

THE GLINTCHASERS SERIES

THEY
PLAYED
THEIR
ROLE

Elijah Menchaca



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To Wings.

Never let anyone stop you from flying.

To Sue.

Oh Captain, my Captain.





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OBLIVION



CORSAR

IRON FOREST

CUTTER'S PLACE

SAGEL

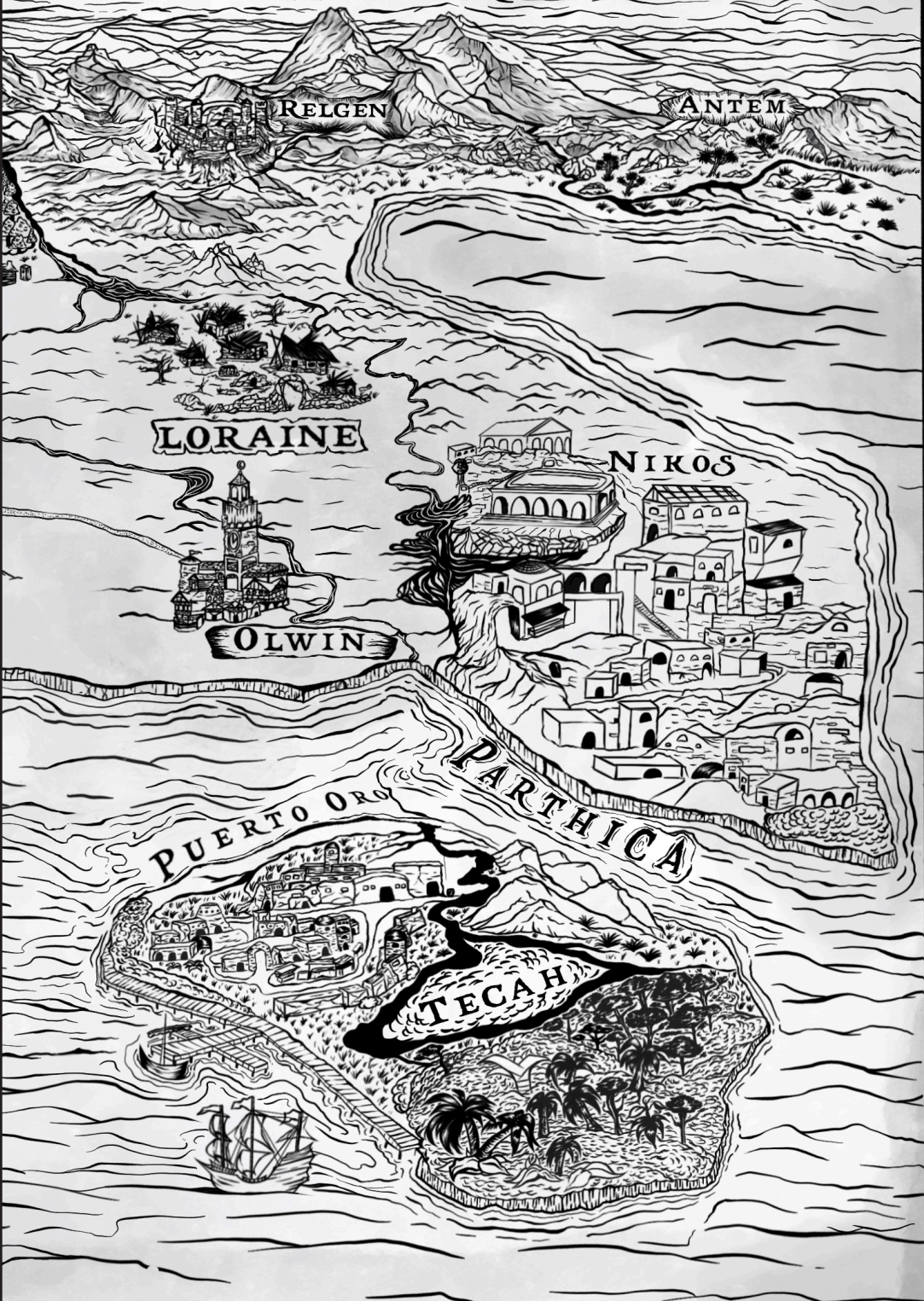
AENERWIN

GREENWYLD

FUTURE'S ROAD



MT. ALLHAMMER



RELGEN

ANTEM

LORAINÉ

NIKOS

OLWIN

PUERTO ORO

PARTHICA

TECAH



AVENGER

As a knight of the Purple Rose, Haegan usually dealt with threats to the kingdom too great for local defenders to handle: necromancer plots, supernatural crime waves, Old World artifacts gone awry. Most recently, the Purple Rose had been tasked with the recovery of the lead engineer of royal skyship maintenance from a band of sky pirates. But that had been months ago, and the city of Relgen and the surrounding lands had been quiet since.

Haegan had taken the opportunity to take a brief sabbatical, his first in years, and left the order and its duties under the care of his lieutenant. He'd gone to visit an old friend, and to see if his friend's son, Silas, was ready to become a squire. Silas was a sandy-haired youth, not yet fifteen, and still in the gangliest stages of puberty. He had never seen the world outside his small village. Today Haegan would get to see his face when Silas saw Relgen for the first time.

They rode side by side, Silas feeding him a constant stream of questions, and Haegan patiently answering without taking his eyes off the road. Silas was an eager prospect, and Haegan could easily see him becoming a dedicated and steadfast knight of the crown. Haegan looked forward to helping him become that knight.

And then, perhaps, retiring. He'd been noticing more and more of his blond hair going gray of late, and sometimes he found himself waking up stiff and sore from sleeping the wrong way. He was getting too old for this life, and sooner or later he would have to leave the kingdom to the next generation. To people like Silas,

or that new flying woman from Sasel. He could either retire on his own terms, or at the end of an enemy's blade, and he liked to think he'd outgrown his youthful fantasies of martyrdom. The kingdom's existence didn't hinge on him fighting to his dying breath. If he laid down his hammer and stepped aside, the world would keep turning.

When they rounded the next bend in the road, Silas's questions stopped. They'd reached the outermost terrace farms that decorated the mountains surrounding the city, and the tiers of green spread out before them interspersed by the homes of the farmers. And beyond the farms was the city of Relgen.

