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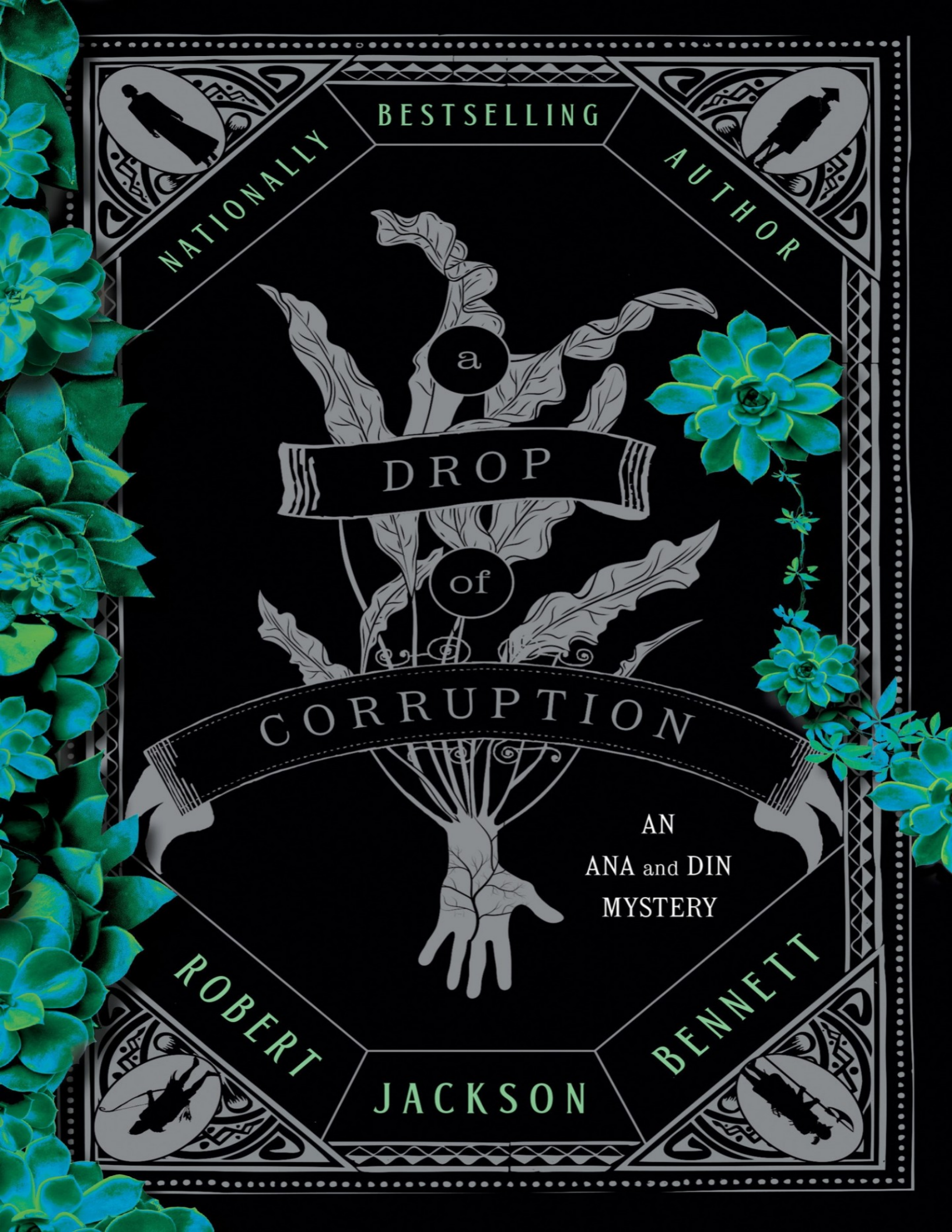
CORRUPTION

AN
ANA and DIN
MYSTERY

ROBERT

JACKSON

BENNETT



BY ROBERT JACKSON BENNETT

City of Stairs
City of Blades
City of Miracles
Foundryside
Shorefall
Locklands
The Tainted Cup
A Drop of Corruption

