

**PART ONE**

**BEL DAME**





Nyx sold her womb somewhere between Punjai and Faleen, on the edge of the desert.

Drunk, but no longer bleeding, she pushed into a smoky cantina just after dark and ordered a pinch of morphine and a whiskey chaser. She bet all of her money on a boxer named Jaks, and lost it two rounds later when Jaks hit the floor like an antique harem girl.

Nyx lost every coin, a wad of opium, and the wine she'd gotten from the butchers as a bonus for her womb. But she did get Jaks into bed, and—loser or not—in the desert after dark, that was something.

“What are you after?” Jaks murmured in her good ear.

They lay tangled in the sheets like old lovers: a losing boxer with a poor right hook and a tendency to drop her left, and a wombless hunter bereft of money, weapons, food, and most of her clothing.

“I'm looking for my sister,” Nyx said. It was partly the truth. She was looking for something else too, something worth a lot more, and Jaks was going to help her get it.

The midnight call to prayer rolled out over the desert. It started somewhere out in Faleen and moved in a slow wave from mosque muezzin to village mullah to town crier, certain as a swarm of locusts, ubiquitous as the name of God.

“Don't tell anyone,” Nyx said, “what I'm about to tell you...”

Nyx woke sometime after dawn prayer with a hangover and what felt like a wad of cotton in her belly. Dropping the womb had bought her some time—a day, maybe more if the butchers were smart enough to sell it before her bloody sisters sniffed her out. She'd shaken them in Punjai when she dumped the womb, along with the rest of her coin.

Jaks was long gone, off to catch a ride to Faleen with the agricultural traffic. Nyx was headed that way too, but she hadn't said a word of that to Jaks. She wanted her next meeting with Jaks to be a pleasant surprise. Mysterious women

were attractive—stalkers and groupies were not. Nyx had tracked this woman too long to lose it all by being overly familiar.

Some days, Nyx was a bel dame—an honored, respected, and deadly government-funded assassin. Other days, she was just a butcher, a hunter—a woman with nothing to lose. And the butcher had a bounty to bring in.

The sun bled across the big angry sky. The call box at the cantina was busted, so Nyx walked. The way was unpaved, mostly sand and gravel. Her feet were bruised, bleeding, and bare, but she hadn't felt much of anything down there in a good long while. Back at the butchers', she had traded her good sandals for directions out of the fleshpots, too dopey to figure the way out on her own. Under the burnous, she wore little more than a dhoti and breast binding. She had an old baldric, too—her dead partner's. All the sheaths were empty, and had been for some time. She remembered some proverb about meeting God empty-handed, but her knees weren't calloused anymore—not from praying, anyway. She had already been to hell. One prayer more or less wouldn't make any difference.

She hitched a ride on the back of a cat-pulled cart that afternoon. The cats were as tall as her shoulder. Their long, coarse fur was matted and tangled, and they stank. The cats turned leaking, bloodshot eyes to her. One of them was blind.

The woman driving the cart was a cancerous old crone with a bubbling gash that clove the left half of her face in two. She offered Nyx a ride in exchange for a finger's length of blood to feed the enormous silk beetle she kept in a covered cage next to her left hip, pressed against her battered pistol.

Nyx had the hood of her burnous up to keep off the sun; traveling this time of day was dangerous. The crone's skin was rough and pitted with old scars from cancer digs. Fresh, virulent melanomas spotted her forearms and the back of her neck. Most of her nose was gone.

"You coming from the front, my woman?" the crone asked. Nyx shook her head, but the old woman was nearly blind and did not see.

"I fought at the front," the crone said. "It brought me much honor. You, too, could find honor."

Nyx had left her partner, and a lot more at the front—a long time ago.

"I'd rather find a call box," Nyx said.

"God does not answer the phone."

Nyx couldn't argue with that.

She jumped off the cart an hour later as they approached a bodega with a call box and a sign telling her she was fifty kilometers from Faleen. The old woman nattered on about the wisdom of making phone calls to God.

