

## Despair

Under the hot morning sun and the feeling of unseen eyes, Conor adjusted his coat and loosened his cowl, releasing a droplet of sweat that itched a path down his spine. In some ways, the concealing attire was attracting more attention than doing without, but as long as no one recognized him, he didn't care. He would have worn a hood too, but it was the law in all Order States that eyes had to be visible. Conor stood outside a rickety looking house, seemingly built of algae-stained planks, like most of the buildings in Scumslum, a riverside section of Ghott.

The house where Conor waited belonged to a man called Despair, a Nayan man spoken of discretely, storied to be able to find anything and anyone, but only at an extraordinary price—hence the name. Only the desperate went to him. Despair was a legend of sorts. Conor had grown up on his whispered tales. They were always third-to-seventh hand accounts, if not further, and the details were always evolving. For much of his childhood Conor thought he was some made-up hero, like Iriana, the Priestess who had saved all of Yharos from the White Death. What had separated Despair from other storied heroes was that he was a man, which was nearly unheard of after the shattering—and later, that he might really exist. Of course, not all of the stories were heroic or benign. They were sometimes dark, telling of deception and a dangerous temper.

On the steps of the house sat a Nayan girl that Conor judged to be around ten, four or five years his junior. She wore the same long shirt and trousers as the rest of her people, and her dark hair was tied in numerous braids that dangled across her shoulders. He'd only heard one word out her mouth. *Wait*. She'd said it when he'd asked if this was the house of Despair, and again after she'd gone inside, then come back out a short time later. Otherwise, she'd ignored him, having answered his questions

with silence or a shrug until he'd stopped asking. Conor was not used to being ignored, but any desire to force her attention went away as soon as the girl stared at him with her all-green eyes.

The eyes of the Nayan, or Scummers—as the Ghothians called them—were difficult to meet, lacking the separations in the normal eye of white, color, and darkness. Conor had normal blue eyes that were common among the coastal people of the shattered Yharosan empire. Waiting under the watchful, all-green eyes of the girl, he suffered through the insulting silence and reminded himself why he was there—for his sister.

“This is robbery!” someone shouted from inside the house. Then the door burst open and a man flew out—then fell—landing hard on the boardwalk, punctuated by the boards cracking sharply beneath him. Conor looked from the fallen man back to the door, but it was already closed, with the girl standing in front of it, shaking her head. When the man climbed to his feet, he stood head-and-shoulders over Conor. He also had normal eyes, and a scar along his chin. *What am I doing here?* Conor kept asking himself. The man turned back to the house, shook his fist, then thought better of it. Limping away, he grumbled about sneaky, thieving scummers.

“Enter,” said the girl as she opened the door and held it.

Conor paused, glanced at the tall man as he limped away, and thought, *this was a terrible idea*. But he pushed away any apprehensions and climbed the first step, the second, and then entered the house. *For my sister*, he had to remind himself.

It was like walking into another—more normal—world. From the outside, the house was the same algae-stained wood as the rest of Scumslum, but the interior had plastered and whitewashed walls, without a spot of algae or dirt. A central hallway ran through house, at the far end of which was an open door. Set beside the door were lamps of polished brass, bracketed to the wall. Conor passed more doors to his right and left as he walked slowly across the crimson-and-white carpet that softened the length of the hallway. Lacking any directions or instructions, he ignored them for the open door and

shuffled into the room. With each step he renewed his decision not to leave.

The room was tasteful, if simple, and would have fit in at the Manor. More brass lamps hung on the walls, unlit with the morning sun streaming through the large windows that offered the view of another wooden house close enough to reach out and touch. Across the room, a man sat beside a large fireplace, with an empty chair across from him, and a table between them. Like the girl outside, the man was a Nayan, but wore a long gray robe that covered him neck to feet. He was looking at a painting above the fireplace. The painting depicted a woman with all-white eyes, one of the Bleached. Conor was horrified and astounded. People tried to forget the Bleached had ever existed, and they certainly didn't have paintings of them. *This is too much!* Conor turned to leave, to run out of the house and forget about finding Despair.

“Sit,” said the man, who had turned from the painting, and was looking at Conor with his all-green eyes. *Too late*, thought Conor as he crossed the room and sat in the empty chair.

“Are you Despair?” asked Conor. Like the girl outside, the man was a Nayan, but wore a long gray robe that covered him from neck to feet.

“Yes.”