A
DROP
OF
CORRUPTION

AN ANA AND DIN MYSTERY

ROBERT JACKSON
BENNETT



NEW YORK

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Contents

[Dedication](#)

[Maps](#)

[Military Ranks of the Great and Holy Empire of Khanum](#)

[Preface](#)

[Part I: The Vanished Man](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Part II: And All the World a Savage Garden](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Part III: The Marrow](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Part IV: Death in the High City](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Part V: The Pale King Ascendant](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

[Chapter 54](#)

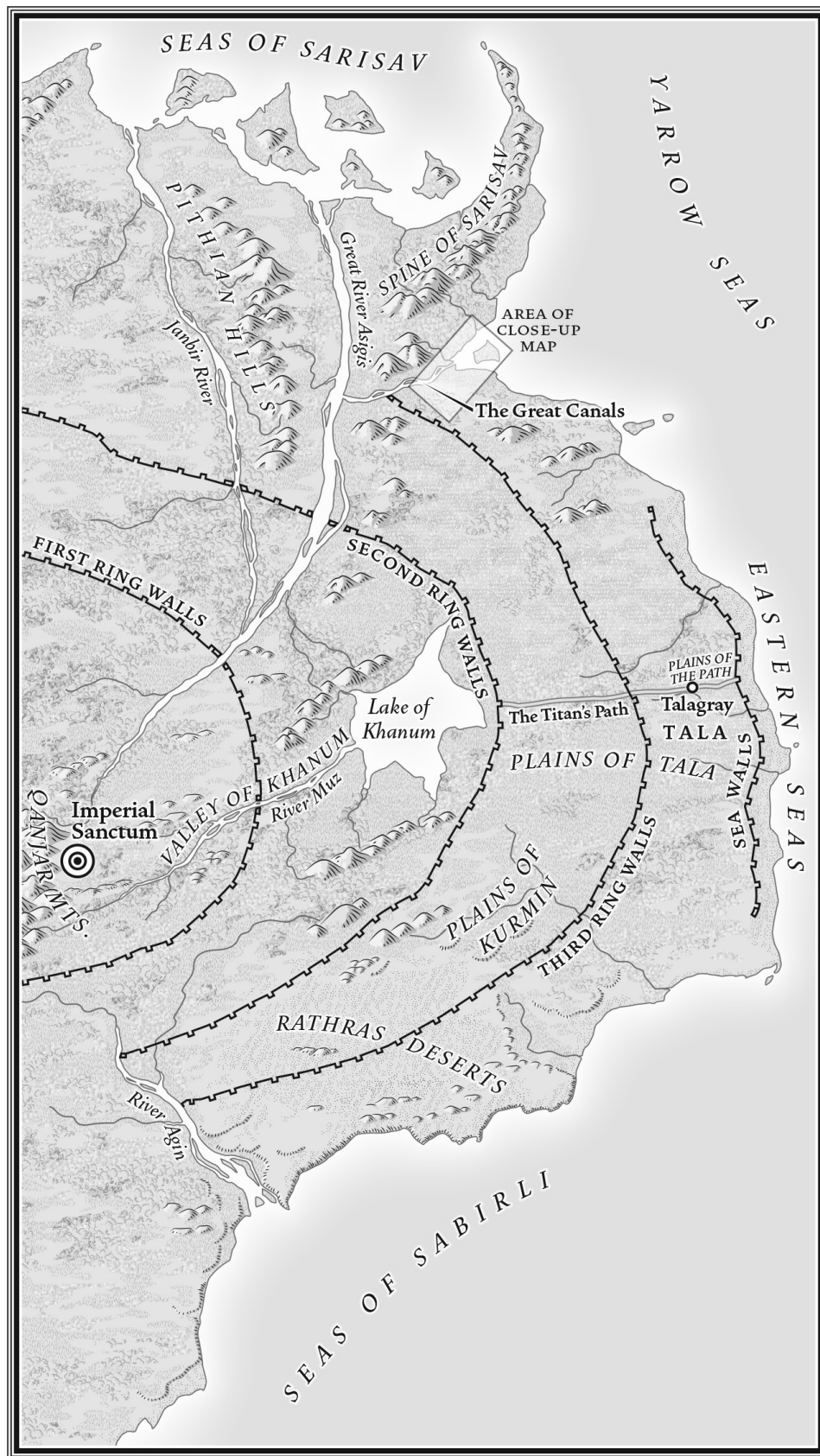
[Epilogue: The Watchman](#)

