

Chapter Three



Arcor was a lawless stretch, a haven for the world's most devoted criminals. Smugglers bartered in its alleys, exiles claimed its ruins, and the bloodiest of pirates came here to hire their crews. It swallowed nearly the whole island, festering with a kind of chaos that earned it a reputation as the most wretched city known to land or sea.

Unlike Rein, Empress Renée was unmolested on her way to Arcor, and she shored the same day as Rein was carried onto the pirate ship. Renée didn't dare enter the city right away. She took cover in a snowed-out wood, far from the madness crowding Arcor's streets. The beaches and ports never rested. Men shouted over the crashing surf, deals were struck with blades, and shattering laughter echoed down the salt-worn streets. From her distance, they looked feral. Savage. The empress wrapped her light gray cloak tighter around her, tucking her face deeper beneath the hood. Strands of white-gold hair slipped loose, shimmering faintly in the cold light, and she quickly pulled them back into the shadow of her hood. She waited there beneath the frost-tipped branches, shivering—but not from the cold.

Shouts rose from the city like smoke, howls of rage, screams sharp enough to make her flinch. Each sound pressed her deeper into the snow-

packed soil, freezing her resolve. She couldn't move. Not yet. The only solution she could summon was to perhaps flow through the streets as a stream, but even that felt too risky. A shimmering stream threading through the filth-streaked streets would only draw more eyes, not fewer. Arcorians weren't stupid, they were dangerous. Renée kicked at the snow beneath her boots, scattering the black, rune-like patterns the wind had etched across its surface. She paced again. Inhaled. Exhaled.

"What should I *do*?" she growled, pressing her fists against her temples. "Where should I go? Where do I even start *looking*?"

Turning back wasn't an option. Renée *would have* to enter the city, and locate the merchant who claimed to know the whereabouts of the elusive Mystery Miracle Worker. She clutched the purpose like armor, wrapping it tight around whatever courage she possessed. This was her chance to silence the doubts whispered behind her back, to prove to the empire, and to her so-called friends, that they'd been wrong about her all along.

After a few more restless minutes of pacing back and forth through the wet snow, Renée forced her mind to still with a deep breath. She crept to the edge of the woods and pressed herself behind a tall, narrow gray tree, its bark peeling like ash. From there, she peered out at the edge of Arcor. The city sprawled in chaos. She watched its ratty inhabitants argue in the streets, snatch goods from carts, drink openly, brawl in doorways, etch obscenities on walls with blackened fingers. Trade and theft blurred together, joy and violence danced in equal measure. It was a place unhinged from order; a kingdom of disorder stitched together by desperation and firelight.

Renée's stomach clenched. She conjured water from the snow, and formed it into an icy dagger to keep with her, just in case. She held it low, hidden beneath her cloak. Another breath. Then another. And at last, trembling but determined, Renée stepped out from the shadows of the trees, and crossed the threshold into the unholy city of Arcor.

Renée kept to the center of the street where the current of chaos thinned slightly. The edges teemed with madness: shouting, staggering, stealing, bleeding. Here, at least, she had room to move, even if every step felt like a calculated risk. She weaved through the city like thread through torn fabric. Now and then, she had to lunge aside to avoid a drunken brawl or a sudden stampede of fleeing feet. Once, a carriage barreled past, its horses crazed, eyes wild with panic. The cart they pulled was aflame, fire licking through whatever cargo had once been inside. Renée leapt out of the way just in time, her heart pounding in her ears.

Death clung to Arcor like a fog. It reeked in the air—sour sweat, hot metal, rotting meat. No one had bothered to clear the bodies. Some were twisted in alleys, others half-buried in snow, their skin blanched and stiff. Trash spilled from corners like it had grown roots. The streets bled; red streaks and black slush mingled with brown snow that coated everything from the cobblestones to the windowsills. This was no place for rules. And yet, she'd heard whispers. There were *some* ... though, unwritten. *I'll give you something, if you give me something better.* There was also one peace rule: *Don't bother me, I won't destroy you.* But this city wasn't built for balance. Arcor was where narcissists came to rein, where violence answered to no god, no crown, and no conscience. Renée pulled her cloak tight around her, keeping in mind these critical rules.

To her relief, most of the Arcorians paid her little mind. Their attentions were easily claimed by the more willing distractions. Such as the painted women hailing down from balconies of the sturdier buildings, their laughter cutting through the city's grime like knives wrapped in silk. Some men shouted back, others wandered inside without a second thought. The spectacle kept most eyes away from Renée. Still, not all. Here and there, a few turned to glance at her, their eyes lingering, measuring. Suspicion gleamed like dull coins, but no one moved toward her. Not yet.

That changed when she passed a ramshackle tavern, its door barely hanging from its hinges. A drunken satyr exploded through the threshold,

flung by some unseen hand. He hit the ground with a grunt and a string of curses that steamed in the cold air. Staggering upright, he turned blindly and collided with Renée. Her balance faltered, and she nearly toppled into the grimy slush. The reek of ale and unwashed fur hit her before he did. Her hand instinctively moved toward her hidden dagger.

