

BABYLON STEEL
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To my parents,
Who wouldn't have approved

Chapter One
Day 1
6 days to Twomoon

WHEN I HEARD the shriek, I bolted up the stairs. That's one thing about being my height, I can take stairs three at a time.

The sound had come from Laney's room. I slammed the door open, and there was Laney, curled like a kitten at one end of the bed, and her client, flat on his back with his eyes shut. "What happened?" I said.

Laney just giggled.

I looked at the client lying in the crumpled pile of rose-pink sheets and spring-green satin comforter. He was one of those padded, flushed men who always remind me that people are basically made of meat. He had a glazed look, and although he had a sheet over him I was fairly certain that I could see either steam or smoke rising from the general area of his groin.

"Are you all right?" I said.

He squeaked, swallowed, and said, "Oh, *yes*."

"Laney..."

"Sorry, Babylon. We were just having a little fun."

"Yes, well, I'd leave that sort of fun to the Twins, if I were you. I thought someone was being murdered up here."

"Oh, really, Babylon, as if I *would*." She patted the client on his balding head, bounced up, flung on a wisp of pink silk that served her as a dressing gown and danced past me, grabbed my hand and dived into my office, narrowly avoiding the ripped rug, pulling me after her. She snatched up a red, leather-bound book I recognised all too well. "Babylooon..." she said, waving it at me. A few scraps of paper fell out.

"Not now, Laney," I said.

"If someone doesn't do these soon, we're in trouble."

Laney's tiny: all big green eyes and masses of blonde curls, but she can glare like a hawk. Plus, she's a Fey. You don't mess with Fey. Not if you've more brains than the average plant. Like every being of power, she can't use most of it here on Scalentine – but she's not helpless, not by a long way.

"I know," I said.

"We need to order new bed linens, and curtains, and replace that lamp, and we haven't paid the glazier yet. We might even have enough money, but no-one actually *knows*. Because no-one's done the *accounts*."

"You do them then."

"You know I don't do *numbers*. That's a completely different sort of magic from mine. But somebody has to do them."

"What brought this on?"

She jerked her head towards her room. "Him. He's an accountant."

"Can't we get him to do them?"

"Well not right *now*," she said, her mouth twitching. "And once he's recovered he won't be back for at least two weeks, he's broke."

Frankly, a broke accountant didn't sound like someone I wanted doing my paperwork. I had enough problems. "All right, all right, I'll do them tonight."

Laney made a face in which hope, exasperation and disbelief were nicely mingled. "Well you need to sign this, anyway," she said, waving more paper at me. "Mercer's bill."

I looked at it. "*How* much for that silk?"

She pouted. "One must *dress*, Babylon."

“Amazes me that so little material can cost so much,” I said. I dipped a pen in the inkstand, signed the bill, and sealed it with my ring. Laney blew me a kiss and sashayed out. I just hoped there *was* enough in the kitty; but I doubted it. What with Laney’s taste in clothes, Flower’s taste in ingredients, and the Twins asking for new equipment every five minutes, considerably more had been going out than coming in. For a while, in fact.

I went back down. A few of the crew had gathered in the hall in case there was trouble; even the Twins had emerged from the basement.

"Everything smooth?" said Cruel. She's got cropped hair the colour of frost, and skin like midnight.

“As silk.”

Her brother, Unusual, glanced up the stairs. He's the other way around, great mane of pitchy hair and silver-white skin. Well, they *claim* to be twins. Don't ask me, I only work here. "Is that the culprit?" he said.

Laney's client was peeking over the banisters.

"Culprits should be punished," said Cruel, smiling at him. Her smiles are...interesting. I saw him blanch and back towards the comparative safety of Laney's room. It probably wasn't just the smile; it might have been the leather, the spikes and the whip.

"Behave, you two, or you can help Flower in the kitchen."

"Yes, Babylon." They rolled their eyes, and withdrew to the Basement.