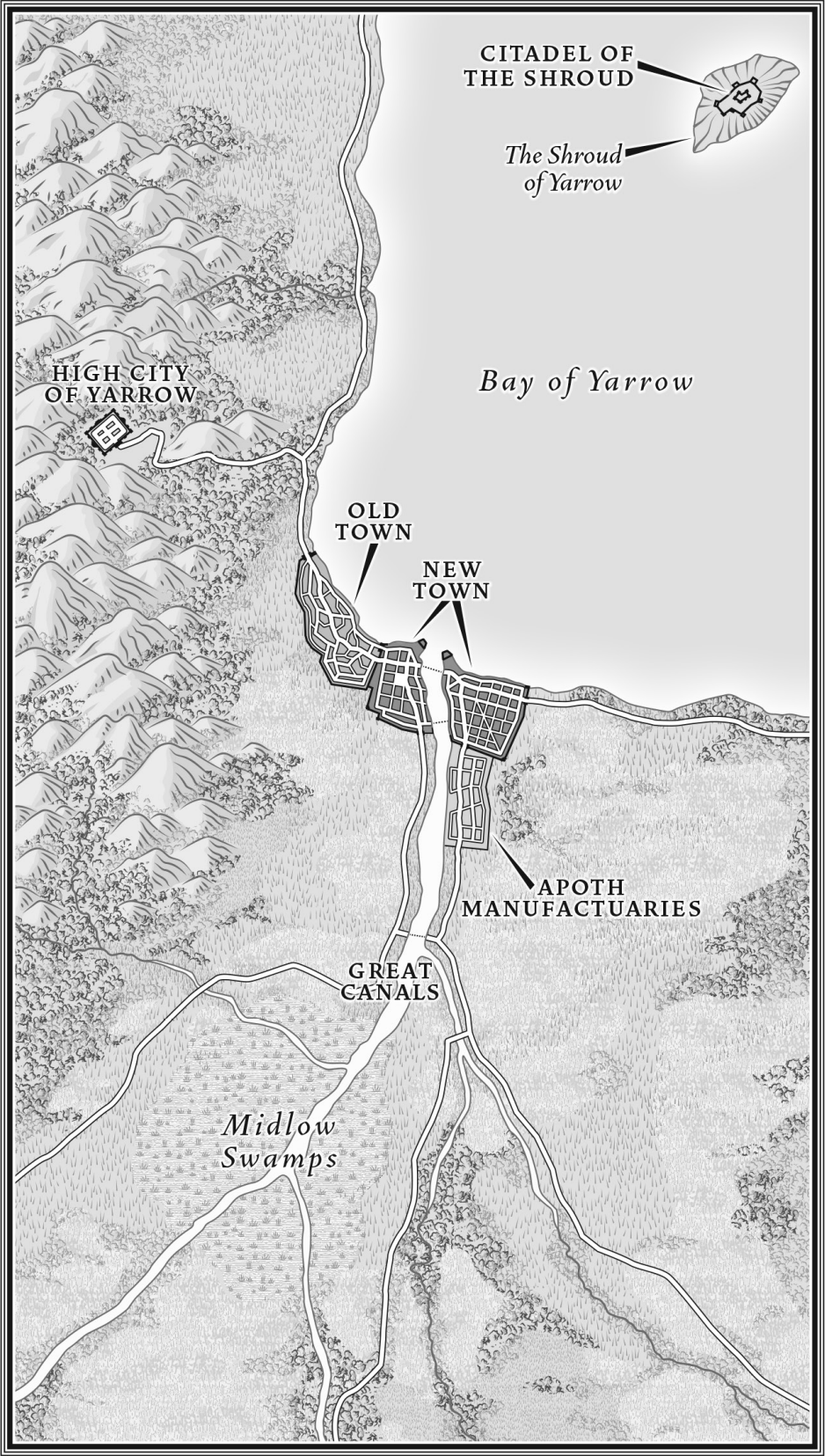
[Chapter 55](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[About the Author](#)