Nyx made a call.

Two hours later, at fourteen in the afternoon on a day that clocked in at

twenty-seven hours, her sister Kine pulled up in a bakkie belching red roaches from its back end.

Kine leaned over and pushed out the door. “You’re lucky the office picked up,” she said. “I had to get some samples at the war front for the breeding compounds. You headed to the coast? I need to get these back there.”

“You’ve got a leak in your exhaust,” Nyx said. “Unlock the hood.”

“It’s been leaking since the front,” Kine said. She popped the hood.

The bakkie’s front end hissed open. Waves of yeasty steam rolled off the innards. Nyx wiped the moisture from her face and peered into the guts of the bakkie. The bug cistern was covered in a thin film of organic tissue, healthy and functioning, best Nyx could tell by the color. The hoses were in worse shape—semi-organic, just like the cistern, but patched and replaced in at least a half-dozen places she could see without bringing in a speculum. In places, the healthy amber tissue had blistered and turned black.

She was no bug-blessed magician—not even a standard tissue mechanic—but she knew how to find a leak and patch it up with organic salve. Every woman worth her weight in blood knew how to do that.

“Where’s your tissue kit?” Nyx said.

Kine got out of the bakkie and walked over. She was shorter than Nyx by a head—average height, for a Nasheenan woman—but they shared the same wide hips. She wore an embroidered housecoat and a hijab over her dark hair. Nyx remembered seeing her with her hair unbound and her skirt hiked up, knee deep in mud back in Mushirah. In her memory, Kine was twelve and laughing at some joke about conservative women who worked for the government. Rigid crones, she’d call them, half dead or dying in a world God made for pleasure. A farmer’s daughter, just like Nyx. A blood sister in a country where blood and bugs and currency were synonymous.

“I don’t have a tissue kit,” Kine said. “I gave it to one of the boys at the front. They’re low on supplies.”

Nyx snorted. They were low on a lot more than tissue kits at the front these days.

“You’re the only organic technician I know who’d ever be short a tissue kit,” Nyx said.

Kine looked her over. “Are you as desperately poor as you look? I know a good magician who can scrape you for cancers.”

“I’ve been worse,” Nyx said, and shut the hood. “Your bug cistern is in good shape. It’ll breed you enough bugs to power this thing back to the coast, even with the leak.”

But the leak meant she’d get to Faleen just a little bit slower. If there was one thing Nyx felt short on these days, it was time.

Nyx slid into the bakkie. Kine got behind the steering wheel. For a moment

they sat in stuffy, uncomfortable silence. Then Kine turned down the window and stepped on the juice.

“What’s her name?” Kine asked, shifting pedals as they rolled back onto the road.

“Who?”

“I can smell her,” Kine said, tightening her hands on the steering wheel. Her hands had the brown, worn, sinewy look of old leather. Her lip curled in disdain.

“I’m working a note,” Nyx said. “What I do to bring it in isn’t your business.”

“A note for a deserter, or one of those dirty bounties you deal in? If you’re bringing in a deserter, where’s Tej?”

Tej, Nyx thought, and the shock of it, of hearing his name out loud, of thinking *Tej, my dead partner*, was a punch in the gut.

“I couldn’t get him back over the Chenjan border,” Nyx said. Another boy buried in the desert.

A clerk the color of honey had given Nyx a bel dame’s note for a boy named Arran nearly three months before, after he’d deserted his place at the front and sought refuge in Chenja. His officer had called in the bel dames because she believed he’d been exposed to a new Chenjan burst, a delayed viral vapor that hid out in the host for up to four months before triggering an airborne contagion. The contagion was capable of taking out half a city before the magicians could contain it. Nyx had gone into the bel dame office and been inoculated against the latest burst, so all she had to do was bleed on the boy to neutralize the contagion, then cut off his head and take him home. Even clean, the penalty for desertion was death. Boys either came home at forty or came home in a bag. No exceptions.

