

SHARDS OF TWILIGHT

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This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or real events is purely coincidental.

**For those who supported me,
yet did not make it here with me.**

**And those who came into my life,
and I hope will never leave it.**

Prologue

Marcen knelt on bare stone, hands bound behind his back, head bowed. Four heavy iron chains wrapped tight around his neck, they anchored him to the floor of his tiny pitch-black cell.

They hadn't killed him right away.

That had been unexpected— it also didn't mean anything good.

His breathing came fast and shallow.

Blood—his blood—pooled beneath him, a few rags had been all the care they'd been willing to give him. He of course could not see it— but he could feel it.

A deep anger boiled inside of him— at the Empire, and, mostly at himself. He had been careless. Stupid.

Caught by a simple guardsman. He knew he should have kept his head down, most certainly he should not have used any of his powers.

Still... when they kept beating her, he had not thought things through. If he had, perhaps, he would not have missed the other five guards further down the alley, hidden by one of the sharp ninety-degree corners which gave the trenches that made up old Sylmora, their snake-like appearance. Of course, such a view was only possible when you looked out over trenches from the upper city, or when you were flying.

He hadn't had nearly enough glimmer in him to win the fight, only a little bit of healing Emberis and perhaps enough Luminite for a single good jump.

Somewhere distant the sound of rain on stone made it to his cell; in his own little spot of darkness, he could not see it— oh how he would have liked to see it once more, feel it cool against his skin. He focused, but his veins remained cold. That was surprising, he should have had some left. Closing his eyes he tried again— he was empty— had he vomited up his last Emberis, or had it already tried to heal him?

A sudden metallic click, then metal grated against metal and light poured in.

The figure standing in the door-opening was like a blotch of ink staining the glass of a Lexigram lantern. Marcen blinked, then spat a glob of spittle and blood towards the figure. A painful smile cracked his lips; he was proud of that. A small victory, one final act of

rebellion. The presence of only one person could only mean the soldiers had informed the Giudicari, the secret police of Caladyr, and a decision had been made.

Marcen was meant to die.

He coughed hard, almost folded over before choking as the chains tightened. *There should have been more torture, or even torture in general. I'm a rebel after all.* He would have felt insulted had his breath not come out in a pathetic wheeze, a groan passed his lips as a fire flared in his chest. "Well," he croaked, the word painful, his ribs certainly cracked and with one lung potentially punctured, as he could feel the bubbles on his lips and hear the slight wheeze in his breath. "Are we going to do this or not?"

The figure spoke.

"Sadly, yes."

Marcen flinched. He knew that voice.

A flash of iron in the twilight edge between his cell and freedom. Cold steel against his throat. The figure whispered, but Marcen couldn't hear it. The blade moved, crimson against grey stone. He barely felt it; the pain wasn't too bad.

The last thing he thought about wasn't the greater mission, nor the pain of his broken body. It was Veshka and how he'd miss her smile as well as his little brother. A tear blurred his already fading vision, he could see the outside, the eternal twilight filled the sky, a faint drizzle came down from the slate grey clouds. Sorell would wake up soon, and he wouldn't be there... ever again.

His little brother would have to fend for himself, for the first time since their parents died so many years ago. He closed his eyes; his body grew numb as he slumped. The chains squeezed tighter, he smiled thinking of his little brother, just as he faded away.

PART ONE

ONE LIFE ENDS...

Chapter One

NOT DIFFICULT TO FIND

Sorell woke to silence.

Which was odd, usually he would wake up to the sound of his brother snoring.

As he rolled over, he blinked against the dull twilight which poured in through the narrow slit in the wall which served as their only window.

His mind was still groggy with sleep, his movement sluggish he let himself drop from his bunk. Their home was tiny, barely more than a hole cut into the high stone trench walls which made up old Sylmora. Six steps wide, five steps deep, barely tall enough to stand in.

The home had been carved out high above the street to avoid flooding, a relic of the time when the survivors

had needed to dig into the stony ground and form trench cities to hide from the storms after the planet had stopped turning.

The walls glistened with a sheen of water, faint wisps of algae had formed which they would need to scrape off again one of these days. The air was cool. A steady drip, drip, drip of leaking cracks in the ceiling filled the room, along with the faint, ever-present scent of rust and mildew.

This was home, he shuffled to the window slit and peaked out over the trench edge, it was cloudy and raining but at least this far from the center they hadn't dug deep enough to fit four or five levels of houses in the trench wall. This far out it was only their home, not even the upper city reached this far. Of course, these days, with the spires to protect the cities from the worst of the tidal storms, people had resettled on the top side. Those who could afford it, at least.