The Bastion of the North stood tall and proud, its walls seeming to grow up out of the mountains themselves. The tallest and oldest of the walls looked perfectly smooth, more impenetrable and immutable than the surrounding terrain. Every layer of them bristled with Old World cannons, constructions of metal and light that gleamed even at this distance, and enormous banners bearing the crest of the city draped down the side.

As they drew closer, a sleek, shining vessel rose up from behind the walls. Rogue Imperia, the largest skyship ever recovered in all the world. Decorative reams of blue and gold streamed from its wings, billowing in the wind as the ship took to the air.

Silas's stunned silence left Haegan smiling and lit a spark of warmth in his chest. Though Haegan traveled the kingdom as a knight, he had called Relgen home all his life. No small part of him derived personal pride in being from the city, and seeing the boy's awe reminded him of why. Relgen was safety. Security. Strength. He was part of that. And now, as a new squire in the Order of the Purple Rose, so was Silas.

"You're lucky," Haegan said, nodding toward the skyship in the distance. "It's not every day you get to see Rogue Imperia take off."

In fact, the crown jewel of the Corsan navy had been grounded since its lead engineer's initial kidnapping, and had remained so even after the Purple Rose rescued her. Haegan's first assumption was that the woman must have finished her inspection and repairs already. Or perhaps this was just a quick test flight, and there was still more work to be done.

But as they drew closer, he noticed something strange. Rogue Imperia was missing her usual escort of flying skiffs. Instead, there were only two crafts in the air near the skyship—a single vessel that might have been a flying pleasure barge, and a tiny sky surfer. Then there was a distant, warbling boom, and a bolt of light streaked from the deck of the skyship, missing the pleasure barge by what must have been only dozens of feet. Rogue Imperia was firing its weapons.

“Sir?” Silas asked hesitantly. “What’s going on?”

Haegan’s grip on the reins of his horse tightened. “Come on.”

They rode faster for the city, with Haegan never taking his eyes off the skyship and its two much smaller pursuers. The ship’s guns cracked off a few more times before an explosion bloomed on the hull, exactly where the cannon had been. The pleasure barge, billowing smoke, skidded across Rogue Imperia’s top deck, and the sky surfer followed.

Haegan and Silas were not the only ones to notice. In the fields and on their porches, people stopped what they were doing, pointing up to the commotion in the sky. When Rogue Imperia itself began to list in the air, someone working on a nearby farm shouted loud enough for Haegan to hear. The knight commander’s head whipped to the voice on instinct.

Up ahead, a carriage had pulled just off the road, and a young woman now stood outside it next to where the driver was seated, both of them pointing up at the skyship. The woman had a hand to her mouth in shock.

Then, all at once, there was an earsplitting shriek in the air itself, and the world was swallowed in white. Haegan tried to jerk his horse to a stop as he went blind, but the animal went wild, spooked by whatever had just happened, and he was thrown from the saddle. For a few agonizing moments after he hit the ground, he saw nothing, and heard only a ringing in his ears.

Too slowly, the world faded back into existence.

Silas was on the ground not far from Haegan, one stirrup still on his boot, the end of its strap dangling off his foot after clearly being slashed with a blade. The boy groaned when Haegan prodded him, but nothing looked broken. He’d cut himself free in time. Good instincts, quick thinking, and lucky. Silas was going to go far in this world.

“What happened?”

Haegan started to say “I don’t know,” but the words got stuck in his throat. It was as though someone had drawn a line across the world, maybe fifteen feet away from them. On their side, everything was exactly as it had been. But on the other side, the fields of the surrounding farms had all died. Everything was wilted and dried out, turned to unnatural burnt umber. Dead leaves and needles drifted off the trees. The delineation was startlingly clear, and healthy plant life touched dead in a straight, even line that cut right across the road, separating Haegan and Silas from Relgen and its outlying territory.

The carriage Haegan had spotted up the road was on the other side of the line. The woman that had been standing next to it was now lying motionless in the dirt. And so were the horses that had been pulling the carriage. The driver was still in his seat, but slumped backward. All around, the world had gone unnaturally still, and deafening silence gripped the air.

“Don’t move,” Haegan ordered Silas.

Without hesitation, he ran across the line to the woman, turning her over and brushing her hair from her face. Her eyes were still open, but there was no life or movement in them. He removed a glove to check for a pulse.

Nothing.

He climbed onto the carriage, finding the driver in a similar state. Eyes still open, body limp, mouth slightly agape. From his vantage point on the carriage, Haegan could look out over the dead farms, and see dozens of bodies, all fallen to the ground. Unmoving. Lifeless.

A sudden fluttering sound cut the silence, followed by a soft thud and a small, wet crunch. He whirled to see a crumpled black shape in the ground, framed in a red splatter. Another thud and crunch followed somewhere nearby. When he looked to the sky, what he saw left his stomach twisted with sickening horror. All around him, dead birds fell from the sky.

He looked around, trying to gauge the extent of the field of death. Aside from its border with the still living world, he couldn’t see the end. As far as he could tell, it completely encircled the city, and miles of land around it, all the way out to where he now stood.

They Played Their Role

In the city itself, Rogue Imperia finished its listing descent, crashing into the walls of the city and detonating in an explosion Haegan felt from where he was standing, and his whole body jerked. He staggered backward, off the carriage, away from the city. A pervasive wrongness filled his every sense. Nothing was right. Nothing made sense. His heart pounded, and his stomach lurched. When he caught the lifeless eyes of the dead woman in the road again, he finally lost all control, fell to his hands and knees, and retched.

Haegan walked alone through the corpse of his home. Everywhere he went, there was no sound but his footsteps. Not so much as a breeze disturbed Relgen's deathly quiet. No motion drew his eye. He walked in and out of businesses and homes freely, the lone living thing in the city. He found the same scene everywhere he went.

Bodies littered the streets. Slouched forward in seats. Lay cold and motionless in beds. Everywhere, tasks lay half-finished, meals half-eaten, games half-played. People had fallen over dead in the middle of every activity Haegan could imagine. Taking a bath. Painting a fence. Making love. The few times he saw motion, it was from fires that had been left unattended or sparked by a dropped lantern or candle.

