

# PROLOGUE

**There is no marsh at Pitkerrin Marsh**, but there is a memory of one. It seeps through stone floors in underground rooms, mottles walls, and hangs stinking in the heavy air. There's no warmth in those rooms, and no true light, no glimpse of sky.

The Marsh is no place for a Dry-dweller.

But that's where I was. Four days I'd been there, four days shaking the wire of my cage shouting in all the languages I knew, four days hallucinating about escape. Sometimes I woke up on the floor, fingers and toes red-marked, back and shoulders black-bruised, and I knew I had climbed that cage in my sleep.

My name is Nomu. At home in the desert that's a word for rain. My mother chose it, though whether she

meant it for a prayer or a joke, I do not know. Three gifts she gave me: my life, my name, my brother Raffael. Now, in the Marsh, I had lost my name and my brother, but I would not lose my life, not without a fight.

I watched the girl in the cage next to mine. She was brown skinned and half starved. Breken, I thought. That's what the people living in squalor on the south side of the river are called: Breken, for the broken Anglo that they speak. The girl was dying. There were fifteen of us in that room and by my count twelve were very sick, but she was dying faster than the rest. Her sheets were tangled around her legs and arms, and her cough had become a retch. The blood-dark rash was spreading on her body as if she was charred black by her fever. Soon her eyes would turn bloody and sightless, but by then she would be too weak to scream at the horror of it. I would though. I would scream. I would make the whitecoats standing at the observation window take notice.

When she lay quiet and breathless on her bed I sat beside the wire mesh between us and talked to her. It calmed us both. I told her that when I was her age I used to climb the watchtower of our settlement hub at day's end and sing the sun down. I told her how peaceful it is up there that time of day; the old chains clank in the breeze and the tower sways and groans as if complaining to its brothers across the rock and sand. They do not answer. They lurch out of the dunes like giant buzzards with

broken wings, straining for the sky. Dry-dwellers, you see, I told her. We stretch our bones to the sky.

Settlements squat at the feet of those watchtowers, small satellites of our own great hub, each one as shattered and dark as a husk pecked open by some gigantic beak.

But our hub remains; in fact it prospers.

From my perch beside the watchtower's tiny cockpit high above the ground, I can feel the thud of the water pumps, the heartbeat of the hub, feeding the meadows and orchards with water from deep beneath the Dry. Trees are heavy with dates and limes and oranges, honey bees crowd their hives, the leafy tops of greens push through the black earth. Ahead of me, the desert at day's end is amber sand and tall black basalt, and the horizon is a shadow of dusty red.

Sitting in the underground of Pitkerrin Marsh, I ached for that old watchtower so much I could smell its ironwork hot in the sun. But you know, I told the girl, it was not put there for my dreaming. The ancestors built it when the world began to go dark so that they could see trouble a long way off, before it reached our door. And trouble came—bands of desert raiders crept insect-like across the plains, hoping to surprise us, and storms grew from dirty, far-off smudges into surging, billowing, mountain-high monsters of sand and dust that scoured the Dry and left us gasping. But always, we were ready.

Then, in my seventeenth year, the year that I began

my apprenticeship in the laboratories, a threat came from a city in the north. It came thundering towards us worse than any storm or desert raid, and our watchtower stood its tall and lonely ground and did not see it.

I stopped my story. The girl was past hearing it, so I began to sing to her instead. I sang the Drum chants in the old language of the desert. Why choose a warrior chant for a dying girl? Because we die fighting when we die young. And because no one should die in silence.

I knew she would be gone soon, for I knew this disease. I'd seen my own people die of it. We knew it as HV-C6: Hemorrhagic Virus-Class 6.

The whitecoats called it Havoc.

**Southside laid down its guns.**

At noon on midsummer's day, Breken squads all along the south side of the river stepped down from an attack footing, and a one-sided ceasefire went live. It was supposed to be an act of good faith. It felt like defeat.

I worked late that night at the hilltop HQ where Moldam township's militia squads were barracked. No one there was leaping for joy or sighing with relief. Maybe some fingers were crossed; maybe some prayers were said. The whole place was deathly quiet, as though we were holding our breath. Up and down the south bank of the river seven Breken townships, about a quarter of a million people, had just handed Cityside the chance to do things differently: to end the war, unlock the bridges and let Southside be transformed—no more, the gigantic detention camp and reservoir of slave labour—transformed,

renewed, restored to what it used to be: the other half of a single, great city.

Dreams are free. Also pulverisable.

At 11pm when the power went down for the night I left for home. Moldam was sleeping, except for a couple of guards on the bridge gate, a squad on patrol and a few stragglers on the streets. Walking down River Road I stopped beside a stuttering streetlamp and climbed onto the riverwall. The wind was up, blowing cold from Port and promising the open sea beyond the rank air of the Moldam alleyways. I breathed deep and looked across the river to Cityside. There was nothing to see—Cityside was blacked out—but you could feel it lying there, like some huge wild beast from an old fairy tale, half asleep, tail twitching, eyes slow-blinking, watching across the water.

