

BESTSELLING

NATIONALLY

AUTHOR

THE TAINTED CUP

ROBERT

BENNETT

JACKSON



Advance praise for
THE TAINTED CUP

“Bennett brilliantly melds genres in this exceptional mystery-fantasy....The worldbuilding is immediately involving, Bennett’s take on a classic detective duo dynamic feels fresh and exciting, and the mystery itself twists and turns delightfully. Readers will be wowed.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Highly recommended...Introduces readers to a conspiracy of murder and skullduggery as seen through the eyes of a naive junior investigator...as his boss and mentor, the rather Sherlockian Ana, threads her way through a complex conspiracy of murders.”

—*Library Journal* (starred review)

“Inspired by Nero Wolfe with a bit of Hannibal Lecter added to his prime investigator, Bennett...kicks off the Shadow of the Leviathan series, which will delight fans of fantasy-infused mysteries.”

—*Booklist* (starred review)

“A true fantasy mystery, with a leading duo who stand with Holmes and Watson among the greats...and Bennett sets it all in a squishy, fascinating, biopunk world I’m dying to find out more about. Bring on the next one!”

—Django Wexler, author of the Shadow Campaigns series

“A classic murder mystery set against dazzling worldbuilding and sly social commentary...Robert Jackson Bennett doesn’t miss.”

—James L. Sutter, co-creator of the Pathfinder roleplaying
game

“One of the wildest, most original stories I’ve ever had the privilege to explore...I am in awe of Bennett’s creativity, the intricate plotting, and this immersive world filled with mushroom air conditioners, killer trees, and giant leviathans that stretches the imagination. I loved every second of it. This is a book that has planted roots in my head for the rest of my life.”

—Wesley Chu, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of the
War Arts Saga

“I loved this. A twisty detective story, a weird fantasy, a thrilling adventure —*The Tainted Cup* is a masterpiece. I want Bennett to write a dozen of these, and send them to me yesterday.”

—Max Gladstone, *New York Times* bestselling co-author of
This Is How You Lose the Time War

“A riveting murder mystery wrapped in a twisty conspiracy, set in a vivid fantasy world terrorized by eldritch monsters...If you love unique, genre-bending, boundary-pushing fantasy as much as I do, look no further than Robert Jackson Bennett.”

—Fonda Lee, author of the Green Bone Saga

“Original, imaginative, and suspenseful, *The Tainted Cup* superbly blends mystery and fantasy in this vivid, complex novel. I couldn’t put it down. Give me more of this world and these characters ASAP!”

—Meg Gardiner, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of
the UNSUB series

THE
T A I N T E D
C U P

III

SHADOW OF THE LEVIATHAN:
BOOK 1

ROBERT JACKSON
BENNETT



NEW YORK

The Tainted Cup is a work of fiction.
Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination
or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living
or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2024 by Robert Jackson Bennett
Map and ranking list chart copyright © 2024 by David Lindroth Inc.

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Del Rey, an imprint of Random House, a division
of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

DEL REY and the CIRCLE colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random
House LLC.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Bennett, Robert Jackson, author.

Title: *The tainted cup: a novel* / Robert Jackson Bennett.

Description: First edition. | New York: Del Rey, 2024. | Series: Shadow of the
Leviathan; Book 1

Identifiers: LCCN 2023039782 (print) | LCCN 2023039783 (ebook) | ISBN
9781984820709 (hardcover acid-free paper) | ISBN 9781984820723 (e-book)

Subjects: LCGFT: Fantasy fiction. | Detective and mystery fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3602.E66455 T35 2024 (print) | LCC PS3602.E66455
(ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20230828

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023039782>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023039783>

Ebook ISBN 9781984820723

randomhousebooks.com

Book design by Edwin A. Vazquez, adapted for ebook

Cover design and illustration: Will Staehle/Unusual Co.

Art direction: David G. Stevenson

ep_prh_6.2_146095922_c0_r1

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Copyright

Map

Part I: The Man in the Tree

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Part II: The Breach

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Part III: Three Keys and Ten Dead Engineers

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Part IV: Hell and the Gentry](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Part V: The Shadow of the Leviathan](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