This was Nyx’s job.

Some days, it paid well.

So Nyx and Tej had tracked Arran. Arran had gone over the border into Chenja. That part was easy to figure out. Where in Chenja, though, that was harder. It took tracking down Jaksdijah so Hajjij first. Arran had been a house boy of Jaks’s mother, a coastal boy raised in the interior. Jaks was the last of his known, living kin. Nyx and Tej found Jaks boxing for bread at an underground fighting club thirty kilometers inside the Chenjan border. The mullahs didn’t like Chenjans fighting foreigners—which made Jaks’s fights illegal—but it paid well.

Tej and Nyx bided their time for a month, waiting for Arran to show up while their money ran out. Arran didn’t disappoint. Tej was on watch the night a hooded figure knocked on Jaks’s door. Just before dawn, Jaks and Arran were headed back to Nasheen.

Tej and Nyx followed.

But Tej hadn't made it back.

"He was the only one of your partners I liked," Kine said, and pursed her lips, probably to hold back words God wouldn't permit her to say. Then, "You should partner with men more often."

Nyx snorted.

They blew back out onto the road. The shocks in the bakkie were going out too, Nyx realized, leaking vital fluid all over the desert. She hoped Kine knew a good tissue mechanic at the coast.

"Where am I taking you?" Kine asked. Sand rolled across the pavement.

"Faleen."

"A bit out of my way."

Nyx let that one go and looked out the window, watching flat white desert turn to dunes. Kine didn't like silence. Give her a long stretch of stillness and eventually she'd change the subject.

Kine was government now, one of the breeding techs who worked at the compounds on the coast. She had some kind of slick security clearance that went well with her hijab and lonely bed. Nyx saw her only when she was ferrying samples to and from the front—just another blood dealer, another organ stealer.

"A ship came into Faleen this week," Kine said as she rolled up the window. Nyx saw the wide sleeve of her burnous come down, flashing a length of paler skin from wrist to elbow—dusty sand instead of sun dark. "If you're looking for magicians to help you bring in this deserter, there are a whole mess of them gathering in Faleen. I hear even the lower sort are there, the sort who might—"

"Where from?"

"The magicians?"

"The ship."

"Oh, yes. The ship is from New Kinaan."

Colonists had been barred from Umayma for a thousand years. Nyx hadn't even seen a ship in a decade. Umayma sat at the edge of everything; most of the sky was dark at night. All she ever saw moving up there were dead satellites and broken star carriers from the beginning of the world.

"I've corresponded with them for some time," Kine said, "for my genetics work. They fight another of God's wars out there in the dark, can you believe it?"

"Does the radio work?" Nyx asked. Knowing aliens were out there killing each other for God, too, just depressed her. She leaned forward to fiddle with the tube jutting out of the dashboard.

"No," Kine said. She pinched her mouth. "How did you lose Tej?"

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Nyx wasn't sure she could answer that question herself, let alone give Kine a good answer.

"You have any weapons?" Nyx asked.

Kine's face scrunched up like a date. "If you can't tell me that, then tell me who's tracking you."

"You giving me the fourth inquisition?"

"Nyxnissa," she said, in the same hard tone she used for quoting the Kitab.

Nyx dipped her head out the open window. The air was clearing up.

"Raine," she said.

Kine's hands tightened on the wheel. She shifted pedals. The bakkie rattled and belched and picked up speed. Dust and dead beetles roiled behind them.

"You're doing black work, aren't you?" Kine said. "One of your dirty bounties. I don't like dealing with bounty hunters. Raine is the worst of them, and you're no better, these days. I'll drop you at the gates of Faleen, but no farther."

Nyx nodded. The gate would be good. More might get Kine killed.

Raine would bring Nyx in if he had to cut up half of Nasheen to do it. Nyx had been a part of his team, once, and it had been a great way of picking up skills and paying off some magician-debts for having her body reconstituted. After a while, though, he'd started to treat her like just another dumb hunter, another body to be bloodied and buried. When she started selling out her womb on the black market, well, that had made the animosity mutual. He had good reason to track her down now. Reasons a lot less personal than cutting off his cock.

