

## BEHIND THE MASK

Dalton Smith ducked into the nearest alley, pivoting to plant his shoulders against the brick wall. Humid air blanketed him, and his shirt clung to his ribs.

Mallory crowded against him in spite of the heat, her fingers clasping his in a vise-like grip. “How did that merchant know what you are?”

Dalton shook his head. “I have no idea. That’s only the second time in—what, eight months?” He wiped sweat from his forehead. “I’ve never seen the guy before, but it’s like he could *sense* something ...”

Mallory stole a glance farther down the darkened alley. “Apparently it’s not just Asukan eyesight that’s super-sensitive.” She shivered despite the stifling heat. “A dark alley won’t be much of a hiding place.”

Dalton grimaced. She was right—Asukans possessed night-sight far superior to theirs. “Our best bet is to mingle with the crowd and hope we blend in.”

Mallory said nothing; she didn’t have to—his strategy was threadbare and he knew it.

He edged forward, sneaking a peek around the corner. The street—restricted to pedestrian-only traffic during the weekend—was filling up with people bound for home after a bustling evening at Wharfside Market. The sun had all but disappeared, stranding a few pink-tinged clouds in the encroaching twilight. Streetlights popped into buzzing life as the crowds swelled.

Dalton tightened his grip on Mallory’s hand. “Now’s as good a time as any. Try to act natural. We’re just a nice young couple enjoying a typical Stoney Cove weekend.”

“Acting natural is my superpower; it’s my husband who’s paranoid.” Mallory squeezed his hand, one corner of her mouth lifting in a half-smile. She leaned forward to peer past him. “And yet tonight—out of nowhere—an Asukan merchant recognized you as a Speaker-with-the-Dead.”

“Not so loud,” Dalton said, only half-joking. Fortunately, these encounters were rare, but he still found them nerve-racking. He’d worked hard to distance himself ... No, he couldn’t let his mind wander. Protecting Mallory was the priority—he’d promised himself. And her.

Mallory nudged him. A fine sheen of sweat covered her face and her eyes appeared larger than normal. “This alley creeps me out. What if he’s behind us?”

“He’s not,” Dalton replied without hesitation, stealing a quick glance over his shoulder to be sure. He wondered if Mallory could hear his heart pounding. “Let’s go.”

Hand-in-hand, they eased into the throng of pedestrians. The sweaty, chattering crowd carried them along, and Dalton gave silent thanks for the anonymity the crowd provided.

Anonymity was his superpower. At least, it had been ...

## PREDATOR AND PREY

Lieutenant Mason Sagewater earned his “ice water in the veins” reputation the old-fashioned way—years of hard-won experience in Stoney Cove’s Police Guild. His reputation aided his ascent through the ranks, and recently landed him with two important responsibilities.

The first was to break in his partner, Jackson Nash, a remarkably one-dimensional rookie to whom blunt-force bullying was the solution to everything. Sagewater relished the task—he knew how to put Nash’s temperament and skills to good use.

Nash waited in the squad car, engine running, as Sagewater exited the office tower of Altana–Covington Mining Corporation. The lieutenant allowed himself a tight smile as his long strides covered the distance to the curb. The aircon inside the vehicle would be a welcome relief from the oppressive humidity.

Nash spoke before Sagewater’s door closed. “Well? What dirty work does Ms. Cortland have for us this time?”

“Dirty work?” Sagewater eyed the sizable folder he’d received from the mining conglomerate, not looking at his partner. “*Deputy Director* Cortland has formally requested the Guild’s assistance, with the backing of Altana–Covington’s full board *and* Stoney Cove city council.”

Nash’s eyebrows telegraphed his astonishment. “Heavy artillery. Must be important.”

Sagewater opened the folder—the second responsibility his reputation had earned him—and scanned the first page. He was no fool. Currying allies inside Altana–Covington was to his advantage, but with it came considerable risk. A poor showing on his part and he’d reap powerful enemies.

Nash threw the car into gear and merged into traffic. “Anything you’d like to share with your partner?”

Sagewater closed the folder and settled back in his seat. “Ever heard of Levi Treehawke, Stoney Cove’s most notorious felon?”

Nash exhaled in a long whistle, glancing over his shoulder before changing lanes. “Who hasn’t? Even the newest Guild recruit’s heard of him.” He frowned at the steering wheel. “Treehawke can’t be up for parole—he’s a lifer.”

