

SWORD AND STARSHIP  
**HARBINGERS**



ELLIS MORNING

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**BOOK 2: HARBINGERS**

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Harbingers (Sword and Starship Book 2)

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<a href="#"><u>Wait! Have you read the full series?</u></a>	5
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER 1</u></a>	6
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER 2</u></a>	19
<a href="#"><u>THE QUEST CONTINUES</u></a>	30

**Wait! Have you read the full series?**



Before reading *Harbingers*, you may want to check out *Blood's Force*, the first book in the **Sword and Starship** series. It'll definitely help you with understanding the plot, the characters, and their universe. You can find *Blood's Force* at:

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# CHAPTER 1



Before landing in the barony of Nidaros, I never would've imagined the army's headquarters would prove the safest place in the capital.

Few candles burned at this late hour. Healthy fires had diminished to embers within the hearths capping either end of the single-story wooden structure. Still, the barracks remained warm. Inviting, even. Dozens of soldiers had retired to their bunks in peaceful slumber.

Any knight errant with enough questing under her belt knew safety was fragile: always one decree, disease, or battle away from vanishing. Hundreds of people in the capital and out in the districts slept like these soldiers, unaware of the deadly threat lurking right beneath them – a threat I had to halt before it destroyed the planet, even if it meant losing my chance to save a dear friend and mentor.

I hurried toward the barracks' exit with urgency. The front door already hung open, swaying into darkness. Without bothering to find a lantern, I took a steeling breath and darted into the void.

My feet crunched through dead grass. Cold air stabbed into my lungs and ignored my coat to drill down to bone. Ahead of me, a man wearing a burgundy tabard over light armor sped down the side of the barracks, oil lantern in one hand and wooden bucket in the other.

Ingvar Leirfall, Captain of the Guard, rushed toward an iron well pump. Its handle had been tied off and adorned with metal charms, wards that were meant to keep evil – and people – at bay. They didn't deter the captain, who ran like he'd never noticed them.

They didn't impress me, either, as my mentors had cured me of superstition and belief in the so-called Unseen years earlier. With a mix of determination and dread that'd become familiar during my time in Nidaros, I chased after Ingvar. My side sword bounced against my

back with each stride. I left it sheathed, as this wasn't the sort of emergency one solved with violence.

Upon reaching the well, Ingvar set down his burdens. He severed the leather ties with his longsword, then tossed the blade aside and placed his bucket beneath the spigot to work the freed pump. It was dry for a while at first before sputtering to life. Instead of water, out poured a ghastly purplish sludge.

Ingvar dropped to his knees. "Jayce." He choked out my nickname — Jess, really, but that was how he pronounced it.

Speechless, I stumbled to a halt beside him, eyes riveted to the bucket.

The mysterious substance — ichor, we called it — spread unchecked through the barony of Nidaros. In the presence of water, it created more of itself, destroying or contaminating the water in the process. Crops withered as a result, leading to dwindling food stores and a worsening shortage of flax, Nidaros' sole export.

Given flax's importance to their economy, the reigning sovereign Lord Catherwood and Madam Castor, Guildmistress of the *Linum Dominorum* trade guild, had taken note of the crisis. If her flax debt went unpaid, Madam Castor would surely stop shipping food and other supplies to Nidaros. Lord Catherwood might curse the barony, severing it from the galaxy and preventing its people from seeking help elsewhere. Either might send armed forces to "encourage cooperation" or extract their due in blood, all while the deadly ichor consumed the planet. Hundreds of Nidarans faced the gnawing agony of starvation — and who knew how all the other planets dependent on the flax trade would suffer?

Ingvar released the well pump and sat back hard on the ground. His tabard had Lord Catherwood's seal embroidered on the chest: a gold griffin devouring a snake. As he hunched over, the griffin looked to be struggling with a burden too heavy to bear.

"No wonder everything's dead." He braced his head in his hands. "If it weren't raining, we'd be dead, too."

Several full rain barrels stood nearby, a common sight throughout Nidaros. At least the emergency water supply was safe. But if it stopped raining — or worse, if it began raining ichor ...

I shook off the thought and dropped to my knees beside the bucket, desiring a closer look.

The flickering lantern light didn't dispel the shadows deep inside, but that wasn't a problem. My coat pockets played host to several ancient Shipbuilder light sources at the moment: my prized stick lighter, and the newly acquired light tile. Of the two, I understood the stick lighter's operation better, and it was more subtle. After a quick peek over both shoulders to confirm we were alone in the dark field, I retrieved it. Twisting the two halves of the small metallic wand aligned the components that activated its internal power source. One end glowed with a bead of heat and light, which charged the battery while active.

"*Skíta!*" Ingvar cursed, unfurling as though preparing to run. Midway through, he froze, frowning at the lighter. "Aye, that thing. Careful with it here, Jayce."

His fear lingered, but I got the feeling it was less for the lighter and more for the consequences I faced if I were caught wielding a "sacred" Shipbuilder artifact that the powers-that-be claimed I had no business touching.

"Don't worry." I cupped my left hand around the light to shield it.

Ingvar slowly sat back. He didn't run away or arrest me for witchcraft, which was better than most people on most planets. I longed to teach him more about the stunning technology and science the Shipbuilders had left behind centuries earlier — now largely forgotten, their artifacts hoarded among Lords and magic adepts. But the timing, and our moods, had to be better first.

I lowered my lighter into the bucket, tilting the container from side to side. Sure enough, no trace of water. The purplish ichor was odorless, slick and shiny like quicksilver, and seeped readily into the wood of the bucket. Imagining the entire *planet* overrun with the stuff sent a shiver through me.