"Tej was a good boy," Kine said, "You kill good men for a lost cause just like Raine."

"Raine always got us back over the border."

"Raine isn't a bel dame. He's a bounty hunter."

"There's not much difference."

"God knows the difference."

"Yeah, well, we all do it our own way."

"Yes," Kine said, and her hands tightened on the wheel. "We're all trying to cure the war."

Spoken like a true organic technician, Nyx thought.

"But there is a difference," Kine said, turning to look at her again, hard and sober now. "Bel dames enforce God's laws. They keep our boys at the front and our women honest. Bounty hunters just bring in petty thieves and women doing black work."

Women like me, Nyx thought.

Her black market broker, Bashir so Saud, owned a cantina in Faleen. The cantina was first. Even on a botched delivery, Bashir owed her at least half what



it was worth. If Nyx had taken the job in Faleen instead of through Bashir's agents in Punjai, she'd have half her money now and wouldn't be so hard up. As it was, her pockets were empty. The last of her currency had been eaten with Tej.

They turned off the paved track and onto the Queen Zubair Highway that bisected Nasheen from the Chenjan border to the sea. The road signs were popular shooting targets for Chenjan operatives and Nasheenian youth. Most of the metal markers were pocked with bullet holes and smeared in burst residue. A careful eye could spot the shimmering casings of unexploded bursts lining the highway.

If dropping the womb kept Raine and Nyx's sisters busy long enough trying to track it down so they could tag and bag it, she could collect her note, call in some favors from the magicians, and maybe find a way to clear up this whole fucking mess.

Maybe.

A three-hundred-year-old water purifying plant marked the edge of the old Faleenian city limits. The city itself had lapped at the organic filter surrounding the plant for half a century before a group of Chenjan terrorists set off a sticky burst that ate up flesh and metal, scouring the eastern quarter of the city and leaving the plant on the edge of a wasteland. The government had rebuilt the road and the plant, but the detritus of the eastern quarter remained a twisted ruin. Chenjan asylum seekers, draft dodgers, and foreign women had turned the devastated quarter into a refugee camp. A colorful stir of humanity wove through the ruins now, hawking avocados and mayflies and baskets of yellow roaches. Nyx caught the spicy stink of spent fire beetles and burning glow worms.

As the dusty ridges of the refugee camps turned into the walled yards and high-rises of what passed for the Faleenian suburbs, the massive ship from New Kinaan came into view, rearing above the old gated city center of Faleen like some obscene winged minaret.

Faleen was a port city, the kind that took in the ragged handfuls of off-world ships that sputtered into its archaic docking bay every year looking for repairs, supplies, and usually—directions. Faleen wasn't the sort of place anybody off-world came to on purpose. Most of the ships that rocketed past Umayma were so alien in their level of technology that they couldn't have put into the old port if they wanted to. The port design hadn't changed much since the beginning of the world, and most everybody on Umayma wanted to keep it that way.

They drove past women and girls walking along the highway carrying baskets on their heads and huge nets over their shoulders. Bugs were popular trade with the magicians in Faleen. Professional creepers caught up to three kilos a

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day—striped chafers, locusts, tumblebugs, spider wasps, dragonflies, pselaphid beetles, fungus weevils—and headed to the magicians' gym to trade them in for opium, new kidneys, good lungs, maybe a scraping or two to take off the cancers.

Kine pulled up outside the towering main gate of the dusty city, scattering young girls, sand, and scaly chickens from her path with a blast of her horn. Another cloud of beetles escaped from the leak in the back and bloomed around the bakkie. Nyx batted away the bugs and jumped out.

She took one long look at the main gate, then swung back to look at Kine. She half opened her mouth to ask.

"I'm not giving you any money," Kine said.

Nyx grimaced.

"Go with God!" Kine yelled after her.