Sagewater nodded absently. “Correct, but Ms. Cortland—and by extension, everyone associated with Altana–Covington—is obsessed about a new potential threat.” He held the folder aloft, glancing at his partner. “Treehawke has a son.”

Nash’s face lit up, a predator sensing prey. “Another Treehawke—that’s the last thing Stoney Cove needs. No wonder the big names at Altana–Covington are nervous. What’s our play?”

“Recon and surveillance, for now,” Sagewater replied, peeling a corner of the folder back. His action was unnecessary; he’d already committed the most salient points to memory. “He’s hiding behind an alias.”

“No kidding.” Nash grinned wolfishly. “An alias?”

Sagewater nodded; he knew how to use constables like Nash. “Dalton Smith.”

## CLOSING IN

Karlissa Doanekai padded up the circular staircase, her feet all but silent on the rusty steps. The subway tunnel receded below as she arrived at the rear entrance to her parents’ gift shop. A sliver of light peeked through the door, slightly ajar. She pushed it open, squinting against the glare as she slipped into the stockroom.

“Welcome back, sis.”

She recognized her brother’s voice. If Jerrod was here, Zachary couldn’t be far. The two friends were virtually inseparable. She blinked as her eyes adjusted. “I came as fast as I could. Zack wouldn’t say anything specific over the phone.”

“Smart move.” Jerrod tossed a clipboard onto a ramshackle desk bolted—almost as an afterthought—to the central shelving rack. Boxed product adorned every available space, with the remainder piled waist-deep on either side of the single door leading from the stockroom into the shop. “Looks like we finally caught a break.”

Karlissa scooted to the doorway, peering into the shop. Perplexed, she pivoted to face him. “Where’s Zack? He said he’d meet me here.”

Jerrod gave a casual shrug, but she sensed his tension, his eagerness. “He’s waiting for us topside. He’ll fill you in.”

Karlissa nodded and they scurried through the shop, dodging between customers, seeing but not acknowledging her parents behind the counter. A flight of stairs, a forty-yard speed-walk, a final up-ramp, and they emerged from the Sunken City into the bustling chaos of Wharfside Market.

“Took you long enough.” Zack’s voice erupted close to Karlissa’s ear and she jumped. Zack retreated a step. “Sorry. I’ve been waiting here ever since I phoned.” He glanced around the busy street, his lip curling. “Some people apparently don’t approve of Asukans loitering—”

“You’re sure it’s him?” Karlissa felt her fingers trembling; she tried to keep her voice steady. “I don’t want to cause a scene for no reason.”

Zack gestured and they fell in step with him. “I asked Old Man Winston the same thing.” He rolled his eyes. “I won’t tell you what he called me. Winston is convinced it’s him, and I trust Winston’s judgment. He *is* an Elder, after all.”

Jerrod cut in. “Any idea where we can find the Speaker?”

“I know exactly where he is,” Zack replied as they paused at an intersection, waiting until the traffic light changed. “He’s with a woman; his wife, Winston thinks.” He pointed at a pub just ahead as they crossed the street. “They’re having dinner. He looks kinda young to be a Speaker-with-the-Dead. Not much older than me.”

*Gift matters, not age*, Karlissa almost said. “Let me approach them ... alone.” She was the eldest; the responsibility was hers. “Three Asukans crashing their dinner date wouldn’t be very subtle.”

“What if he refuses?” Zack held the heavy door open for her. “What if it turns out he’s no better than his old man—may he rot in prison.”

Karlissa hesitated at the threshold, and Jerrod answered instead. “What choice do we have?” His golden eyes looked haunted. “There are worse fates than being dead ...”

## CHAPTER ONE

“You are a Speaker-with-the-dead.”

Dalton couldn’t tell if the young woman was making a statement or asking a question. He took another forkful of his dessert, tempted to pretend he didn’t hear. He caught his wife’s eye across the booth. Mallory raised an eyebrow and feigned studied concentration on her second pint of beer.

A pre-recorded playlist blared through the pub’s sound system, creating a boisterous mixture of music and half-shouted conversations. Perhaps if he didn’t acknowledge the woman’s question, she’d give up and move along. He took his time chewing, but in his peripheral vision, he saw she hadn’t budged. Tenacious. He grudgingly gave her that much.

Dalton stole another glance at her as she hovered just beyond the table’s edge. Her eyes shone like burnished windows in her pale face—the golden orbs a marked contrast to her delicate skin. She held her hands waist-high, fingers interlaced as if she were a supplicant at prayer.

