

Chapter 1

"You'd do best to remove your fingers from my purse before you lose them," Nefeli murmured.

Nefeli's blade was a battered, ancient thing, but she kept the edge sharp and its point deadly. She'd been offered nicer daggers, but it had once belonged to her friend Amal, so she kept it close. Good thing, too, with street rats abounding and just waiting for unattended coin to steal.

"I—I'm sorry m—miss." The child's eyes were wide as they stared at where Nefeli's blade pressed to their wrist. Their curled hair was unruly and snarled, and the smell of their filth just about burned Nefeli's nostrils. Nothing more than a little street rat smeared with gutter grime and gods knew what else.

A pang of sympathy hit Nefeli, but she didn't let it show. She knew what it was like to be tasked with picking pockets in hopes of gaining enough to eat that night, much less a pallet to sleep on. But if she let her feelings show, it'd be only a matter of time before another targeted her.

"P—please don't call for an oathsman," they stammered, frozen against her blade.

Nefeli leaned close enough that she could smell the rank sweat on the kid's skin, using her body to block anyone's view. If any curious eyes found them, all they'd see was a beaming woman talking to a child. She needed to get this handled and fast, she really didn't want to spill blood on the beach.

Street rat business was always so messy.

"Bold of you to think I'd need an oathsman. This is a religious event, child. How much mercy do you think a crowd would show to a thief disrupting a once-in-a-lifetime ceremony?"

The child flinched. A genuine reflex, not a calculated one. They glanced down, but not before Nefeli saw the wetness gathering in their eyes.

So they were new to the life.

Nefeli eyed where the *great* and *noble* leader of Dhira—Khareis Nezha—sipped cold mint lemonade beneath a luxurious portable canopy alongside her assistant and entourage, all while the commoners marinated in their own sweat.

The Khareis would take none too kindly to a blade being pulled. Under such auspicious circumstances, Nefeli held no illusion that she'd be allowed to go free, even if she'd been the one about to be robbed. It was luck that nobody around them was the wiser, thank the gods.

It would take even more luck for the Khareis's assistant not to recognize her if Nefeli drew her attention.

"Look, kid, I'm going to let you go." The child's head shot up and she met their gaze with a steely look. "You're not to idle. If I catch you pulling this on someone else, you lose your little finger."

Those were the street prices for getting caught. If the kid had any sense at all, they'd know her for what she was—one of them.

"Thank you, miss. Thank you."

The relief in the kid's gaze broke her a little. "Before nightfall, go to the shack next to the Dancing Pig. Looks abandoned but knock three times and ask for Mehri. She'll take care of you."

The crowd's energy thrummed and people around them surged forward, but Nefeli and the street rat remained still, like rocks amid a river. The acolytes must have finally graced the spectators with their presence. If she didn't move quickly, she'd miss out on a prime vantage point so she could give her sister Sadiya every minute detail of the ritual.

"Go," Nefeli said, shoving the kid gently before sheathing her blade. The child didn't respond, only darted through the bodies around them. Nefeli kept her eye out until she saw them clambering up the slope, just barely catching when they gave the thieves hand sign of thanks.

She let out a long-suffering sigh and adjusted the green-glass spectacles that protected her eyes from bright light. It was a good thing, too, because the sun was unrelenting. She and the other spectators were fully exposed to the elements on the beach, the blackened cliffs rising high behind them, blocking the view of the bustling port city that lay just beyond.

Access to the spit of sand was usually reserved for the temples and their acolytes, but not today. No, today they allowed their citizens a glimpse into the priests' ancient magic in anticipation of the Great Summit. Something about bringing god-blessed water to the Burned Palace to fuel its waters for a fortnight so people far beyond her station could do gods knew what. That political folly was far beyond the likes of a street rat-turned-thief, as was the religious brouhaha that *should've* started fifteen minutes prior. And the only thing worse than suffering through a mind-numbing archaic ritual was suffering through one in the humid-ass heat of summer. Trust her sister to convince Nefeli to attend something so inane. Sadiya had actually begged. *Begged*. With *tears*. Which had conspicuously disappeared from Sadiya's eyes as soon as Nefeli had relented.

The little manipulator.

It wasn't even like Nefeli could tune out, either, not with Sadiya sure to be clinging onto every word as she recounted the details later. Nefeli couldn't truly be mad at Sadiya, though. It wasn't Sadiya's fault; she yearned for things she was no longer able to do. She would be there if her failing body would allow it.

So Nefeli would oblige and, in truth, she would relish the bright smile that broke across Sadiya's face. But Nefeli could *absolutely* whine about it.