I looked around. The floor of the hall is honey-coloured wood, and the long windows let in the western light and have red velvet curtains, unfortunately now fading rather drastically to a sort of stripy maroon. I sighed. Laney was right, we really did need some new things. I started, reluctantly, to head back upstairs, but I'd barely got halfway before I heard the front door and Flower's rock-crushing tones booming, "Babylon?"

I went back down to the hall, to see Flower, and, in the doorway, the Chief of the City Militia. He frowned at my sword, which was still drawn. "Trouble?" he said.

"Precautions."

"I see."

Flower made a worried face at me behind his back. Well, over his head, really. The Chief's tall, but Flower *looms*.

"Right, come on, you know the drill," the Chief said.

"Yes, Chief." I led the way into the small parlour, sighing. He was going to make my life a misery, I knew it.

He stood in the middle of the small, blue-and-white room, with its big wing-chairs with their blue-velvet upholstery, its crackling fireplace, and its brass lamps with their pearly glass shades. He looked tough and tired and about to snarl. "Money," he said.

"Money?"

"Money. Babylon...come on. How many times? I don't want to have to arrest you, you know that."

"You wouldn't."

"If you don't pay your damn taxes, Babylon, I don't have a choice! You're six months behind, woman! You've got ten days."

"Ten *days*?"

"They've extended it twice already. This is the absolute last time they'll do it. And this is the last time I'm warning you. Just pay them *something* to quiet them down, even if you can't pay the whole lot." He frowned down at his sword hilt. "I'd lend you some money but if it got out..."

"I wouldn't let you."

"I know. So do me a favour and just damn well pay it, will you?"

Ten days. I really *was* going to have to do the accounts. And see if I could increase the client roster, too. Though I doubted even that would get us out of the hole.

“All right, all right,” I said. “I’ll throw them a bone.”

“Good. My move, I think,” he said. He sat himself down in one of the big wing-chairs and picked up a pawn from the chess board.

Chief Hargur Bitternut. He’s one of those lean, wolf-haired, long-faced types who looks like he should be carving out new territory in some untouched land, but as head of the militia, he spends most of his time just trying to hold back chaos right here.

I sat down opposite him, looking at the board, turning the ring on my forefinger around. The sword and lotus caught the light. “You moved something. Before I got here.”

“You think I snuck past Flower? How? Babylon, one of these days you’re just going to have to learn to trust me.”

“You, I trust. Your chess game I don’t trust.”

“That’s because I always beat you,” he said.

“True. Let’s arm-wrestle instead.”

“Now, or in a week?”

“That time again? Ah. It’s a Twomoon, isn’t it?” I said.

He nodded, looking more lugubrious than ever.

That’s Scalentine. It’s on a planar conjunction, for one thing; and it has two moons. And once a year, they’re both full at the same time.

In a city endowed with a thousand different sorts of madness, not to mention a fairly wide variety of weres (the Chief’s one of them), you can imagine what a double full moon does. We put on extra security, don’t let in anyone we don’t recognise and stock up on cures.

I moved a pawn, and the Chief sighed. “Babylon. Come on. You’re not trying.”

I made a face. We played for a while in silence. Well, he played. I moved things around and swore under my breath when he destroyed another pawn.

“So,” he said. “Heard anything that’s going to make my life more complicated?”

“I’ve not heard a thing. It’s been unusually quiet, to be honest.”

We all hear things. We’re not in the habit of betraying bedroom confidences; *not* good business. But I know a lot of the local whores, plus their attendant hangers-on. They tell me the gossip. If it’s a bit of petty skimming I don’t bother the Chief with it, but anything that sounds likely to cause serious trouble I drop him a hint. In return, he warns me about anyone who might cause *me* difficulties, and tries to teach me chess.

Somehow I don’t think I’m ever going to get it, though. I don’t have the patience.

“Well, I should warn you... the Vessels are on the warpath,” Bitternut said.

“Diplomatic Section had another delegation trying to get all the pleasure-houses closed down.”

“Not *again*.”

