

City of Nals

Many call Nals the hidden gem of the Verdala Empire and they might very well be right. The city stands tall and proud, guarding the empire's vulnerable seafront with quiet strength. But what most choose to forget is that this city of silks and gold was built upon ruins. It took two hundred years for Nals to be reborn. Now, where ash once choked the streets, opulent buildings rise—marble and gold woven into their very bones. The people move like currents through its polished avenues, dressed in flowing silks and adorned with jewels that catch the sun like fire. It is, undeniably, a sight to behold.

Between the shifting crowd, a shadow moved. Fluid and fast. Slipping silently through narrow alleys.

Her eyes swept across the surroundings like a hawk circling high above, missing nothing below. She wore a black lace dress that clung to her like smoke, an enormous hat veiled most of her face in shadow. Each step she took echoed against the brick walls, sharp and rhythmic, drawing unwanted attention in the otherwise silent alley. She needed cover—but that wouldn't be hard to find.

Two alleys later, she emerged into a sprawling square, vibrant and chaotic with city life.

Merchants shouted over one another, hawking wares to passersby who barely slowed to glance. Beggars crowded the corners, hands outstretched, eyes hollow with hunger and hope. Street musicians filled the air with discordant melodies, while artists painted under tattered canopies. Maids ran errands with baskets in hand, and children darted between legs, kicking a worn leather ball with reckless laughter.

Everything the city had to offer, collided here in the heart of Nals.

The shadow paused for a moment to take it all in. She had heard stories and tales, but no words could have prepared her for the strange contrast between what she saw and what she felt.

Tall stone buildings wrapped around the market's center like silent guardians. Their upper floors were draped in ivy and silk banners, fluttering in the warm sea breeze. Fashion houses displayed gowns of glimmering chiffon and embroidered velvet; a perfumery let its fragrant smoke curl lazily out of a bronze vent; and jewelers set diamonds to catch the afternoon light, glittering rays of colours splashing the windows.

But all of it, every bit of elegance, was swallowed by the overpowering stench of fish.

In the center of the square pulsed the largest fish market in the city. The smell was sharp and unforgiving, as briny and foul as the sea itself. The noise was deafening—traders yelling over one another, crowds shoving through narrow paths between stalls, trying to claim the freshest catch of the day. Cats weaved between crates and baskets, hoping for a dropped scrap or a distracted vendor.

The contrast between the meticulously curated storefronts and the raw chaos of the fish market was almost cruel—an unspoken truth about Nals itself. A city covering poverty in gold and marble.

Although there was still much to uncover in the market, she had a mission—and she began to move again, this time without urgency. Her steps were measured, deliberate. She was no longer just passing through; she was hunting.

Somewhere within these old stone walls, hidden in plain sight, was a treasure whispered about in stories. A hidden gem said to exist only here, in the central square. And she—well, she was a hunter. A damn good one.

She walked the perimeter slowly, her sharp eyes scanning every nook and crevice carved into the facades of those elegant buildings. Then, not long after, between a wine shop and a jeweler's storefront, she saw it.

A white, imposing door—smooth and solid, carved from heavy wood, with nothing but a single, oversized bronze handle at its center.

There you are.

The sweet taste of victory curled on her tongue as she stepped forward, wrapped her fingers around the handle, and let it fall with a sharp clang. The sound echoed through the stone square, loud enough to make the jewels in the display window next door tremble on their stands.

If her heart squeezed with anticipation, her face didn't show it. She stood still, silent, waiting for someone to answer the door—to see if the hidden gem she was searching for truly lay behind it.

But one thing was certain about her: when it came to patience, she was far from perfect.

Without a flicker of hesitation, she seized the bronze handle again and let it fall—this time with even more force. A sharp clang rang out, louder than before. She paused, waited a few seconds, then did it again.

Her luck was that, with the fish market roaring behind her, no one seemed to notice the woman knocking on an unmarked door like a madwoman.

On the tenth knock, the door finally creaked open.

A tall figure stood in the doorway, dressed in a crisp maid's uniform. Her face was twisted into a scowl so sharp it could cut glass. On a scale from one to ten, her annoyance sat comfortably at eleven.

She gave the lady in front of her a once-over, then, summoning every ounce of suppressed rage, asked through gritted teeth:

"Can I help you with something?"

The lady smiled beneath her veil, unbothered by the question. She didn't waste time with a reply—instead, she tilted her head ever so slightly and spoke in a voice that was sweet, but unmistakably commanding.

"Is this how the nobles of this estate teach their maids to speak to esteemed guests?"

She let the words hang for a breath before adding, just sharp enough to sting:

"I must admit, I'm disappointed. But perhaps your master will be interested in hearing how I was received."

The maid's face drained of color the moment she realized what her unchecked anger might have cost her.

Her master had been expecting someone. In her irritation over the persistent knocking, she hadn't bothered to properly look at the woman standing before her.

But now, with fear seeping in, the signs were impossible to miss. The dress was made of black lace so fine it could only have come from the ballrooms of high society. Her posture was flawless: straight-backed, elegant, the kind of bearing drilled into noble daughters from the moment they could walk.

The only mystery left was her face, hidden beneath the enormous, elegantly tilted hat. A deliberate choice, no doubt.

"I am so sorry, my lady. This maid let her tongue slip," the woman stammered. "It won't happen again! Please... allow me to show you inside."

She bowed deeply, her head low, as the lady looked directly at her—still wearing that same sweet smile, the kind that could either melt hearts or cut through bone.

“Of course,” the noblewoman said, voice honeyed. “Lead the way.”

She followed the maid into a grand foyer, where the walls were wrapped in handcrafted wallpaper—an intricate blend of red and white silks, threaded through with gold to form a sprawling pattern of blooming roses. The design extended into the hallway beyond, turning every surface into a garden of fabric and shine.

Roses.

The lady wondered briefly if the flower was part of the family’s crest. Information a noblewoman would have.

The maid walked briskly ahead, leaving her no time to linger and study the pattern more closely. As they moved deeper into the mansion, a sweet scent began to fill the air. Warm, soft, and unmistakably vanilla.

She’d smelled it before. That much, she was certain of.

Before she knew it, the maid stopped in front of a heavy oak door and pushed it open, revealing a spacious receiving room. The noblewoman stepped inside, but before she could utter a word, the maid was already turning to leave.

“I will go inform my master that you’ve arrived. He will be with you shortly. Someone will bring refreshments in the meantime.”

She stood still, watching the woman disappear down the hall with surprising speed. What an interesting character, she thought, a malicious smile playing beneath the veil.

With no one to greet her, she began to pace slowly, measuring the room from one end to the other. It was simpler than the opulent foyer and gilded hallways. The walls were painted a pale, almost sickly green, and nearly every surface was covered in bookshelves. Expensive tomes lined them from floor to ceiling, many still smelling of fresh ink and new bindings.