Wondering if all Nayan spoke in single-worded conversations, Conor reached into his pouch and took out a gold ring, then set it on the table and said, “It was my fathers.” While his family was powerful and wealthy, Conor, being male, had little wealth of his own. When he wanted anything, he only needed to ask, but in this case, that had been impossible. So he had brought his most prized—and valuable—possession, the ring that his dead father had left him.

“Explain,” said Despair, leaving the ring on the table.

“My name is Oren,” said Conor.

“No,” Despair interrupted. “Again.”

Conor felt another droplet of sweat itch down his back. He'd come to a man that was supposed

to do the impossible, and tried to lie to him. It felt so foolish that he had hoped to hide his identity.

“My name is Conor. My mother is Adrina Erkanan, Stewardess of Ghott.” Despair relaxed in his seat, nodded and waved him on. “My sister, Tarra, is an Acolyte of the Order. Last year, she left Ghott to study and train at the Monastery. Three months ago, my mother was summoned to the Order garrison by the Matron. She was told that my sister had run away. Since then, they haven't told us why she ran or where she went, and can't or won't say anything else about what happened.” Conor inhaled slowly, then sighed and continued.

“Mother doesn't believe that Tarra would just run away; neither do I nor my eldest sister, Talia. We begged Mother to push the Order for answers, or send someone to the Monastery, but she refused. Soon after, Talia was sent away to Niest, to meet the son of a wealthy family. My mother told me that she'd sent her away before we overstepped ourselves, and that if I didn't stop, she'd do the same to me. You must know that Ghott has no standing army, and it is only the garrison and the presence of the Acolytes of the Order that keeps our neighbors peaceful. Mother says that we can't press the Order for answers, and can't risk insulting them by sending anyone to look for—.”

“Get to the point,” interrupted Despair. “What do you want from me?”

“Find my sister and bring her home,” Kiril said hurriedly.

“Discretely, I imagine.”

“Absolutely. No one can know I hired you. It could ruin my family.” Despair's eyebrows rose, but Conor couldn't read anything in his all-green eyes, one of the six reasons he'd been taught not to trust a Nayan. It was too easy for them to hide their intentions.

“With such a risk, why did you come to me at all?”

“She's my sister,” said Conor. As he spoke, Despair stood. Conor remained seated, and was surprised when Despair turned and walked away.

“Is that all?” asked Despair.

“Yes.”

“Very well. In four days I will have an answer.”

Conor opened his mouth to speak, but the man was already gone, and when Conor followed into the hallway, it was empty. The front door was open, with the Nayan girl standing there, looking at him.

“Leave,” she said.

Conor pulled down his cowl and lowered the high collar of his coat before he joined the masses waiting to enter the gate of the second ring-wall. No one paid him any mind, as the trade city was always busy and crowded. He could have announced himself and skipped the line, but he wasn't in a rush to get anywhere. There was too much on his mind. *Why am I trusting a scummer? What if it was all a ruse, and I never hear from him, and if I return to the strange house, it is empty?* As the line inched forward, all of these thoughts raced through Conor's head, growing and multiplying into more and worse disasters.

Mind occupied, Conor didn't notice that he was at the front of the line until someone tapped him on the shoulder. Ahead of him were three city-guards, but they were busy holding up the rest of the line and hadn't touched him. That had been the woman still standing next to Conor. While he didn't recognize her, the black robe and the staff in her hand made her an Acolyte of the Order. She beckoned him and he followed, letting her lead him through the gate, then off the side of the road, away from the city traffic. He couldn't help being worried. *Is the Order following me? he wondered.*

“Where were you?” she asked.

“Who are you?” countered Conor, his heart thumping double-time in his chest.

“Acolyte Kyra.”

“Why are you here?” *Keep asking questions.*

“You've been summoned.”

“Who did?”

“You've been summoned to the garrison. Your mother is there. The Matron requests your presence.” Mention of the Matron sent a shiver down Conor's spine. She was the master of the Order in Ghott, and if he was honest, master of Ghott itself. Little governing was done without the Matron's blessing. He did not want to see her, especially right then. *What if she knows about my plans?* So he tried to stall.

“Request? So I don't have to go?” It was the wrong thing to say, made clear by the way her face flash-froze in a half-snarl, and the frosty glare she gave him. She quickly regained her composure.

“Let's go,” she said. And he followed, his bravery expired.