“I doubt you need worry – even the Diplomatic Section realise what a bad move that would be. But you may get some Vessels giving you noise.” He moved a knight.

“Can’t you arrest them for something?”

“I can’t arrest a whole community, Babylon. And annoying as they are, they haven’t actually shown any sign of breaking the law.”

“Painting nasty slogans on our walls? Hassling my crew?”

“*Apart* from that. And they’ve been warned. They haven’t done anything serious – at least, I don’t think so...”

“You don’t *think* so?”

He scowled, and moved the knight back where it had come from. “Girl got attacked down in Ropemakers’ Row, the other night.”

“Oh, fire. One of the freelancers? Who?”

“New girl. Straight off the boat. No instinct for a bad client, probably.”

“How bad is it?”

“She’s going to be all right, though she’ll need a good healer to reshape her face.”

“Bastard. She got money for a healer?”

“Not a lot. Few of us helped her out a bit.”

That’s the Chief. No wonder his clothes always look like they’re older than he is. I’d give him a discount, only he’s never been a client. Just a friend.

Then I realised what he’d said. “Hang on... don’t tell me she was attacked by a *Vessel*?” I said. “What, for being a whore? They’ve started to take the law into their own hands? You could have told me before we started playing, Chief.”

“You wouldn’t have concentrated.”

“I can’t concentrate *now*.”

“There’s no real evidence the Vessels had anything to do with it. I’ve already talked to them.”

“So why *did* you talk to them?”

“The girl said the attacker was wearing a Purity mask, but that doesn’t mean a lot. It’s not impossible to get those masks copied. Could have been a previous client or someone she’d turned down, who didn’t want to be recognised. We set dogs on the trail, but by the time she got up the courage to report to us more than a day’s worth of trade had gone down the street, including half the pigs in Scalentine.” He shook his head. “You know what it’s like. We’re lucky she talked to us at all.”

“I know. They’ll come around, Chief, just give ’em time.”

“I hope you’re right, Babylon. Anyway. I just wanted to let you know. Don’t go thinking it means more than that there’s some idiot out there with a taste for using his fists. Not like they’re unknown.”

That was true, sadly enough, but personally I wouldn’t have much trouble believing that the Vessels had stopped talking and started hitting.

They’re one of the religious orders that give me a pain. Heavy on the general ‘Shalt Nots’, and with the weird but not uncommon idea that all sin starts below the neck.

“You know if they come anywhere near me or mine I won’t be responsible, Chief.”

“Yes, you will, Babylon.”

I slammed a pawn down at random. “Yeah, I will. *I* don’t say, ‘the gods made me do it.’”

“I know you don’t. Trust me, if they break the law, *provably*, they’ll be in as much trouble as anyone else. Just tell your people to be careful.”

“Right.” Just then something skittered past my foot, and I stamped out, making Bitternut jump.

“What?”

“Beetle.” I ground the thing underfoot.

“Hah. There’s me thinking you were scared of nothing.”

“I hate beetles.”

Bitternut stood up. “I have to go, gorgeous.” He looked at the chessboard and shook his head. “Work on your strategy. Read some military campaigns.”

I made a face. I’ve seen war; books don’t carry the stink.

“You take care of yourself, Chief.”

“Always.”

“Laney’s been asking after you,” I said, quirked an eyebrow at him.

“The lovely Laney, eh?” He gave me that melancholy grin. “Maybe I’ll drop by again before Twomoon. See you, Babylon.”

He nodded to Flower, who was filling the doorway, and left.

Flower's one of the few creatures I know who makes *me* feel fragile. He's huge. And green. A nice green, like polished jade. I don't know what his life was before he turned up on my doorstep; but he was wearing a slave-cuff on one ankle, and he had a lot of scars.

Flower handed me the glass of wine he was holding; it looked fragile in his big green hand. "You may need this."

"Flower, you're a treasure."