Animals were not spared. There were the dead birds of course, the larger ones having splattered on the ground, the little ones unbloodied but still broken and crumpled from their falls. But he also found cats, slumped in alleyways, dead as the rats still clutched in their mouths. Dogs lay motionless atop the children they had been playing with. Horses, sometimes still harnessed to the vehicles they'd been pulling when they'd collapsed.

By now, everything and everyone were many hours dead, but some unnatural force or phenomenon had preserved them. If he didn't look too closely, he could delude himself into thinking everyone in the city had simply fallen asleep at the same time. But when he did, he would see the discoloration in the skin, just enough to be noticeable. And constant dead, unblinking eyes. They were all around him, staring at him. Pleading with him. They begged for answers, for understanding, for someone to make sense of all this.

Time had vanished from his awareness. His mind and body were numb, save a constant, twisting nausea in the pit of his stomach. He walked without purpose or even conscious thought, letting the horror that gripped his soul drag him along. At some point, it grew dark, and the sun was replaced by distant fires, unattended lanterns, and scattered fixtures of automated lightstone. Fire and light streaked across the night sky as stars fell and burned.

Haegan walked until his legs ached and his eyes burned. His mouth had long ago turned to cotton, dried out from constantly hanging open in shock. His next step faltered underneath him, and he fell to his knees. The shock of pain that followed was like a splash of ice water, returning him to his body. When he looked around, he found that he recognized where he was. From the purple banners that decorated the walls to the oversized painting of the Baroness of Relgen, he knew this building. He knew this room. He knew the armored bodies that lay scattered around him.

This was the headquarters of the Knights of the Purple Rose. And the corpses surrounding him were fellow knights. His brothers and sisters. For so many of them to be here, in armor, their weapons fallen around them, they must have been about to leave on a mission. Maybe to deal with whatever had been going on with Rogue Imperia.

Now, finally, Haegan wept.

Over the course of an hour, his shuddering sobs turned to anguished screams, to desperate shrieks, and then finally to keening whimpers. Haegan was hollowed out, as if he'd wrung out every drop of his being into his tears, and now there was nothing left but a brittle shell. He knelt among his fallen comrades, waiting for that shell to break into pieces.

Instead, he found himself staring down into the dead face of one of the knights. Thadeus, his name was. The boy was only a few years older than Silas. He'd been inducted into the order only half a year ago. Haegan had privately suspected during his journey back that the two young men would become good friends.

Silas—who was now staying with farmers, recovering from his fall and learning what he could from those who had been outside the city—and Haegan had been less than two dozen feet from the edge. A few seconds' delay in their approach were all that had separated them from joining the fallen city in sudden, senseless death.

They Played Their Role

The precariousness of that shook Haegan, but it also steeled him. Fire filled the hollowness the tears had left behind, filled every inch of his body. The brittle shell he had been only seconds ago calcified, and his whole being redirected itself.

If he had been here, he would be dead. But he was alive now, and there was a world outside of this mass tomb that had once been his home. A world where people still lived. A world that had just lost its bastion.

The people of that world needed a knight. Silas needed a mentor. And his fallen brothers and sisters needed justice. Something had killed them, had killed all of Relgen. Something was deeply wrong in the world. And as dark, angry pain kindled inside him, Haegan swore that he would not rest until he made it right.



2

QUARRY

Everyone always looked unhappy when it was hot. That was the only way Snow could tell the difference between a normal sunny day and sweltering heat anymore. When the sun was high overhead on a cloudless day, she checked people's faces for the beleaguered expressions and profuse sweating, because she couldn't feel the difference herself.

Today must have been scalding.

People languished through the ruintown's dirt avenues, scowling and staring at the ground as they stomped through a haze of dust to begin the day's work of stripping down the Old World remnants the town had sprung up around—or rather, in.

In another time, this place had been some kind of coliseum, built into a recess in the surrounding plains. Or maybe it used to tower over the surrounding land and had just been buried by time. She wasn't an archeologist. Either way, now it was a massive half-buried hole in the ground, surrounded by carts and filled with dozens of scattered work tarps and haphazardly erected buildings. People moved through it like an ant colony, milling between work sites, excavating, and carrying materials, all while foremen watched from a flying skiff hovering overhead.

The pub at the center of town was a decent size considering it was probably built out of wood from a few dozen carts and whatever support beams

could be bought off excavation teams. She counted the exits—three not including windows—gave the surroundings a once over for any security, and went inside.

A chill swept through the pub as she opened the doors, and every head turned her way. She was a lean, dark-haired woman, clad in a long-sleeved shirt and a dark leather jerkin without a bead of sweat on her face. Even after the doors closed behind her, cold lingered in the air, and the people closest to her shivered.

The patrons were an even mix of dirt-caked locals and out-of-towners overladen with bags and traveling equipment, save for a man and woman at a corner table who were sporting swords and underlayers for armor. Those two were amateurs, or else dregs. No other kind of glintchaser would stick around a ruintown after all the best loot had been scooped up.

They wouldn't be a problem.

Ignoring the stares, Snow scanned the bar for a stool that looked stable and took a seat. The bartender's eyes locked on to her as a visible lump formed in his throat.

Snow was pale. Too pale to be breathing, and yet there she sat, drumming her fingers and staring with ice blue eyes that cut through him. A man didn't work in a ruintown without seeing some strange things, but uncertainty was still plain on his face. People had lots of guesses over the years about what Snow was. Ghost. Winter Spirit. Demon. Whatever the bartender's guess was, it wasn't enough to make him run, but he was still unsettled.

He swallowed. "Get you anything?"

"Beer."

The mundanity of the order was a clear relief, and the man latched on to it like a lifeline. Maybe he didn't know what Snow was, but he knew how to serve a beer.

"Two glint."

Snow set a coin worth five times that on the table. Her eyes made it clear she didn't expect change.

"Anything else you needed?"

“Depends.” Snow traced a finger across the surface of the metal tankard she’d been given, and a thin film of frost formed across its surface before she brought it to her lips and took a long drink. The cheap stuff always tasted better cold. “Are you the man to see about getting a new axle for a cart?”

The bartender looked back at the coin, and hesitantly nodded an understanding as he pocketed it.

“Planning on traveling?”

