

## Chapter 1

### IV

Following a dirt road south of the city, Venanty felt a wave of guilt: Nalabeathan had insisted on keeping Keary's going after the box between them, so he had left Geeula out. It was better for the event to find its way, for Keary to discover Geeula, for her to draw to his interest: once aligned, she'd pull the man where he needed to go. In addition, Venanty could proceed despite the elf's absence; there'd be someone on the inside; and it was only a matter of finding the place.

Using his shrewdness, Venanty found the building. A sign read *Sherbet Bros. Warehouse*, a place of stored things, perhaps even a map or two.

"Oombar!" Two women across the street, in black coats and white flowered hats, smiled and waved. "Find any ghosts?"

"Ladies," he said, and solemnly tipped his cap. "I'd be so fortunate. No, it seems they're off tonight."

Venanty watched them giggle their way up the hill. *So annoying*, he thought. *I need my senses at their utmost*. He stepped in mud and frowned. "Cheer up, Oombar," he muttered. But then, both women floated over the gate of a nearby cemetery, and their true nature became apparent, and he frowned again.

Before the warehouse, bordering the left side of the road, lay a brick wall. He propped an empty wheelbarrow against it for a foothold, pulled himself over, and landed on some shrubs. Brushing himself off, he took in the surrounding courtyard, then made for a concrete stairway. A rugged looking man wearing black suspenders and large, brown boots descended the opposite side, and although nervous, Venanty greeted him calmly, to which the stranger nodded and continued on.

Behind a solid, oak door was a large hall filled with long armed chandeliers and several wooden tables. Light from outdoor lamps shone from the windows above. A boy, Harold, tired eyes and black, disarrayed hair, stood at the back of the room. This startled Venanty at first, but then the child waved.

"There isn't much time," whispered Harold. "Master Sherbet reads in his library before bed."

Venanty gave him a small bag of coins. "Half now, half later, as agreed."

Harold nodded.

Warehouses typically had a receiving office, an attached hall, and opened into a vast area where all the items were kept. For Sherbet Bros., this was not the case. They arrived at a room with a chair, and a small table with a brass lamp.

Harold paused to listen, then proceeded.

A flowered rug squished softly under Venanty's feet.

Through a second doorway, they descended a shadowy stairwell to a wide, metal door.

Lighting a lantern, Harold glanced back. "Keep calm," he said. "And keep close."

"That's encouraging."

Harold unhinged the latch, and the door slid along its runner. "You'll see what I mean soon enough."

Beyond a wall of still water lay a typical room: a couch, an end table, several lit sconces, and a gold framed painting of a boat; however, everything appeared submerged.

The boy entered and was engulfed.

Venanty hesitated but then continued. It felt like water, but one could move and breathe as one normally did. Attempting to question Harold, he spoke, but no sound came out.

Harold signaled for him to wait, so Venanty sat on the couch.

Just then a fisherman appeared, and despite sitting, Venanty experienced helping him haul a net onto a ship. A series of taps came from a window in the room, and he wondered where the opening had come from, since there hadn't been one before. Confusion was interrupted by dismay, as Venanty's shared laborious task with the fisherman disappeared.

The boy pointed, and Venanty saw he intended them to crawl through. There was a blinding light, so one couldn't see as one entered.

The main storehouse was made up of girders and beams, hundreds of floor levels rose into the dark, and an exposed stairwell lay at the end of each section. They followed a row until they reached a platform with a railing and an engine. The engine had wheels, and the wheels were attached to ropes.

Harold turned a crank, and it sputtered to life.

Venanty grew queasy as the floor dropped beneath.

"I know it's odd, the fishing room, travelling down to go up," said Harold, over the roar. "But that's how the building works." He grinned. "Bet you've never seen an elevator like this."

"You're right. I haven't."

Harold pointed to the signs passing behind them: 50, 51, 52... "We're over fifty stories up. If we fall from here—SPLAT!"

Venanty felt himself turn pale. "Great," he said.

"Actually, someone fell—"

"Don't wanna know."

"Suit yourself."

At 248, Harold pressed a button and the platform stopped. Venanty avoided thinking of the height as they continued off the platform, down a corridor, and made a left into what appeared to be an endless row of crates. Some of the floorboards shifted.

"Careful, it's loose," said Harold, purposely letting one creak under his foot. "A man fell through once. Wanna know what happened?"

"No."

"Suit yourself."

Venanty examined a crate, which said: Floor: 248. Archive: 4,441—FRAGILE, and then turned to the boy. "Is anyone around? It seems quiet."

Harold shook his head. "Not this late." He gave a pensive look. "One day I'm gonna run something like this. Only above ground and smaller, and I'd make the floors sturdy with no loose boards, so no one could fall through. Maybe I'll help the Sherbet's run this one, but I think they'd rather have their own kids than someone like me. It's either that or making these." He raised his light for Venanty to see. "See all the tiny wires?"

Venanty nodded.

"It keeps it together. If it falls, the glass won't break."

Venanty noted the woven net gave protection but still allowed the light through. "Very clever, Harold."

Just then footsteps came from above, and Harold covered the light, and they waited as the sound passed.

"A night watchman," said Harold.

"I thought you said the place was empty," said Venanty.

"Yeah. Looks like I was wrong."

"How much further?"

“Hold on, let me see where we are—oh, wait. Here it is—Archive four thousand, five hundred and six...Archive four thousand, five hundred and seven.” Harold removed a tiny bar from his pocket, wedged it into the edge of the crate, and wrenched it open. Within lay a second crate, which he also freed. Inside was a satchel, which he retrieved and handed to Venanty.

Venanty undid the clasp and found a scroll. “Fingers crossed,” he said, then untied and opened it. But before he could, there came a booming voice: “Oombar Venanty, I presume.” A large, barrel chested man with a gray beard in a cherry colored suit emerged. Four women in black dresses, with violet cat-like eyes, stood behind him. They held pistols.

“Master Sherbet!” said Harold.

“You look worried, boy. Maybe you thought I was in my study, reading?”

Harold shook his head. “No, sir.”

Sherbet looked at Venanty. “Well, it turns out I’m not, and I’ll take the scroll, thank you.”

Venanty hesitated.

Sherbet chuckled. “I’m afraid there’s no way out of this one.”

Venanty seized Harold’s lantern, undid the glass, and held the parchment by its flame. “Come any closer and no one gets the map.”

Sherbet signaled to the women to lower their weapons, and they did. “No need to be rash. We’re all friends here. It’s such a small city. You see, I know someone who overheard Nalabeathan talking to Harold. I could’ve asked the boy about the crate, but then there’d be no reason for you to come here.

“You used the map as bait,” said Venanty.

“Very perceptive, and I have every intention of returning it to you. Is it one of those silly boxes? What do I care? But that won’t happen until you fix my situation.”

“Whatever it is, forget it.”

“But there isn’t any choice.” Sherbet signaled again, and a fifth woman appeared from the shadows, grabbed Harold and held a gun to his back. “Aren’t the aildon wonderful? Hand over the map, please. I’d hate for anything to happen to the poor child.”

Venanty handed over the scroll, and much to Venanty’s surprise, Harold moved next to Sherbet.

Sherbet patted the boy’s head. “Perhaps a reacquaintance is needed, Oombar, since it seems you’ve already met Harold Sherbet—my son.”

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