Nyx raised a hand. She'd left God in Chenja.

Kine shifted pedals and turned back onto the highway, heading for the interior.

Nyx turned toward the two giant slabs of organic matting that were the main gates into Faleen. Rumor had it they'd seen better days as compression doors on some star carrier the First Families rode down on from the moons.

Nyx pulled up the hood of her burnous and bled into the traffic heading through the gate. She passed the broken tower of a minaret and walked through narrow alleys between mud-brick buildings whose precipitous lean threatened a swift death. She didn't much like the stink and crowd of cities, but you could lose yourself in a city a lot more easily than you could out in farming communities like Mushirah. She had run to the desert and the cities for the anonymity. And to die for God.

None of that had worked out very well.

Bashir's cantina was at the edge of the Chenjan quarter, and the ass end of it served as the public entrance to the magicians' gym and fighting ring. Bashir made a pretty penny on fight nights when all of Faleen's starving tailors, tax clerks, bug merchants, and renegade printers crowded in through the bar to watch the fight. The ones who couldn't get into the main fighting area contented themselves with drinking cheap rice wine and whiskey, listening to the steady *slap-slap* of gloved fists meeting flesh and the damp thumping of sweaty bodies hitting the mat.

Bashir also made a little money on the side as a black work broker.

Two tall women with shoulders as wide as the doorway stopped Nyx at the cantina stoop.

"You have an appointment?" one of them asked. "It's private business only until we open for tonight's fight."

"Do I look like I have an appointment?"

“Who the fuck are you?”

“Tell her I’m the bel dame.”

The women shifted on their feet. “I’ll get her,” the biggest one said.

There was a time when Nyx had enjoyed throwing that title around on a job. “Yeah, I’m a bel dame,” and “bel dames—like *me*.” These days the whole dance just made her tired. She’d cut off a lot of boys’ heads over the last three years. Draft dodgers, mostly, and deserters like this Arran kid who came back into Nasheen still contaminated with shit from the front.

Nyx pushed at her sore belly and rocked back on her heels. She wondered if Bashir sold morphine before noon.

The bouncer came back and said, “She’ll see you.”

Nyx ducked after her into the dark, smoky interior of the cantina. Dust clotted the air, and bug-laced sand covered most of the floor. It was good for soaking up blood and piss.

Bashir sat at a corner table smoking sweet opium. Nyx could taste it. The smell made her nauseous. Bashir had two bottles of sand-colored whiskey at the table, and someone had left behind a still-smoking cigar that smelled more like marijuana than sen. Bashir had two teenage boys beside her, both just shy of draft age, maybe fifteen. They were sallow and soft-looking and kept their hair long, braided, and belled. Somebody had kept them out of training. Letting adolescent boys go that soft was illegal in most districts, even if they were prostitutes. They wouldn’t last a day at the front—the Chenjans would mash through them like overripe squash.

“Nyxnissa,” Bashir said. She exhaled a plume of rich smoke. “Thought I’d seen the last of you.”

“Most people think that,” Nyx said, sliding next to one of the boys. He flinched. She outweighed him by at least twenty-five kilos. “Until I show up again.”

“How was your trip?” Bashir asked. She wore red trousers and a stained short coat but kept her head uncovered. Her skin was a shade paler than those who worked in the desert, but the tough, leathery look of her face said her wealth was recently acquired. Like the boys, she was getting fat and soft at the edges, but unlike the boys, she’d fought it out on the sand with the best of them in her youth. There was muscle under the affluence.

“Not as smooth as I hoped,” Nyx said. She pulled off her hood.

Bashir looked her over with a lazy sort of interest. “A bug told me you don’t have what we bargained for.”

“I need a drink,” Nyx said, “and half of what you owe me.” She hailed the woman at the bar, but Bashir waved her woman back.

“The bug says you dropped the purse at the butcher’s.”