Conor hated the garrison of the Order. Sometimes he could forget how powerless it was, being a man in the shattered empire, but never in the Order garrison. It was a place for women. Mostly Acolytes, but all women and girls who wanted to could study there. Yes, the Order was necessary to protect against the Bleached, and he'd been taught the risk of infection to men at an early age, but why did they all have to look at him like he was a petulant child. It wasn't that the Order was all women that bothered him, it was that the Order—at least those he'd met—all acted like he should be thanking them for their sacrifice, and offended that he didn't, even though none of them had ever seen a Bleached woman in Ghott, and the last White Death had been before Conor was born.

They had to pass through the gate of the first ring-wall to get to the garrison, but this close to the Stewardess's Manor, the city-guards recognized him, and just the presence of Kyra split the crowd around them as they passed through the line. On the road, people stayed clear of the black-robed Acolyte, the women smiled and bowed their heads; while the men bowed too, it was quicker, and most just looked away. Conor understood the reaction. Laws restricting men had been made by the Order and accepted across the shattered empire for over a hundred years. It had been to protect them, but since the

Pact, the laws were felt and seen more often than the rare instance of White Death. Sometimes he wished he'd lived in the time before the shattering, the Bleached, and the Order.

The Order taught histories of the old times. They told of the Yharosan Empire, before the fall of the city of Yharos, when men were emperors. They told of man's greed and blood-lust, and the near destruction they had brought to the land when the empire collapsed after the loss of the capital, even before the Bleached came. The White Death had only made it worse. The Order said it was a curse on men, which was why only women could survive infection.

Once inside the garrison, there wasn't a man to be seen. Kyra led him deep into the garrison, stopping at a door guarded by two robed Acolytes. They looked to Kyra, who nodded, then they ushered Conor in and closed the door behind him.

The Stewardess and the Matron were sitting in the private dining room, having a quiet conversation. They stopped when he entered. His mother was a small woman, with long black hair and soft blue eyes, like his. The Matron was taller and more striking, with shoulder length hair, also black, and a stare that seemed to see through him, and made Conor want to flee and never look back.

"Hello, Mother. Matron." Conor bowed. Neither woman looked pleased.

"Where were you?" asked his mother.

"Just for a walk."

"Why are you dressed like that in this weather, and what were you doing outside the second ring-wall?" asked the Matron.

"I've asked you to take a guard when you leave the first ring-wall," said his mother.

"I wanted to be alone," said Conor.

"Boys your age don't want to be alone," said the Matron with a laugh devoid of mirth. Then she turned to the Stewardess. "I'd bet that your boy has met a young lady; which explains the secrecy, and the strange attire."

“Oh, Conor. Why would you hide something so silly? Do you think I would embarrass you?” asked his mother. Conor blushed, which his mother took as confirmation. Her face softened and the Matron rolled her eyes, reactions that compelled Conor to adopt the story as his own. It was easier than making one up since he'd never been a good liar.

“Yes, it is a girl,” said Conor with his face to the floor. If she didn't expect him to be embarrassed, his mother would probably have seen through the deception. Still, it was a dangerous subject, so he changed it with a question that might shift their attention. “Is this about Tarra?”

“Conor, what did I tell you about bothering the Order with these questions?” asked his mother. She didn't raise her voice, but the look she gave him implied her temperament.

“I'm sorry, Mother. I worry about her.”

“We all do,” said the Matron. “We must be patient and believe in Tarra. I don't doubt that she will return. She is a dutiful Acolyte.” His mother, Conor noticed, had flinched at the Matron's words, a reaction that had come and passed so quickly that Conor would have doubted his eyes if he hadn't known her true feelings. They both believed that his sister would never have run off. *That's why I had to sneak away*, Conor wanted to tell her. *The Order is lying to us*. All Tarra had talked about was becoming an Acolyte, and once she'd sworn the oaths and taken the robe, being one.

“Now,” said his mother, changing the subject herself, “your morning jaunt distracted me from why we asked you here. The Matron has learned that there have been rumors of Bleached in the countryside. You might think otherwise, but this puts you in danger. You won't go running off again, even for this girl. You aren't the first man caught kissing below his station. The Matron has also promised that there will be an Acolyte with you at all times, while the rumors are investigated. We have to take this seriously.”

“Very seriously,” agreed the Matron. “Acolyte Kyra, whom you've already met, will be like a shadow until further notice. Do you understand?”

There was nothing more feared than the Bleached and the White Death that they carried. Nothing he said would change their mind, so he did the only thing he could, and nodded his understanding.

“Then you can leave,” said the Matron, waving her hand dismissively. “We have more to talk about that doesn't concern you.”

