's eyes of a tapenti. The woman wasn't as tall as Viv—few people were—but situated upslope, Viv had to look up at her.

Or maybe it just felt that way.

She was powerfully built, the delicate patterns of her hide sculpted over muscular shoulders and legs. Her scaly hood flared along her temples and neck, salmon where the light glowed through it, and the long, rattle-like braids of her hair slithered dryly in the breeze.

The lantern of a Gatewarden gleamed where it hung at her waist opposite a longsword, and she wore a badge on her blue tunic.

The woman cocked her head in a way Viv couldn't interpret as anything but disdainful. "A stunning display of martial prowess." Her eyes darted beyond Viv to the crest of the dune and the site of her aborted blade practice.

Viv's skin crawled in a hot flush, the kind that could tip from

embarrassment into rage with no more than a feather's weight. She wasn't fool enough to let it happen, not with the local law, but she didn't have to be polite either. "Guess there's not much else to look at, huh?"

The tapenti smiled thinly, and her eyes narrowed. "It's a sight I'd rather not see around my city. I like it quiet, and little girls hauling swords around promise to be noisy. I suggest you keep your steel sheathed, or better yet, back in your room. No reason you shouldn't stay there too, in my estimation."

Viv sputtered, "Little *girl* ... ?"

The Gatewarden rode over her roughshod, her voice a relentless hiss. "When they dragged you in, I took one look at you and knew I'd need to watch you. *Highlark* certainly won't forget your arrival anytime soon. If you cause the slightest trouble here, I won't hesitate to toss you in a cell to ride out your convalescence until your ... *friends* show up to take you off my hands."

Viv could only stare in mute fury. Her hand twitched toward her saber's hilt, but she mastered the impulse even as she saw the tapenti's eyes follow the motion with grim amusement.

"Good day." The woman tilted her head mockingly toward the inn. "And be careful on your way up the hill. A bad fall might extend your stay, and neither of us would want that, would we?"

Then she was gone, and Viv could only stare up the street toward The Perch and fervently long for something to stab.

If Rackam didn't come back soon, she'd have to leave and find him herself, before she did something she might *really* regret.

3



Still seething from her encounter with the Gatewarden, Viv considered The Perch with a renewed lack of enthusiasm. Unable to face a tedious, lonely walk to a tedious, empty room for the rest of a tedious, pointless day, she angled for the boardwalk and the nearest occupied shop.

As she brought her crutch down in front of Thistleburr Booksellers, there was a tortured crack. She swore as the rotten wood buckled beneath the weight. Viv almost went tail over tusks for the second time in a quarter of an hour but managed to hike the crutch up before it went all the way through.

She stared at the half-disintegrated plank. “Shit.”

With adrenaline still sizzling up her arms from the near miss, she pushed open the door and staggered into the dim light of the bookshop.

The interior smelled almost exactly as she’d imagined—of old paper, mildew, and disappointment—but with the additional odors of dog and ... *henhouse*. She wrinkled her nose.

Books crowded a long, narrow shop—squeezed into leaning shelves, scattered on top of them, teetering in stacks on the floor. Some volumes seemed new, but most were old, with errant threads poking from leather or cloth-covered wooden bindings.

Sea charts and maps lay in a disorganized heap on a low shelf below the front windows. A hurricane lamp with a cracked chimney flickered weakly where it was mounted on the wall.

The inside was constructed of the same planks as the exterior facing. Once painted white, they now looked tea-stained and peeling.