

A
TRADE *OF*
BLOOD

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HODDERSCAPE

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



A MOST CURATED
BUTCHERING

CHAPTER 1



"IT IS AN INARGUABLE TRUTH, YOU KNOW," SAID ANA, "that most people are absolutely *enthralled* by dead girls."

I cracked my eyes and gazed at the carriage ceiling, certain I'd misheard this comment. I waited, listening to the rumble of the wheels and the crackling of the horses' hooves on the gravel road.

Perhaps she would stop now, I thought. Perhaps there would be no more of it.

I shut my eyes and sought my way back to sleep.

"In fact, did you know, Din . . ." said Ana.

I opened them again.

"Did you know, for example, that out of all the recipients of the Order of Kibiri—the highest possible honor given to law-keeping imperial officers—that nearly *eleven percent* of the recipients earned this honor for resolving the murder of a young girl?"

"Is that so, ma'am?" I said, hoping to satisfy her into silence.

Yet she continued: "Oh, yes! That death, that very *specific* death, which is a mere fraction of all unlawful activity across all the Empire—that is given astonishingly disproportionate commendation! If you pursue, oh, corruption, or malfeasance, or lethal negligence—any one of which could cause harms far beyond the untimely expiration of one single goddamn comely nubile—then all are apparently indifferent to you! Instead, countless justiciars jump at the mention of a dead young girl, much as a hunter might leap to his feet at the glimpse of a stag—for that way lies speedy elevation!"

I readjusted the pillow I'd made of my Iudex coat. "How upsetting, ma'am."

"Yes. Very morbid. Very *ghastly*, Din. Honestly, the more I think on it, the more disturbed I grow."

She crossed her arms, turned her blindfolded head to the corner of the carriage, and let out a great huff.

We rumbled on. I watched her out of the corner of my eye. That had to be the end of it, surely.

I shut my eyes.

"But the *other* kind of death . . ." she snarled.

"Ohh," I murmured.

"... that gets the *most* amount of ridiculous treatment, is most assuredly a death among the gentry!"

I decided to surrender entirely and sat forward, yawning. I should have known better than to hope: Ana nearly always talked through-out every minute of a carriage ride, no matter how long.

"You could be a goddamn onion farmer," continued Ana, "covered in shit from collar to crotch, and yet if word were to strike your ear about the murder of some flouncing little princeling, a debauched dandy who'd never deign to step foot in the same fucking room as you, you'd sweep your hat from your head, press it to your breast, and soulfully murmur—*Oh, oh! What evil has befallen our realm this day?*" She scoffed. "And yet—and yet!—somehow, here we are, Din!" She pounded the wall of the carriage with a fist. "Trundling through bean field after bean field, dashing off to look at a corpse that is not *only* the body of a dead girl, but a dead *gentry* girl! I wonder what awful crime I have committed to earn the ire of the fates in this fashion!"

A call from our carriage's pilot: "Need anything, sir?"

I cracked the window and called out, "No, all is well."

"It's just I thought I heard pounding, sir."

"All is well!" I said and shut the window with a snap.

"Is it?" demanded Ana. "*Is* it well? I find I disagree! For do you know what *truly* galls me about this particular task that has been heaped upon us?"

I watched her finger tremble with rage in the dim light of our carriage. I did some dour calculations in my mind.

We still had quite a ways to go. The more time she had to build up her fury, the worse her behavior would be when we arrived.

"I assume, ma'am," I said, sighing, "it is that you do not find this murder we've been assigned to be interesting?"

"Correct!" she cried. "*Not interesting*, not at all! If you have a dead girl, odds are you will find a very stupid boy on the other end of the knife. And that they have, in fact! Got the little fucker locked up and all! We need hardly attend this for a minute!"

At that, my eyes shivered in my skull, and I summoned up my memories of our briefing orders.

As an imperial engraver, I had been augmented to possess a perfect memory and could summon nearly any experience from the depths of my mind. Our orders had been so stark and perturbing, however, that I hardly needed to use my talents at all to recall them.

Phrases from our orders leapt out to me. Some choice excerpts included "profound social strife throughout the region," "hyperinflation of costs of key imperial goods likely," and—most noteworthy—"potential casualties quite high."

I released my memories and returned to the moment.

"We attend this, ma'am," I said, "because the murder suspect is of *another* gentryclan. The two families are now on the verge of outright war. One death may become dozens, if not hundreds."

"But none would be interesting!" she said. "Not a one, not at all! They can gut each other in the goddamn streets, for all I care!" With that, she crossed her arms and continued muttering.

AFTER ENDURING ANOTHER hour of Ana's fuming, I climbed out of the carriage to join the pilot atop his perch. Though it'd grant me little sleep, the sound of the horses' hooves was at least less caustic.

I sat blinking sleepily as we trundled through the leagues of bean fields. The horizon was flat, green, and endless, with nary a tree in sight. The sight somehow defied the eye. It was as if the whole of the canton of Sapirdad had been transformed, every scrap of soil and nutrients redirected toward the cultivation of beans. An odd sight, to me: I had grown up on these very plains—though on the other, less wealthy side of the Empire's third-ring wall, of course—but the total defoliation of this landscape made it entirely alien.