“One more thing,” said his mother. “I've known young men. I'm going to have the city-guards watch for you at the gates. So don't try and sneak past.”

“Yes, Mother.” Conor felt defeated. Then she also waved him away. It took added effort for Conor to walk—and not run—towards the door.

The Acolyte, Kyra, was waiting outside, leaning against the wall. She was carrying a bag slung over her shoulder that hadn't been there before. When the door shut behind him, she opened her eyes and stretched with her staff across her shoulders. Then she walked by him, patted his cheek and said, “Let's go,” before taking the lead and conducting him out of the garrison.

The Manor house had become unbearable since Conor's summons to the garrison. When the Matron had said that Kyra would be like a shadow, she had been so wrong. Shadows go away in the bright light and deepest dark, but not Kyra. She was obeying orders, as she'd made clear on the first day, when she'd followed him to the privy, and wouldn't let him leave her sight, even to change. She even demanded that they sleep in the same room, which had obliged him to offer his bed. It was an empty offer, one that he knew would be as politely refused as it was given, and then she'd accepted.

She didn't talk much either. Yes, she was an Acolyte of the Order, and they were known to be short-worded, but with the amount of time they spent together, it became unnerving to have her so quiet, especially when he forgot she was there and started humming to himself or scratching when he itched. Undressing was another problem, and not just for his own privacy. He'd never been attracted to

an Acolyte before, with the heavy robes and smug demeanor they wore to conceal their humanity.

He'd also never expected her to change in and out of her nightdress, without any thought of modesty, right in front of him. Of course he'd looked away, but not always fast enough, or long enough, and the glimpses he caught made him see her as something other than an emotionless woman who hounded his every step. Without the mantle of the Order on her shoulders, she looked her age, which couldn't have been more than ten years older than Conor. He wasn't sure which was worse, the awkwardness of those moments, or that undressing in front of him had no affect on her whatsoever. Even a naked Acolyte could make him feel like a child.

Kyra had not been the only distress for Conor. Lying about a secret girl had seemed like a good idea at the time, and eased him out of what could have been a line of dangerous questioning. But he'd never expected his mother to find his dalliance with a mystery girl so amusing that she would spread the story to the servants, and even the family of a councilman that had been her guests at the Manor. If he ever had a real secret romance, he was not going to tell her. In the first two days he'd received invitations from the daughters of three wealthy families, and been forced by etiquette to attend to each of them, to his regret.

As was expected of courtly men, he had to present himself to the high-classed young women, and then suffered through their company while he was treated like a puppy. Conor came to realize why so many men left Ghott as soon as they received permission. In Ghott—and all of the Order States—men were little more than decoration in the court. Well treated and cared for, but still decorations. By the third day he'd learned to avoid the invitations by avoiding the Manor.

He did this by spending his time exploring the Inner Ring of the city. Ghott was really three cities in one, with three ring-walls partitioning the sectors. The oldest partition was within the first ring-wall, called the Inner Ring. The oldest and wealthiest families lived in the Inner Ring, and it was also where the Order kept their garrison. There wasn't a poor section of the Inner Ring, though some of the

oldest places, from before the shattering of the empire, where in a state of disrepair. Conor liked those the best. One tailor shop had the Empirical sigil engraved into the keystone—a rising sun with six rays that he recognized from his books. He loved reading the old texts in the Manor library, of the time before the Bleached, when men ruled the cities and states of the Yharosan empire.

Next was the Merchant Ring, where most of the traders lived. It also contained the city-guard barracks and most of the merchant warehouses. There were a large number of market squares in the Merchant Ring, and some of it was nicer than the Inner ring, since what the residents lacked in age, they made up for in wealth.

The second ring-wall separated the Merchant Ring from the slums. The slums pressed against the second ring-wall, and spread nearly the entire way to the final wall of Ghott, made of wood, but taller and thicker than any of the interior stone walls. Nearly every structure in the slums was made of wood or clay bricks. The only hint of order in the third ring was the straight roads and wide alleys, strictly kept by the city-guard to prevent the spread of fire.

The slum was different from the other rings, both in the poverty of its inhabitants, and that a section of it was walled off, separating the Ghottians from Scumslum, the village where the Nayan lived, within the city. East of the gate to the Scumslum was the River Gate, that lead to the pier that extended into the Senna River delta.

