

Chapter 6

Feyra lay in the dark, twisting the crystal ring. She was no longer racked by indecision; she knew exactly what to do. She was merely waiting for her moment. She waited, and she twisted the circle on her finger, as if counting down the heartbeats until she could act.

The ring had only been hers for four hours and yet it already felt like part of her. She would twist the crystal band a quarter-turn so each time a different horse was uppermost – black horse, white horse, red horse, pale horse. She wondered if she shared the habit with her mother.

Her mother.

Nur Banu had been a mother to Feyra in all but name. She would grieve for her, yes, when the shock was past; but she had no need to place their relationship in a different perspective. There was love and respect given and received, embraces, encouragement, hours of time spent in each other's company; more than any other daughter could expect. Feyra did not torture herself with things unsaid. All needful things had been told in those last awful hours, and the rest unspoken in the twenty years before them. Feyra's one regret was that her mother had not been able to say more about the horsemen. About the black horse her father was to carry to Venice, about what she herself had to do.



The street outside fell quiet at last. It was time.

Feyra rose, quiet as a cat. She did not need to dress for she had never disrobed; she did, however, place a full veil under her hat. She was not hiding her beauty, now, but her identity.

Noiselessly she opened the casement and the filigree shutters where she had stood that morning. Kizlar Agha had not thought it necessary to post guards at the back of the house. She dropped silently down on to the roof of the outhouse where the neighbours shut up their goats at night. The wretched creatures began to bleat, and she breathed in their stink with an involuntary gasp of terror, before climbing down into the dark alley below. Creeping to the corner, she saw the street was deserted and ran as fast as she could down to the docks. There, heart beating in her throat, she saw the hundreds of crowded wooden hulls and spars and the cluster of masts standing like a rank of enemy pikes in the moonlight, preventing her escape. How would she ever know which vessel her father would take? He was given a different ship for each voyage. And what if he had already sailed?

She wandered the harbour in despair, reading the rash, bombastic names that men gave their ships, foolish boasts of certain victory. Should she stow away on a boat, any boat, and take her chances with whichever crew she had thrown in her lot with, or return home unseen, wake in her own bed and be taken in the Harem? Feyra was not ignorant of the ways of men. She knew what her fate would be, as the only woman on board a strange ship of men without her father to protect her. But was this worse than the fate that awaited her in the Harem? She would be the plaything of one man as opposed to twenty, but that man was her brother, and a monster to boot. It was hardly a choice.





Just as she was about to turn back for the last time, she spotted a name painted in gold on a ship that looked different to the rest. With its straight timber cambers and decorated forecastle it seemed foreign, and the name, painted in gold, read *Il Cavaliere*. Nur Banu had not neglected to teach her letters – this name in Venetian meant simply ‘the horseman’.

Feyra hid behind a stack of barrels and watched. The gangplank was down, and a sequence of torches set into the harbour wall illuminated the comings and goings. She watched two sailors, shipmen of her father’s, going back and forth to the ship with various equipment and supplies that they took from a wharfhouse on the dock. She toyed with the idea of identifying herself to them and asking to be taken to the captain’s quarters, but the knowledge that he would be in the presence of the Kizlar Agha prevented her.



Instead she studied the sailors and their rhythm, back and forth, back and forth. Ships had been her playhouses since she was small, and she had explored many a hold in her time, fascinated by the barrels and boxes of freight that she found there. Usually the hold was reached from a hatch on deck, but she did not ever remember seeing one that was built quite like this. In this Venetian merchant ship, the gantry doors from the hold opened right to the air, so the cargo could be loaded directly from the dock, through double doors that closed and sealed watertight well above the waterline. A gangplank led directly into the dark doorway.

In the Harem, when Feyra had been treating the concubines, she was fond of saying that the solution to a problem was often the simplest. So it was here. She simply waited





and then sneaked like a slip-shadow up the gantry and into the dark belly of the ship.

She dropped down into the cavernous, dark space, rolled herself small behind some grain sacks and settled herself to wait. Over the next hour more sacks were dropped on top of her so that she became hot and pressed. Her medicine belt, her old friend that she'd worn so long that she felt it was part of her body, dug painfully into her waist and ribs. She considered the consequences of one of the bottles cracking and the shards of glass puncturing her skin, and, what was worse, some of those compounds seeping into her flesh; compounds that, in their nature, could be curative in the right amounts; but in the wrong amounts, fatal.