To the Spaniards—*Mantente amable, mantente tonta.*





MILITARY RANKS
OF THE
GREAT AND HOLY EMPIRE OF KHANUM
(from highest to lowest)

CONZULATE

PRIFICTO

COMMANDER-PRIFICTO

COMMANDER

IMMUNIS

CAPTAIN

SIGNUM

PRINCEPS

MILITIS

BEFORE THERE WAS MEMORY, before there was history, there were the leviathans: the colossal, monstrous creatures that lumbered ashore each wet season and went wandering the plains, bringing death and panic with them. For centuries, the folk of the land lived at their whim, and knew only fear and suffering.

Then the people of the Valley of Khanum learned the secrets of shaping flesh and root and branch—secrets rendered from the blood of the leviathans.

They altered their bodies. They made themselves brilliant, and strong. And when they emerged so transformed from the shadows of that valley, they began to change all the world before them.

First, they devised methods to bring down the leviathans. Then they conquered the petty tyrants, who ruled the highlands where the leviathans could not venture. And thus, the Empire of Khanum was born.

For six hundred years, the Empire has spread and survived—but only barely. The first people of Khanum died out long ago, and the Empire lost much wisdom and cunning with them. Each year, the leviathans still come ashore. Each year, all the arts and genius of the Empire must be mustered to hold them back. And all the while, harmony, equality, and progress must be maintained, for without them, the Empire shall unravel.

Within this Empire serves Dinios Kol, who is assigned to the Iudex, the imperial institution for administering justice. His mind is altered so he forgets nothing. He acts as assistant investigator to Ana Dolabra, a woman so brilliant she lives most of her days blindfolded and rarely leaves her rooms, for fear that common life shall overwhelm her mind.

Together, they are tasked with the investigation of imperial deaths of an unusually difficult or dangerous nature. He investigates and remembers; she analyzes, evaluates, and spies hidden truths in all he witnessed.

Together, they bring justice to the Empire.

I

THE VANISHED MAN

CHAPTER 1

I'D THOUGHT THE JUNGLES OF the eastern Empire to be oppressively hot, but as I sat in the prow of the little canal boat and felt the sweat slip down my brow, I decided the north was, without question, far worse. The final leg of our journey had been almost entirely shaded by the dense tree canopies, yet even in the coolest shadows, the jungle underbrush perpetually steamed, as if all the world was just shy of boiling. My blue Iudex coat had been soaked in sweat from collar to cuff for nigh on three days now, so much so that I left a wet print where I sat. Not a fine first impression to make for the officer waiting for me.

We made one last bend around the canal and finally approached the Yarrowdale waterfront. Even at this early hour, the piers were swarming with vessels: tiny fishing junkers and lumbering barges and merry little oyster cogs—as well as some unusual craft I'd never seen before.

I eyed these as we approached the piers. They were unwieldy, low-bellied boats with thick stonewood walls fastened to their sides, yet the walls sparkled with glints of hammered iron. I realized they were stubbled with arrowheads lodged deep in the wood, the shafts splintered or cut away. It was as if each craft had withstood a half-dozen volleys mere moments ago. An odd sight in so quiet a place.

I disembarked, my bag thrown over my shoulder, and stood on the busy waterfront, peering about for the imperial officer assigned to meet me here.