The aimless circuits were a diversion from the sudden—and unwanted—attention that assaulted him at home. With time to think, his mind often returned to his sister, and then Despair. There were so many unknowns. He couldn't even remember if he was supposed to go back to Despair or not. He tried not thinking about it, distracting himself with the old buildings. He even tried to include Kyra, asking her questions and pointing out bits and pieces of local history he thought were interesting, but she barely responded to his prompts, offering at most a nod or shake.

Keeping secrets was a lonely existence. A few times, Conor teased the thought of telling Kyra

the truth, just to get her to react, but he knew that would be disastrous. He wasn't used to keeping things from his mother, or his sisters, but he'd never done anything worth hiding either. That was another reason for staying out of the Manor. Conor was afraid that if he spent time there, his mother would realize that something was wrong, and the truth would slip out. So he took his walks and waited. He couldn't go to Despair again, not without consequences. It was better to wait and see.

On the second day of thoughtless meandering, Conor returned to the Manor and found the Nayan girl from Despair's house standing next to the Manor gatekeeper.

“Who is this?” asked Kyra, which was the most he'd heard from her that day.

“She has a message for master Conor. We didn't let her in, but she won't leave.” The gatekeeper turned to Conor and asked, “Should we send her away?”

“No, that's okay,” said Conor. The gatekeeper shrugged and returned to her post. She would probably spread the story, but he couldn't do anything about that. When the girl approached Conor, Kyra stepped between them and put a hand on her shoulder.

“What do you want?” she asked.

The girl looked up at the black-robed Acolyte, then to Conor. “My words are for master Conor,” said the girl in a whisper of a voice. She held her small hand out to him. He took it, but Kyra grabbed his arm and pulled him away from the gate and out of the girls reach.

“Who is she?” asked Kyra.

“I don't know,” said Conor, but he could tell that she didn't believe him. *I need to learn to lie*, he thought.

“Don't tell me your plaything is Nayan.”

Conor stifled a groan. For all the attention and irritation he'd been taking because of her, he wished there was a *plaything*. Someone he could spend time with and talk to; even trust. For a make-

believe person, she had proved helpful, without the complications of a real girl.

Instead of answering, Conor shrugged. Before Kyra could ask any more questions, he pulled away and went back to the Nayan, took her hand and lead her onto the well-tended grounds of the Manor. He stopped when they reached his favorite spot under a towering blackwood tree.

“Can you talk now?” he asked.

The girl tugged on his hand. “Closer, please.”

Conor knelt in front of the girl so that their eyes were parallel. “Better?”

“Yes,” said the girl. Moving closer, she leaned her head against his, her mouth near his ear. Over the girls head, Conor could see Kyra frowning, but staying put. He looked back at the girl and asked:

“Did Despair send you? Has he made a decision?”

“He's waiting for you,” she said, not answering his question. Conor waited for more, but her mouth remained closed.

“Waiting for me?” asked Conor. “Can't you tell me his answer?” The girl shook her head and Conor continued, “I'm not allowed out of the first ring-wall. Can he come here?” The girl backed away. “Well, how long do I have?” he asked. She shrugged. He was getting annoyed. *Why did he send this girl?* “Why won't you answer me?” he asked with a raised voice. Kyra took a step towards them but Conor waved her away and let his voice drop down to a whisper. “How am I supposed to explain a visit to Scumslum?” As soon as the word was out of his mouth, Conor wanted it back. The people who lived there called it Seaside. “I'm sorry. It's a habit,” he said, and again regretted his words. *Even my excuse is bad.* The girl bit her lip at the casual insult. “I'm sorry,” he repeated.

She shrugged again, then turned and walked away. No one tried to stop her. *What do I do now?* he wondered. Kyra was still waiting by the gate. After days spent waiting for the Acolyte to warm up, he didn't want to talk to her. All the lying was harder than he'd imagined, and he needed to think.

Leaning against the tree, he closed his eyes. It was a short respite.

“What did she want?” asked Kyra.

*He's waiting*, thought Conor, but said, “Nothing.”

“You need to end this.” Disgust flashed across her face, then melted into the generic Acolyte expression she always wore.

*The lies? I know*, thought Conor, but said, “End what?”

“You can't lower yourself to being with a Nayan girl.”

“How is that any business of the Order?”

“It isn't. I'm not thinking about the Order, but of your mother and sisters, and the shame and ridicule you could bring to your family. You do care about your family, don't you?”