She cut her gaze to the path between the cliffs where the red fabric of religious robes fluttered, the acolytes creeping their way along the path. If Nefeli missed their entrance, Sadiya wouldn't be mad, just *disappointed*. Nefeli shuddered at the thought and pushed through the bodies until she had a clear view.

Great gashes ranged across the cliff faces, evidence of the talons that tore down their length. Just out of sight were the crumbling ruins of great buildings once raised by the magic of the dragons and their riders.

The dragons were gone now, bound to their ancestral lands in the heart of the black sand desert, but clear evidence of their presence remained even after all these years—the fissures in the rock a permanent reminder of their violence, the blackened stone an eternal shrine to their flames. Nefeli could imagine them wheeling above, their cries ringing louder than the crash of the waves below. At least she thought the cries would be like that. For all she knew, they whistled like starlings.

If she was being honest, which she often wasn't, she wasn't just drinking in the sights for Sadiya. She was drinking them in for her—because with every use of her magic, Nefeli's sight tunneled in just a little bit faster.

It also helped her not feel so gods-damned edgy to be in front. At least this way it was less likely for someone to pop out from her blind areas and send her flinching. She never could trust what lay just beyond the cone of vision she could still see.

They looked like a wound, the red robes trickling their way along the cut in the cliffs. Seven in all, led by the Hierophant. His shaved head glistened in the sun, his kohl-rimmed eyes dark above his veil. A ceremonial blade hung from his belt.

The remaining six walked in two lines behind him, each pair holding a large deep-turquoise amphora between them, sigils tracing their way across the ocean-hued jugs in fiery script, only broken by deep cracks in the surface.

All of the acolytes were dressed identically, the scarlet robes cut generously to obscure their figures, the sleeves falling to just their elbows. Each of them wore a chain that ran from one pierced ear to the other, a gauzy veil guarding the lower half of their face and leaving their eyes exposed. A matching chain wrapped around their waist that jingled softly from the masses of amulets dangling along its length, the gems catching in the light with brilliant flashes of emerald, sapphire, topaz, and ruby.

Something inside Nefeli whispered, begged her to unravel the secrets of the amphorae's script. There was a glimmer about the sigils—their power calling to her own. She stamped down the urge to learn more. It wasn't like she could steal them and make some coin. Anyone who said knowledge was power was a damned fool. The greatest power of all was money.

The acolytes didn't spare the gathering a glance as they shuffled past, their veils hiding any expression. They didn't pause when they reached the water, didn't address the crowd, just followed the Hierophant into the surf, their robes billowing behind them like blood in the water. It wasn't until they were chest-deep that they turned as one to face the shore and lifted the consecrated vessels high above their heads.

Something in her gut tightened at the image. It was something none of them would ever see again, and especially not Nefeli. The crowd was rapt and silent—even the gulls overhead refused

to cry out, as though they knew what was happening was sacred—but when the Hierophant's blade flashed and his wrist dripped crimson into the froth and turned it pink, everyone inhaled as one.

In any language, across any class, blood meant business.

The Hierophant's voice rang out from its watery depths.

"Our world is a cracked amphora. Magic spills out into the darkness beneath." He paused for just a moment, letting the death knell of a statement toll out over the crowd before he continued.

"We call upon Uhtal and their sacred waters. For they are the ever-changing, the ever-needed. May their currents draw us swiftly, may their tides pull us closer to them, and may the sieve hold water yet."

A signing translator Nefeli hadn't noticed before gestured with elegant fingers, sharing the priest's holy words with those in the crowd unable to hear. The Hierophant continued, his voice booming over the surf.

"Let the Breaking be healed so that our souls may be filled once more."

The acolytes raised their spare hands in unison and water droplets rose. The hair on Nefeli's arms stood on end and her lungs burned as magic thickened the air, as if the water under her skin rose with the ocean tide before her, trying to join it and crest around the holy group.

Her saliva moved from her tongue to pool behind her teeth, vibrating and begging to be released. She clenched her jaw in response.

The droplets hovered above the acolytes, trembling as though they resisted the pull of the magic.

There was something pinched about the Hierophant's eyes and a glint caught her eye. He'd taken his blade to his skin once more, deepening the wound in his arm and painting the water with his blood.

Nefeli had never seen a ritual require so much payment.

Her heart thudded against her ribcage like a drum as she thought she saw the white of bone amidst the red. If the Hierophant felt pain, he didn't let it show.

Breathe. He knows what he's doing.

The water droplets high above swirled in a torrent, a tiny waterspout swaying this way and that. The ocean surged forward to swallow the priests and priestesses, cresting upward as soon as it met their bodies until all that was left visible was their fingertips stretching toward the sun-soaked sky.