For all the blights I'd fought elsewhere in the galaxy, I lacked the knowledge to ease this one. My ignorance hurt, almost as much as it hurt to see my one ally in this whole mess despairing. Was the ichor the result of some runaway chemical reaction? I didn't know enough chemistry to hazard a guess there. Maybe it was some kind of organism, like algae or bacteria? I'd seen plenty of such blooms before, but none that left bodies of water to race through soil. The ichor didn't seem to merely inhabit water, either. Whatever changes it made, the result was lethal to plants — and to people, as Ingvar and I had witnessed earlier.

With a stab of horror, I remembered the unidentified stains on my boots, trousers, and coat



that'd accumulated over the past few days. I put down the bucket and checked them all over. They appeared to be splotches of ichor mixed with dried mud. Where possible, I examined my skin underneath, confirming it looked and felt normal.

I let out a quiet sigh of relief. This seemed further proof that physical contact with the ichor wasn't harmful. If any got *inside* a person, though ... the thought filled me with uneasiness. I shut off and pocketed the stick lighter, then sat down hard beside Ingvar. The fatigue and pains of that long, dangerous day returned with a vengeance.

"The adepts blocked off all our wells weeks ago," Ingvar said, referring to the local practitioners of "magic" and guardians of tradition concerning the Unseen. "They've known of the ichor for some time, and yet, never a word of it to me or Baron Tristan." His furious, questioning gaze locked onto mine. "Is this their doing? What if this is some poison of theirs that got out of hand?"

It was frighteningly plausible. My trust toward magic adepts was middling to nonexistent as a rule, and the adepts in Nidaros had given me no reason to adjust my stance. That morning, some unknown number of them had sent me on a one-way trip into the dungeon beneath their keep to meet with a fire grenade. I'd fought my way out, but one of my attackers – Adept Knorr – had died in the process.

Despite all that, I had trouble believing the adepts had *made* the ichor. It seemed too powerful a creation from those who thoughtlessly aped tradition – and too lifelike, almost like it had agency. A drive to reproduce and spread, if nothing else.

"I think they discovered this stuff a while ago, but didn't know what it was," I replied to Ingvar. "So they kept it a secret, warned people away from it. It wouldn't be the first time adepts have covered up something they couldn't explain."

Ingvar's scowl shot toward the bucket. "Even if we take it to Baron Tristan and shove it under his nose, Ormyr will have a deflection ready!"

"I know," I said, tamping back annoyance. Master Ormyr, the chief adept in Nidaros, was hell-bent on steering us away from anything that had a whiff of progress about it. The local Baron was his all-too-willing accomplice in that regard.

Ingvar's eyes refocused on me, pleading. "What do we do, Jayce?"

With a deep breath, I gathered up my reassurance and determination. "We need to find

out what this stuff is and how to get rid of it.”

Though I had guesses about the ichor’s nature, I lacked the means by which to test them. The proper equipment and know-how were hard to come by – but, to my continued astonishment, one woman in Nidaros possessed both. Anticipating Ingvar’s reluctance, I brought up my next point gently. “Thordia’s looking for answers. She may have them by now.”

Ingvar slumped again, shaking his head downward.” *Skíta.*”

Thordia Naustvik: the very “witch” accused of “cursing” Nidaros. In reality, she was an expert in botany and other Shipbuilder disciplines. She’d isolated the ichor on her own, but hadn’t been able to do anything about it before Master Ormyr had come seeking her hide.

Earlier that evening, Ingvar and I had searched Thordia’s home in the Low North district, hoping she was still evading the adepts there. She’d fled, however, leaving behind amazing specimens of ancient technology and a note intended for her brother Verahl. In it, she’d explained her intent to venture to some mysterious, far-off place called the Harbinger and seek a cure for the ichor there.

Ever since we’d made that discovery, Ingvar had avoided discussing it with me. My sympathy welled, a painful reminder of how much I’d grown to care about him against my own wishes. Longing to reassure him, I rested my hand on his back, close to his shoulder.

His head shot back up. Surprise flickered over his expression, but he didn’t flinch or push me away.

Though my heart pounded, I managed to keep my voice level. “Why does Thordia think she’ll find answers at the Harbinger? What *is* the Harbinger?”

Ingvar glanced askance. Silence stretched between us. Just as I was about to try asking again, he faced me, eyes full of trepidation. “The old ones say it presaged the fall of Lord Gyllenfeld.”

The Lord who’d originally ruled over Nidaros decades ago, before Catherwood and several other Lords had swept through and conquered his holdings.

“’Tis how the Harbinger got its name,” Ingvar continued. “Truth is, Gyllenfeld had fallen *afore* it struck.”

I blinked at his choice of words. “Struck?”

“Ages afore any of us were born, this great *thing* fell out of the sky and drove into the ground like a tent spike.” Ingvar swallowed around a lump in his throat. “The earth shook, forests fell, entire districts burnt up. Sky full of light one moment, ash the next. Hundreds died in the chaos.”

My free hand rose to my mouth. “That must’ve been awful.”

“The Baron of Nidaros at that time decreed that anyone who approacheth the thing should be put to death,” Ingvar continued. “Every Baron since hath upheld the decree, not wishing to risk stirring up its wrath again.”

It must’ve been *massive* to cause such turmoil. A meteorite, or an old Shipbuilder structure? Not just a single ship, but something vast. “Have you ever seen it?” I asked, curious whether he could offer his own experience and not just hearsay.

Ingvar nodded. “My family’s farm lieth in the East, in a district spared its violence. I faced down the beast every day there wasn’t a fog or storm. Always felt like it was watching us, waiting for the right moment to finish what it began.” He glanced off into the nighttime void, sizing up a nemesis across an invisible battlefield.

“What does it look like?”

He swallowed hard. “A ringed spire towering in the distance.”