Conor gritted his teeth. “That's out of line. Of course I do,” he said, then silently defended himself in the way he couldn't aloud. *If I didn't, I wouldn't have begged my mother to send someone to find Tarra. If she hadn't refused, I wouldn't have gone to Despair. For days I've been looking foolish so that no one looks too closely at what I've been doing or how I've been acting; all because of how much I care about my sister and my family. And now I have to end a relationship with a girl who doesn't exist. I don't even know how to pretend that. What would be believable? A letter maybe? But Mother always says that if you have to give bad news, deal with it face-to-face if possible.* The thought stuck with Conor. *To her face.* Conor gave Kyra his best apologetic smile, then said, “I'll break it off, but I need to do it in person.”

“That is a foolish idea. The whole point is you shouldn't be seen with her. You are also forgetting that you are not allowed outside of the first ring-wall.”

Conor touched her arm, his eyes pleading. “What if she comes here, or keeps sending her sister. People will talk. I need to tell her in person, to make her understand.”

Kyra pulled her arm back. Conor pressed his back against the tree trunk, then slid down until he was sitting on the ground, arms around his knees. Kyra looked down at him, and for the first time, he

saw her facade soften. It didn't reach her lips, but he thought it was a smile. He could see it in her eyes.

“What should I do?” he asked her.

“You should do nothing. I will send a message to the Matron and ask her permission to take you to you plaything.”

“But my mother.”

“If the Matron allows it, she does not have to know. The fewer who know the better. Let's go inside. If I send a page now, we can go this evening and end this foolishness.”

“Thank you,” said Conor. Kyra put out her hand to help him up, but instead he wrapped his arms around her legs and hugged her awkwardly. Unbalanced by his embrace, she wobbled and almost fell before she could pry him off.

“Stop it,” she demanded. “How do you expect to keep a secret, acting like that?”

Despair  
Chapter 2

Following Kyra out the gate of the Inner Ring, Conor held his breath, waiting for a city-guard to notice and stop him. The black Acolyte's robe made Conor's neck itch. It was rougher than he'd expected. *Maybe that's why they're always so testy.* The robe had been her idea. When he'd pulled on his coat and wrapped the cowl around his neck, she had laughed. It was the first time he'd seen her really smile. Then she'd ruined it by talking, asked if he was trying to get noticed, then tossed him a clean robe from her pack. Her idea was better, but he didn't have to admit it. Once they were outside of the Manor grounds and alone, he'd put on the robe and followed Kyra. Once through the gate, Conor felt glad and embarrassed at the same time. Why was it so easy for him to pass as a woman?

Foot traffic was sporadic in the evening, with most people in their homes or sitting by the fire in an inn or tavern. They passed through the gate of the second ring-wall as easily as the first, and entering the Scumslum was easiest of all. It only had city-guards on the inside. No one cared who went into the Scumslum, just who left.

Standing before the rickety-seeming house for the second time, Conor looked around, but the Nayan girl wasn't there. Shadows spread from the house as the sun began to set, painting the sky in reddish hues over the horizon.

“This is it?” asked Kyra.

“Yes.”

“Let's go inside then.”

“No.”

“What do you mean? That's why we came.”

“Can you stay here while I talk to her? I won't be long.” *Not long at all*, he thought. *I'll go inside, talk to Despair, and the whole ordeal will be over with.*

Kyra muttered unintelligibly then spoke so he could hear her. “Fine. But if you're not out by sundown I'm going in. I don't care what you're doing.”

“Thank you,” said Conor. He left Kyra in the shadows with the black robe she'd lent him, then climbed the stairs alone and knocked on the door. No answer. He counted: *One... two... three... four... five...* then knocked again. This time he heard footsteps on the other side and the door opened, revealing Despair, haloed in the glow of the oil lamps that lined the hallway.

“Come in,” said Despair, who lead the way into the house. Conor followed, closing the door behind him. When Despair stopped in the middle of the hallway, Conor bumped into him, then bounced off liked he'd walked into a wall—the man didn't move. They weren't going to the same room as the last time. Despair opened a door and went inside; Conor followed. The room was well lit by brass wall-lamps and a fireplace burned softly, making the air thick and flavorful with the aroma of Nayan fish-oil that had a relaxing affect, soothing Conor with each slow breathe.

The oil was the reason that the Nayan hadn't been chased out of every port-city on the western coastline when they'd first arrived from the sea. Some had sailed out to their island home of Navay, hoping to discover the secrets of the oil, but came back empty handed, with stories of a thick sea-grass, impossible to navigate through—or sometimes did not return at all. Only the Nayan had the oil, and they didn't sell it cheap. It was so expensive that even Conor's mother only burned it on special occasions.