He grinned. That's quite a sight in itself; he's a tusky fella. He's one of my favourite people, is Flower. We call him that partly because no-one can pronounce his name, which is all glottal stops and consonants, but mainly because he's such a sweetie. Just the sight of him will usually calm down the most rambunctious of punters, but he's the gentlest creature in the planes, and one hell of a cook to boot.

I took a sip of the wine. "How did you know? Did the Chief tell you?"

"About that girl? Yes. But that wasn't why."

"Oh?"

"Visitor."

If Flower brought me a glass of wine for every visitor we got I'd never be sober. "Tell me," I said.

"Darask Fain."

I almost choked on my drink.

Tiresana

I WAS A BAG-child. An unwanted baby, hung on a door in a linen bag, in the hope that the family inside the prosperous-looking house would be generous. It was hard times on Tiresana, and a lot of babies ended up in the river, or left in the desert for the wild dogs to find.

Philla, the master's daughter, was on her way downstairs when the head servant found the wriggling, bawling bag; nothing in it but me, wrapped in undyed linen, and a few chips of white marble. Philla was fifteen, sentimental, taken with babies. She begged for me to be taken in. Her parents saw no reason why the servants shouldn't take in a baby, so long as it didn't interfere with their duties; they'd get a trained house-servant out of it, eventually.

Philla named me Ebi, after the little desert cats.

It was a stable household; servants were rarely dismissed, the master and mistress liked familiar people about, who knew their ways. For the rest of the servants, I was mainly extra work on the whim of a silly girl, who came to the kitchens to play with me when I was tiny, but lost interest quickly as I grew.

I remember the stone-flagged floor; a bone spoon for a toy. I remember Philla, a little – mainly as long clean hair and a scent of jasmine. When she left the house on her marriage, she left the bag I'd been found in to be given to me when I was old enough not to lose it. I was ten or so when someone remembered, and it was the only thing I'd ever owned apart from the clothes I stood in. It was nothing much, a stained linen bag and a few chips of white stone, but I kept it by me. As though there were another life somewhere, and that bag was the key.

Chapter Two

DARASK FAIN. HE'S never been a client; but I've heard of him, everyone has, somehow. He moves between the different levels of society smooth as a dancer; but he always seems to skate the surface; runs a gambling den called the Singing Bird, and has the reputation of being a very dangerous man with a finger in a lot of pies. That sort of client can be an asset, or a major liability.

He's also the most devastating thing on two legs in Scalentine.

Flower had shown him into the red room (the one we call Punters' Parlour among ourselves). It has red divans with masses of cushions in all the shades of a rose garden, (including pink and yellow – Laney's choice – you wouldn't think it would work, but it does), and some pictures. Sexy pictures, but subtle; I don't like paintings that look like an instruction manual, and they can have the opposite effect to what's intended.

The red room's the biggest room we have, but it was verging on packed. There were two other punters; one was a new face, young and nervous-looking, the other was an elderly and delightful clockmaker who turned up mainly to reminisce about his wild younger days with whoever was prepared to sit around with very few clothes on and listen, though he could still be pretty sprightly when the mood took him.

The rest of the crowd was made up of the crew. Laney, in three wisps of green silk that matched her eyes, was perching on the arm of the clockmaker's chair, gesturing extravagantly as she pretended to believe some outrageous story, and everyone else was either offering Fain a drink, plying him with food, or just gawping. Well, not Flower, who was in the kitchen, but the Twins were hovering, and they didn't usually pay much attention to what they called the 'prose punters'. No-one was paying any mind to the new lad. *Not* good. I was going to have to do some dressing down.

Hard to blame them, though, when you saw Fain.

He was seated on one of the sofas, with a glass in his hand and a plate of pastries at his elbow. I have rosy-shaded lamps in there; they give a rich, flattering light. Fain didn't need it; with those dark eyes, high cheekbones and glossy black hair he would look good under a noonday sun. Unlike some new clients, he looked utterly at ease.

This all went through my head in less than a moment. Fain had spotted me as soon as I walked in, and stood up. Everyone else did too, even the clockmaker.