My heart raced. Awestruck, I searched my feverish thoughts for the right words to explain. “A long time ago, the Shipbuilders built hundreds of stations in space – like spacefaring vessels, only much larger, and not faring anywhere. I won’t know for sure until I see it, but it sounds like the Harbinger’s one of those giant stations. Without the Shipbuilders there to take care of it, it must’ve drifted out of its proper position in space and crashed on Nidaros.” I skipped the discussion of Lagrangian points and orbital decay. “That crash would’ve been very violent, like you said. Think of a stone sending ripples through a pond, only through air and land instead. It’s amazing that it survived intact.”

A testament to their ancient genius. Had anything inside the station survived impact? Thordia must’ve believed so. The mere thought of the incredible things that might lie in wait there sent chills through me.

Ingvar stared deep into my eyes, struggling to process my explanation. His apprehension killed my excitement, replacing it with dread. “Thordia must be seeking more powerful

Shipbuilder magic to use against the ichor. But if she's not careful, she might unleash something even worse."

I bit my lip nervously. Was it possible? Adepts throughout the galaxy droned on about the awful dangers of mishandling Shipbuilder "magic," but they just wanted to keep everything to themselves and their masters. As for Thordia, I only knew her through notes, hearsay, and the artifacts left behind in her home. She struck me as someone who humored the local dogma far enough to satisfy the authorities while remaining true to herself behind their backs. Someone like me. I wanted to enlist her help. The only problem? It'd be sheer hell to search for a single woman on foot somewhere between Nidaros and the innards of a gigantic space station.

With wrenching agony, I wished my former mentor, Beguine Drea, were there with us. This discovery would've thrilled her, and she would've known exactly how to extract whatever knowledge the Shipbuilders had possessed regarding the ichor. But Drea was trapped in the frozen, adept-cursed town of Gules, millions of miles distant. Leaving Nidaros required the Baron's permission and the help of Master Ormyr, as Gules' coordinates had been erased from my ship's index. Even if I had those things, an entire planet depended on me, and might not have days to wait.

"Captain!"

The distant call jarred me from my guilt-ridden thoughts. I shook my head and glanced up, seeking the source of interruption.

A bobbing lantern revealed three soldiers clad in burgundy and gold tunics, approaching the barracks along a worn path. Lieutenant Pontus Grimsson, Ingvar's second in command, led the way: a shorter, stockier gentleman with a graying beard. Anyone who saw him next to Ingvar would assume Pontus was Captain of the Guard. An unusual arrangement, but it seemed Ingvar benefited from having a more experienced soldier at his right hand.

Behind Pontus trailed two younger soldiers, Ebbe Madsen and Magnus Holmvik. They stared at their feet, none of the usual rival banter passing between them.

"Over here, lads!" Eagerly, Ingvar sprang to his feet and offered me a hand up as well.

I accepted and stood with a nod of thanks, of two minds about the interruption. Our discussion was too important to shelve. At the same time, Ingvar had sent these soldiers on a

mission of inquiry. They might've returned with valuable information – although, judging by their empty hands, physical evidence had eluded them.

The soldiers waved back, abandoning the path to make a beeline toward me and Ingvar.

"Thank the Unseen ye've returned, Captain. Dame Jessamine," Pontus greeted as he converged. He didn't explain why he spoke with such relief – probably because of the younger soldiers in earshot – but I knew it was because a part of him had feared we'd never return. When he'd learned of our intent to search the Naustviks' house, he'd all but pleaded us not to.

The other soldiers flanked their lieutenant. At Pontus' right, teenaged Ebbe smiled my way. Magnus stood at Pontus' left – closer to my age, and more reserved.

Ingvar gave a nod in greeting. "Any luck?"

"Some. We should talk." I assumed Pontus meant a private discussion, minus the younger soldiers – and maybe even me.

Ingvar lowered his head again. "Ebbe, Magnus, thanks for –"

"Sir! The well!" Ebbe gave a start and pedaled several steps backward, eyes riveted upon something behind us. One of his hands strayed toward his belt and grasped the loop of wishing beads suspended there.

With a stab of fear, I spun around. All that lay in wait were the freed well pump, the charms and ties littering the ground, the bucket of ichor, and Ingvar's lantern. Facing the soldiers again, I found Magnus and Pontus had joined Ebbe in clutching their own bead-loops with wide-eyed horror.

"We were supposed to steer clear of it, sir." A tremor went through Pontus' voice. "Who or what could've destroyed those wards?"

"We don't know," I intervened, fancying myself the quicker liar. "We're trying to find out. Don't worry, we're protected."

To prove it, I waved a hand toward Ingvar. My late mother's amethyst ring still dangled from the chain around his neck. I'd lent it to him earlier, a gesture that still made my heart jump when I thought about it. From there, I pointed out the mati amulet around my neck, which Master Ormyr had given me that morning; it resembled a blue human eye frozen in an unending stare. Ingvar had his own copy of the same amulet, hanging from his belt next to

wishing beads that, to my satisfaction, I'd never once seen him grasp.

Neither Ingvar nor I believed that any of these things brought luck or protection. But, as the captain had mentioned earlier that day, they had their uses. For me, they helped with the show of conformity necessary to avoid prison cells, execution, and worse. These soldiers were friendly, but Ingvar was the only one with whom I had the luxury of total honesty.

The soldiers' worry eased, but didn't vanish entirely. "Could be a witch here in the capital," Magnus muttered.

"*Skíta!*" Ebbe cursed. "What if it's Thordia herself?"

"The real threat is what's coming out of the damned wells." Ingvar grabbed the bucket and brought it to them for inspection. "*This* is our curse! The adepts knew and never told us!"

Upon viewing the contents, the soldiers' jaws fell. Pontus' lantern looked like it'd fall next.