The room was different from the last; smaller, lacking chairs and furniture. Despair stopped in front of the fire and warmed his hands over the dancing flame. Conor stood in the center of the room, unsure what to do, which seemed to be a common occurrence when in the presence of Despair.

“Anya tells me you were rude to her. Is this true?” asked Despair.

“Anya?”

“My little guardian. The girl I sent to you.”

*Females can't keep anything to themselves*, thought Conor, but said, "I'm sorry. It was a slip of the tongue. I hope this doesn't cause any problems. I will apologize again if necessary."

"No need. She has a thick skin. She was told to relay everything you said and she did. I can't blame you for your upbringing. At least not entirely." Despair hadn't raised his voice, but the subtle insult raked against Conor's ego. *Who does he think he is, talking to me like that.* He felt his skin tighten as the anger became visible on his face. *What do dirty, stinking Nayan know about a proper upbringing.* Then he remembered exactly who Despair was, and that he needed him. Despair continued, "I will accept the contract—"

"Thank you!" interrupted Conor. All thoughts of anger and pride disappeared.

"But," said Despair, slightly more forceful, "realize that I am not promising to bring your sister back. If I can, I will, but otherwise I will return with whatever information I discover. I won't have you misunderstanding our agreement, and feeling cheated in the future."

"I understand," said Conor, less excited at the dis-assuring words. But it didn't matter. Conor had already paid too much to back out. Even if he asked for his father's ring back—which he wasn't brave enough to do—he had no one else to go to. He would have to accept the loss of his sister.

"We have a deal then," said Despair, who turned away from the fire. Conor bowed his head, then held out his hand in the way of the Nayan. Despair ignored it. He wasn't moving at all, not even to blink. It felt like Despair was staring through him. Then Despair started sniffing and twitching his nose. His all-green eyes narrowed and locked on Conor's, who felt his bones turn to stone under the gaze, suddenly too heavy to move. "Who sent you?" It wasn't a question but a demand.

Conor broke away from the all-green stare and the fear melted away. "Sent me?" he asked. "You sent for me." He tried to meet Despair's eyes again, but couldn't hold the contact. He blinked.

Looking down at Despair, Conor felt disoriented, then realized he was in the air, held up by the man's hand around his neck. "What are you doing?" he choked out, losing most of the precious air in

his lungs.

“Why are you here?” demanded Despair. Conor gasped for air. Despair let go and he fell on the floor, hard; breathing heavily. “Speak.”

“For my sister. I told you!”

“Who sent you?”

“No one, I swear!”

Despair crossed the room with amazing speed that Conor could have missed between blinks, then wrenched the door open. The light from the hallway was bright—too bright.

Smoke billowed into the room and Despair slammed the door closed. The smoke thinned out but not before they both had coughing fits.

“We need to get out of here!” Conor cried out in a panic.

Despair didn't respond. Instead, he pulled a hood over his head and his elbow across his face, opened the door and disappeared into the hallway, pulling the door closed behind him.

“Wait!” yelled Conor, followed by another fit of coughing before the smoke dissipated, rising to the high ceiling. After he could breathe again, and had wiped the tears from his stinging eyes, Conor ran to the door, yanked it open—and screamed. He was instantly assaulted by the oppressive heat of the fire that had spread along the carpet and slammed the door shut. Then he screamed again, when he realized the pain was not from the fire, but the knob that had burned through his skin, branding his palm with a floral engraving. Conor pulled away so forcefully that he fell. Then he slid across the room—on his back—staying beneath the smoke and trying to ignore the searing pain in his right hand. When his head bumped the wall, it knocked enough sense into him to get to the windows.

The windows were large and opened outward on hinges, Conor yanked one open with his left hand. He lifted one leg over the sill, then saw a man standing outside, holding a crossbow that was pointed at him. Unbalanced on one foot, Conor made the quickest decision of his life and fell

backwards, feeling a sharp pain in his shoulder before his body hit the floor, hard, then followed through with his head.

Conor struggled to open his heavy eye-lids. Someone was standing over him. Blink. Their mouth was moving but he couldn't hear anything. Blink. "Get up," echoed in his ears. He was being dragged. *Where am I? What's going on?* Blink. All-green eyes stared down at him. Blink. Despair. Conor recognized him. His lips were moving, but Conor had to wait for the words to reach him. Blink. It was taking so long. "Get up." repeated Despair. Conor moved and got to his feet. Blink. No, he was still moving, so slowly. So much effort. He gave up, felt the floor against his back, then heard the thud moments later. Hands grabbed him, pulled him to a sitting position and leaned him against the wall. "Stay up," said Despair.