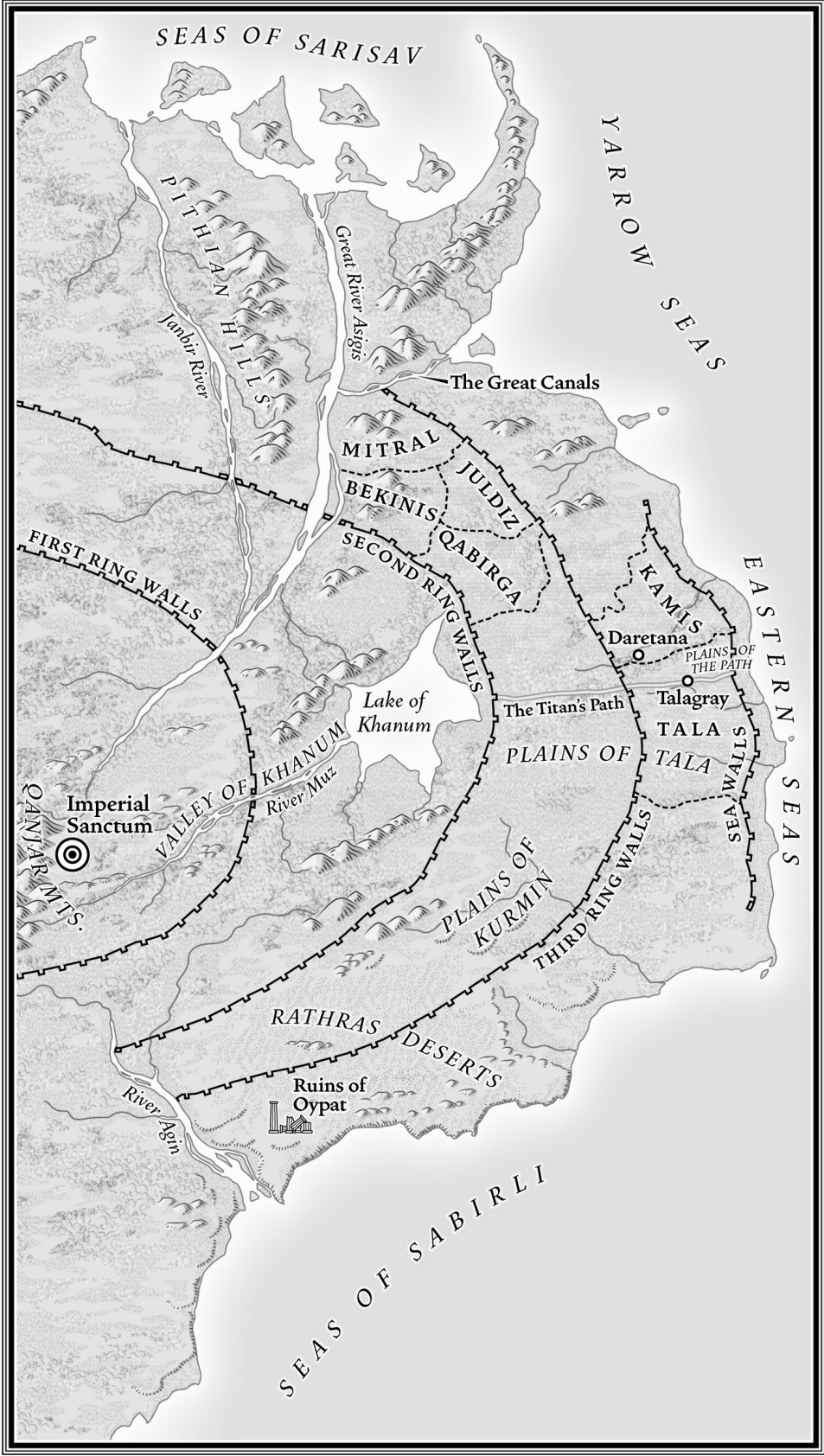
[Chapter 42](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[By Robert Jackson Bennett](#)

[About the Author](#)



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

CONZULATE

PRIFICTO

COMMANDER-PRIFICTO

COMMANDER

IMMUNIS

CAPTAIN

SIGNUM

PRINCEPS

MILITIS

I

|||

T H E M A N I N T H E T R E E

CHAPTER 1

III

THE WALLS OF THE estate emerged from the morning fog before me, long and dark and rounded like the skin of some beached sea creature. I walked along them, trying to ignore the flutter of my heart and the trickle of sweat down my neck. A faint blue light glimmered in the mist ahead. With each step it calcified into a mai-lantern hanging above the estate's servants' gate; and there, leaning against the walls beside the gate, was the figure of a uniformed man in a shining steel cap waiting for me.

The princeps watched me approach. He cocked an eyebrow at me, and it climbed higher up his forehead the closer I came to him. By the time I'd finally stopped before him it'd almost joined the hair atop his head.

I cleared my throat in what I hoped was an authoritative manner, and said, "Signum Dinios Kol, assistant to the investigator. I'm here about the body."

The princeps blinked, then looked me up and down. Being as I was nearly a head taller than him, it took him a moment. "I see, sir," he said. He gave me a short bow—a quarter of a full bow, maybe a third—but then did not move.

"You do have a body, yes?" I asked.

"Well, we do, sir," he said slowly. He glanced over my shoulder down the fog-strewn lane behind me.

"Then what seems to be the issue?"

"Well, ah..." Again, a glance down the lane behind me. "Pardon, sir, but—where's the other one?"

"I'm sorry?" I asked. "Other one?"

"The investigator? When will she be arriving?"

I suppressed a flicker of worry. I'd dealt with this question when working other matters for my master, but doing so when the situation involved a dead body was another thing entirely. "The investigator isn't able to attend," I said. "I'm here to review the scene, interview the staff and any witnesses, and report back to her."

"The investigator is choosing to proceed with the investigation... *without* being present?" he said. "Might I ask why, sir?"

I took him in. His short mail shirt glistened in the low light, each ringlet dabbled with tiny pearls of condensation. Very fancy. Ornate belt at his waist, slightly soft belly hanging over the buckle—a consequence of early middle age. Same for the thread of gray in his beard. Black boots highly polished, trim woven with seaweed-stained leather. The only standard-issue item on his body was the longsword in his scabbard and his dark red cloak, indicating he was an Apothetikal: an imperial officer responsible for managing the Empire's many organic alterations. The rest of it he must've purchased himself, probably for a princely sum.

All this told me that even though I was a signum and thus technically outranked him, this man was not only older and wealthier than me, but he'd probably seen more in his career than I could imagine. I couldn't blame him for wondering why the investigator had sent this twenty-year-old boy in ratty boots to a death scene all on his own.

"The investigator usually is not present at investigations, Princeps," I said. "She sends me to assess the situation and uses my report to make the appropriate conclusions."

"The appropriate conclusions," the princeps echoed.

"Correct," I said.

I waited for him to permit me inside. He just stood there. I wondered if I was going to have to order him to let me into the estate. I'd never given a direct order to an officer of another imperial administration before and did not entirely know how to go about doing it.