That was the confirmation Snow needed. She had her man. “Actually, I wanted to ask you some questions about your last customer.”

“I’m not sure who you mean,” the man lied.

“Ex-knight and a set of twins, moving heavy cargo,” Snow said. “I want to know the details.”

Snow recognized the look on the man’s face. Whether it was money, fear, or professionalism, he was intent on keeping his mouth shut. She braced herself for the worst, even as she reached into her coin purse. It didn’t hurt to at least try the easy way first.

She set down enough coins to renovate the place into a real bar. “Does this jog your memory?”

The man firmly pushed the stack back toward her. “I think you have me confused with somebody else.”

The color drained from Snow’s eyes as they shifted from blue to white, and the last dregs of beer at the bottom of her tankard froze solid. Heads turned toward her again as the temperature of the entire room dropped to the point that people could see their breath.

“I really don’t think I do,” Snow said. Her voice was a warning.

The two glintchasers in the back were standing up now, hands on their weapons. Snow’s eyes did another sweep of the tavern, double-checking everyone’s position in the room, who had access to anything that could be used as a weapon, and who looked like they’d actually try.

“Last chance,” she warned. “Silas Lamark came to you to smuggle weapons. Tell me where they came from, and where they were going, and there won’t be any trouble.”

Instead of answering like a sensible person, the bartender whistled, and the two glintchasers drew their swords. A few other people stood up from their tables, ready to back them up against the outsider.

“It’s time to leave,” one of the amateurs warned Snow.

“Okay,” she sighed, getting up. “I tried.”

Snow kicked her stool backward, and then, in the blink of an eye, vanished, reappearing an instant later behind the hired swords with her dagger already drawn. The man was fast enough to take a swing at her, but it only found air as she ducked, sidestepped, and grabbed his wrist. It went numb as ice spread out from her hand, and he dropped his sword.

By now, the bartender was making a run for the back, but no sooner had he reached for a door handle than a dagger sailed through the air, piercing his hand and pinning him to the doorframe.

The armed woman finally managed to bring her sword around to swing at Snow, only for the assassin to disappear. Having seen that trick before, the woman tried to spin around, and found herself slipping on ice that had formed beneath her feet. Snow reappeared, gave her a firm kick to topple her, and then neatly vaulted over the bar to land next to a still-screaming bartender.

It was over in a second.

The bartender stared at her with the eyes of a cornered animal as she casually rested her hand on the dagger pinning his hand. At her touch, burning cold spread through the blade into his flesh.

“In about a minute, you’re going to start losing fingers to frostbite,” Snow explained. “Then the hand. Then the arm.”

Snow paused, hearing someone approach. Keeping one hand on the dagger, she grabbed a bottle off a shelf, froze its contents solid, and hurled it directly into the forehead of a man rushing the bar. He dropped on the spot, and nobody else moved. The only sound in the room was the bottle rolling across the floor.

For a moment, everyone stared, processing the display of brutal efficiency. Eventually, they came to the conclusion that this was none of their business, and everyone still standing quickly cleared out.

The bartender's eyes fixated on Snow as she leaned in. Her breath had the bite of wind in deep winter.

"What are you?" the man gasped.

If he didn't already know the answer to that question, she really was in the backcountry. Even if only an unlucky few had ever met her, the Cold-Blooded Killer had a reputation that few in Corsar could match. It was honestly a little refreshing to not be recognized, and it put her in a charitable mood.

"Unless you really want to find out," she warned, "you'll start talking."

After the initial scuffle, nobody in the bar tried to get in Snow's way. On one hand, she appreciated the privacy and room to work. It sped the process along when she didn't have to worry about other people trying something stupid.

On the other hand, the odds were that someone had run to get help.

At her encouragement, the bartender gave her what she wanted fairly quickly. He still probably wasn't going to keep that hand, but he was brief enough to give her time to get out of town before the cavalry arrived.

She slipped out a window in the back of the kitchen just as she could hear the beginnings of an angry mob descending on the bar. Staying off the streets bought her a few blocks without eyes on her, and when she finally did step out into them, it was to vanish into a sea of faces walking in a dozen different directions.

Within minutes, the shouts of people searching for her were far behind. If she'd waited until nightfall, it would have been even easier to lose them. But she was well past needing the help of darkness to disappear.

As she made her escape, she considered what she'd learned. She'd spent the last few months trying to track down Silas Lamark, a man who'd crossed her and her company too many times to be allowed to live. It had started with him putting out a contract on all of their heads, and nearly getting them all killed by bounty hunters. Then, with the help of the Cult of Stars, Silas had slipped right through Snow's fingers, and gotten away with a pile of Old

World weapons. Now, finally, she had more than a heading for tracking him. She had a location.

Silas was in Sasel, capital city of the kingdom. And now that she knew that, she would see him dead by the end of the month, and finally put this mess behind her. After that . . .

After that, she wasn't sure.

She could go back to work as a contract killer, which she hadn't done for nearly a year now. That job had been her life for the last eight years, ever since the fall of Relgen. But lately, thinking of going back to the work had felt wrong, in a way it hadn't ever before. Not morally wrong—she'd been killing for a living since she was seventeen, and long since stopped being bothered by it—but pragmatically. Assassin had been the obvious career move after the Starbreakers broke up, but now, maybe, the Starbreakers were back. And even if they weren't back, they were still around, in her life. The job didn't feel as necessary as it had when she was alone.

That still left her with the question of what in the seven hells she was supposed to do instead. She was still thinking about it when she rounded the corner to the scaffolding that would let her leave the ruintown, and had to come to a stop. Standing between it and her was a girl, probably not even twenty, dressed in ill-fitting armor hastily strapped over a rough tunic and pants.

As soon as the girl locked eyes with Snow, she put two fingers to her mouth, and gave the loudest whistle Snow had ever heard. It echoed through the stone streets of the town, and the girl took up a fighting stance.

“Don't move,” the girl warned.

Another rookie freelancer. Maybe even in the same company as the ones from the bar. There was fear in her eyes, but her hands were completely still. She had guts, Snow would give her that. But she was in for a rude awakening.

“You really don't want to do this,” Snow warned the girl.