"The knight and I found more of the same in the Low North. The whole barony's infested." Ingvar proffered the bucket toward the nearest junior soldier. "Magnus, take this into the room left of my office. Ebbe, go with him. Don't show anyone, and don't speak of it yet. I'll brief you all soon. 'Til then, best not to let rumors run loose."

With dread plastered over their faces, neither young man moved to comply.

"Is it safe, sir?" Pontus pleaded more than asked.

"Don't touch it, and you'll be fine," I said. Prior experience led me to think physical contact was harmless, but it was best not to take chances.

At the soldiers' continued reluctance, Ingvar's demeanor softened. He placed the bucket on the ground again and glanced between them reassuringly. "The adepts aren't interested in solving this, lads, just locking it away. Our people need us to do better. If nothing else, we must make plans to warn everyone of this ichor."

I liked the idea of educating people. If they hadn't encountered the ichor yet, they would.

"Contained, the ichor's harmless." Ingvar gestured to the bucket. "Better we keep it contained than release it back into the soil, aye?"

Ebbe stepped forward, regaining lost ground, but his jaw quivered. "We don't know what kind of invisible evil's leeching from it, sir."

"With all the charms in the barracks, you have nothing to worry about," I said. Dozens lay before the hearths, not to mention the baubles each soldier carried on his person.

"Magnus? Your captain gave you an order," Pontus warned the soldier who had yet to move.

"Don't worry about it, lad. I'll take it in," Ingvar dismissed. "Just realize this isn't the last time ye've seen it."

"I'll take it, sir." Still grasping his beads, Magnus fetched the bucket with his free hand. "Come on, pup," he goaded Ebbe.

"Thanks, lad." Ingvar smiled faintly.

Pontus handed his lantern to Magnus, adding a clap on the back. "Wish hard for the Unseen's help."

"That's very brave of you, friend." I nodded my approval as Magnus started for the barracks.

"I could've done it, but he had orders." Ebbe nursed his shoulder as though someone had socked him there.

I bit my lip to conceal my amusement, then hit upon an idea. "Actually, there's something else we need help with, if you think—"

"What is it?" Ebbe asked eagerly.

I glanced toward the well pump. "It'll probably be a while before an adept can seal that off again. In the meantime, we should cover it with something. We don't want anyone to think it's safe to draw from." Or elicit more panic. I searched for anything useful in the perimeter of Ingvar's lantern-light. "Maybe we could upend one of the rain barrels over it?"

Pontus' stern expression made clear he wanted nothing to do with this venture, but Ingvar looked receptive to the idea. "The one we've been drawing against is low at this point," the captain said. "Let's pour off the remainder in one of the other barrels first."

I nodded. "Ebbe, here." I fished through my pockets, then handed him the hammer charm my handmaid Sigrid had given me when I'd first arrived in Nidaros.

Ebbe accepted it with a grin, then darted after Ingvar. I wasn't far behind. While Pontus hung back, the rest of us cooperated to lift a partially full barrel, drain it as Ingvar had described, then lower it over the well and its scattered charms.

"*Skita!* Feel that?" Once it was in place, Ebbe jumped away from the barrel as though it'd shocked him. "Worst chill I ever felt in my life! An angry ghost for certain!"

It was all in his imagination, but scolding along those lines wouldn't help. "I don't feel anything," I said.

"Remember your control, lad," Ingvar urged him. "'Tis just as important here as on the battlefield. Let training take over and ground you. No matter what might happen, ye can address it as long as ye don't fall to panic."

Ebbe took a deep breath. "Aye, sir. It won't happen again."

Ingvar tossed his head toward the barracks. "Dismissed. Remember, not a word about this to anyone afore we're ready. Don't think it'll be much longer."

Ebbe moved to return my hammer charm.

"Keep it," I said.

"Thanks, Lady Knight." Galvanized, Ebbe took off toward the barracks.

I smiled to Ingvar with satisfaction. Once more, I admired his skill with his charges, striking a balance between friend and guide.

Ingvar smiled back, lowering his head bashfully.

Pontus remained entrenched in the secure glow of Ingvar's lantern, which lit the underside of his uneasy expression. As Ebbe ran past, he stared after like he had half a mind to follow, then faced Ingvar. "Ignoring wards? Hoarding the agent of a witch's curse? Unseen, what're we doing?"

"Narrowing in on what's truly plaguing us," Ingvar replied with conviction, stepping away from the barrel to retrieve his longsword from the ground.

"That's some hubris, lad," Pontus warned.

"The ichor stealeth our water to make more of itself," Ingvar explained as he straightened. "That's the reason everything's dried up and no seeds have taken root. The adepts can do *nothing* for it!" He thrust his sword-point into the ground for emphasis. "If Ormyr knew how to banish it, he would've done so already, then crowed about it 'til his boasts rattled Lord Catherwood's ears. Thordia may be no witch at all, just Ormyr's scapegoat."

Ingvar had found a clever way to propose Thordia's innocence without sounding heretical. I approached his side, lending my physical support for the possibly difficult conversation to follow.

Pontus' eyes narrowed. "Ye were just at the Naustviks' house. Surely ye saw proof of



Thordia's guilt there?"

"We weren't there long," Ingvar replied, returning his longsword to his scabbard. The only way I knew he was lying was that I'd been out there with him. "We were set upon by a vinrake."

That much was true, though. A shudder went through me as I recalled our near-fatal struggle with the tentacled beast.

"A vinrake! In the districts?" Pontus' eyes widened fearfully.

"We took care of it," Ingvar assured him, "and we also happened upon Rigg's missing brother."

Another truth. A boy named Dag Nyvind had been lying low at the Naustviks' house, avoiding some bad situation at home.

"We brought him back here, got him billeted," Ingvar continued. "Rigg's keeping an eye on him."

This was the first thing Pontus was glad to hear from us. His expression brightened momentarily before sobering again.