It made me nervous. It's been a long time since people did that when I entered a room.

"Madam Steel."

"Mr Fain. I hope you're being looked after?"

"Quite charmingly. But I wonder if I might beg the privilege of a private word with you?" He had a voice like velvet-clad fingers running down one's naked back.

"Certainly. I'll be with you in just a moment." I held out my hand to the young lad, who bent over it and stammered something about it being an honour. "I just came to... I mean I thought... I'm terribly sorry..."

I managed to get out of him what it was he was after, and sent him off with one of the older lads who'd know how to deal with his nerves. I ordered everyone else back to their duties sharp enough to let them know I was peeved, and took Fain into the blue parlour, aware of more than a few envious looks directed at me as I went.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," I said.

He settled himself into a chair like a cat into a sunbeam. "You run a very pleasant house, Babylon. I'm already regretting that I haven't been here before."

"Now you are, what can I do for you, Mr Fain?" I had several ideas in mind, and they were getting more extravagant by the moment.

“I am prepared to offer you a large sum of money in return for a certain service I believe you may be able to perform for me.”

That put me on edge. I didn't know enough about Fain to guess what his personal tastes might be, but if he was prepared to offer way over the going rate, it had to be something a bit out of the ordinary. And though the motto of the House is 'All tastes, all species, all forms of currency,' there are tastes we don't cater for. Anyone who prefers an unwilling partner or one too young had better not step through my door. Anything resulting in permanent injury and such, we don't do. He was not a man I wanted to antagonise, but I have principles. That may be why I'm often broke.

I sat down and arranged myself in an encouraging posture, and waited. Not for long.

“Someone has gone missing. I'd like you to look for her.”

I managed to shut my mouth, eventually. “I'm sorry, what?”

“A young woman – a stranger to the city – has disappeared. I am extremely concerned for her welfare.”

I was thoroughly bemused, not to mention pretty disappointed. “Why me?” I said. “This isn't the kind of request I usually get.” I wasn't entirely able to keep the regret out of my voice.

“Because I think you have the qualities I am looking for. I'd know better if you came to the club, of course...”

“Gambling's not really my game.”

“But I suspect you'd be rather good, if you decided to take it up.”

“I'm not sure about that. I think it requires a level of concentration that's beyond me. Besides, I'm not good at numbers.”

“But judging by what I've heard, you're good at people. Often, that's all that is required.”

“You must be pretty good at people yourself.” Somehow that had come out sounding a lot more inviting than I intended. Ye gods and little fishes, I was practically *purring*.

It had to be the voice. No-one should be allowed to be that good looking *and* have a voice like that. It eased past the brain and curled itself right around the privates.

I dragged my concentration back into my head. “Anyway, this girl. What qualities have *I* got? Why not go to the militia?”

“I believe you can talk to people who won't talk to the militia. The last Chief left a long shadow.”

The Chief before Bitternut had been a nasty little pusbag; corrupt as a dead dog in high summer. It made the Chief's job harder than it needed to be. I still heard stories from some of the other whores. A lot of them come to me when they fancy a bit of advice or a gossip. Them and ex-soldiery.

“But still,” I said, “why me?”

“You need the money.”

That acted on me like a dash of cold water. “What do you mean?”

He shrugged. “I *do* run a gambling house, Madam Steel. I know when someone's overstretched.”

The fact that he was right didn't make me any happier about him knowing, and I wasn't sure I believed his explanation, either. We kept the place in good order. Maybe someone had been gossiping with a client, and word had got out. Discretion, or lack of it, works both ways.

Still, he *was* right. “So who is this girl and why are *you* looking for her?”

Fain leaned forward, and I could smell his scent; a mix of clean male, and something dark and woody. I was increasingly aware that I really didn't trust him and that I was having

a damn hard time keeping my hands off him anyway. I tried to concentrate on listening to his words rather than watching his mouth.