As she exhaled, she let the cold take over. The blue of her eyes became paler by the second, and frost spread across her cheekbones and fingertips. At the same time, she felt a numbness take hold, dulling her every sensation and emotion, and sweeping away any pity she felt for the rookie in front of her.

She was an obstacle. Nothing more.

The girl responded by rushing forward. At first, Snow expected a punch, but the girl's hands moved in a quick, swirling pattern before swiping across the air to summon a blade of fire. Snow ducked out of the way but cursed herself. Getting spotted by an amateur was sloppy enough. She should have seen the telltale scars on her opponent's hands sooner. The girl was a wizard.

That whistle had to be a signal, which meant more obstacles were coming. She needed to end this quickly.

She sidestepped the girl's next spell, a burning whip that left scores in the ground, and threw a knife into the rookie's palm. It broke her concentration, and the flames vanished. Snow closed the distance before the girl could even finish screaming. In one motion, she yanked the knife free, jammed it into the girl's shoulder, and twisted until she heard a pop.

With her other hand, she grabbed both the girl's wrists and froze them together before shoving her to the ground. The girl lay there, gritting her teeth and failing to hold back tears. After a second, the knife tore itself free from the girl's shoulder and flew back to Snow's waiting hand, propelled by an invisible force. More footsteps came sprinting up behind her. They'd been closer than Snow would have expected. Before she could turn to face them, a peal of thunder rattled the sky.

The *cloudless* sky.

Snow didn't sheathe her weapon, but she did relax her stance. The fight was over.

Two more rookies arrived with their weapons drawn. And then a gleaming, emerald green blur dove from the sky, too fast to track with the eye. In a blink, the blur materialized as a light-skinned woman in dark green leathers standing right beside Snow, ethereal wings of green light splayed out wide behind her. Her landing was so fast it sent a curtain of wind rippling out in all directions, tossing back her light brown hair, and stopping the advancing glintchasers in their tracks. Snow's own hair was whipped into a wild frenzy, and it was only thanks to flash freezing her feet to the ground that she hadn't lost her footing. The new arrival's wings dissolved to nothing as she stood

straight, but her eyes continued to swirl as orbs of solid green thunderclouds. Elizabeth Meshar, the Winged Lady of Sasel, had arrived.

“Wings,” Snow greeted.

The Winged Lady took in the situation, the bleeding rookie on the ground and her two stunned friends, and Snow’s own bloodied knife, and shook her head.

“You three, clear out,” she said, with an even mixture of authority and fraying patience. “I’ve got business with this one.”

“The Winged Lady . . .” one of them let out an awestruck breath. It took the last of Wings’s patience with it.

“Now!” she snapped. The wind picked up with her voice, and the gust blew them all back another half step.

This time, the rookies listened. The two late arrivals helped their friend to her feet, and immediately began hauling her away in the opposite direction, casting constant glances back over their shoulders and furiously whispering between them. Only when they were gone did the swirls of Wings’s eyes fade back into her ordinary, human eyes with bright green irises.

Beneath the power, Wings looked like she hadn’t slept in days. The beginnings of dark circles had formed under her eyes, and there was a dimness to her gaze, as if she couldn’t quite focus on what was in front of her. Her mouth was set in a hard line, her jaw was tense, and the fingers she normally used to draw a bowstring were twitching furiously. The irritation hadn’t just been an act to get the rookies to leave.

“What’s wrong?” Snow asked, and was surprised to find genuine concern creep into her chest. Without her even pushing against it, the cold had receded, letting a bit of feeling back in.

Snow had never seen Wings look so desperate. “Arman’s been missing for two weeks, and you were the last one to see him. Tell me you know where he is.”

In an instant, Snow’s eyes changed color, snapping from pale ice to bright blue. The buzz of emotional numbing from the Heart of Ice retreated enough for her to feel a twinge of fear in her chest.

The assassin’s throat tightened. “What?”



3

WITNESS

Two weeks before, Snow was ducking beneath the swipe of a sword that could have taken her head off, and found herself actually annoyed that she was being put on the defensive by a complete nobody. She consoled her ego with the knowledge it was her opponent's sword, and only the sword, that made it possible.

The blade was a silver so bright as to be nearly white, with arcane etchings running its length. The edge gave off a crackling blue glow and left a trail of light in the air with every swing, giving the appearance that Snow was dancing to avoid a flying snake of blue light. The sword was an Old World weapon, forged and enchanted in a time when the secret for doing so wasn't a secret at all, but common science. It would cut through steel like an ordinary blade through wood, and withstand wear far better as well.

It was, as far as enchanted weapons went, bargain-bin quality. It had no special properties beyond its own enhanced durability and lethality, and even that was only noteworthy for how it eclipsed the modern standard. The armies of the Old World had issued weapons like it to every soldier. *Real* Old World weapons could call lightning or blow apart castle walls. Even Snow's own enchanted dagger Companion Piece had more tricks up its sleeve than her adversary's sword. But as basic as the weapon was, it was still dangerous enough to force Snow to be careful.

For about two breaths. Then her opponent stepped too far forward, ruining his footing, and Snow pounced. She vanished from sight right in front of her enemy's eyes in a blink, and reappeared behind him already driving her foot into his back ankle. He crumpled to the floor, and she lunged down over him, driving her dagger into his chest. His eyes widened for a split second, staring up into her cold, unfeeling gaze. Then his eyes rolled back, and he gave a final gasp before dying on her knife.

She stood, wiped the blood on her opponent's shirt, and checked to see how Phoenix was doing.

Phoenix was a man with caramel skin, dark eyes, and even darker hair. It and his beard were on the scruffy side of short, clean but unkempt. Though recent months had seen him more active and out of the house than he'd been in years, he still hadn't shed the extra padding civilian life had given him. His dark leather armor and red overcoat, both enchanted with a dozen different functions, still fit, but where Snow was lithe and lethal, Phoenix looked—well, like what he was. A shabby, slightly out-of-shape, stay-at-home father still shaking the rust off his old freelancing days. Easily perceived as a weakness in a fight.

The spellforger had been backed into a corner by his own opponent, who was wielding a sword identical to the one Snow had, save for one key difference: the glow of the sword Phoenix was facing kept sputtering in and out. Its wielder was a woman at least half a foot taller than Phoenix, with muscled arms exposed by the piecemeal armor she wore. With the skill and strength she moved with, she probably could have taken Phoenix in a straight fight even with her weapon malfunctioning.