To my relief, he finally said, "Right, sir..." and reached into his pocket. He took out a small bronze disc with a little glass vial set in the center,

which sloshed with black fluid. “You’ll need to follow close, sir. This gate is a bit old. Can be fussy.”

He turned to face the servants’ gate: a rounded aperture in the smooth black surface of the estate walls. Hanging on the other side of the aperture was a veil of curling, furred vines of a greenish-yellow color. They trembled as the princeps approached—a disquieting, juddering tremor—and fell back, allowing us to enter.

I kept close to the princeps as we walked through the gate, leaning down so my head didn’t scrape the top. The vines smelled sweet and sickly as they tickled the back of my neck. Likely altered to seek out flesh, and if the princeps hadn’t been carrying his “key”—the vial of reagents in his hand—then the two of us would have been paralyzed, or worse.

We emerged into the estate’s inner yards. Dozens of mai-lanterns twinkled in the morning gloom ahead of us, dangling from the gabled roof of the sprawling house set high on the hill beyond. A verandah wrapped around the home, rope nets blooming with bright decorative moss to shield windows from the morning sun. Floors wide and smooth, wood polished to a fine shine. A cushioned section sat on the eastern end—a miniature tea pavilion of a sort, but instead of a tea table there sat some massive animal’s skull, its cranium shaved off to be level. A rather ghoulish adornment for so fine a place—and it was a fine place, easily the finest house I’d ever seen.

I looked at the princeps. He’d noticed my astonishment and was smirking.

I adjusted my Iudex coat at the shoulders. They hadn’t been able to find one my size, and I suddenly felt terribly stupid-looking, packed into this tight blue fabric. “What’s your name, Princeps?” I asked.

“Apologies, sir. Should have mentioned—Otirios.”

“Have we identified the deceased, Otirios?” I asked. “I understand there was some issue with that.”

“We think so, sir. We believe it is Commander Taqtasa Blas, of the Engineers.”

“You believe it is? Why believe?”

This drew a sidelong glance. “You were informed that the nature of his death was an alteration, yes, sir?”

“Yes?”

“Well...such things can make it tricky to identify a body, sir.” He led me across a small wooden bridge that spanned a trickling stream. “Or even,” he added, “to identify it *as* one, sir. That’s why we Apoths are here.”

He gestured at the fog beyond. I searched the mist and spied figures roving through the gardens, also wearing coats and cloaks of dark red, all carrying what one might mistake to be birdcages; yet each cage contained not a bird, but a delicate fern.

“Checking for contagion,” said Otirios. “But so far we’ve found nothing. No telltale plants have browned or died yet, sir. No sign of contagion on the estate grounds.”

He led me to a thin fernpaper door in the estate house. As we approached I thought I heard some long, sustained sound within the mansion. I realized it was screaming.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Probably the servant girls,” Otirios said. “They were, ah, the ones who got there first. Still quite agitated, as you can imagine.”

“Didn’t they find the body hours ago?”

“Yes. But they keep having outbursts. When you see the body, you’ll understand why, sir.”

I listened to the screams, wild and hysterical. I fought to keep my face clear of emotion.

I told myself to stay controlled and contained. I was an officer for the Iudex, the imperial administration responsible for managing the high courts and delivering justice throughout the Empire. I was supposed to be at this fine home, even if it was filled with screaming.

Otirios opened the door. The sound of the screaming grew far louder.

I reflected that piss was supposed to stay in my body, but if that screaming went on for much longer, that might not stay the case.

He led me inside.

THE FIRST THING that struck me was the cleanliness of the place. Not just the absence of dirt—though there was no dirt, not a smudge nor smear in sight—but there was a sterility to everything before me, no matter how elegant: the dining couches were too smooth and unblemished, and the woven silk mats laid in squares on the floor were too unspoiled, perhaps having never known the tramp of a foot. The whole house felt as cozy and comfortable as a surgeon’s knife.

Which wasn’t to say it was not opulent. Miniature mai-trees had been altered to grow down from the ceiling, acting as chandeliers—something I’d never seen before—their fruits full to bursting with the glowing little mai-worms, which cast a flickering blue light about us. I wondered if even the air was expensive in here, then saw it was: a massive kirpis mushroom had been built into the corner of every main room—a tall, black fungus built to suck in air, clean it, and exhale it out at a cooler temperature.

The shrieking went on and on from somewhere in the mansion. I shivered a little, and knew it had nothing to do with the temperature of the air.

“We’ve kept all the staff and witnesses here at the house, as the investigator directed,” Otirios said. “I expect you’ll want to interview them, sir.”

“Thank you, Princeps. How many are there?”

“Seven total. Four servant girls, the cook, the groundskeeper, and the housekeeper.”

“Who owns this estate? I take it not Commander Blas?”

“No, sir. This house is owned by the Haza clan. Did you not see the insignia?” He gestured to a little marking hanging over the entry door: a single feather standing tall between two trees.

That gave me pause. The Hazas were one of the wealthiest families in the Empire and owned a huge amount of land in the inner rings. The staggering luxury of this place began to make a lot of sense, but everything else grew only more confusing.

“What are the Hazas doing owning a house in Daretana?” I asked, genuinely bewildered.

He shrugged. “Dunno, sir. Maybe they ran out of houses to buy everywhere else.”

“Is a member of the Haza clan here currently?”

“If they are, sir, they’re damned good hiders. The housekeeper should know more.”

We continued down a long hallway, which ended in a black stonewood door.

A faint odor filled the air as we grew close to the door: something musty and sweet, and yet tinged with a rancid aroma.

My stomach trembled. I reminded myself to hold my head high, to keep my expression scowling and stoic, like a real assistant investigator might. Then I had to remind myself that I *was* a real assistant investigator, damn it all.