Ingvar folded his arms. "All right, your turn. How'd ye fare at the keep? Obviously, ye weren't able to fetch the corpse from the dungeon."

Days earlier, Ingvar and I had infiltrated the adepts' keep to rescue Verahl Naustvik, whom Master Ormyr had imprisoned for aiding his sister Thordia's escape. Within the dungeon, we'd discovered the corpse of some long-dead prisoner, desiccated and coated in a strange purplish substance. The cause of death had been a mystery at the time, but no longer.

"Whoever they were, they probably died from exposure to the ichor," I chimed in.

"Aye, but we still don't know if it were murder, accident, or suicide," Ingvar said.

Pontus waved his hand dismissively. "Can't bribe my way down there right now, sir. The adepts are cleaning up after the day's events." His eyes narrowed. "Master Ormyr's avoiding me, or so it seems. Still feel like he's hiding something."

"No doubt." Ingvar's expression hardened. "Have a feeling there'll be no more corpse the next time we're allowed in the dungeon."

Over Pontus' shoulder, a flash of red light caught my eye, back toward the capital center. I doubted my own vision at first, but after a day full of odd lights like these, I was too twigged

to ignore anything. I stepped sideways for a better view, examining the starry sky for any hint of reoccurrence.

“Something wrong?” Ingvar asked.

I felt foolish, as though I were admitting to seeing a ghost. “I thought I saw a red light, almost like a beacon.”

Ingvar was at my side instantly. “Munitions?”

“I don’t know, I didn’t hear anything. It might’ve just been—”

A green flash, no bigger than a star, winked in and out of existence in the same part of the sky. The flash repeated, soon followed by an orange one that flickered against the darkness.

## CHAPTER 2



Outside the barracks, Ingvar, Pontus, and I stared out into the starry night. Colorful flashes pierced a single point in the sky at irregular intervals—some strong, others flickering. Some were as short-lived as fireflies, easy to miss if one weren't looking directly at them. Most were green and orange, with the occasional burst of red.

I held my breath while puzzling over the matter. Stellar phenomenon, meteor shower? No, it seemed much closer than that. Explosives? But silence reigned in their wake. Ingvar and I had found the Naustviks' house full of Shipbuilder holograms and lighting devices. Could this be more of the same, wielded by adepts or others with adequate knowledge? But usually, such objects and knowledge were rare.

There was a more mundane possibility: fireworks. Metal salts like calcium chloride, ground into a powder and introduced to fire, burned up in a dramatic display of color. My mentors at the Enduring Flame Beguinage had introduced me to tricks like that, specifically labeling them tricks. Adepts performed such stunts, too, but called them "magic."

At my side, Ingvar frowned. "They seem to hover right over the capital buildings." He referred to the three Shipbuilder structures at the core of Nidaros' capital: the Baron's estate, the adepts' keep, and the storehouse.

"Unseen. Never thought ..." Pontus trailed off nervously. He stood ahead of us, his reaction invisible.

"Pontus?" Ingvar prompted. "Is there something I don't know about?"

The lieutenant faced us, fists clenched at his sides. The right one slowly ground his wishing beads into dust. "Last week, the boys on night watch whispered about a vision like

this. They convinced the next night's shift to be on the lookout, but it never repeated itself. Forgot about it until now."

"Wherefore didn't anyone tell me?" Ingvar asked.

"We know not to bring you a ghost tale unless we have the ghost on a leash, sir." Pontus tossed his head over his shoulder. "Is that close enough?"

Ingvar scowled toward the flashing lights again, saying nothing.

I thought about the buildings Ingvar had mentioned, hidden in darkness from our vantage. All three stood dozens of stories high. The storehouse contained not just food and flax, but also plenty of munitions. The adepts' keep housed spell components along with most of Nidaros' remaining Shipbuilder artifacts.

The Baron's estate seemed the least likely source at first. But then I recalled a conversation I'd had with the kitchen servants a few days earlier. One of them had alerted me to unexplained shortages in the larder, and odd lights late at night. She'd feared these were signs that Thordia Naustvik had infiltrated the capital to rescue her brother Verahl from the adepts' dungeon.

"When I first got here, Alfrun told me about strange lights high up in the Baron's estate," I spoke up, leaving Thordia out of it. She was bound for the Harbinger, after all.

Two questioning frowns shot toward me. Then Pontus' eyes went wide. "Thordia must be casting against everyone in the capital. Propping up her curse!"

So much for keeping her out of it. "I think adepts are more likely," I said. They had the means and the freedom to practice their rituals as they deemed appropriate.

"But we can't rule out witches entirely," Ingvar said.

Indeed, witches were real. Not supernatural power-wielders, but people who either shunned or had been barred from formal adept training, which made their "unsanctioned magic" forbidden. Was someone performing witchcraft in the capital at the risk of their lives? What was worth the risk—more accurately, what did they *believe* was worth it? And did they mean harm to anyone? While I knew it wasn't Thordia, the possibility of unfriendly actors stuck in my head.

"We shouldn't leave this unexamined," I said, straightening with resolve.

Funny that I didn't immediately correct the "we" to "I." My questing elsewhere in the

galaxy had inured me to dodging the local authorities, but here, I'd collaborated with Ingvar from the start. I could rely on his help. Moreover, I welcomed it.

"Agreed. It might well be visible all the way to the districts." Ingvar picked up the lantern resting on the ground. "People are frustrated enough over food. Rumors of a witch in the capital will only make things worse."

"Sir!" Pontus threw him a look that was part furious, part horrified. "Ye best one vinrake at a witch house, now ye think ye know something about facing evil magic? Ye haven't the first clue. Leave this to Dame Jessamine!"

Pontus had made a similar protest before we'd headed to the Naustviks' house. Again, I felt uncomfortable about being a source of friction between them. I glanced to Ingvar, biting the inside of my lip.