We turned off the Great Spoke Road and started toward the city of Lacanthim, and the way ahead filled with carriages, carts, and riders. I'd expected to see cattle on the roads—these lands were famous for their prized urhosi cows, which were often as big as a house—but though many of the carts were ferrying livestock, they were certainly not cows. Rather, each one was piled high with cages containing small, unsightly creatures of a like I'd never seen before.

I wrinkled my nose as one particularly full cage passed us. The beasts within were not cats, precisely, or squirrels or weasels, but something in between. They were small, furred, greenish-yellow things, each about the length of a man's arm, with a ringed tail, small black eyes, rounded ears, and—most noticeably—long, prehensile fingers and thumbs on their front legs. They almost had the look of human hands, yet leathery and distorted. I watched one tapping its long digits along its cage and felt distinctly revolted.

"Are *those*," I said aloud, "the . . ."

Our carriage pilot laughed. "Yes, sir. The famous cats. Though here they're more famed for their odors."

I gazed at one cart full of cages as it shrank into the distance. So those had been the drokha-cats of the Empire's third ring, released into the fields at night to pick the crops so the laborers would find bushels brimming in the morning. I guessed that their humanlike hands had been why they'd been chosen for such duties.

My mouth twisted. "Those little beasts are the ones that handle *all* the harvest?"

"Yes, sir. Nearly every third bite you eat probably passed through their fingers."

"I suppose it's not wise," I remarked, "to learn too much of where your meals come from."

He glanced at me. "If the cats bother you, sir, I'd stay clear of the flensing halls. Those'd likely turn your gut a mite more."

I opened my mouth to ask, then thought better of it. As pastoral as the farmlands of the third ring might appear, already I felt they were as strange as all the rest of the Empire.

Soon the traffic on the road backed up, blockaded by some obstruction ahead. I couldn't see any hint of it this far back from town: all I could spy were dozens of cages full of cats screeching and hopping about, which caused the horses to whicker nervously.

"Any idea what's blocking the road?" I asked.

"No, sir. Never seen it like this, sir."

I shot a sour glance at the line of carts ahead and climbed back down to speak to Ana.

"Road's blocked up, ma'am," I said as I slipped inside.

"So I gathered!" Ana snapped. "I am not a goddamned imbecile, boy! What is the damned issue?"

"Don't know, ma'am," I said. "But our orders were to be at the inn in town by midday."

"Oh, hell," she muttered. "Am I truly about to force us to *speed* to this miserable task?" She waved a hand at the ceiling. "Tell the child up there to cut across country."

"We are, ah, surrounded by croplands."

"And?"

"And, I am unsure if the locals would appreciate us driving across their crops in this manner, ma'am."

"Tell them I'll pay for it myself!" she snarled. "It's fucking beans, correct? Cow feed! How much could it possibly cost? I wish to get this over with, damn it all!"

I climbed back out of the carriage and rejoined the pilot atop it. "My superior has asked us to drive across the crops," I said to him.

He stared. "She what, sir?"

"Is there a short path we could take about the town?" I asked. "Some back way toward an alley?"

"You drive a cart across someone's crops, they're liable to take you to court."

"Well, as officers of the high court, we shall be well familiar with that," I said, defeated. "But there is a murdered girl in town, and we must get there speedily. We'll pay for whatever damages we cause."

Still he hesitated. "I'm not sure if I could get more work here if folk knew I did such a thing."

"You can blame it on her. They'll quickly learn her nature and believe you. You can blame more on her if you wish. Crop failures. Pestilence. They'll believe that, too, soon enough."

The pilot took a breath. Then, with a flick of the reins, he nudged the horses off the road and into the bean fields. The other carters and drovers and riders caterwauled and hollered mightily as we churned through the crops, and though our pilot grew pale as a pasture moth's wing, soon we left them behind and approached the city directly.

Then we saw what had blocked the roads, and I likely grew just as pale as our pilot.

The lane ahead was blockaded with a dozen men, all of them armed and clad in various shades of yellow from head to toe. Many were armored, though not with the plate or mail of the Legion, but some manner of algaeoil leather—and each leather cuirass bore a crest upon the chest.

I could not make out the crest from this distance. Yet I knew what it was, for I had read my briefing carefully. It was surely a crest of a bull, set upon a field of saffron: the family crest of the Armenta gentryclan.

Their presence made a dreadful sense to me—for the current suspect of the murder, a young man named Castus Armenta, was a prime son of that family. What these armed folk wished to accomplish by being here, I did not know, but I felt sure the answer was a foul one.

I called down to Ana: "Appears we might be late, ma'am. Armenta forces fill the city ahead."

The carriage shutter cracked open the tiniest bit—even when blindfolded, Ana disdained exposure to the exterior world—and her voice came ringing out: "Oh? Any sign of the other clan?"

"Not yet."

A reflective pause.

"Then either they all lie dead," pronounced Ana's voice, "or, more likely, there is a standoff in the city."

"What makes you think so, ma'am?"

"Well, the local peacekeepers have locked up Castus Armenta for the murder, yes? And I am sure the family of the slain girl would very much like to break him out of jail to hang the little bastard for killing her. Which means the Armentas, if given the chance, would like to break *in* and spirit him away before they can do so! The fact that the Armentas are still here suggests they have not yet achieved this—probably because the other family is preventing them." A rough cackle came from the carriage window. "A stalemate, then! Each family would like to chop the other to bits—but none can strike the first blow, for that would be dishonorable. We shall have our work cut out for us, boy."

The carriage shutter closed with a snap.