Turning away, Sorell inspected the bunk beside his. He frowned. It was empty, unslept. He lay his hand on the mattress, the reeds crunched beneath his touch but felt cold.

That was... odd. Not impossible, or even that uncommon— his brother had plenty of business outside of their shared home. Most of which better to be done at night, and most importantly hidden from Sorell and with less people in the trenches. It wasn't the first time he'd stayed out all night. However, usually, he would at least leave a note or say something the day before.

As he rubbed the sleep from his eyes, Sorell grabbed a pitcher of dark ale, grainy enough that you'd almost had to chew it, and told himself not to worry as he poured himself a mug.

The brew was filling, dulling some of the gnawing in his stomach. Grabbing a small rickety stool, it creaked in annoyance as Sorell sat down, he fumbled in his coat pocket for a small Lexigram time teller—the same kind they made at the artificery. This had been the first one he had ever crafted. Nearly ten years before when he started working at the artificery.

Flipping open the cover he sighed. It was earlier than he expected. He still had plenty of time before he would have to be at work. Arching his back, he felt a few pops and sighed in relief. With a gulp he drained his mug, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and drew some water from a bucket beneath one of the leaks and began cleaning himself. His lanky frame barely filled his clothes—not in the way his master would've wanted. He wanted Sorell to look refined, but instead, the garments hung around his frame in a way that made him seem more like a beggar.

He glanced at his reflection in a piece of polished metal, rubbing his chin. He had a faint stubble; he didn't mind it. With a sigh, he pulled his raven hair back, tying it off with a silvery ribbon.

The trench streets of old Sylmora were damp with rain, the kind that never fully stopped, hanging in the air like a second skin.

Sorell pulled his coat tighter around him as he stepped onto the walkway, his boots finding their usual path along the uneven yet smooth stone. The old trench city hadn't been built for comfort— only survival. Despite that, the centuries of footsteps had smoothened the stone like molten candle wax reshaped by time. People had found their comfort anyway.

Narrow pathways lined the upper levels, some of which were precarious bridges of rusted metal, others had been carved out of the stone. The deeper he got into the lower city, the deeper the trenches became. Above, the buildings from the upper city began looming over the edges. Those up top, barely ever looked down.

Below, the deeper layers of the trench were already stirring with activity— markets opened, forges sparked to life, the night's clientele leaving the pubs in exchange for the morning's, thieves running their morning grifts.

It should have felt normal.

Yet it didn't.

A strange tension hung in the air, the urchins seemed more skittish. Too many guards.

Sorell hadn't seen this many patrols, this far from the elevators to the topside, since the glimmer raids two years ago.

The trench had been left to smolder for months. Usually, the guard barely patrolled the trenches, only

sticking to the commercial parts where people bribed them enough to care. Today... today, they were everywhere.

Sorell froze as a pair of Vincolari marched past him, soldiers from the military branch of the Giudicari, Caladyr's not-so-secret secret police, dark-coated and deliberate. Their sigil-marked armor gleaming faintly under the Lexigram lanterns which had been bolted into the walls. Their faces hidden behind blank steel masks. Where guards kept their hands on their weapons, the Vincolari moved differently— like they didn't need weapons to kill you, despite them carrying far better ones than the guards. Pistols instead of crossbows and swords instead of cudgels. Where the guards walked like hounds, they prowled like wolves.

Sorell kept his eyes down and kept placing one foot in front of the other.

Not. My. Business.

People around him were acting differently. Less talking, more hurried glances. A few stalls hadn't even opened, their doors shut, despite the cliental moving too, and from their jobs, many were ready to buy some food, as many of the homes didn't have a kitchen of their own. He couldn't help but wonder what had happened, and with the trenches in this state, how he'd slept through it.

He passed a board of public notices, barely glanced at it, until his still sluggish mind caught up with what he saw.

A name, no, a list of names.

His steps faltered. He turned back.

A piece of paper had been nailed to the board, edges curling from the rain, some words smudged but readable. Sorell could feel his heart tremble as he read the names. Some he didn't know. Some he did.

Marcen wasn't on the list, but he was one of them. There were those on the list who his brother worked with. Sorell swallowed. The list of names was a rid of execution. All in all, nearly thirty people would be hung in the streets by manacles which pierced the wrists with nails as thick as a baby's forearm and would then be left to die. Any who'd aim to help would endure the same faith.

No wonder they'd even brought the Vincolari into the trenches. Thirty wailing souls, each begging for death, could kill a rebellion or light the spark for one.

In the corner of his eye, he saw a pair of Vincolari watching him. They didn't know. They couldn't know. Still, he forced himself forward.