“So sorry, milady,” he slurred. “But you were too delicious to resist. Come with me and I’ll show you how to have a good time!”

“How dare you!” Renée spat as she pushed him away.

“Oh! You’re one of *those* types, huh?” The satyr laughed.

“Unhand me!” Renée hurled the satyr to the icy mud. “Curse you and your entire race!”

“Oy!” he cried, enraged. “Nobody shoves *me*!”

Suddenly, a number of his satyr friends exited the same tavern and waved their mugs around, spouting unintelligible words, though Renée managed to make out a few sentences.

“Oy! What are you doing shoving my friend?”

“Come try sssshoving one of us and see what happens!”

“Go shove someone your own size!”

Renée scampered away before they decided to come after her, her slippers sliding slightly on the frosted cobblestones. Behind her, a chorus of hooves clattered in pursuit, clumsy, drunken, and eager. But the ice betrayed them. One satyr skidded sideways, crashing into another, and then all three collapsed in a chaotic tangle of limbs and laughter. She didn’t dare look back. Her breath puffed in clouds as she rounded the corner and ducked behind a crooked stone building. Only then did she risk a glance. Peeking out, she spotted them sprawled in the mud, hooting and pointing

at each other like children in a playground scuffle, her escape already forgotten.

Relief washed over Renée, but it was thin and fleeting. The city pressed in around her, anxious and broken. She scanned the landscape: a crumbling building, a mound of stale trash, a dead tree with brittle branches clawing at the gray sky, then another ruin. Her gaze finally landed on a rusting sign swaying above a crooked door. A faded image of a book was etched into its surface. A library, depreciated and apparently unused. Perhaps she could find some useful information on the Mystery Miracle Worker inside.

She crossed the street, smoke stinging her throat, and pushed open the door. Inside, the air was still and dry, as if the building had been sealed away from time, though not in a romantic, preserved way. Shelves stood like brittle skeletons, mostly bare, their spines long picked clean. What books remained were ghosts: cracked bindings, torn covers, pages yellowed and curling. There wasn't a librarian in sight. Good. The fewer people she had to deal with, the better.

She wandered through the aisles with quiet steps, her eyes flitting over the remains of forgotten knowledge. There was no method to her search. She didn't know what she was looking for, only that she'd know it when she saw it. The silence around her deepened, pressing against her ears. Goosebumps prickled her arms.

Then, a second set of footsteps. Slow, heavy, and measured. Renée froze beside a shelf as the steps grew louder, until a shadow stretched across the aisle's edge. Rounding the corner came a hulking figure: a clay golem, thick-limbed and timeworn, with cracks along its sagging face, and dull eyes that held no spark. It was old, possibly ancient, and unmistakably meant to serve. Renée's stomach turned. A slave librarian. Contempt rose in her like bile. Golems were malleable creatures, easy to enslave and mostly known for this purpose. She considered leaving, abandoning the library and the fool's errand of chasing legends. The Mystery Miracle Worker likely wasn't worth digging through rot.

Renée dismissed this thought as soon as it came. She wasn't returning to the Obsidian Palace just to admit she'd failed.

"What are you doing here?" the librarian asked. It was evident in her tone that she, too, felt disdain toward Renée. "I don't tolerate trespassers."

"Are libraries not open to the public?" Renée asked.

"This hasn't been a library for years," the golem answered. "It is my home now, and you're trespassing."

"I'm searching a library for information."

"You won't find any information here."

Renée hesitated. She didn't wish to speak to the golem anymore, but her search was too important to give up. She fought her resentment down and endured. "Very well. Then would you happen to know where I could find the Mystery Miracle Worker? Or perhaps the merchant who knows her whereabouts?"

The librarian laughed. "Is that what you're looking for?"

Renée showed little physical response to being mocked, but it was all she could do to keep from drowning the golem. This one didn't match the stories she'd heard; yielding, unthinking, easy to bend. Perhaps the librarian was only part golem. "Yes."

The golem tilted her head to the side, her eyes scanning Renée up and down. "What do I get out of giving you that information?"

Renée considered. Her malicious feelings toward this librarian were only increasing at a rapid pace. She breathed deeply, fighting for control over her rage. "I can pay you." Pay a golem? The phrase left a bitter taste in her mouth.

"How much?"

“How much would you like?” Renée asked through gnashed teeth.

“How much do you have?”

The empress nearly exploded. The golem should be thankful she was getting anything at all. She molded some gold coins out of the water particles in the air behind her back before showing them to the librarian. “I have ... a full moon.” A hundred dollars.

“Crescents don’t do anything here.”

“Except for the fact that they’re pure gold, which does something everywhere.”

The librarian’s eyes widened, and she reached for the money. Renée quickly pulled back and made sure her words were comprehensible when she asked, “Where can I find information on the Mystery Miracle Worker?”

The librarian narrowed her eyes. “The merchant seadog you’re looking for is several shops from here. I don’t know if he’s there at the moment since he *is* a seadog.”