Yet no one appeared. There were the fisherfolk, lined at the piers and looping nets about their arms, half-naked with their pale flesh burned dark from the sun. There were a number of indigents, filthy and with matted hair, who sat at the edge of the waterfront bowed like religious supplicants. There were many Engineers, returning from the canals so mummified in

mud you could hardly spy the purple of their uniforms. And last were the many Apothetikal soldiers, who stood on guard with their crimson Apoth capes about their shoulders and their spears clutched tight in their hands, watching the crowds with hard, brittle eyes.

I noted their pose, their tension. Strange to see Apoths assigned to guard duties: they were usually more concerned with tinctures and reagents. I glanced again at the scarred armored boats rigged up along the piers, and wondered exactly what had been going on here in the port town of Yarrowdale.

I waited for twenty minutes at the piers, the air roiling and steaming, the jungle beyond sighing as the wind tousled the trees, but I did not see my officer. I silently cursed the Empire's much-delayed and always-confused communications. Perhaps they'd told them the wrong day.

I trudged off, my bag on my back, headed for the Yarrowdale ossuary, for that was where the corpse was stored. Yet as I started down the road, I paused.

Just past the start of the road there was a small hillock, dotted with barri trees with thick turf gathered about their roots, and there, lying in the middle of the turf, was a young woman, wearing a hooded cloak with her fingers clasped over her belly like she was deep in restful slumber. Her trousers and boots were so congealed with mud they were now little more than clods of soil, but the color of her cloak was Apoth crimson.

And there, at her breast: a few winking heralds. The bars of an imperial signum, just like myself.

I had been told an Apoth signum would be waiting for me here. I approached her, hoping I was wrong.

I'd planned to clear my throat to wake her once I was near, but when I was within ten span of her she spoke aloud, her Yarrow accent as thick as pudding: "Can I help you?"

"I was told I was to meet an Apoth signum here," I said. "Might that be you?"

She opened her eyes and looked at me. She was quite young and short, a pale, pink-skinned, broad girl, with short, greasy hair stuck to her scalp.

Her eyes were very round, and the whites of them had a greenish tint to them—a common feature of Yarrow folk of the region—but the flesh about them was purpled, as was the flesh of her ears and nose: a sign of significant augmentations. It was likely the girl could hear every beat of my heart and smell every drop of sweat upon my body.

“Oh!” she said. She looked me over, still lying flat on the grass. “I thought you’d smell more expensive.”

“I...What?”

She propped herself up on her elbows. “I have been smelling the breeze, waiting for you. Inner ring officers always have a very expensive aroma. Lots of oils in their hair, and their skin so perfumed. Yet you do not smell as this.” She squinted at me. “So. You are the Iudex officer who is here to help us with our mysterious dead man?”

“I am,” I said. I gave her a short bow. “I am Signum Dinios Kol, Iudex Special Division.”

She looked me over but said nothing.

“And you are?” I asked.

“Did you eat dried fish on your journey here?” she asked.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Dried fish. Did you eat a slice or two of this today? Perhaps one spiced with coriander?”

“I...well, yes? Why?”

“Mm,” she said, nodding sagely. Then she stood, bowed, and said, “Signum Tira Malo, Warden of the Apothetikals. I apologize for not giving you a finer greeting, Kol. The true Empire lies a long way from here. Sometimes we forget its touch.”

“Is it common for Yarrow officers to just lie about on riverbanks in the morning?”

“Lie about?” she said. “I was attempting to dry.” She extended an arm into the sun, and ghostly flickers of steam arose from her sleeve. “I have had a long night’s work on the canals and in the swamps, trying to comprehend more about how our dead man came to be so very dead. It was

dirty work, and useless, but will get dirtier still.” She looked over my shoulder. “I thought there’d be two of you.”

“My immunis shall come in her own time,” I said. “I presume there are lodgings assigned for us?”

“Of course. My comrades shall take care of her, when she comes.” She nodded toward the folk I’d taken to be indigents, seated at the waterfront. I realized now they were also bound in Apoth cloaks, as muddy as they were. “But before we go—would you prefer to vomit here, out of doors, Kol? Or would you prefer to wait?”

I stared. “I’m sorry?”