But Phoenix didn't do straight fights.

He brought his arm up, and his bracer produced a shield of arcane force that took a sword strike for him. The shield and blade let out a high-pitched, sizzling whine as they connected, and sparks flew from the point of contact. Then, with a flex of Phoenix's hand, the shield rushed out, expanding until it was the size of his opponent. It engulfed her like a net, and her whole body locked up, held still by the force of the magical barrier.

While she was trapped, Phoenix brought his wand up like a club. The cylindrical chamber just above the handle rotated, locking a new power cell into place, and the wand's tip crackled with conjured electricity. When he brought it down on the woman, the power of the shield holding her detonated, and her body convulsed as lightning raced through her nerves. She fell to the ground, still twitching, and smelling faintly of ozone.

"Is that the last of them?" Phoenix asked.

Snow nodded. "It looks that way."

"Good."

A silence fell over the warehouse they had been battling in, and the two of them surveyed the damage they'd done. Six prone figures wearing mismatched armor were scattered among the boxes and shelves, ranging from dead, to concussed, to held in place by layers of ice.

The Old World weapons they'd been carrying littered the floor, some still bright and functioning, but most with light flickering or faded entirely. One sword in particular had been broken in two by a low-powered blast from Phoenix's wand.

"I thought you said these people were willing to talk to us," Phoenix said.

"They were," Snow countered, "until you brought up confiscating their weapons."

"I feel like there should be a bigger gap between 'you can't have my stuff' and 'now you die.'"

"They were quick to fight, I'll give you that," Snow said. Her eyes shifted in color, slowly becoming brighter. Feeling returned not just physically, but emotionally, as the power of the Heart of Ice receded from her, and the twinge of annoyance she'd felt during the fight grew into contempt. This crew really had been nothing but a bunch of overly ambitious, bloodthirsty idiots. "We probably did Harbin a favor taking them down."

"Oh, he'll love that. Glintchasers policing his town for him."

"If he wants, we can let the ones who are still alive go, and he can catch them himself."

"Don't be petty."

“Don’t tell me what to do.”

Phoenix gave her a hesitant half smile, which only grew more nervous and uncertain when she met it with her usual flat expression. Somewhere distantly, it occurred to her that between his brain and her delivery, he would have a hard time deciphering whether or not that had been sardonic banter or genuine malice she’d just thrown his way.

But she found she couldn’t be bothered to clarify, or apologize for making him uncomfortable.

She did briefly wonder if calling him in for an assist without someone else to play buffer between them might have been a bad idea, but she swept that aside. They were adults. They could handle being alone on a job together.

“Well,” Phoenix said just as the silence threatened to reach even more awkward lengths. “Harbin aside, at least we’ve got something to work with.” He bent down to the closest fallen Old World weapon to examine it. After taking a closer look at the arcane circuitry—ruined enough to explain the sputtering power output—he stuffed the entire thing into a bottomless pouch on his belt that, on the outside, was no bigger than his fist. “I’ll see what I can learn from these things, but if Silas is selling off parts of his new arsenal, it looks like he’s only selling the dregs.”

Snow nodded. “You look into that, I’ll follow up and see what I can get out of these amateurs. They won’t be able to give me Silas, but they’ll have the next link in the chain.”

“Are you planning on questioning them before turning them over to Harbin?”

Snow shrugged. “I can get to them whether they’re in jail or not. Might as well let Harbin do the work to hold them.”

“Ah, there’s that famous glintchaser contempt for authority. It really is part of the charm, isn’t it?”

Phoenix and Snow drew their weapons on reflex, even as they both recognized the voice. Materializing out of thin air came a woman with beige skin and bright blue hair and eyes that matched the short, layered silk robes

she wore. Arcania script decorated one of her sleeves, marking her as the High Inquisitive of Tarsim Arcane Academy. To most of her professional colleagues, she was Kira Arakawa. But to anyone who actually knew her, she would always be—

“Ink,” Phoenix said. “What are you doing here?”

The wizard looked between the two Starbreakers before focusing in on Phoenix. “I need to borrow you for a consultation. I’ve got an artifact my people can’t make sense of, and I need to know what to do with it.”

Phoenix’s brow furrowed. “Now?”

“No, I teleported halfway across the kingdom to see if you could pencil me into your busy schedule for sometime next week,” Ink said, dripping refined sarcasm. She gestured to their surroundings and the enemies that had already been taken care of. “Yes, now. It’s not as if you’re busy.”

“I was going to go home after this.”

Ink rolled her eyes. “I will have you back home before supper, if that’s what you’re worried about. Now come along.”

Phoenix glared. He hated being ordered around by anyone, especially Ink, and Snow knew he would say no on principle. But Ink seemed to anticipate that as well, and kept talking.

“I could let my artifact experts keep whittling away at it, but their progress is slow, and everything else I’m working on is being held up by this. You’ll be better and faster, and I need better and faster. So please, will you come along?”

She pushed out the last words like it physically pained her.

Snow probably still would have given Ink the finger and been on her way, but Phoenix could be a pushover, if you knew the buttons to push, and wounded and subdued as it had been over the years, his ego was still one of them, especially when it came to Ink.

He let out a long suffering sigh. “Fine.”

“Thank you,” Ink said, sounding as if the words were poison on her tongue. With Phoenix’s assent secured, she began weaving a teleportation spell. The air around her and Phoenix shimmered, then began to break into a fractal pattern.

“Let me know if you find anything,” Phoenix said to Snow. “I’ll talk to you later.”

And then, with a crash and a flash of light, he and Ink were gone.

Phoenix reappeared alongside Ink in what first impression identified as underground Old World ruins. There were no windows, the air had a cool stillness to it, and the architecture was several centuries removed from modern construction. Going off the exact style, he’d put them somewhere on the western coast of Corsar, where the ruins were most often the buried or sunken remains of Old World cities built long before the Collapse. The lightstone had long since been stripped from the grooves in the walls, but new fixtures were bolted in their places. A stripped and renovated ruin, then.

