Chapter 1

What can you do with guilt and loss except move forward? So Rose moved forward, travelled as she had always done, until she washed up in the reborn nation of Draugma Skeu. And there, she stopped. Was she a hero looking for a cause worth fighting for, a little girl looking for a place to call home, a piece of jetsam caught by chance on a rocky shore?

She was – unused to city life. It seemed to manifest as a series of obstacles. When she wanted to walk, the streets confined her. When she wanted to read, the pneumatic mail pestered her. And one night, when she wanted to sleep, someone came to kill her.

This last irritation announced itself as an intermittent, awkward scratching at the window. It stood out against the ambient noise of beating wings and scurrying claws. She picked up her revolver from the bedside table and listened. Weak, diffuse light turned the contents of her bedroom into abstract shapes, floating deracinated in the void.

When she'd first moved in, she had reinforced the window lock and moved her bed so it out of the line of sight from the window. The intruder hadn't anticipated this, and was struggling.

She got out of bed, picked up a lantern, and crossed the room. Waxy floorboards clung to the soles of her feet with each step.

Waiting by the window with her back to the wall, she ran her thumb across the steel of her revolver, across the cold and unforgiving curves, and fantasised about all the ways she could win.

The window lock gave way with a crack.

She let the intruder crawl halfway through the window before she turned the lantern on briefly. Just long enough to see him and the pistol her was holding.

After that, the battle was hers. While he was still trying to come to terms with the unexpected flash of light, she wrenched his pistol out of his hand and dragged him through the window, where he fell on his face. A dull thud from a dull opponent. He tried to defend himself, failed. The usual. She put her foot on the back of his knee and pressed down, hard enough to hurt, gentle enough to not cause any lasting damage.

“Are you going to give up, or am I going to have to shoot you?” she asked.

He stopped struggling and lay there, breathing heavily. She felt the rhythm of it through his knee. Some acerbic aftershave stink floated off him.

“I'm not hearing an answer,” she said.

“I give up.” His voice was gravelly, and slightly artificial, like he was doing it deliberately to sound tough.

“That's your first smart choice of the night. You should be proud of yourself.” Disappointment made her petty. You woke her up at night, the least you could do was offer a decent fight. She released him and turned the light on.

Still lying on the floor, the intruder glared up at her. He'd slicked back his hair in the style of gendarmes from the old Draugma Skeu dictatorship, but in the scuffle it had lost its shape, and oily strands flopped over his face.

Anxiety struck her. Her comb – where was her comb? She checked the shelf anxiously for a moment until she found it. It was still intact. She ran a thumb across the bloodwood, tracing the

grain, to reassure herself of its existence.

Priorities: She tied him to a chair with her rolled-up bedsheet, took the bullets out of his pistol, and closed the window. The lock had snapped. It would need to replaced. “The Welkin rings,” she muttered.

With practical matters dealt with, there was space to feel self-conscious. She put on a linen shirt over her nightgown, then sat on her bed to his left, where the binding on his hands was visible and he'd have to crane his neck to look at her.

“Well?” she asked. “Are you going to explain what you're doing here?”

He glared at her.

“No?” She leant forward and studied his face. There was something familiar about it.

She took her vellum off the shelf and unrolled it on her lap.

The vellum looked up at her with three amber lizard eyes. It recognised her, but had been trained not to react until given the correct signal:

Rose brushed her fingers across its scales. The scales changed colour. Waves of amber and pink rolled across its body. She brushed a command pattern onto its skin, to call up some images. The colours changed again, grew more detailed, and resolved into a picture of a human face.

It wasn't the face of her intruder. She called up the next image.

The people in the vellum's gallery were members of a group called Honour Restoration. They saw themselves as the successors of the dictatorship, destined to bring order to the chaos of freedom.

Rose had found eleven of them in the last year. She had killed eight and convinced three that leaving and never returning would do wonders for their life expectancy.

And number twelve had just thoughtfully delivered himself right into her room. The face of her intruder smirked at her from the vellum's skin. She moved her finger back and forth on the vellum, and his face turned slightly to the left and right. With their widely-spaced eyes, vella always picked up a hint of parallax.

“Quentin Sudge,” she read out. “Age 29. Formerly a border guard for the Draugma Skeu Gendarmerie.”

That got his attention. His gaze hardened. “You,” he said. His faux-gravel tone eroded to sand.

“Me.”

“You foreign fatherfucker, you think you can come here and interfere with our affairs? And on the side of the copies! Killing humans! You can't even speak Paene properly.” He mockingly imitated her pronunciation of a difficult vowel, and finished by spitting at her. The combination of uncontrolled anger and having to turn his head did nothing for his aim. The saliva landed on his own shoulder and ran down his arm.