“She’s the daughter of people I want to keep happy. If I can find her for them they will be extremely, not to say lucratively, grateful. I’m prepared to invest against the possible returns.”

“How much?”

He told me. I swallowed hard.

It was a lot of money. It would certainly keep the tax office quiet; it might even pay Laney’s mercer’s bill. We had a good reputation and good, often generous, clients but we were picky and planned to remain so. Unfortunately that can thin the coffers no end.

“What sort of business are her people in?” I said.

“Does it matter?”

“It might.”

He sighed. “They’re not precisely in business. They’re more... government. They are, however, highly influential and helping them out could be extremely advantageous for me.”

“Government where?”

“Incandress.”

“Oh.” It sounded vaguely familiar; it might have been one of the places I passed through on my way to Scalentine, but then, there had been a lot of those.

“It’s a satrapy of the Perindi Empire. The Ikinchli come from there.”

“They do?” There are quite a few Ikinchli in Scalentine, and I knew at least one of them pretty well. “This girl’s not Ikinchli, though?”

“No.” Fain rummaged in a pocket and held something out to me. “They call themselves Gudain.”

It was a gold locket. Not exactly the most delicate thing; it weighed so heavy in my hand I could probably have brained someone with it, and it was thick with scrollwork, curlicues and turquoise cabochons. I flipped the catch with my nail.

Inside was a portrait. It looked to me like the sort of thing that gets done by a court painter, so only the All knows how accurate it was. But she was a pretty creature, humanlike, with thick, straight, greeny-gold hair, skin with a seawater sheen, and astonishing eyes. Huge and brilliant yellow. I’d never seen eyes like that on a human, but they touched some memory in me. Not the colour, but the look.

“She was visiting Scalentine with her family,” Fain said, “and the family of her betrothed. I believe they were here to buy... something or other. Some frivolity, jewellery perhaps, to do with the forthcoming wedding.”

That actually made a certain amount of sense. Scalentine being the way it is, we do have things here from all over the place.

“They were staying at the Riverside Palace.”

I whistled. “Fairly well to do then.”

“Fairly, yes.”

“What’s her name?”

“Enthemmerlee Defarlane Lathrit en Scona Entaire.”

“There’s a handle and a half,” I said. “So what happened?”

“They were at the Hall of Mirrors, when there was some kind of disturbance, and the next thing they knew she was gone.”

“What sort of disturbance?”

“Oh, a minor fight in the crowd, and some visiting grandee or other in a jewelled litter, creating fuss. Nothing to do with the Incandresse.”

“Just gone?” I said.

“So they said. Vanished.”

“No ransom demand?”

“No. Nothing.”

I looked at the picture again. The girl had a calm, serious stare, and looked terrifyingly innocent. Though it's hard to tell with different races, I'd bet she was no more than sixteen.

“They're government, you say. Ruling families?”

“Yes. Noble class.”

Nobility has a habit of pimping out their children, though they don't call it that and it's done with a deal of ceremony. Maybe the girl didn't want to be married, and had seen the chance to do a runner. I sympathised, but it meant she was on her own, in a city which, much as I love it, is not the safest place for a pretty innocent. And she was noble class, which almost certainly meant she had no more idea how to look after herself than a kitten.

Not that poor girls are necessarily safe, either. I looked at the portrait. Something about that solemn stare sent a quiver down my back. Memory, or guilt.

“All right,” I said. “I'll ask around. But I need to borrow this. I'll get some copies done, get it back to you.”

“Keep it as long as you need. There is one thing, though...”

“What?”

“Timing. The wedding *must* take place before Twomoon. The family are somewhat insistent on that point.”

“Doesn't give me long to find her.”

“I know.”

He took a bag of coin out of his pouch and laid it on the table, took my hand, bowed over it, and though he just brushed it with his lips, I felt the touch all the way down. “Thank you, Babylon.”

“I'm not promising anything other than that I'll look.”

He smiled. “I know.”

I saw him out, and watched him walk away, with a smooth elegant stride. The money weighed heavy against my hip.