Ingvar faced Pontus, unmoved. "I have a duty to determine what's happening right over our Baron's head."

"Unseen, lad! Ye're being a damn fool!" Pontus cried.

"Tell me about it later." Ingvar faced me. "Jayce?"

I threw an apologetic glance Pontus' way. "We'd better move. If that's not adept magic, then any adepts who beat us there may bury the whole thing, just like the ichor."

Pontus' eyes went wide. "'We?' Unseen take me, I'll not go anywhere near that!"

"I'm not asking you to," Ingvar said. "Better that ye stay in the barracks tonight, just in case. We'll resume our talk later." He then jogged toward the worn path winding through the soldiers' practice field.

Pontus nursed his beads, looking on with helpless worry.

"We'll be back soon," I said with more certainty than I felt. But I had no trouble spurring myself after Ingvar, hurrying until I'd caught up to run at his side.

The path led deeper into the capital. Ingvar's lantern made sprinting impossible – unless we wanted a bath in burning oil – but we managed a respectable pace given the fatigue of a long, dangerous day.

As we drew closer, the mysterious lights continued to flicker among the stars. The looming silhouettes of the three capital buildings became distinct against the night sky, the last evidence of the Shipbuilders' original settlement in Nidaros. In the middle rested a

structure that looked like a jagged fistful of straw: the adepts' keep. To either side stood twin buildings that resembled billowing sails on masts. The one to the right of the keep was the storehouse; to the left, the Baron's estate.

With the buildings in sight, it became clear that the sporadic colorful lights were indeed coming from the top of the estate. The inner capital's familiar cesspool smell returned, thankfully blunted by the cold. I scanned our surroundings for signs that anyone else might be mounting a response to the lights. Tiny fires bobbed in the distance, revealing soldiers on watch, but the routes they traced were relaxed and unhurried. There were no signs of activity around the keep, either. Only a few lights glared through its windows.

Close to the estate, one really had to crane his neck to even notice the oddity at the summit. That likely served to our advantage.

"No adepts. Maybe someone's begging to investigate right now, and Master Ormyr's telling them no," I quipped around short breaths.

A laugh escaped past Ingvar's worried demeanor.

I smiled back. "I have to say, I'm not used to chasing down so many *real* anomalies. Whenever I go back to Spectra and regale Lord Catherwood with my deeds in Nidaros, I won't have to embellish or make up a damned thing."

"Seriously had my fill of strange lights for one lifetime." Ingvar slowed to a halt, scowling up at the Baron's estate. "Afore we go in, we'd better figure out how we're handling this."

"Right." I stopped beside him, tamping down the instinctive urge to rush in and fix things — an instinct that'd burned me too many times in the past few days. "For what it's worth, that looks like the same material that goes into fireworks, but it could also be a Shipbuilder artifact. Remember the light tile Dag brought back from the Naustviks' house?"

I carried an identical device. Though it surpassed the lantern in convenience, it remained in my pocket. This close to the adepts' keep, there was too much risk of the wrong person spotting it.

Ingvar scowled upward. "Knowing what they are doesn't help much. If 'tis not an adept's doing, then someone's taking an insane risk. These lights are *meant* to be seen. Could be a signal, a warning — or a lure into a trap."

"True." Though I had to wonder who the target of such a trap might've been, if Pontus

and Alfrun were right about this going on since before my arrival in Nidaros. "We'll be careful. Do you know a quiet way up there?"

"Only one stairwell leadeth that high," Ingvar explained.

"Stairwell?" I cringed at the prospect of climbing all those stories. "Does this building have any intact lifts?"

Ingvar frowned, puzzled.

"A Shipbuilder mechanism for traveling between floors quickly," I explained.

His confusion persisted. "Not that I've heard of."

Disappointing, but not surprising. As artifacts from the Shipbuilder era broke down over time, few people in the galaxy possessed the knowledge and materials to repair them. And in some places, like Nidaros, attempting a repair was enough to get you charged with heresy and killed.

Ingvar's expression hardened with determination. "We'll head up quietly, recon, then decide what to do."

I nodded my approval. "Side entrance?" Better to avoid panicking anyone in the estate before we knew what we were dealing with. We also didn't want to tip off our flame-wielder.

"I was thinking the same." Ingvar pointed toward the pitch-black gap between the estate and keep, which led to a familiar courtyard. "Follow my lead."

The courtyard housed another tied-off well pump, along with more rain barrels. Around the curving keep wall stood an entrance to the adepts' dungeon, guarded by a lone soldier. Fortunately, we didn't have to go near it. Our side-door was close to where we'd entered.

Ingvar slipped up to the door, put an ear to it, then tried the latch. It yielded, allowing him to open the door a crack. He peeked inside, glancing high and low. Finally, he beckoned to me, then slipped in first.

I kept close behind, content to follow, as the captain knew the estate better than I did.

Ingvar's lantern light revealed the now-deserted kitchen where I'd first met Alfrun and two other estate servants, Kofri and Lif. Kofri had mentioned sludge coming out of the wells. Alfrun had fretted over signs of a witch's presence. I wondered how many more of their outlandish claims would end up having some truth to them.

With the fire out, the kitchen was no warmer than outside. No smells lingered from

supper, whatever watered-down concoction that might've been. The floor-to-ceiling larder held mostly shadow, a depressing reminder of how little everyone in Nidaros had by way of food, even Baron Tristan and his court. There was no sign of the food I'd gifted to the barony. Maybe it rested in the storehouse, awaiting distribution throughout the districts.

Ingvar crossed the kitchen without pause. As I followed, memories of the kitchen I'd all but grown up in flooded my mind, giving me goosebumps. If business at my mother's inn had ever slowed to this point, we would've stared starvation in the face.