“The scent of fish on your breath,” she said. “It is not decent. I think the fish has turned sour, and whoever served it to you spiced it so you could not taste it. I give it, oh, about an hour until your stomach starts burbling, and then it shall come up.” She turned to me, smiling lazily. “It will not be helped by the ossuary. It is a difficult place, even if one’s stomach is as still as stone. And especially given the state of our dead man.”

I pressed my hand against my stomach, thinking she had to be wrong. But then there, in some crevice of my belly: did I feel the slightest unpleasant flutter?

I glared at her. “You make many assumptions, Malo. I am fine, and ready to begin our work.”

“Are you,” she said lightly. “Very good, then! Let us go to the ossuary and do our filthiness there.”

—

THE YARROWDALE OSSUARY did not put me at ease: between the low, vaulted ceilings and the distant mutterings of other Apoths, the building felt much like a catacomb, and worst of all, the dank air reeked of a vaguely musky yet awful scent.

“You are a lucky man, Kol,” Malo said as we walked its passages. “You know this?”

“Why is that?”

“They recently did a purge of our samples,” she said. “Tossed out all the ones well past their term, for we can only preserve them for so long. The air in here is now like a spring meadow, compared to how it was last month.”

I pressed a knuckle to my nostrils. “How can anyone bear it?”

“A simple answer.” She stopped to grab a cart on high spoked wheels and began pushing it along with us. “Most don’t.”

I looked Malo over as we walked. She did not seem bothered by our surroundings in the least: she sauntered along, chewing languidly on a piece of hina root—a minor stimulant—which gave her mouth a blackish tinge. She’d hung her cloak up at the door, and I saw now that she sported not only a short sword sheathed at her side, but two knives in her belt, one in her boot, and a little one sheathed at her wrist. I wondered exactly what her duties were, to require such strength of arms.

Finally we came to a little cupboard door at the end of the hall. “Here he is,” she sang.

She opened the cupboard door. I braced myself, yet the only thing within was a wooden box, about ten smallspan tall and three span wide and long: not much larger than a Legionnaire’s shield. Malo grasped the box and slid it out onto her rolling cart, the spindly spokes of the wheels creaking with the new weight.

I studied the shallow wooden box.

“I had thought,” I said slowly, “I was coming to review a body.”

“A what?”

“My orders said I was to review the body of an officer found in a canal, who is suspected to be a victim of violence.”

“Ohh,” she said thoughtfully. “Well. Then someone has made a mistake! For I did not say we had a *body*. I told my superiors we had found *remains*. I chose the word most carefully.”

There was a silence as I continued looking at the small, flat box on the cart.

“So,” I said, sighing. “I take it he’s not just very short.”

She grinned, her teeth now black as Rathras grapes from the hina root. “No such luck. Shall we take a peek?”

WE MOVED TO a circular, laboratory-like room, with a wide, bronze table beneath a row of glimmering blue mai-lanterns. The air here smelled strongly of lye and other cleaning reagents. A drain was set in the floor beneath the table, with a pinkish halo of stain on the stone about it: a place often cleaned, I supposed, but never truly clean.

Humming, Signum Malo slid the box from the cart to the table, then walked to the shelves and donned a large leather apron and gloves over her muddy, crimson Apoth's uniform. "You might want to get a chair," she said. "This can take time. I am a warden, and thus trained in many Apoth arts, but most of what I do is tracking and, ah..." She mimed firing a bow and arrow. "Resolving disputes, I should say?"

I parted my soaking cloak and dumped myself into the chair, my sword swinging at my side. "I'd thought a warden's tasks were keeping valuable reagents and precursors safe, not combat."

"Well, we don't get any Legionnaires for protection out here. We are far from the Empire proper, and there are no leviathans this far north. Yet it makes a crude sense, does it not? For what are human beings, if not walking bags of valuable reagents and compounds?" She grinned. "Why should I not track them, and bleed them of some critical reagents when deemed fit?"