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The heat of the artificery embraced him like an old friend, the scent of ink and hot metal clinging to the air as Sorell stepped inside. Already the room was filled with the steady hiss of steam and the scratching of metal against shard and steel, the kind of background noises one learned to ignore when working in a workshop where they made Lexigrams, the contraptions which

used Lexurgic runic sigils to make the Twilight shards do their bidding.

Master Braskir was already glaring at him from behind a desk forged from copper. His arms, the size of most man's upper legs and pure muscle, crossed over his soot-streaked apron.

"Finally," he grumbled. "There you are." The older man's voice was sharp, edged with irritation.

Sorell gave him a look. *What did I do?*

"You've got a noble waiting for you," he grumbled. "Even asked for you by name."

Sorell frowned, "Who is it?"

Braskir stared at him as if that was the dumbest thing he had ever heard. "How should I know?" He gestured to the backroom. "Go on then, don't keep him waiting" he motioned again. "Vincolari in the streets, now a noble wants to see my journeyman—" Braskir grumbled under his breath, shaking his head whilst keeping his eyes on Sorell.

He made sure to keep his voice low— just loud enough for Sorell to hear, but not the noble.

Sorell nodded absently, his mind was racing. *Why would a noble ask for me by name?*

The back room of the artificery was usually quiet, reserved for high-paying clients who didn't want to deal with the noise of the workshop, or preferred not to be seen. These were still the trenches after all.

Sorell stepped inside and at once knew something was wrong.

The man waiting for him in the wooden chair wasn't a stranger, nor was he a noble. Not anymore.

"Tibalt Dallacroix" Sorell's voice grew to almost a hiss as he spoke the name, closing the door to make sure Braskir wouldn't be peaking in.

Marcen's going to be pissed when he hears about this.

A man of sharp angles and sharper words, wrapped in the elegance of a life he no longer had. His expression was unreadable, posture relaxed—his eyes however held something heavier. Beside him, dressed in some nobleman's guard attire stood Zirren, like a statue, arms folded, her presence a silent warning. Once or twice, they'd been at the house, of course only when Marcen thought Sorell would not be.

Sorell's pulse quickened, these were the people Marcen had wanted him to avoid...

"You're not a hard man to find," Tibalt said smoothly.

"I am not hiding," Sorell countered. "But you are not the kind of client I was told to expect."

"I'm not here as a client."

There was something about his tone which made the hairs on the back of Sorell's neck stand up. Zirren stirred and moved to the door, cracking it open to peak.

Tibalt leaned forward, his voice calm, measured. "Your brother was captured last night."

The air in the room shifted, growing colder. Sorell felt himself go still. "Is he alright?" He barely recognized his own voice.

Tibalt didn't look away, his gaze didn't soften. "No." he said simply. "The Giudicari killed him."

Impossible, Marcen can't be... dead.

The words didn't hit all at once.

It must be a lie... a mistake.

They oozed into his thoughts, slow and sickly, like poison slipping into his veins. The world seemed to grow less bright as the realization sank in. Then came the disbelief. "You're lying."

Tibalt said nothing. He didn't need to say anything, it mattered little if Sorell believed him or not.

Sorell's breath came faster, but before he could speak again, the front doorbell rang softly, and the faint workshop noises died out.

Sorell knew who it was before he stepped towards the door to peak into the workshop.

Two Vincolari soldiers stepped in, blocking the exits, steel masked and wordless. The air around them carried weight, pressing down on the room like an unseen force. For a moment things couldn't get worse.

First Marcen is dead, now the Vincolari are here.

The bell rang again, Sorell's blood turned into ice. In stepped one of the officers of the Giudicari, his coat marked with his insignia, face visible but just as unreadable as the steel masks of the soldiers who accompanied

him. He moved with the slow, deliberate steps of a man who already knew the outcome of the conversation.

He was there for someone.

Sorell didn't move.

"I told you," Tibalt said softly. "You were not difficult to find. The moment they caught your brother; they'd come for you too."

Sorell felt his pulse thunder in his skull.

"I'm not—" He stopped himself. His voice was too tight. Too raw. He swallowed "I'm just a Lexurgist."

Tibalt didn't smile, still something in his expression gave the feeling like he'd already won. "You think they either care or believe you?" he asked, tilting his head toward the now closed and bolted door. "They are not here to ask you questions, Sorell, they're here to bring you in. The questions come later, and they won't ask nicely."

"I have nothing," Sorell wanted to say firm, yet his voice was more of a squeak. "I am nothing," Sorell stepped back from the door, a plea in his eyes as he looked from Tibalt to Zirren and back. "I'm just a journeyman Lexurgist."