Eloquent, he wasn't. Able to compose a decent insult, he wasn't. But at least he knew something about her. “Fatherfucker” was a slur directed at her homeland, Koymos, where one's immediate family didn't include the father.

“You know, Quentin, since you're here, my captive audience, there's something I really want to ask. What do you hope to accomplish with all this Honour Restoration shit? Even if you had killed me?” She stood and swept her arm out at the window. “The dictatorship is over. Draugma Skeu is now the land of freedom and kindness and let's-all-get-along-ness. They have freedom. What do Honour Restoration have? A dwindling gang of thugs and an assassin who's less lethal than a post-banquet fart.”

Sudge's offered her a poisonous smile. “If you say so.”

Rose had learned by experience that captured opponents tended to offer two flavours of smug. The first was delusion, the sort that came from someone so righteous, so arrogant, that they believed they would win despite all evidence to the contrary. The second was underhanded, the sort that came from someone who had a hidden plan.

This was the second flavour.

He knew something she didn't. Which meant she'd have to find out.

She'd also have to tell her colleagues. That was the worst part of living in a city, even one as free as this. Having to contort herself to the needs of others, to twist and wind through social conventions. She'd been free for so long that the nation of the free felt like an imposition.

She checked Sudge's bindings and threw a blanket over his head.

With an ink brush, she composed a message in the calligraphy forced on her when she was young: Intricate, sinuous characters like theatrical dancers. The ink lost its lustre as it dried.

She rolled up the note and put it in a pneumatic capsule, set the address levers for Pangur House, and put it under the brass tube at the mail slot. She opened the valve. The city inhaled and took her message into itself.

Back in the bedroom, she uncovered Sudge. The side of his face had swollen, discoloured and puffy like a fungal fruiting body.

“Now, what the hell am I going to do with you?” she asked him. “I don't want to kill you, not when you're sitting there helpless. I'd send you on your way, tell you to leave and never return. But to do that, I'd have to trust you wouldn't come back and make a nuisance of yourself. And you're not giving me much to work with.”

Sudge sneered. “Pathetic. You're too soft to execute us, too soft to lock us up. You can't govern.”

“See? That's exactly what I mean.” Rose sat on the bed and watched him for a few moments. “I could break your fingers. You'd be alive, but you wouldn't much of a threat. Is that too brutal? You know, the dictatorship did something similar to a friend of mine.”

If the threat troubled Sudge, he didn't show it.

“Who sent you? Where are they?”

No answer.

“Come on, Quentin. I don't want to repeat myself.”

No answer.

“Last chance. Who sent you? Where are they?”

No answer.

So Rose broke every finger on his left hand.

While Sudge was howling and cursing her through a gag, Rose wrote down the address: *23 Shoemaker Street*. That was the only useful information he knew. A contact there had given him money, equipment, and her address. He didn't know their name.

She gave him an analgesic, set the bones, and put a medusoid on his fingers. The translucent blue animal explored the damaged flesh with squirming tentacles. If Sudge was lucky, his only memento of this encounter would be some stiffness and pain.

“I'm sorry I had to do that,” she said. “But I did warn you.”

She sent another message to Pangur House, looked up 23 Shoemaker Street in her atlas, strapped her comb to her thigh, got dressed, and paced. Wouldn't do to leave Sudge on his own. Couldn't take him with her. Come on, come on.

She ungagged Sudge. Ribbons of saliva stretched out and snapped. “Do you play Glass Beads? No? Shame. You know, it's almost impossible to find decent players in Draugma Skeu. What about Pyramids? Everyone plays Pyramids.”

But he wasn't in the mood to play Pyramids either, so she read instead.

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It was Song Hour by the time Rose's colleagues from Difficulties Guild arrived. If she'd been out in the world, she would be able to see the sunrise; in Draugh, where buildings hid the horizon, she saw only molten copper clouds against a cobalt sky.

When Rose opened the door, there was spectre crouching in the corridor, velvety wings folded up against russet fur. She swivelled her giant ears and lifted her baroque, leaf-shaped nose to focus on the apartment, and gave an echolocation chirp. “Here for Sudge,” she said.

“This way,” said Rose.

The spectre scrambled into Rose's apartment. In the air, with their wings spread, spectres looked magnificent. Hanging from the ceiling, they looked austere. On the ground, they looked like a pile of fluffy blankets.

“Careful with his left hand,” Rose advised her.

“Noted,” said the spectre. “Is he safe to exile?”

“Normally I'd say yes, but I want to see who sent him first.” Until then, Sudge would stay in Pangur House. A violation of the no-prisons policy, but that was the sort of compromise Difficulties Guild dealt in.

While the spectre ushered Sudge away, Rose collected her revolvers and knives.