“I did,” Nyx said. “It was a high-risk job. You knew that when your agent gave

it to me.” She’d been carrying genetic material worth a nice chunk of money in that womb. Bashir wasn’t going to let it go easy, no, but bel dames made good black market runners which made them valuable to people like Bashir—until they got caught. Word got around when you did business with gene pirates.

Being unarmed made it easier to resist the urge to shoot Bashir in the head and demand the contents of the cantina’s till from the barmaid. She was too close to the magicians’ gym to get away with that.

“It was a substantial purse,” Bashir said.

Nyx leaned back against the seat. The boy next to her had a hold of his glass, but wasn’t drinking. Like many Nasheenan women, Bashir was known to like boys, but these ones were a little young and soft for a desert matron.

“Where’d you pick up these two?” Nyx asked.

“Lovely, eh?” Bashir said. Her dark eyes glinted in the low light. The place was too cheap for bulbs. They were still using worms in glass. “They were a gift. From a friend.”

Bashir didn’t have friends. Nyx cut a look at the door. The bouncers had closed it. The woman at the bar was still wiping the same length of counter she’d been mopping when Nyx dropped in. I shouldn’t have come, Nyx thought. She should have gone straight to the magicians and asked for sanctuary. It had been only a matter of time before turning Nyx in was worth more than a black market purse. But, fuck, she’d needed the money from this job.

Nyx knew the answer but asked anyway.

“Who gave them to you?”

Bashir showed her teeth.

“You’ll get shit from the magicians for crossing a bel dame,” Nyx said. They could take her money, her shoes, her sword, her *bloody fucking partner*, but they couldn’t take her title. “How much did you get for selling me out? I’m worth a lot more than a couple of fuckable boys.”

“Your reputation’s been tumbling for a good long while, Nyxnissa. The bounty hunters have your name in a hat now, and if you’re lucky, it’ll be Raine who brings you in and not some young honey pot trying to prove something by cutting off your head. What would your sisters say?”

“Leave the bel dame family out of it.”

“There’s been some stirring in the bel dame council. Rumor has it they want to clean up this little mess with you internally, the way Alharazad cleaned up the council. They’ll cut you up and put you in a bag.”

“Then you and your pirates are losing a good ferrier.”

“You don’t deliver enough to make yourself worth the risk. And now you dropped your womb, so I don’t have anything invested. Putting out a note on you got me a good purse for reporting a pirate. Delivering you to the bounty office and claiming my own bounty makes us even.”

So Bashir had turned her in for bread.

“How much am I going for?” Nyx asked. Her hands itched for a blade that she no longer carried. She was good with a sword. The guns? Not so much.

“About fifty,” Bashir said.

Well, that was something.

The boy beside Nyx took his hand away from his drink.

The woman behind the bar moved toward the kitchen.

All right, then.

Nyx kicked up onto the tabletop before the boy could steady the pistol in his other hand. The gun went off with a pop and burst of yellow smoke.

She threw a low roundhouse kick to the other boy's face and leapt off the table before Bashir could get her scattergun free.

Reflex sent her running for the back door, kicking up sand behind her. She shouldered into the kitchen, knocked past a startled Mhorian cook, and ran headlong out the open back door and into the alley.

A strong arm shot out and slammed into her throat. The blow took her off her feet.

Nyx hit the sand and rolled.

Still choking, Nyx tried to get up, but Raine already had hold of her.

He twisted her arm behind her and forced her face back into the sand. She spit and turned her head, gulping air. She saw two pairs of dirty sandaled feet in front of her. She tried to look up at who owned them.

Little ropy-muscled Anneke hadn't broken a sweat. She stood chewing a wad of sen, one arm supporting the weight of the rifle she kept lodged just under her shoulder. She was as dark as a Chenjan, and about the size of a twelve-year-old. The other feet belonged to the skinny half-breed Taite, who wasn't a whole hell of a lot older than thirteen or fourteen.

“You must be desperate,” Nyx said, spitting more sand, “to use Taite and Anneke as muscle.”