We approached a door that led into the maze of estate corridors, through which Ingvar strode with purpose. His lantern remained valuable, as the candles mounted on broken artificial light fixtures had all been snuffed out. No light leaked past any of the wooden doors that'd replaced the malfunctioning Shipbuilder ones. Our muffled footsteps were all we heard.

Eventually, Ingvar honed in on a door that fed into a narrow stairwell. The winding staircase rose into darkness, seemingly without end.

"Aw, hell." My legs ached in anticipation.

Ingvar held up a hand to check my progress. "Listen," he spoke under his breath.

We paused a short while. The silent darkness persisted.

"It sounds like we got here first," I whispered.

"But the lights are gone," Ingvar replied in kind. "Mayhap someone beat us here after all."

Alfrun had seen them from the stairwell, hadn't she? I fought off a creeping dread. If the adepts weren't responsible to begin with, were they in the process of punishing the source this very moment?

"Let's move," I said. "Whoever's up there, they only have one way down, right? And that's through us."

Ingvar nodded with a strained look. "Hope we can assess the situation, then figure out what to do, but the situation might crash down on us first. I don't care to fight. Don't think ye do, either."

"Only as a last resort." But I was prepared for the possibility. Along with my weapons, I wore a nanofiber brigandine. The Shipbuilder armor was almost invisible beneath my coat.

"Also don't care to apprehend anyone over useless trinkets and hand-waving," Ingvar



continued. "Anyone I take into custody over this will likely end up in the dungeon, at Ormyr's mercy."

Remembering my past experience with the dungeon brought on a shudder. "If it's not an adept, I'm hoping we can talk or scare them out of doing this again."

"Aye." As Ingvar glanced upward, his expression hardened. "But if they attack, or they're doing something awful up there – *whoever* they are – we'll have no choice but to stop them."

"Agreed," I said, glad we were on the same page. Normally, it would've surprised me to hear a soldier resolving to fight his own adepts if necessary. After the attempt on my life earlier that day, it no longer did.

Ingvar started upstairs, his free hand hovering beside his longsword's grip. I followed close, also leaving my sword sheathed. Craning my neck, I scouted the situation above and kept watch for pursuit, but everything remained quiet.

The air warmed the higher we climbed. Exertion warmed us as well; I was sweating before long. As the climb dragged on, our pace slowed. The continuing quiet made me fear we'd missed the show, that its source had already fled or been apprehended. Then a burst of green light flashed over our heads – faint, but real.

"*Skíta!*" Ingvar froze.

"They're still here," I murmured, galvanized.

The captain straightened with renewed vigor. "They won't be evading us now. Quickly."

We pressed on until, at last, only one more flight of stairs loomed ahead of us. Those stairs ended at a small landing that led to an open threshold. Panting with exertion, Ingvar darted up to said landing, then fell to his knees beside the threshold.

After dozens of stories, I was also sucking wind. I leaned up against the opposite side of the threshold, drawing and holding deep breaths in an effort to slow my racing heart.

A burning smell tinged the air, further evidence toward the metal salt theory. Another scent mixed with it, naggingly familiar somehow. Lavender? I couldn't recall its significance. A supplicating female tone murmured at the fringe of hearing. It sounded like the sort of chanting that accompanied "magic" rituals throughout the galaxy.

Once I'd recovered, I sneaked a glance past the threshold. Beyond lay a stub of a corridor, more like a cube-shaped room. The cramped space confused me until I recalled the billowing

sail shape of building. This top floor was much smaller than the lower floors, where it billowed most. Left, right, and straight ahead stood doors. The left and center doors were open, their thresholds hazy with smoke. The door to our right was closed. Colorful bursts of light leaked out occasionally from around its frame.

I glanced to Ingvar, who by then had stood to survey the area himself. "It sounds like there's at least one adept or witch up here, but there could be more," I murmured. "Maybe we should check the open rooms first, get a better idea of what we're up against."

Ingvar nodded, quietly resting his lantern on the floor. "Go. I'll stay back and cover the exit."

The ominous chanting continued, rising and falling in intensity, seemingly oblivious to our presence. The captain drew his longsword to hold in a low, defensive guard. I reached for the dagger-hilt on my belt—only for my hand to close over air. Only then did I remember giving the weapon to Dag Nyvind as we'd left the Naustviks' house. I kept spare daggers aboard my ship, but had forgotten to take one. Carefully, I drew my side sword from my back baldric instead. These quarters were too cramped to wield it effectively, but if I were forced to defend myself, something would be better than nothing. Keeping the blade trained toward the ground for the moment, I slipped into the hazy corridor-stub. Behind me, Ingvar positioned himself to thwart any escape attempts.

I aimed for the open door to the left first, sticking to its threshold in hopes of avoiding detection. The opening led into a small, trapezoid-shaped room. Its entire curved back wall was made of a glassy material, revealing the stars and dark horizon. However, the cold breeze wafting through suggested the wall wasn't as solid as it looked. It reminded me of the window in my room several floors lower in the Baron's estate, which was similarly solid-looking and yet permeable.

No one lurked inside the room. However, green candles, braided loops of dried flax, scatterings of herbs and dried flowers, smoking censers, and a host of green and white ribbons suggested an earlier occupation.

It all seemed too homespun to be adept trappings. I also would've expected more of Lord Catherwood's colors, but burgundy and gold were absent here. The witch theory was gaining ground. Again, I marveled at how Alfrun's suspicions hadn't been that far off the mark. There

could be a single witch or a whole coven up there, for reasons ranging from innocent to anything but. Unfortunately, nothing within the room spoke to those intentions. Then there was the possibility that this was all a frame-up job, something meant to get someone else in trouble.