She returned to the wooden box on the table, twisted three bronze clasps running along a seam at the side, then tugged at the top. With a loud clattering, the top and walls fell away.

Within was not a body, nor anything resembling a human limb, but a large, oblong brick of a very unusual moss, with stiff, bonelike tendrils all densely grown together. The brick was perfectly rectangular, having grown to fill the interior of the box—or so I supposed. Malo gently pushed the brick of moss off the bottom slab of wood until it rested free on the table.

I stared at the brick of moss, my thoughts lingering on that word: *remains*.

The powerful, musky odor in the room intensified, and with it rose an unpleasant burbling in my stomach. I kept my face still but thought, *Damn*

it all, she was right about the fish.

“Won’t be a moment,” said Malo.

Humming, she paced to a shelf and picked up a tray carrying many small knives and a large, corked blue pot. Then she returned to the brick of moss, uncorked the pot, and poured a thin stream of oil over the brick with a flamboyant flick, like a cook greasing a hot pan. Then she corked the bottle, set it aside, and began rubbing the oil along the brick with her gloved hands, massaging it into the many crevices of the tendrils.

“How does this work?” I asked.

“The moss?” she said. “You’ve not seen it before?”

“Most of the bodies I’ve reviewed have either been quite fresh or long since gone.”

“A lucky thing, for you,” she said. “It has always been called *ossuary moss*—though it is not truly a moss but a predatory fungus. It lives in hollows in the earth, lining the chambers there, waiting for creatures to fall in. When they do, the moss stings them, paralyzing them, and slowly grows to swallow them, like a cocoon. That’s when the *truly* fun stuff happens.” She grunted as she shifted the brick. “It secretes a fluid, cleaning the organism of the many pestilences that cause rot. Almost like curing it, really, so it can then consume all the tissues, with no waste. The breed we’ve altered no longer consumes flesh, of course. It simply leaves us with a sample that stays fresh for up to two years.”

I glanced at the many cabinets lining the hall behind me. “Samples?”

Malo grinned at me. In the darkness of the laboratory, with her eyes and nose stained so purple, her face had a skeletal look. “We are Apoths, Kol. We make use of many tissues. Some of them our own.”

There was another putrid wave of musk. The oil had now soaked into the moss’s hide until it attained a slightly translucent sheen. I glimpsed a ghostly white mass at its core.

“Please tell me what you know about the murder,” I said.

She chuckled bleakly. “A more pleasant subject, maybe. But only somewhat.”

“DEAD MAN’S NAME is Immunis Mineti Sujedo,” Malo began, “of the Imperial Treasury. Hailed from the second ring of the Empire as a member of a Treasury delegation, here to confer with the king of Yarrow on *high imperial business*.” The words dripped with poisonous sarcasm. “He was last of his delegation to come, arriving just over two weeks ago—the tenth of the month of Hajnal. He was met at the waterfront by Apoth guards, seemed in good health and high spirits, and was escorted to his lodgings. Just as we shall do for your immunis, when she comes.”

I paused. I had already known much of this, but not that last bit. “Why was he escorted by guards?” I asked.

“Because he was here to talk about taxes,” she said. “And everybody hates the tax man—especially here in Yarrow. Which is no safe place.”

The sight of the armored boats so stubbled with arrowheads flashed in my mind.

“I see,” I said quietly.

“Guards got him moved into his rooms,” continued Malo. “Then he visited the Treasury bank in the city, again escorted by guards. He did some business there and returned just before sunset. When he got back to his lodgings, he said he was not feeling well after his journey. He seemed to be weak of stomach.”

I nodded sternly, trying not to think of my own rebellious innards.

“He had the guards send a notice to his Treasury delegation leader saying he would be staying in that night,” Malo said. “Then he called for dinner, yet ate little, and went to bed. He was due to visit with the other members of his delegation the next morning, but...he did not appear. A message was sent to Sujedo’s rooms, requesting his presence. When there was no answer, the guards went in and found the man had...Well. He’d been abducted in the night!”

“Abducted?” I asked, surprised. “The orders I was given indicated he’d gone missing.”