Beyond this the harsh canvas crushed her face. A new fear was born: that she would suffocate, so in the short absences of the sailors she began to shift her body weight and dig herself an airhole. In the glow of a single lamp hanging from a bracket she could begin to understand that she was crushed because all of the supplies for the voyage were being piled into one side of the hold only. At the fore of the hold was a space cornered off by a muslin curtain, with yards of empty rough floor planks between the curtain and the rest of the supplies.

At length Feyra could ease the dreadful pressure on her body, and look about her. In the quarter-light she began to examine the sacks and barrels, looking for insignia, searching for the deadly cargo that her father was to carry – anything to do with a horse, anything black. There was another strange thing: the supplies that crowded around her were good firm cheeses, quarters of meat, fine white flour, quite different to the usual shipboard fare of pemmican and ship's biscuits. She extended her hand to the aft side and pushed



through the sacks, the grain below the canvas whispering as she pushed her fingers through.

As she watched the sailors come and go, she stayed as silent as she could, trying to still even her breathing. But it was not, it seemed, enough; one of the loaders set down his barrel and straightened up, holding out a hand, high and fingers splayed, to quiet his fellow.

‘What’s amiss?’ said the second, setting down his barrel likewise.

‘I heard a noise,’ hissed the sharp-eared one. ‘From the stack.’ He pointed to the barrels behind which Feyra lay. Her pulse thudded in her ears. The sweat from her fingertips clumped the grain.

‘Just a rat,’ said the second. ‘You’re hearing things.’

‘Just a rat? You should pin back your ears of cloth. Did you not hear our captain’s directions? *No animals aboard* – there’s not even a ship’s cat. So we’ll have to find it ourselves.’

‘Why no animals?’

‘I don’t know. Something to do with the cargo.’

‘All right. Let’s look if we must, but the main payload’s still for loading.’

They came so perilously close that Feyra could smell a strong aroma of goat – one of the sailors was evidently a herder by day. The second, whose eyes were clearly better than his ears, looked directly at her. ‘Found it! Come ’ere, yer stowaway!’

Feyra shrunk back, but the fellow held high an enormous rat, black and slick as oil and shrieking in fright. The shipman snapped his neck for him and all was silence. He slung the long body over his shoulder like a draftsack and carried him out to the night, followed by his sharp-eared friend.

Feyra lay back burning with relief, heart thumping fit to leap out of her chest.

Then a thump and shuffle and a curse alerted her; the sailors had one more item of cargo to load. And it was heavy. She watched as they manoeuvred their burden, four men now carrying something on their shoulders like pallbearers.

A sarcophagus.

All the pallbearers were veiled. Feyra might have thought that they were showing respect for what they carried, but for their demeanour and language. The bearers heaved and bumped the box, moaning and uttering oaths in a way that convinced her that they could not possibly be carrying a body. The sarcophagus seemed to be made of silver or pewter, some metal that gleamed low and grey. It was enamelled all over with curling designs picked out in colour, and was taken, with much groaning and shuffling and instruction and counter-instruction, to the muslin curtain. The curtain was drawn back, the burden taken beyond, and placed on the planks with a thud.

The bearers retreated in somewhat of a hurry, taking the torch with them. In their wake, there was a sudden, intense silence. Feyra could still see the white glow of the closed curtain, white as a Dervish's skirt, which had settled back into its fold.

Same as before, different than before.

For now Feyra felt the almost palpable menace emanating from the box behind it, somehow more terrifying and unsettling than anything she had witnessed that day. She looked at the drape, the colour of death, and at the rough, empty expanse of planks between her and it, and listened to the silence. It was pierced, brutally and suddenly, by the



high, unmistakable voice of the Kizlar Agha as he retreated down the gangplank.

Then there was a great shove and a cry, the splash of an immense rope into the wash, and the smell of burning hemp as the ship yanked from its moorings. Feyra's stomach gave a lurch and a heave. There was no going back.

She was at sea.