The air in the room felt thinner.

"If you stay, they'll take you." Tibalt's voice remained perfectly even, perfectly logical. "And if they find anything they don't like, and we both know they will, you'll end up like your brother."

Zirren reached for something behind the backroom's codex closet. A soft click, then it slid open, revealing a

way for the less reputable clientele of Braskir to make their way in and out.

Sorell clenched his fists. "I'm not like Marcen, I am not a rebel."

"Maybe not." Tibalt leaned back slightly. "But do you really think they care? They did not just capture your brother, they caught him. They know what he was, they will be wondering the same about you."

Sorell's thoughts were moving too fast yet far too slow—his heart hammered like a drum.

"The way I see it, you have a choice to make." Tibalt said, though his voice made it clear there was no choice at all. "We came as a courtesy to your brother. But the choice is yours. Come with us now or stay and find out how eager the Giudicari can be when they want answers."

Sorell's stomach twisted.

There was no choice. Not really.

Tibalt knew that.

Sorell knew that.

They both knew that the other knew it.

Sorell exhaled sharply.

"Fine."

Tibalt nodded once. "Good." Then stood up and stepped into the mole tunnel, one of hundreds which ran beneath the trenches, a way for the downtrodden to move around without being seen.

As kids Sorell and Marcen had used them often, oddly the resistance was rumored to use them very little,

mostly because they most often ran between businesses and shelters. But most importantly because it was one of the few safe places for the homeless.

“Come along, then.” Tibalt stepped into the tunnel without hesitation. “Zirren, unlock the door—no need to have them tear the place apart.”

Zirren glanced at Sorell. She didn’t say anything, but she didn’t have to.

It was time to go.

Chapter Two

A PUB ONCE

The safehouse looked like nothing.

Of course that was the whole point.

Sorell stood in the rain, staring up at the faded wooden sign which hung over the entrance. The paint, once golden, had long since peeled away, leaving only the faintest impression of letters and a drawing. *The drunken mole* A pub once. Now, the window slits had been boarded up and it was just another dead place in the trenches. Like so many other places its door and windows sat on the second floor, a staircase and catwalk ran up to it.

Tibalt pushed open the door, the hinges creaking with the weight of abandonment.

“Inside.”

Sorell hesitated, then followed.

The interior was just as lifeless as the exterior— a few broken tables, dust clinging to empty bottles behind the bar. A forgotten ruin. Except for the fact that the floorboards didn't creak.

“You keep a pub as a safehouse?” Sorell muttered, his voice hoarse, distant, even to himself. He felt like there was a hole in his chest where his heart should've been.

“A dead pub is the safest place in the city,” Tibalt replied smoothly. “No one looks twice at an abandoned place in the trenches, too many of those.”

“Besides,” Zirren added, locking the door behind them “we're not staying up here.”

Tibalt rounded the bar and knelt beside a turned-over crate. He pressed the palm of his hand against it and seemed to push against some sort of plate triggering a mechanism. A soft click, a few of the floorboards popped up like some of the fancier bottles of booze, those with the bracket cap. The planks covering the hatch seamlessly blended with the floorboards.

“After you.” Tibalt said as he gestured to the hole in the floor.

Making his way down the stairs, the air grew colder, staler, dustier. The steps went deeper than any normal beer cellar would have, meaning this place had little to do with whatever the drunken mole had once been.

Finally, the stale air began to smell like smoke and an eerily homely smell of wet stone. The stairs led down into a small yet functional underground space.

Sorell barely had time to take in the room. Makeshift furniture stood about the place. Several doors pocked the walls, where there wasn't a door, maps had been pinned up, some were of the city, others of the nation, others still of places Sorell had no idea where they would be.

All except one.

This wall was different, plastered with small drawings and notes, a few candles burned in front of it. A memorial. In front of it stood a woman, Sorell knew her face, he was certain he knew her name.

Dressed in a pair of dark blue pants with a surprisingly clean white shirt over it. Her hair was red and short; she held her one eye fixed on Sorell. The other, milky white, was blind to the world. She held a frown as she watched them enter and as Tibalt came down the steps she looked at him expectingly.

For a moment, there was complete silence.

Then, Tibalt exhaled, shaking off the tension.

"Well, Fiska, we have him," he said.

"And just in time too," Zirren smiled.

Fiska's gaze flicked back to Sorell, her serious expression making place for a rueful smile. "Welcome to the rebellion."

Sorell didn't answer, he couldn't. His throat was as dry as paper. Growing tighter, like some invisible hand