“Have you worked many death cases before, sir?” asked Otirios.

“Why?” I asked.

“Just curious, given the nature of this one.”

“I haven’t. Mostly the investigator and I have handled pay fraud among the officers here in Daretana.”

“You didn’t handle that murder last year? The sotted guard who attacked the fellow at the checkpoint?”

I felt something tighten in my cheek. “The Iudex Investigator position was created here only four months ago.”

“Oh, I see, sir. But you didn’t work any death inquiries with your investigator at your previous station?”

The muscle in my cheek tightened further. “When the investigator arrived here,” I said, “I was selected from the other local Sublimes to serve as her assistant. So. No.”

There was the slightest of pauses in Otirios’s stride. “So...you have only worked for an Iudex Investigator for *four months*, sir?”

“What’s the point of this, Princeps?” I asked, irritated.

I could see the smirk playing at the edges of Otirios's mouth again. "Well, sir," he said. "Of all the death cases to be your first, I wouldn't much like it being this one."

He opened the door.

THE CHAMBER WITHIN was a bedroom, as grand as the rest of the house, with a wide, soft mossbed in one corner and a fernpaper wall and door separating off what I guessed was the bathing closet—for though I'd never seen a bathing closet inside a house, I knew such things existed. A mai-lantern hung in the corner; in the corner diagonal from it, another kirpis shroom. Beside it were two trunks and a leather satchel. Commander Blas's possessions, I guessed.

But the most remarkable feature of the room was the clutch of leafy trees growing in the center—for it was growing from within a person.

Or rather, *through* a person.

The corpse hung suspended in the center of the bedchamber, speared by the many slender trees, but as Otirios had said it was initially difficult to identify it as a body at all. A bit of torso was visible in the thicket, and some of the left leg. What I could see of them suggested a middle-aged man wearing the purple colors of the Imperial Engineering Iyalet. The right arm was totally lost, and the right leg had been devoured by the swarm of roots pouring out from the trunks of the little trees and eating into the stonewood floor of the chamber.

I stared into the roots. I thought I could identify the pinkish nub of a femur amid all those curling coils.

I looked down. An enormous pool of blood had spread across the floor, as smooth and reflective as a black glass mirror.

A flicker in my stomach, like it held an eel trying to leap out.

I told myself to focus, to breathe. To stay controlled and contained. This was what I did for a living now.

“It’s safe to approach, sir,” Otirios said, a little too cheerily. “We’ve inspected the whole of the room. Worry not.”

I stepped closer to look at the greenery. They weren’t really trees, but some kind of long, flexible grass—a bit like shootstraw, the hollow, woody grass they used to make piping and scaffolding. The thicket of shoots appeared to have emerged from between Blas’s shoulder and neck—I spied a hint of vertebrae trapped within them and suppressed another pang of nausea.

Most remarkable was Blas’s face. It seemed the shoots had grown multiple branches as they’d emerged from his torso, and one had shot sideways through Blas’s skull, bending his head at an awful angle; yet the branch had somehow enveloped his skull above the upper jawline, swallowing his face and his nose and ears. All that was left of Blas’s skull was his lower jaw, hanging open in a silent scream; and there, above it in the wood, a half ring of teeth and the roof of a mouth, submerging into the rippling bark.

I stared at his chin. A whisper of steely stubble; a faint scar on the edge from some accident or conflict. I moved on, looked at the rest of him. Left arm furred with light brown hair, fingers calloused and crackling from years of labor. The leggings on the left leg were stained dark with blood, so much so that it had pooled in his boot, filling it like a pot of sotwine.

I felt a drop on my scalp and looked up. The shoots had punched through the roof of the house, and the morning mist was drifting inside in dribs and drabs.

“Sticks out about ten span past the top of the house, if you’re curious, sir,” said Otirios. “Shot through four span of roofing like it was fish fat. So—a pretty big growth. Never seen anything like it.”

“How long did this take?” I asked hoarsely.

“Less than five minutes, sir. According to the servants’ testimony, that is. They thought it was a quake, the house shook so.”

“Is there anything the Apoths have that can do this?”

“No, sir. The Apothetikal Iyalet has all kinds of grafts and suffusions to control the growth of plants—succus wheat that ripens within a quarter of a

season, for example, or fruits that grow to three or four times their conventional size. But we've never made anything that can grow trees within minutes...or one that can grow from within a person, of course."

"Have we got any reason to believe it was intended for him?"

"Inconclusive, sir," said Otirios. "He's Engineering, moves around a good bit. Could be he accidentally ingested something during his travels or contaminated himself. There's no way to tell yet."

"Did he visit anyone else in town? Or meet any other infected official, or imperial personnel?"

"Doesn't seem so, sir," said Otirios. "It appears he departed from the next canton over and came straight here without meeting anyone."

"Has there ever been a record of any contagion like this?"

A contemptuous pucker to his lips. "Well. There are contagions all over the Empire, sir. Suffusions and grafts and alterations growing wild...Each one is different. I'd have to check."

"If it is contagion, it should spread, correct?"

"That's...the nature of contagions, sir?" said Otirios.

"Then how did it happen to this one man, and nothing and no one else?"

"Hard to say at this point, sir. We're checking Blas's movements now. He was on a tour of the outer cantons, including the sea walls, reviewing all the construction. The, ah..." He hesitated. "...The wet season is coming soon, after all."

I nodded, stone-faced. The coming of the wet season hung over the outer cantons of the Empire so heavily that ignoring it would be like trying to forget the existence of the sun.

"No one visited the room before Blas arrived?" I asked. "Or touched anything?"