I hoped the room past the center door might clarify things, but it was similarly festooned and deserted. Once I returned to where Ingvar stood guard, we retreated into the stairwell to discuss my findings.

“These don’t seem to be adepts,” I said. “The trappings are all green and white.”

Ingvar’s eyes went wide. “Lord Gyllenfeld’s colors.”

That’s right, I’d forgotten. A shiver went through me. “Then these might be witches *and* dissidents.”

Many people in Nidaros still harbored loyalty to Lord Gyllenfeld despite Catherwood’s takeover decades earlier. Recent troubles had only stirred further resentment toward the Catherwoods. The Gyllenfeld dissidents, who’d never gone fully silent in Nidaros to begin with, expressed themselves ever more boldly. Maybe these were witches who meant their enemies active harm – those enemies being Baron Tristan and his court.

“Our answers are in that closed room.” As I glanced over Ingvar’s Catherwood tabard, worry seeped in. “Whatever they’re doing up here, they probably won’t take well to seeing you. Let me head in alone. I’ll tell them they’re endangering themselves and shouldn’t gather here anymore.”

Ingvar frowned. “Wherefore would they heed you, Goose? Gyllenfeld witches won’t care that ye’re Lord Catherwood’s emissary. As a foreign sellsword, they’ll like you even less.”

He was right. I needed a solid way to appeal to them. Whom did witches trust most? *Other witches*. This burst of inspiration restored my confidence. “I’ll pretend to be one of them.”

Ingvar’s jaw fell. “What?”

“People ask me if I’m a witch all the time,” I said. “It’s an easy sell.” A boast my former master, Sir Mayweather Stark, had made constantly. His words slipped through my defenses – and just like that, the no-account braggart weaseled back into my thoughts. Mentally, I shoved him away in disgust, then refocused on Ingvar. “Pretending to be an ally is the most

peaceful way to get this to stop. I'm not worried about trouble later. If they try to accuse me of anything, it'll be my word against theirs." And as a knight errant questing on behalf of Lord Catherwood himself, my word was orders of magnitude more credible than that of witches who'd been caught casting in the Baron's home.

Ingvar's surprise darkened. "I see your point, but I still don't like this. I'll guard the exit and keep an eye on you, in case ye need me." He braced my shoulder with one hand.

"Careful, Jayce."

I rested my hand over his, took a deep breath, and nodded. Then I pulled away, angling for the last unexamined door.

The chanting continued, a single supplicating voice. It was impossible to know how many witches might be gathered around listening to it. Side sword held low, I approached the door, pressed down the latch, then opened it slowly.

Thin smoke wafted out, carrying more of the lavender smell. This third room was arranged like the others, except for one big difference. Along the transparent back wall, several scorched metal plates sat on the floor, with campfire-sized piles of burning firewood inside. Two more such fires flanked a slight, cloaked silhouette in the room's center, less than ten feet from where I stood. Her back faced me as she chanted on, oblivious.

She appeared to be alone, which was a relief. I anticipated a gentle heart-to-heart conversation in which I'd quietly convince her, from one witch to another, to pack up the show and find a safer place to conduct her business. Leaving my sword at my side, I slipped into the room, hovering at the threshold. "Sister witch? Don't be afraid, we need to talk."

Her murmuring halted. The witch whirled around, black cloak flaring with the movement. Fire- and candlelight revealed a familiar dark-haired young woman fairly drenched in green and white beads. A punching dagger adorned her right hand, its blade curved like a talon.

With shock, I recognized her as my handmaid. "*Sigrid?*"

Sigrid's mutual shock was written all over her face at first. Then her pretty features twisted into a hateful glare. Her hands darted toward belt-pouches, gathering up fistfuls of powder that she threw onto the fires flanking her. As they consumed the powder, the flames amplified in size and intensity, taking on bright orange and green hues.

Metal salts, for sure. The display was meant to intimidate me, but her punching dagger was more my concern. I put on a calm front, ignoring the chill spreading over my skin and the urge to raise my side sword in defense. It was crucial to stick to the game, reinforce I was a fellow witch and thus nothing to worry about. "Sigrid, I'm sorry I didn't realize sooner. I'm your kin!"

Her outrage didn't budge. "How dare you call me that!"

Words wouldn't move her. Fortunately, I had plenty of my own "magic" in my coat pockets. My left hand slipped into one of them, seeking something she'd respect.

"Lord Catherwood sent you here to murder my kindred!" Sigrid raised her fist, aiming the punching dagger at me like an accusing finger. Flashes of green and orange fire glinted off the blade. "But you've never gotten very far, have you? My magic freed Verahl Naustvik from the dungeon. Now it hides him and Thordia so no one will ever find them!"

My jaw dropped. What an imagination on her! She'd had no hand in those things whatsoever, but her eyes held complete conviction. Meanwhile, my searching hand closed around the light tile I'd found at the Naustviks' house. "Sigrid –"

"I painted you as an agitator, and now I've summoned you to die!" Eyes burning, she lunged toward me, dagger aimed at my chest.

As my sword-arm rose instinctively to block, my left hand brought out the square tile. A tap of my thumb caused its glassy surface to erupt with a cold, bluish light. Squinting against its intensity, I aimed the lit tile at Sigrid's face.

To the self-proclaimed witch, it must've seemed like a tiny star had just sprung to life in my hand. Sigrid screamed as though burned, then stumbled to a halt with an arm crossed over her face. Heedless of the fires and ritual objects strewn on the floor, she backed away from me, on course for the transparent wall lining the back of the room. The *immaterial* wall.

Dread seized me. "Stop!" I shut off the light tile with another thumb-tap, pocketed it, then darted after her.

One of Sigrid's feet slipped through the wall and outside, where there was no floor to support it. She shrieked and teetered on one leg, arms flailing as she tipped backwards.

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-Ellis

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