“That's all the greeting I get?” Raine asked. He pulled her up, kept a grip on her arm, and tugged off her burnous.

“Where did you lose your gear, girl? I taught you better than that.” He shook the burnous out, probably thinking she'd hidden something in it.

Raine was a large man, a head taller than Nyx, just as dark and twice as massive. His face was broad and flat and stamped with two black, expressionless eyes, like deep water from a community well. The hilt of a good blade cut through a slit in the back of his brown burnous. He was pushing Bashir's age—one of the few who'd survived the front.

She grunted.

He took off her baldric and passed it to Anneke for inspection.

“Nothing here,” Anneke said, and tossed the baldric at Nyx's feet.

"You're clean," Raine said, half a question. "You know how much you're going for?"

"More than fifty," Nyx said.

He took Nyx by her braids and brought her close to his bearded face. The beard was new, a Chenjan affectation that would get him noticed on the street and pegged as a political radical. "Do you know what the queen does to bel dames who turn black?" he asked. "When they start selling zygotes to gene pirates? Those pirates will breed monsters in jars and sell them to Chenjans. But you don't care about that, do you? You need pocket money."

Raine had recruited her from the magicians' gym after she was reconstituted. They'd spent long nights and longer days talking about the war and his hatred for those whose work he saw as perpetuating it. Gene pirates—selling genetic material to both sides—were no better to him than Tirhani arms dealers.

Raine released her.

"I didn't train you to be a bel dame," he said. "I taught you to be a bounty hunter, to fight real threats to Nasheen like young bel dames who sell out their organs to gene pirates."

"I got issued a bel dame note for a contaminated boy. I know he's in Faleen. I needed the cash from the womb to bring him in."

"You should have given the note to a real bel dame."

Nyx looked him in the eye. "I don't give up notes."

"Taite," Raine said, holding Nyx with one strong arm while reaching toward the boy. Taite had the half-starved look of a kid who had grown up outside the breeding compounds. He reached into his gear bag.

They were going to truss her up and sell her.

Nyx stood in the back alley of Bashir's cantina. At the end of the alley she could clearly see the back entrance to the magicians' gym. Anneke was leaning against the wall now, rifle still in hand. Getting shot would hurt.

Getting trussed up and hauled into the Chenjan district, though... that would be the end of the job. And probably a lot more.

Nyx tensed. Taite pulled out the sticky bands from his gear bag and threw them to Raine.

Nyx twisted and swiveled in Raine's grip while he tried to catch the bands. She palmed him in the solar plexus. He grunted. His grip loosened. She pulled free and bolted.

Anneke jumped to attention. Nyx pushed past her.

The rifle popped.

Nyx felt a sharp, stabbing thump on her right hip, as if someone had set a sledge hammer on fire and hit her with it.

She staggered down the alley and clutched her hip. A burst of mud-brick exploded behind her. She heard two more rounds go off.

The red door of the magicians' gym appeared at her right. She stumbled and pounded on the door.

"Sanctuary!" she yelled. "Bel dame! My life for a thousand! Sanctuary!"

She heard Anneke yell, "Fuck!"

The pack of them ran toward her. Raine's face was dark. Nyx screamed, "My life for a thousand!" and pounded on the door again. There was nothing easier to shoot than a stationary target.

Anneke was a hand breadth away. She reached for Nyx's hair.

The magicians' door opened. A waft of cold air billowed into the alley, bringing with it the stink of sweat and leather. Nyx fell inside, into darkness. She tucked her feet underneath her, pulling them across the threshold.

"Fuck!" Anneke said again.

Nyx lay at a pair of bare feet cloaked by yellow trousers. She heard a low buzzing sound, and a soapy organic filter popped up over the doorway. Through the filmy gauze of the filter, Nyx saw Raine standing behind his crew, her burnous still in his hand.

She looked up the length of billowing yellow trousers and into the sapphire-eyed face of Yah Reza.

"You're bleeding all over my floor, baby doll," Yah Reza said, and shut the door.