“What’s the name of the shop?”

“Worldly Trade. There’s a picture of Xyntriav above his door.”

Renée considered her answer. She didn’t like how vague the information was, but what could she do? Perhaps this was all the useless golem could provide, which shouldn’t surprise her. Reluctantly, she handed the money over.

“If I find this information to be false, I will come back for this money. If it’s not here, I’ll take the payment in some *other* way, if you catch my drift.” With that said, Empress Renée left the library.

Renée cast a quick glance up and down the street, scanning for trouble before slipping away from the creaking, half-collapsed structure. The

golem hadn't bothered to mention which way to go, but she had called the man a seadog, and that was enough. His shop had to be somewhere near the docks. She moved swiftly, weaving along the edges of decaying buildings, hopping over splintered planks and what remained of less fortunate citizens—limbs left to rot in the gutter. The stench clung to the back of her throat. Her eyes darted from shadow to doorway, ever watchful for the twitch of movement or the low murmur of drunk and dangerous voices.

At last, a faded wooden sign came into view: a faint map of Xyntriav. The shop looked as battered as the library with peeling paint and crooked shutters, but the door stood open. Relief surged through her. A quiet room with one or two unpredictable strangers was better than navigating a street full of madness. She stepped inside. The air smelled faintly of water-logged wood and old paper. A heavy desk anchored the room, surrounded by clutter: fraying maps, yellowed charts, and curious instruments of navigation: sextants, compasses, chipped figurines from distant lands. But no shopkeeper in sight. Renée let the door creak shut behind her, and listened to the hush settle again.

“And what might someone like yourself be looking for in a shop like this?” came a voice from behind.

Renée spun on her heels, heart jumping. A man stood by the door, arms folded, half-shadowed by the dim light slanting through the dusty window. She met his gaze, ready to speak—then stopped cold. His feet were facing the wrong way. For a beat, her mind scrambled for an explanation. Then it clicked. He was an abarimon. She'd heard the name once, maybe twice, buried in some half-remembered tale. Strange folk with backward feet and a habit of vanishing into wild places. She'd all but forgotten they existed, until now, staring one in the face.

“I'm looking for the merchant whom I was told works here,” she uttered.

“What do you want from him?”

“That is between me and him.”

“Is he expecting you?”

“No...”

He took a step toward her. “Then you must go through me first. What is it you’re looking for?”

“The location of a certain someone,” Renée answered. “And that is all you’re going to get out of me.”

The man glanced away, a flash of frustration in his eyes. “And what if I told you that I’m the merchant you want?”

Now Renée grew frustrated, sick of the games. “I wouldn’t believe you for a second. Now if you would, I’d like to speak with him.”

The abarimon chuckled and approached his desk to gather the maps spread out on its surface. “I’m afraid, my dear, I am the person you wish to speak to. However, I’m pressed on time, so we must hurry with your business so that I may go.”

“Prove it to me that you are whom I search for,” Renée demanded, placing her hand on her hips.

“And how would you like me to do that?” The merchant slipped a map into a leather tube, then set the others against the wall beside a bookcase. “Now either you can ask me what you want or I’m going to leave.” He flung the strap of the tube over his shoulder, and approached his door to exit.

“I’m looking for the Mystery Miracle Worker,” Renée spat.

The merchant paused and shut the door. “What business do you have looking for her?”

“Now that business is between her and myself, and there is no way you could possibly convince me you are her, so there’s no point in trying.”

“Right.” The merchant crossed his arms again and leaned leisurely against the doorframe. “But I will ask for something in return for this information.”

Renée rolled her eyes. “Everybody wants something! What is it you’d like?”

“That key you so carelessly wear like a steel chain around your neck.”

Renée swallowed her sudden anxiety. She placed her hand over the key, and tucked it into the blouse of her dress. “The key is off limits. What else do you wish for?”

“Nothing else. It’s the key or no information. Make your choice, and quickly please.”

Renée thought fast. “Very well, but you will only receive the key when you have told me everything I need to know. I can’t trust that you’ll tell me once I give it to you.”

“Well then we seem to be at a stalemate, as I can’t trust that I’ll get the key after I reveal the location,” the abarimon replied.

“It seems as though we cannot reach an accord. Thank you for wasting my time. I must go and find the information I seek elsewhere.”

“No one else knows where the Mystery Miracle Worker is hidden,” said the merchant.

“Then how does she get business, hm?” Renée challenged. “I’m aware you got your knowledge from another Arcorian, I can simply find her.”

“You’re going to hunt down the captain of the *Dark Aurora*?” the merchant asked with skepticism.

“Oh, thank you for that bit of information. As a naiad, I should have little issue finding her now.”

Renée approached the door to leave the shop, but the merchant stopped her. “Hold on. Very well, we’ll do this your way. Unfortunately though, the information you want is at my home on the other side of the city, which is a day’s journey from here. If you give me until tomorrow, I shall return here by noon with everything you want. Then we can make trade. What do you say?”

At last, Renée was getting somewhere. “I’ll be here at noon.”