Several worktables had been brought into this room, all of them covered in books, papers, and inks. The walls were taken up almost entirely by chalk and pinboards, and the scrawl of notes and diagrams that filled them was dense to the point of being incoherent. All that, Phoenix considered normal enough. His own workshop back home had looked worse. He’d expected an office of some kind somewhere in the Academy, but then again Sasel was built on Old World ruins. Why couldn’t the Academy use some for artifact storage and study?

The thing that tripped him up and got his attention was what all of the worktables and notations were centered around. Mounted on a rack, partially supported by cables affixed to the vaulted ceiling, was an unmistakable, bronze-colored bulk. It was in pieces, and much of its interior workings had been extracted or set aside on nearby work surfaces, but reassembled it would have been a twelve-foot-tall, broad, bipedal metal construct with long arms, a riveted metal exterior, and a central orb in the center of its chest instead of a head.

It was the remains of the Servitor, the Old World machine that had threatened to destroy Corsar. Even *one* of its Hearts could power unparalleled

weapons, or turn people into them. Phoenix had fought the Servitor himself, ten years ago, in the ruins outside Loraine. It had choked the air with the dust from its swath of destruction. Hundreds of soldiers, knights, and glintchasers had died bringing it down, his own wife nearly among them.

That was what the Academy was working on. To imitate it, or bring it back, or something else entirely, it almost didn't matter. This was everything he had ever been afraid of since he'd first learned the secrets of spellforging, and had his eyes truly opened to the devastation the elves had brought upon themselves with all their mastery of magic.

"What is this?" Phoenix demanded.

Ink didn't seem to register the distress in Phoenix's voice or the fear and anger that accompanied the sudden racing in his chest.

"What does it look like?" she asked. "We're working to create our own artifacts based on the Servitor so we can actually use the Hearts we find. Without having to shatter them and fuse the energy into a person."

That was the thing about Servitor Hearts. They were incredibly powerful stores of arcane energies, but they were made to work together to power the Servitor, not be used individually by humans. Snow and Wings had gotten power from the Hearts of Ice and Sky, but in both cases, the original housing of the Heart had been destroyed, and the released energy had been infused into their bodies.

It came with physical and mental changes, and they'd needed surgical intervention to withstand the strain of it long-term. There were some people with the power to let them control the Hearts, like Kurien the Prince Killer, but most people could do nothing with an intact Heart beyond exploiting the passive effects of its presence.

"*This* is what you want my help with?" Phoenix asked.

"You're the authority on Servitor Hearts, as you love to remind us all. As well as the only spellforger on the continent," Ink said. "It could take my people decades to work out the principles to even let them get properly started on this project. With your knowledge, with spellforging, we could be prototyping designs tomorrow."

“No.” Phoenix shook his head in disbelief. “You had to know I’d say no. I’ve said no a thousand times. This isn’t just a consult to help you understand what you’re dealing with, this— I’m *not* giving you spellforging. You know I won’t.”

Ink frowned. “Really? You’re still on that, after all these years?”

“I’ve seen what spellforging let the elves do to themselves,” Phoenix said. “I’m not going to let us end up like them.”

“Powerful? Dominant? Spread across the stars?”

“Dead.”

Ink’s frown deepened, and she gave a frustrated shake of her head. “It’s inevitable, you know. Someday, someone is going to unlock it, with or without your vow of silence. You can’t keep all of humanity from spellforging forever.”

“Maybe,” Phoenix said. “But it won’t be on me.”

“Oh, but it will,” Ink countered, raising a finger in a gesture that was oddly lecturing for her. “Choosing inaction is still a choice. You are the spell-forging. The one man in all of Corsar, all of Costera, maybe all of Asher with the secret of the art. You have power, and you choose to do nothing with it. You forfeited your opportunity to decide the future, and now whatever shape it takes, it will take because you did nothing.”

“This isn’t about the future,” Phoenix spat. “This is about *power*, and about how it *kills* you that someone else has it instead of you. That’s what this has always been about. You, Targan, the whole Academy. You’re all the same.”

Ink gave a sharp, humorless laugh. It was a short and bitter sound, and it half sounded like her lungs tried to escape out her throat when she made it. Distracted as he was by his own anger, Phoenix might not have registered how out of character it was for Ink, if her face hadn’t flickered at the same time. If, for just an instant, her features had looked subtly different. Subtly wrong. It passed with her laugh, but even with Ink’s face stable once again, Phoenix couldn’t unsee it. There was a shift in his brain, as it set aside arguments of ethics and started picking through the conversation with a new lens, a new goal.

“You knew I would say no,” Phoenix said softly, more to himself than Ink.

Ink shrugged. “Perhaps. But one can still hope.”

“You weren’t hoping.”

Now that he was looking with intentional scrutiny, the gesture was all wrong for her. There was no coy playfulness to her shrug, no grace. In fact, all her movements were stiff and tired. He played the entire conversation back in his head, played every conversation he’d ever had with Ink, and as the inconsistencies piled up, his hand drifted toward the holster of his wand.

This wasn’t Ink, but that teleport spell had been real. These ruins were real. The Servitor was real. And whoever this really was, they had *known* Phoenix would say no to helping with this. Known, and brought him anyway.

In a single motion, Phoenix drew his wand and fired a blast of force at Ink’s face. At the same time, his other hand drew the strongest fire sphere he had in his belt, and hurled it at the Servitor and all the scattered materials in the workshop. He was taking down whoever this really was, and he was turning this whole project to slag and ashes.

Except, without the imposter moving so much as a muscle, Phoenix’s attack splashed harmlessly against a shimmering barrier of violet energy six inches from Ink’s face. Without looking, she casually raised a hand toward the fire sphere he’d thrown. It froze in midair, and when it detonated, the explosion froze before it could expand beyond the size of a fist. It held in place, a quivering, half-finished combustion, straining against invisible bonds to be let free and fill the room in a superheated conflagration.

If there was any doubt left in Phoenix’s mind that this wasn’t Ink, it was gone now. Ink had never done anything like *that*.

“One minor benefit to you hoarding your secrets,” Not-Ink said. “Without spellforging, we mortals have had little choice but to improve our direct spellcasting.”