"The servants did, of course. We only have their testimony to rely on there."

"And no signs of attempted entry?"

"No, sir. This place has more wardings than the Emperor's Sanctum itself. You've got to have reagents keys just to get close."

I considered this silently, recalling the number of windows and doors in this house.

“It’ll be a fine thing if you can explain it, sir,” Otirios said.

“What?” I said.

“A fine thing for a career.” Another smile, this one somewhat cruel. “That’s what you want, right, sir? Advancement? It’s what any officer would want, I’d imagine.”

“What I want,” I said, “is to do my duty.”

“Well, of course, sir.”

I looked at him for a moment. “Please give me a moment, Princeps,” I said. “I will need to engrave the room.”

—

OTIRIOS LEFT ME standing alone before the tree-mangled corpse and shut the door. I reached into my engraver’s satchel on my side and opened it up. Within sat row after row of tiny glass vials sealed with corks, each one containing a few drops of fluid: some pale orange, others faintly green. I slid one out, removed the cork, placed it beneath my nose, and inhaled.

The pungent scent of lye filled my nostrils, making my eyes water. I sniffed it once again, ensuring that the aroma lay heavy within my head. Then I shut my eyes and took a breath.

I felt a tickling or a fluttering in the backs of my eyes, like my skull was a bowl of water full of fish flicking about. Then I summoned up a memory.

The voice of my master, the investigator, whispered in my ear: *When you arrive at the scene, Din, observe the room carefully. Check all manners of entry and exit. Look at everything the dead man might have touched. Think of missed places, forgotten places. Places the servants might not think to clean.*

I opened my eyes, looked at the room, and focused, the aroma of lye still loitering in my skull. I studied the walls, the floor, the way every item and every piece of furniture was arranged, the line of every shadow, the

bend of every blanket—and as I focused my attention, all of these sights were engraved in my memory.

The great and heavenly Empire of Khanum had long ago perfected the art of shaping life, root and branch and flesh and bone. And just as the kirpis shroom in the corner had been altered to cool and clean air, I, as an Imperial engraver, had been altered to remember everything I experienced, always and forever.

I looked and looked, occasionally sniffing at the vial in my hand. Engravers remembered everything, but later recalling those memories quickly and easily was another thing. Scent was used as a cue: just like ordinary folk, engravers associated memories with an aroma; so later, when I reported to my master, I would uncork this same vial, fill my skull with these same vapors, and use their scent as a gateway to recall all I'd experienced. Hence why some called engravers “glass sniffers.”

When I was done with the room I stepped forward and squinted at the clutch of shoots, walking around them in a circle. Then I noticed one shoot had bloomed: a lonely, fragile white bloom, but a bloom nonetheless.

I stepped closer, mindful of the blood on the floor, and studied the bloom. It had a sickly aroma, that of sotwine vomit, perhaps. Inner petals bright purple and dappled with yellow, stamen curling and dark. An ugly little flower, really.

Next I took out all of Blas's belongings one by one and laid them out before me. A bag of talint coins; a small knife; a set of shirts, jerkins, leggings, and belt; his imperial-issued longsword and scabbard, complete with the ornate crossguard for officers; a light mail shirt, probably for emergencies, as real battle armor would be difficult to casually carry about; and, last of all, a small pot of oil.

I sniffed it. It was aromatic, even in this foul-smelling place. Spice, oranje-leaf, wine mullings, maybe incense. My eyes fluttered as I searched my memories for a matching smell—and then I found something similar.

Just over a year ago: Leonie, a friend of mine, had waved a little pot under my nose and said—*Therapy oils. For massage, and other things. Not cheap!*

Yet this was a far fancier pot than that had been. I turned it over in my hand. Then I replaced it with his gear—yet as I did, I noticed something I'd missed: a small book.

My heart fell. I slipped the slender volume out and flipped through the pages. The pages were covered with tiny writing that would have been barely legible to most people—but to my eyes, the letters danced and shook on the page, and I knew I would have great trouble reading them.

I looked over my shoulder at the closed door. I could hear Otirios speaking down the hall. With a grimace, I pocketed the book. It was a major breach of conduct to remove evidence from a death scene, but I had my own way of reading. I just couldn't do it here.

Later, I told myself. And then we'll put it back.

Next I checked the bathing closet. It was a tiny room with a window set above the stonewood bathing basin. The window seemed too small for anyone to climb through, but I made a note to examine the grass below later for any imprints.

I looked at the burnished bronze mirror on the bathing closet wall, tapping it and making sure it was adhered to the wall. I examined the shootstraw pipes, then stepped back and gazed at the wall and ceiling, wondering how they brought hot water in from the distant boiler to fill the stonewood basin. The marvels of the age, I supposed.

Then I glanced backward and did a double take. Mold was blooming along the fernpaper walls, mostly at the top—little blotches of black here and there.

I'd never seen fernpaper walls mold before. I especially wouldn't have expected to find any on these walls, so clean and white and processed. People used fernpaper throughout the Outer Rim of the Empire, partially for their resistance to molds and fungus—and also because when the ground shook out here, and walls came tumbling down, it was better for them to be made of fernpaper than stone.

I studied the mold and sniffed the lye vial again, ensuring that this sight was easily recallable. Then I looked at the body again, this half person frozen in an agonized scream. A drop of water fell from the hole in the

ceiling and landed in the lip of his boot, sending a tiny fan of pooled blood dribbling down the leather. The lake of gore on the wooden floor widened by a shred of a smallspan.

A twist in my stomach. I stood and looked at the burnished bronze mirror. Then I froze, staring at the face looking back at me.