Their eyes met for a split second, and even that slight acknowledgement forced his hand.

“I think you’ve mistaken me for someone else,” Dalton said, confident he sounded utterly sincere. Deflection was a well-practiced skill and an automatic defense mechanism. “I can’t help you with ... whatever it is.”

The diminutive woman bowed slightly at the waist. Her minor change in posture brought their eyes to the same level. “I am not mistaken. You are a Speaker-with-the-dead. You have the gift.”

Mallory’s eyes widened slightly. Dalton read the question in her expression. *How could she know?*

He took a deliberate sip of his coffee, having already switched from alcohol to caffeine—he’d be driving later—and mentally ran through a few of his standard alibis.

“You’re not the first person to confuse me with someone else.” He placed his mug on the table, shifting in his seat to give her his full attention. He knew, from experience, how to convey polite and pointed dismissal. “I have one of those faces everyone thinks they recognize.”

Mallory laughed and inserted herself into the conversation. “This happens all the time.”

The woman didn’t look at her. Mallory continued, undeterred. “I’m sorry we can’t help you, miss ... I don’t think I caught your name.”

“Karlissa,” she replied, not distracted. Her golden eyes studied Dalton, and he wished Mallory had stayed out of it. “And there are those among my people who can sense a Speaker’s ability, such as yours.”

He stretched his leg out under the table to prod Mallory’s ankle, hoping she would interpret his signal accurately. The less said, the better.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, Karlissa.” He bottled his annoyance, giving her his most disarming smile. “My name’s Smith. Dalton Smith. Not what you’d call a traditional clan name for a Speaker. You’d be better off asking around at Wharfside Market. Now, if you don’t mind, I’m on a dinner date with my wife.”

He caught Mallory’s eye, hoping to telegraph the need for dismissing the persistent woman.

Karlissa recoiled a step, unclasping her hands. Dalton took a prolonged sip of his lukewarm coffee, and out of the corner of his eye, saw her fingers stretch to their widest extent before clenching into tight fists.

He ignored her, mustering all the patience he could, anticipating a quick end to her unexpected interruption.

Karlissa muttered something in an exasperated tone. Dalton couldn’t hear her over the house music. She pivoted sharply and stalked away, her rigid body language conveying frustration.

Mallory kept watch over her shoulder. Despite Karlissa’s small stature, they had a clear view of her as she exited the pub. Mallory’s shoulders rose and fell in a relieved sigh as the door closed. She turned to face him, reaching for her drink. “That went well. When they leave angry, they usually don’t come back.”

Dalton kept an eye on the exit. He felt uneasy, and he wasn’t sure why. “Maybe. It took her a while to back down. Who knows what she’s thinking.” He raised his mug but set it aside the instant the tepid coffee touched his lips. “She’s Asukan.”

Mallory wrapped both hands around her pint. “Yeah, I noticed her eyes. She wasn’t wearing shades. I guess the lights aren’t bright enough to bother her.”

“Plus, I think she *wanted* me to know she’s Asukan.” Dalton glanced at his watch. The live entertainment would soon begin, and neither he nor Mallory had any interest in staying that long.

They’d created a weekly tradition of dining out almost a year earlier, shortly after their wedding. The regular rhythm of dinner-and-drinks was a pleasant way to mark the completion of another work week. Live music, on the other hand, tended to drown out their mealtime conversation.

“How would knowing she’s Asukan make a difference?” Mallory leaned over the table, propping herself on her elbows. “Are you supposed to feel sorry for her?”

Dalton shrugged. He wished she would drop the subject, but Mallory’s instinctive concern for others was one of the qualities he loved about her. “Asukans are empathic. You heard her. Somebody she trusts sensed my lineage and tipped her off.”

Mallory broke into a wide grin, eyes sparkling with amusement. “Ah, yes, despite your best efforts at anonymity, the infamous Speaker legend catches up to you.”

Dalton laughed, feeling self-conscious. “Yeah, ‘legend’ is the right word. It’s amazing what some people believe. The more outlandish the rumor, the more they latch onto it.”

“I wouldn’t waste time worrying about it.” Mallory cupped her chin in one hand. “Unless you’ve changed your mind about advertising your lineage.”

“I’d rather set myself on fire.” Dalton signaled the waiter for their bill. “I’ll leave the fortune-telling to the Wharfside weekend con artists.”