One of her fingers lifted, and the roar of flames filled the room as the explosion from the fire sphere that Not-Ink had contained erupted in a concentrated beam aimed directly at Phoenix. He threw up a force shield on instinct, and it was the only thing that saved him from being incinerated. The sheer force of the blast still took him off his feet and sent him careening out of the workroom and into the next chamber, this one larger, and dominated

by a long meeting table surrounded by chairs. Phoenix's landing cracked the table in half. A groan escaped him as he rolled onto his stomach, then forced himself to his feet. Not-Ink strolled into the room after him with a stiff but unbothered gait, her face flickering again. Phoenix got the briefest look at whatever was under the illusion, lines and wrinkles mostly, but on the forehead, he swore he caught something more deliberate and unnatural. A symbol he hadn't had time to make the details of.

Then his stomach lurched, and he was falling—across the floor, and into one of the walls. His head spun with vertigo as he struggled to adjust to what he was seeing. The broken table, the scattered chairs, the Ink imposter were all exactly where they had been. But now his back was pinned to the wall, and the whole world looked like it had gone sideways. As if for him, and him alone, the concept of “down” had been shifted.

Flung around as much as he had been, Phoenix had lost his wand. He summoned it back to his waiting palm with a thought. It flew across the room to meet him, and the second it touched his hand, he was unloading everything the weapon had into Not-Ink. She extended two fingers toward him, and a beam of sizzling green energy met his wand's stark white. When the powers clashed, Phoenix's blast was instantly evaporated, as if it had been water and suddenly turned to mist. For a second, the dissipated energy hung in the air like a cloud of fog. Then, with a flick of Not-Ink's wrist, it all coalesced into a single point—inside the chamber of Phoenix's wand. He barely had time to widen his eyes in surprise before the weapon exploded in his hand.

Every cell in the wand detonated at once, creating a ball of smoke, flame, webbing, and pure energy that completely swallowed Phoenix. All he saw was white. All he heard was a ringing in his ears. His enchanted armor saved his life, but he felt its protections buckle under the assault. His coat was shredded, his leathers torn, and the flesh of his hand was slashed and burned.

Slowly, painfully, the world came back into focus. Rapidly dying flames licked the remnants of the table and chairs. Thick, massive cobwebs of spider silk clung to everything. Smoke hung thick in the air. And the fragments of his weapon laid scattered around him.

Not-Ink stood completely unscathed, along with a circle of floor around her that stood out stark against the scorched surface beyond it. She looked unimpressed.

“I should have done this years ago,” she said. “If only I’d known it would be so easy.”

She gestured, and Phoenix was falling again, this time toward the ceiling. Vaulted as they were, it would be a harsh landing. But even battered, even down his preferred weapon, his mind raced to keep up, to keep fighting. He dug a gravity disc out of his belt, activated it to slow his fall, and landed on his feet on the ceiling.

Not-Ink made a *tsk* sound, and a moment later, all of the furniture in the room followed Phoenix’s lead, and fell up. Even throwing up a shield, he was battered under a rain of chairs, and when the halves of the tables hit, he crumpled beneath them.

Not-Ink snapped her fingers, and he and all the furniture fell back to the floor. This time, he was too slow to catch himself. He landed with a resounding thud, hard enough to bounce off the floor a few inches on the first impact. The wind was knocked from him, and chairs rained down on top of him until he was buried.

He tried to groan, but it came out as a wheeze as he struggled to get air back into his lungs.

Everything hurt. He was certain he had broken bones, and one of his arms was caught on something. He couldn’t get a good look at Not-Ink, just her feet and the skirt of her robes, but it was enough to see as the illusion of her appearance dropped, replaced by long, unflatteringly loose Academy robes. He heard doors open, and more footsteps approach.

“Take him to the Prisoner,” an old man’s voice said. It was familiar, but Phoenix was fighting to remember it through what felt like a concussion. “Let us see if the madman is as good as his word.”

“I still don’t like this,” a different, younger voice said, and Phoenix thought distantly that he recognized this one too. “His companions will come for him. If they find us—”

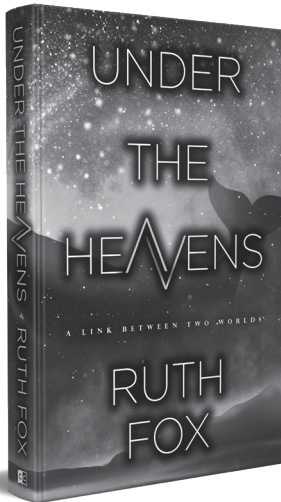
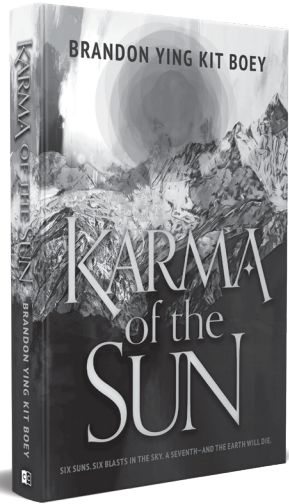
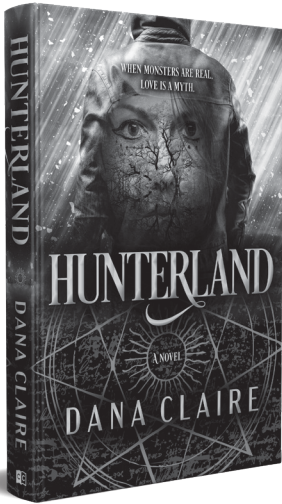
“They will be dealt with,” the old man insisted. “We have not come this far to be stopped by a disbanded glintchaser company. Now go. The sooner he’s put to work, the sooner we can move forward.”

Phoenix’s head throbbed, still spinning from being tossed around. Every breath sent a stab of pain raking through his ribcage. His right hand was trembling as it dribbled blood all over the floor, and beneath the shredded and crisped remains of his glove, he could see flesh burned black. He tried to force himself to get up. To fight. He needed to get away, to warn his friends and family.

That was his last thought before he blacked out.

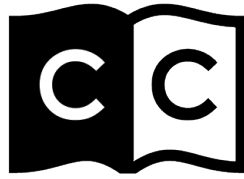


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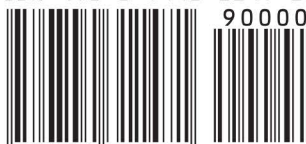
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