A very young man's face, with a thick shock of black hair, dark, worried eyes, and the slightly gray skin of someone who'd undergone significant suffusions and alterations. I studied the face's delicate chin and long nose. Pretty features—not masculine, nor rugged, nor handsome, but *pretty*, and how awkward they looked on a person so large.

Not the face of an Iudex Assistant Investigator. Not someone who was supposed to be here at all. A boy playing dress-up at best, aping authorities he could never hope to command.

And what would happen to this young man if anyone found out how he'd *actually* gotten this position?

My stomach twisted, twirled, danced. I dashed to the bathing closet window, burst through it, and sent a spray of vomit pattering down to the grass below.

A voice said, "Fucking hell!"

Gasping, I looked down. Two Apoth officers were staring up at me from the gardens, shocked looks on their faces.

"Ahh..." one said.

"Shit," I spat. I stumbled back in and shut the window behind me.

—

NOT HAVING A handkerchief, I wiped my mouth on the inside of my coat. I sniffed and swallowed three, four, five times, trying to suck the rancid taste and aroma back inside me, bottling it up. Then I stepped carefully around the puddle of blood, went to the bedroom door, and opened it to leave—but then I paused.

Otirios's voice floated down the hall, chatting with another Apoth guard.

“...stuffy little prick, barely out of puberty,” he was saying. “Think I’ve heard of him, from the other Sublimes. Supposed to be the dumbest one of the lot, nearly failed out a hundred times. I’m surprised to find him working for the investigat—”

I walked forward, fast. “Princeps,” I said.

Otirios stumbled to attention as I strode around the corner. “Ah—y-yes, sir?”

“I’m going to review the house and the grounds before I speak to the witnesses,” I said. “While I do that, please place the witnesses in separate rooms and then watch them, to ensure they don’t talk among themselves. I’d also like your other guards to make sure the exits and entrances are covered—just in case there’s an unaccounted reagents key and someone tries to slip in or out.”

Otirios blanched, clearly displeased at the idea of managing so many people for so long. He opened his mouth to argue, then grudgingly shut it.

“And Princeps...” I looked at him and smiled. “I *do* appreciate all your support.”

I was still smiling as I walked out. I had never given such an order before, but I’d enjoyed that one. For while I couldn’t really rebuke Otirios—he was part of another Iyalet, a different imperial administration—I could stick him with a shit job and leave him there for a long while.

I walked throughout the mansion, occasionally sniffing my vial as I studied each hallway, each room, the insignia of the Haza clan always hanging over my shoulder at the door—the feather between the trees.

The Hazas were able to afford a kirpis shroom for every major room, it seemed, but the one in the western end by the kitchens was shriveled and dying. Curious. I made a note of it, then kept moving, checking all the windows and doors—mostly fernpaper, I noticed. All milled bright white, and each probably worth more than a month’s pay for me.

I crossed through the kitchens, then spied something below the stove: a tiny blot of blood. I touched it with a finger. Still wet, still dark. There might be many reasons for blood to be in a kitchen, of course, but I engraved it in my memory. Then I went outside.

The gardens were very pretty and elaborate: landscaped streams crisscrossing the grounds, little bridges arching over them in picturesque places. A sight from a spirit story for children, perhaps; yet I didn't find anything of interest as I wandered the paths, nodding occasionally at the Apoths still searching for contagion.

I came to the place where I'd vomited out the window and searched the grass for any indentions or marks of a ladder or something similar. Nothing there, either.

The last thing to look at was the groundskeeper's hut. It was a quaint place, made of thin fernpaper walls, the shelves dotted with tiny plants the groundskeeper was apparently nursing along. Lines of merry little blooms, some fresh, some wilting. There was also a clay oven, quite large. I peered inside and noticed the ash in the bottom, then touched the brick there and found it was still slightly warm, like coals had been smoldering overnight.

I made another trip about the grounds to confirm I'd seen all there was to see. Then I glanced around, confirmed I was alone, and slid the commander's book from my pocket.

I opened it, squinted at the shivering, dancing words on the page, and began to read aloud.

"Wall s-segment...3C," I mumbled. "Check d-date the fourth of Egin... two t-tons sand, two tons loam..."

I read on and on, stuttering through the tiny script, and listened to my voice as I read. I had great trouble reading and memorizing text, but if I read it aloud, and listened to my own words, I could remember them as I could everything else I heard.

I read it all aloud as fast as I could. It was mostly a record of the commander's movements as he did his inspections, with entries like *ck. Paytasız bridges in the north of the Tala canton—6th to 8th of Egin—all pass*, and so on. He'd apparently been very busy just over four weeks ago, during the month of Egin. I had no idea if any of it was pertinent or not, but as an engraver, I was to engrave everything in my memory.

I finished engraving the book, then began crossing the many bridges to return to the house. I had not interviewed anyone as a death witness before,

especially not the staff of the house of a gentry family. I wondered how to begin.

I caught a flash of my reflection in the water below, dappled and rippling, and paused. “Let’s not fuck this up, yes?” I said to my watery face.

I crossed the last little bridge and entered the house.

—

I PRESSED THE servant girls first, being as they’d had access to Blas’s rooms. I started with the girl who’d been crying so hysterically—a little thing, narrow shoulders, tiny wrists. Small enough to make one wonder how she made it down the hall with all those dishes. It’d been she who’d responded to Blas when he’d started calling for help at eight o’clock, she told me, just before breakfast.

“He called for help?” I asked.

She nodded. A tear wove down her cheek to balance precariously in the crevice above her nostril. “He said he...his chest hurt. Said it was hard to breathe. He was coming down for breakfast, and he stopped and went back to his room. I came to him, tried to get him to lie down before...before he...”