"Grant upon us your strength, Uhtal. Bless this water so as to cleanse our world of brokenness. Gift us your power and will to forge the balance anew, in harmony with your sacred depths."

The glimmer around the edges of Nefeli's vision increased, an incessant shimmer against the light dancing across the ocean, and she shoved her spectacles further up her nose. The magic of the ceremony trembled; her own magic rose in response and begged to be used.

Blood coursed down the Hierophant's arm, a dark river feeding the sea and its power. A coil of dread curled in her stomach. It was too much. He was losing too much blood. She took a half step closer on instinct. Nobody was watching him sway in the water, the magic thick and heady in the air. But then she saw it, the collective tears in each of the other acolytes' eyes.

They knew.

Tension rose in Nefeli's muscles as she rooted herself in place, even as she scanned the crowd. The Khareis remained under her shade, her face showing nothing more than a static expression of pleasant interest. Nefeli knew it for what it was: a mask. Something was not going the way the Khareis had thought.

The Hierophant brought his hands down and the water streamed into the amphorae, splitting into the sacred three. As the last drop entered, the lids were brought down as one.

And despite the gaping cracks, they did not leak.

The magic receded in a wave and the water in Nefeli's veins calmed, leaving her feeling heavy and still. The ocean resumed its crashing along the shore and the acolytes struggled toward the sand, their vessels cradled tightly against their bodies.

The Hierophant crumpled, his form dropping below the surface, his rippling robes masking the blood that poured from him. The crowd gasped. Nefeli remained stone.

One priestess raised her head high, her knuckles white as she gripped her amphora and spoke.

"Our beloved Hierophant has given his life for this most sacred of ceremonies and joined Uhtal in his fathomless depths. Know that as his body sweeps from shore—drifting until he finds his final resting place among the shoals, feeding the Uhtal's creatures—his death a gift of life. And in turn, we pray his sacrifice will gift us all life. It is because of the Breaking that magic now flows from our grasp. With Uhtal's blessing, these waters will cure our broken world and create balance once more. Take heart, for Uhtal's water is within us all."

Nefeli's mouth dried. Magic was broken and with each passing generation, the cost of accessing such power grew. What once would have taken a sliver of her vision now took broad slices. In turn, the Hierophant had given his life to use what power he still possessed. Now he would be scavenged by sea creatures until he was nothing but bones.

The acolytes turned away, making their way up the path in a single line, their bare feet sending sprays of pillow-soft sand in the air with every step toward their temple. Once they were out of sight, the spell was broken. The crowd disbanded, eager to return to their day. Nobody looked to the ocean, to where someone had just given their life. In hopes of what? The fool's chance that someone had figured out how to fix magic since the last Summit? She scoffed and glanced to where the Hierophant's red robed drifted out to sea.

What a damned waste. It'd been centuries since the balance of the world had been broken. There would be no healing it.

She stayed there watching the corpse disappear, leaving only a dark smudge behind, the final evidence of his life spent.

For just a moment, Nefeli was eighteen again. Sand clung to the sticky sweat coating her trembling limbs as she dragged Amal's limp body beyond the break of the waves. The skin was cold beneath Nefeli's lips as she pressed a tender kiss to Amal's brow one final time. Amal's thick hair swirled in the water, veiling her face from view before the sea embraced her corpse.

And it'd been all Nefeli's fault.

Nefeli's breath squeezed its way through her throat as she blinked the burning sensation away from her eyes, tearing her gaze away from where the Hierophant had once stood.

She trudged up the path, her feet sinking into the soft sand, trying to keep her at the beach. The noise of the market hit her first, even before she crested the ridge. When she reached the street above, she paused to inhale deeply. The brine of the sea mingled with cumin and cardamom, cinnamon and cloves, a small glimpse of the spices just waiting to board the merchant ships at the harbor.

Nefeli passed a stall claiming to be selling pieces of genuine dragon scales, extolling loudly of their magical attributes. Her power didn't bother giving even the slightest of twinges. Nothing draconic about a single ware, though she had to appreciate the shopkeep's hustle. Not her problem if some naive idiots paid out the nose for fakes. The real thing might be imbued with wild magics, but with the dragons bound to the desert, any teeth, scales, or talons were rarer than Antyran rubies, and that was saying something.

Someone bumped against her shoulder and it took everything she had not to whirl as a piece of paper slid into her palm. She hadn't seen whoever it was; they'd stayed in her blind spot. Likely just by chance—she didn't let many know of her deteriorating vision. But as soon as the messenger had come, they were gone, melted into the crowd. Nefeli unfolded the message.

Dancing Pig. Second bell. I have a job for you.