Conor tried to speak, but his jaw wasn't moving correctly. Blink. All-green eyes were watching him—smaller ones. Blink. The Nayan girl was standing in front of him. She looked scared. *Why are you scared?* he wondered. Blink. A leg was suddenly next to his head. Blink. He climbed the leg with his eyes. Above the leg was a torso, burned red and black; then an arm, also red and black. Blink. Burns made lines up and down Despair's left side. Blink. The skin was ragged and bleeding across half of Despair's face. Blink. Conor heard voices. They sounded familiar.

"What do we do?" one asked.

"Wait here. Someone is still outside," said the other.

The leg beside Conor's head was suddenly bent. Blink. It was gone. Despair was gone. Blink. Conor heard distant screams. They came nearer, louder and louder. *Who is screaming?* Silence returned. The girl was beside him, looking out the window. Blink. She turned to Conor, face ashen. He reached out to her, but everything moved so slowly. After an eternity of staring at each other, his hand was barely off the floor. Blink. Hands reached through the window. Blink. The girl was gone. *Where did she*

go? Blink. Hands again, and a face. Conor smiled. He recognized the face, It was Despair. Blink.

Hands grabbed at him and pulled him over the windowsill. It felt like sliding down a mountain. Bump.

Scrape. Bump. Pinch. Scrape. Scrape. Bump. Blink. The sky was dark, but fire lit the night. Blink. A

Body. Blink. Blood, so much blood. Pools of blood. Blink. Throat torn, head twisted half off. Blink.

The girl stood in front of him, covering her eyes. Blink.

“Can you get up?” asked Despair.

*No*, thought Conor, *I'm tired*. Blink.

“Drag him carefully,” said Despair.

Conor moved. Blink. He felt like he was flying. He felt free. The sky was hard and dug into his back. Blink. He was moving backwards. Blink. *Where did everyone go?* Noises behind him, the volume building until he could make out words.

“Did you get him?” asked a new voice.

Then it screamed. Blink. He was moving again. Blink. Someone lay beside him. They were looking at the sky too. Blink. Something was in the man's eye. Blink. The man was gone. More smoke blanketed the sky. It blocked the stars. Blink. Conor stopped moving. He was lifted into a sitting position. Blink. Despair was looking at him. Blink. Conor's head fell against his chest. Blink. Someone lifted it up. The sky was gone. Men were standing in the distance. The place looked familiar. Blink.

*Scumslum. Despair's house.*

“Fire!” cried Conor. *There is a fire!* Blink. The men were looking at him. He could see their eyes in the firelight. They were not Nayan. Blink. They were closer. One looked familiar. Blink. Closer. He was the one from before, with the scar on his chin. Blink. Someone was choking Conor. He tried to struggle, but they wouldn't let go. *I can still breathe*, he realized. He wasn't choking. There were arms around his neck, small ones. He rolled his eyes to the side. Blink. The girl was kneeling against him, hiding her head behind his shoulder. Conor heard screaming. Blink.

One of the men had flaming hands. Blink. No, a torch. They were watching Despair. He was moving. Blink. Another man was clutching his wrist. It was bent the wrong way. Blink. Despair was blocking the men from sight. Blink. A sword gleamed in the firelight, dripping red. Blink. Only the blade, stuck out of Despair's back. Blink. The screams built like an avalanche in his ears. They came from everywhere. Blink. Two men were on the ground. Blink. Three men. Blood. The last was holding the torch. Despair reached out. Blink. The man's face was on fire. Blink.

No one was standing except for Despair. Blink. Blink. Something felt wrong. Conor felt pressure in his shoulder. Blink. Pressure in his hand, his back, his head. Blink. The pressure built and sharpened. Blink. Not pressure. Pain. Blink. He felt the crossbow bolt in his shoulder. Hot blood felt like fire where it ran down his arm. He felt each detailed line of the seven-petaled flower branded into his hand. He felt every bleeding inch of bruised, burned, and torn flesh. Blink. He still heard the screaming. It was familiar. He tried to speak, the noise heart his pounding ears. He couldn't. He was the one screaming. The sky was getting darker. Blink. The screams tapered off. Blink. The pain receded. Blink. He closed his eyes.