She bowed her head; the balanced tear spilled down her lip; then she started wailing again. “I’m suh-sorry,” she sobbed as she tried to regain her composure. “Sh-should have asked...W-Would the suh-sir care for some t-tea?”

“Ah...No, thank you,” I said.

For some reason, this made her sob all the harder. I waited for her to stop. When she didn’t, I let her go.

I moved on to the next one, an older servant named Ephinas. She sat down slowly, her movements cautious, controlled. Someone used to being watched, probably. She corroborated the first servant’s story: Blas arrived late in the evening, bathed, went to bed; and all had seemed completely normal until he started screaming for help in the morning. She had not gone

to him, so she didn't know more than that—but she did come alive when I asked if Blas had stayed here before.

“Yes,” she said. “My masters let him stay here often. He is close with them.”

“How was this stay different from other stays?” I asked. “Or was it different?”

Hesitation. “It was,” she said.

“Then how so?”

More hesitation. “He left us *alone* this time,” she said quietly. “Probably because he never got the chance to try.”

I coughed, snuffed at my vial, and hoped she could not see me blush. “Tell me more about that, please,” I asked.

She did so. From the sound of it, Blas was quite the absolute bastard, pawing at the servants the second he had them alone. She said she wasn't sure if his advances had been reciprocated by any of the other girls, but she didn't think so, though all of them got the same treatment.

“What was the nature of his visit here?” I asked her.

Her eyes dipped down. “He was a friend of the Haza family,” she said.

“He's a friend? That's the only reason why he stayed here?”

“Yes.”

“Isn't it strange for someone to stay at someone else's house while they're not here?”

This elicited a contemptuous glance. Her eye lingered on my cheap boots and ill-fitting coat. “It is not uncommon for gentryfolk.”

Even the servants thought themselves worldlier than I, it seemed. But then, they were probably right.

I asked her more, but she gave me less with every question, withdrawing into herself further and further. I made a note of it and moved on.

I asked the next girls about Blas's advances. While they corroborated the story, all of them claimed they'd never had a relationship with Blas beyond these unpleasant moments, and none of them had much else to say.

“I didn’t hear or see anything before he died,” said the final girl flatly. She was bolder, louder, angrier than the others. Less willing to quietly suffer servitude, maybe. “Not for the whole night. I know that.”

“You’re sure?” I asked.

“I am,” she said. “Because I didn’t sleep much before the guest came.”

“Why was that?”

“Because I was hot. Very hot.”

I thought about it. “Do you sleep near the kitchens?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Because the kirpis shroom is dying there. Could that be why you were hot?”

She seemed surprised. “Another one’s died?”

“They’ve died before?”

“They’re very sensitive to water. Too much and they shrivel up and die.”

“What kind of moisture?” I asked.

“Any kind. Rain. Humidity. Leave a window or door open nearby—especially now, when the wet season starts—and they’ll get sick right away. They’re temperamental as hell.”

I leaned back and focused. A fluttering at the backs of my eyes, and I summoned up my memories of searching the house, each image of each room flashing perfectly in my mind like a fly suspended in a drop of honey. No doors or windows had been open that I saw. So how might the kirpis have died?

“Did you or anyone else in the house happen to *close* an open door or window before Blas died?” I asked.

She stared at me. “After seeing what we saw, sir,” she said, “we could barely stand, let alone do our work.”

I took that as a no, they had not shut any doors or windows, and continued on.

EVENTUALLY I RAN out of servant girls, so I went hard at the cook, asking her about the blood in the kitchen. She was most unimpressed.

“Why do *you* think there might be blood in the kitchen?” she demanded.

“Did you cut yourself?” I asked.

“No. Of course not. I am too old, and too good. If you found blood, I am sure it’s from the larfish I cooked for Blas’s breakfast—not that he ever got to eat it.”

“Larfish?” I asked. I pulled a face. “For breakfast?”

“It’s what he likes,” she said. “It’s hard to get, out close to the walls, where he works.” She leaned closer. “If you ask me, he picked up something out there, at the sea walls. Some parasite or another. I mean—think of what the sea walls keep *out*. Sanctum knows what kind of strange things they bring in with them!”

“They don’t get in, ma’am,” I said. “That’s the point of the sea walls.”

“But they had a breach years ago,” she said, delighted to discuss such grotesqueries. “One got in and wrecked a city south of here, before the Legion brought it down. The trees there bloom now, though they never bloomed before. They weren’t trees that *could* grow blooms before.”

“If we could get back to the circumstances of last night, ma’am...”

“Circumstances!” she scoffed. “The man caught contagion. It’s as simple as that.”

I pressed her harder, but she gave me nothing more of interest, and I let her go.

—

THE GROUNDSKEEPER NEXT. Fellow’s name was Uxos, and he was apparently more than just a groundskeeper, performing odd jobs about the house, fixing up walls or fernpaper doors. A most timid man, perhaps too old to still be groundskeeper. He seemed terrified at the idea of trying to fix the damage the trees had done to the house.

“I don’t even know what kind of tree it is,” he said. “I’ve never seen it before in my life.”

“It had a bloom, you know,” I said. “A little white one.” I described it to him—the inner petals purple and yellow, the sweet and sickly aroma. He just shook his head.

“No, no,” he said. “It’s not a flower I know. Not a tree I know. I don’t know.”

I asked him about the kirpis shroom, and he said the same thing as the servant girl: too much water kills them. But how this one had died, he didn’t know.

“Someone probably overwatered it,” he said. “Dumped a drink in it. It’s expensive, but it happens. They’re very hard to care for. It’s a complex process, cooling the air. They make black fruit in their roots you have to clean out...”