Friends were over there. Fyffe with her parents up at Ettyn Hills. Dash, now an agent with Security and Intelligence based at Pitkerrin Marsh. Lou and Bella lying half a year in their graves, their bodies pierced with shrapnel from the Breken bomb that had put them there. Sol's grave was there too, but his ghost was here. Right here, at my shoulder. He never left me and why should he? He was dead; I hadn't saved him. He'd be eight years old forever. There were a thousand ways I could have done things differently and he might have got home. I'd thought of all of them, planned them, executed them perfectly in my head, and at the end of every one of them

he came straight back to me, the dead weight of him in my arms on the bridge, the bloody tunnel of the bullet through his chest, his eyes staring at the sky.

There was a scrabbling noise behind me.

‘Nik, hey there.’ Lanya kissed me cheerily on the cheek, sent a shiver and an ache right through me. She studied my face and read my mind. ‘Saved him yet?’

I made a face at her and she smiled.

‘You won’t solve it,’ she said. ‘For once, your brain is not your friend.’

We were always having this conversation. I was stuck in ‘if only’ territory. If only I’d stopped Sol being kidnapped and brought to Southside in the first place; if only I’d convinced the militia here that they should let him go, no strings attached; if only the exchange they’d set up, of Sol for Suzannah Montier, a Breken leader held hostage on Cityside, hadn’t been sabotaged by a Breken faction opposed to her return...then he would be home free, instead of buried back on Cityside, having done nothing, ever, to deserve that.

I said, ‘Okay. Here’s another way.’

‘What?’

‘Revenge.’

Lanya nodded slowly. ‘Revenge.’

‘Yes. Why not? Everyone else is doing it.’

This was true: for every assassination, rocket attack and mass imprisonment perpetrated by Cityside, some

group on Southside struck right back with its own murder, bombing and kidnapping.

‘No one wins,’ I said. ‘So rationally it’s no answer but you said not to use my brain.’

She gave me a lopsided smile. ‘Any word on the ceasefire?’

I shook my head. ‘Waiting.’

‘There’s a surprise.’

Southside was used to waiting on Cityside. It had tried not waiting, that’s what the uprising was all about—trying to push back, to drive both sides towards talks and a less murderous future. Right through winter, Lanya and I had met on the riverwall and exchanged what news we had about how it was going. By the beginning of spring, things were looking grim. Cityside’s security and intelligence service and its army had quit squabbling with each other; the two had joined forces and hit Southside hard. The uprising faltered and stalled. By late spring people on Southside were talking surrender. Then came some good news at last: One City was back in business.

Southside had allies on Cityside and One City was the strongest of those allies. Activists, urban guerillas, extremists—they came with various labels depending on who was doing the labelling. Some of them had been years in Pitkerrin Marsh, but when Breken forces had taken control there six months before—only for a day or two before losing it again—they’d broken the politicals



out. Now those people were spreading a shedload of chaos through the well-ordered Cityside streets: cyber attacks gridlocked trains and traffic, maxed out the phone network and crashed the electronic payment system in shops downtown. Graffiti was splashed across City Hall, churches and banks, and the news channel was being intermittently hacked.

It all sounded a whole lot more fun than going quietly crazy in Moldam HQ propping up a computer system that could have come off the Ark, which is how I spent my days.

Now Lanya and I were on the riverwall again, standing close—as close as you can get when you’re wearing big old army coats, which is not nearly close enough. Lanya looked across the water. I looked at her. In the half-working streetlamp I could see her wide eyes and long lashes, the curve of her cheek and all those beaded braids spilling out from the twisted red scarf around her head.

Some people look at Cityside like it owes them. You can see it in the way their lip curls and their eyes narrow. Not Lanya. When she looked across the river she saw a new city where there was space for everyone. She dreamed it, and she wanted to build it too—to muck in, get her hands dirty, raise a sweat and make it rise up whole on both sides of the river. Me, I didn’t see how that could happen. And anyway, no one was building a new city yet, not without a lasting ceasefire.

Lanya said, 'On with the lesson. What are we up to?'

She wanted to know what life was like over the river.

I made up lists for her: we were up to H.

'Heating in winter,' I said. 'Hot showers. Halfway decent chocolate.'

She looked sideways at me. 'You said chocolate already, under C.'

'And I'll probably say it again, under 'R' for really-good-if-you've-got-enough-money chocolate.'

She laughed. 'Cheat.' Then she pointed towards Cityside. 'Oh, look!' A light flashed there. Then a series of lights—laser-bright—arced across the bridge. All in silence.

I got as far as 'Holy sh—' when the shock wave slammed us off the wall and the roar rolled over everything.