“That is not as anyone here would put it,” she said. “*Gone missing* would make one think he disappeared while moving from one place to another. But a guard was posted at his door all night, and the door itself remained locked throughout, and the man never left the room. The only sign that anything had gone amiss was his bed, which showed signs of a struggle and was bloodied and mussed.”

“Bloodied?” I asked.

“Yes, as if he’d been attacked or stabbed as he slept. Stranger still—the windows of his room were all still locked from the inside! No signs of tampering, no breaking, nothing. No one has any idea how the attacker got in or out. And besides the man himself, nothing within had been taken. I went to his rooms and gave the airs there a good sniff.” She tapped her purpled nose, apparently indifferent to the oil on her gloved fingertip. “I can track a squirrel through wet forest for over a league with little more than a tuft of fur. Yet when I went to Sujedo’s room, I found *no* scent but his, and those of the servants. He was alone in his chamber for all the time before we found him gone. How he vanished from it, I cannot say.”

I glanced at the brick of moss, now gleaming with oil. “And when and where did you find the remains?”

“We discovered them on the fifteenth of Hanjal, five days after his arrival and disappearance,” she said. “So, ten days ago now, in case you have forgotten what date it is with all your travels.”

I gave her a small, cold smile. “I didn’t.”

“Of course not. We found all the bits some twelve leagues away from his lodgings. The journey to the exact spot is long, hilly, jungle-dense, swampy. And that is *after* you leave the city of Yarrowdale, with many eyes watching. A tricky path to walk undetected, let alone with a body.” She spat a stream of black spittle to her right. It landed directly in the drain below the table: a feat of astonishing accuracy. “I am beset by impossibilities. How might this man be stolen from such a place with no one noticing? How could he reappear in such a state, so far away? We wardens could not answer any of it.” She shot me a wry look. “How happy am I to have you

Iudex here to work your magic. I much prefer hunting ratshit smugglers in the jungle to this.”

A flatulent puff arose from the tendrils of moss. The stench in the room was now nothing short of horrid.

Malo sniffed the air. “Smells done to me,” she said. “Let us see...”

A final gust of reek from the brick, and then, slowly, it began to soften, starting with a sinking indentation in the center, then growing until the corners wilted and drooped, and then, gently, the mass of pale tendrils began to unfurl.

Malo began plucking at the drooping tangle, wielding a pair of tongs like a cook fluffing a kettle of rice. “Ah, yes. Come!”

I joined her beside the table. She plucked again at the dissolving moss, and a form began to emerge at the core.

No, that wasn’t right: not one form, but three.

First there was a hand, the fingers curled as if gripping an invisible ball. Its fingernails were the color of tea, and were darker than the flesh, which was a pale gray. It was ragged at the wrist, the delicate bones there ending in shattered splinters, their spongy marrow permeated with dark stains.

Next to that, a chunk of torso, headless and armless. Most of the left shoulder and rib cage, but not much else. It had been thoroughly disemboweled, as if all the organs had been scooped out by a giant spoon. Ribs emerged from the pale flesh like straw frets at the edge of a gentryman’s paper fan. Somehow, ridiculously, the left nipple remained, dark and pebbled, along with a brambly tuft of black chest hair.

And there, lying just below that on the bed of moss, was a jawbone, fleshless and perfectly severed from whatever skull it had once hung to. Much like the marrows of the fractured wrist, the crevices of the teeth were dark with sediment and stain.

“That is all they’ve found of him,” said Malo. “All they ever could fish out of the canals of our missing Treasury man Sujedo. Sad, is it not?”

I stared at the severed pieces, my nostrils swimming with the odor of the moss, and now the stench of rot.

The sour fish in my belly rolled over yet again.

I turned, staggered to the drain in the floor, knelt, placed my hands on either side, and vomited directly down it, coughing so mightily my whole body began to ache.

“There it is,” said Malo appraisingly. “You seem very practiced! That is the most precise vomit I have ever seen.”

I resumed my position over the drain and retched again.