Finally I asked him about his oven, and the ashes of the fire out there in the hut.

“I use the fire to clean my tools,” Uxos said. “Some plants are very delicate. Can’t get fungus from one to the other. So I put them in the fire to clean them.”

“Don’t they have washes for that?” I said. “Soaps and such for your tools?”

“They’re expensive. Fire is cheaper.”

“The Hazas don’t seem like people who care much about price.”

“They care,” he said, “if *people* get expensive. Then the people go. I try very hard not to be expensive. I don’t want to go.”

A worm of worry in his eye. Too old to be groundskeeper by half, I guessed, and he knew it. I pressed him for more, but he had nothing more to give, and I let him go.

—

LAST WAS THE housekeeper—a Madam Gennadios, apparently the boss of the whole place when the Hazas themselves weren’t around. An older

woman with a lined, heavily painted face. She wore bright green robes of a very expensive make, soft and shimmering—Sazi silk, from the inner rings of the Empire. She paused when she walked in, looked me over with a cold, shrewd eye, then sat down, her posture immaculate—knees together at an angle, hands in her lap, shoulders high and tight—and stared resolutely into the corner.

“Something wrong, ma’am?” I asked.

“A *boy*,” she said. Her words were as dry and taut as a bowstring. “They’ve sent a *boy*.”

“I beg your pardon?”

She studied me again out of the corner of her eye. “This is who’s trapped us in our house, the house of my masters, and won’t let us remove that damned corpse—a great, overgrown *boy*.”

A long, icy moment slipped by.

“Someone’s died in your house, ma’am,” I said. “Potentially of contagion. Something that might have killed you all, too. Don’t you want us to investigate?”

“Then where’s the investigator?”

“The investigator isn’t able to attend,” I said. “I’m here to review the scene and report back to her.”

Her gaze lingered on me. I was reminded of an eel contemplating a fish flitting before its cave. “Ask me your questions,” she said. “I’ve work to do, a damned ceiling to patch up. Go.”

I inhaled at my vial and then asked her about the nature of Blas’s stay. She gave what might have been the smallest, least sincere shrug I’d ever seen. “He is a friend of the Haza family.”

“One of your servant girls said the same thing,” I said.

“Because it’s true.”

“The *exact* same thing.”

“Because it’s true.”

“And your masters often let their friends stay at their houses?”

“My masters have many houses, and many friends. Sometimes their friends come to stay with us.”

“And no one from the Haza clan intended to join him?”

“My masters,” she said, “prefer more civilized environs than this canton.”

I moved on, asking her about the locations of the staff’s reagents keys.

“All the reagents keys are locked up at night,” she said. “Only I and Uxos are in constant possession of any during the evening, for emergencies.”

I asked about replacing keys, how to duplicate them, and so on, but she was dismissive. The idea was impossible to her.

“What about alterations?” I said. “Have your staff had any imperial grafts applied?”

“Of course,” she said. “For immunities, and parasites. We *are* on the rim of the Empire, after all.”

“Nothing more advanced than that?”

She shook her head. I felt a heat under the collar of my coat. I didn’t like how little she moved, sitting up so ramrod straight, shifting her head only to look at me out of the side of her eye like a damned bird.

“Can you at least tell me the nature of the commander’s relationship with the Hazas?” I asked.

A withering stare. “They were *friends*.”

“How long have they been friends?”

“I do not know the nature of all my masters’ friendships, nor is that for me to know.”

“Do they have many friends in Daretana?”

“Yes. In many of the Iyalets, at that.” Her eyes glittered at me. “And some of them are above you.”

I smiled politely at her, yet the threat seemed very real. I asked her more, but she gave me nothing. I let her go.

—

THEN IT WAS done: all witnesses questioned, all personnel accounted for, all times of departures and arrivals established. The only person who’d

arrived in the past day had been Commander Taqtasa Blas, who'd come to the residence at just past eleven on the night of the twenty-ninth of the month of Skalasi. He immediately bathed and went to bed, awoke on the thirtieth, and then paused right before breakfast to die in the most horrifying fashion imaginable. Though I thought I'd made a pretty good job of it—except for my chat with the housekeeper, perhaps—I could make neither head nor tail of the scene: not whether Blas's death was murder, or even suspicious.

Contagion did happen, after all. Especially to those who worked at the sea walls.

I stopped by the bedroom on my way out. To see the corpse one more time, yes, but also to replace Blas's book in his belongings. It felt strange to slip his diary back in his bags, his frozen scream hanging over my shoulder. Despite all the mutilation, the pain of his expression remained striking, like he was still feeling all those shoots threading and coiling through his flesh.

I walked out and thanked Otirios, and he led me across the grounds back to the servants' gate.

"Is it all right for us to remove the corpse for study, sir?" he asked.

"I think so, but please keep all the witnesses here," I said. "I'll report back to the investigator, and she'll likely want to summon some of the witnesses to question herself."

"It was well done, sir," he said.

"What was?"

"Well done. If I might say so. All handled well." He gave me a grin, beaming and big-brotherly. I'd only ever seen such smiles above a fourth pot of sotwine. "Though next time, sir—might want to be a bit friendlier. I've seen undertakers warmer than you."

I paused and looked at him. Then I turned and kept walking, down through the picturesque garden paths and out the vinegate.

"But I've also got to wonder, sir..." Otirios asked as we passed through the vines.

"Yes, Princeps?" I said. "What advice do you have now?"

"Might this have been easier if the investigator herself had come?"

I stopped again and looked at him balefully.

“*No*,” I said. “I can say with absolute honesty, Princeps, that no, this would *not* have been easier if the investigator had come.” I returned to the path, muttering, “You’ll have to trust me on that.”