Mallory drained her beer as the waiter appeared. She traded him her empty glass for the check. Dalton pondered his cold coffee, grimaced, and handed the half-empty mug to the waiter.

“My turn to pay.” Mallory waved the check in the air as she fished her wallet out with her other hand.

Dalton grinned, glancing at the bemused waiter. They’d opened a joint account after their wedding, and the playful back-and-forth competition over whose “turn” it was to pay dated back to their university days.

Mallory settled the bill, and Dalton helped her into her linen jacket.

“Look on the bright side,” she said, untucking her long hair from beneath the collar. “You’re too honest to take advantage of peoples’ superstitions.”

Dalton groaned, picturing the late-night television hucksters who preyed on the naiveté of the desperate. He’d buried his so-called ability years ago—twelve, to be exact—repulsed by the charlatans and their shameless profiteering.

And deeper than that ...

No. He refused to dwell on the past. He’d worked too hard to make a clean break.

The evening's entertainment took to the stage, tuning their instruments in preparation. College students crowded the dance floor, eager for an evening of drinking and dancing.

"Just in the nick of time." Dalton glanced at his watch. "Our Asukan friend should be halfway to the Sunken City by now."

Mallory caught him by the hand as they threaded their way to the exit. "She really got under your skin, didn't she?"

Dalton had no answer. He held the door open, and they stepped into the welcome warmth of midsummer dusk. A knot of excitable college students pushed between them, disappearing as the door swung shut. Pounding rhythms, muted but unmistakable, signaled the beginning of the evening's entertainment.

Dalton and Mallory joined hands again as they meandered toward their parked car. The sun had set, but the shifting banks of cumulus clouds reflected a rich purple-pink palette. A warm, humid breeze, typical for the season, wafted in over Lake Altana.

"Dalton Smith."

A voice—female and very close—interrupted their casual stroll. Dalton halted abruptly, and Mallory stiffened with a sudden intake of breath.

*Busted.*

He gave Mallory's hand a reassuring squeeze, and they pivoted in the direction of the voice.

Karlissa stood in the mouth of an alley, a tight little smile her only expression. Her posture communicated satisfaction and a hint of smugness.

"Perhaps now we can continue our conversation." She spoke softly, her precise diction easy to decipher above the ambient noise of traffic, pedestrians, and the breeze.

She'd brought reinforcements. Two Asukan males flanked her on either side, stone-faced.

Mallory's fingers tightened on his.

"Well, you're half-right, for what it's worth." He opted for a disarming grin, wishing for an absurd moment that he really *did* possess the clairvoyance often attributed to his kind. Or that he hadn't naively told the Asukan his name. "My name's Dalton Smith, but I'm not a Speaker. You're wasting your time. And mine."

Karlissa's companions stood at stiff attention, as if rooted to the pavement. Karlissa took a small step forward, her expression difficult to read.

"Your lies are clever but inadequate." She shook her head in a slow arc. "The opposite is true. You *are* a Speaker-with-the-dead." Her smile abruptly fled. "But you are not Dalton Smith."

## CHAPTER TWO

Dalton raised his eyebrows at Karlissa's unexpected accusation. He counted to three—just the interval of elapsed time to feign sincere surprise. He didn't dare look at Mallory.

"Then who am I?" He shoved his free hand into a jacket pocket, hiding his shaking fingers.

One of Karlissa's companions reacted to his casual move, lurching forward to shield Karlissa with his body. She peeked around him and gave his shoulder a reassuring pat. "Relax. A Speaker-with-the-dead does not carry weapons."

She stepped out of the alley to stand in front of her would-be protector.

"You took the name Smith to disguise your lineage," she said matter-of-factly, as if reading the label on a can of soup. She removed her sunglasses and tucked them into an inner pocket. "Yet you cannot deceive everyone into thinking that you aren't a Speaker-with-the-dead."

"Interesting." Dalton drew the single word out into its own sentence. "So, what's my real name, then?"

"I do not know." The Asukan's eyes were twin orbs of gold in the lowering twilight. It didn't sound to Dalton like she cared one way or the other. "That wasn't revealed."

"Revealed?" Mallory's skepticism sounded genuine. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Karlissa's gaze flickered to her but quickly resettled on Dalton. "My knowing these facts—which are closely guarded by you—is my calling card. You are a Speaker, Smith is an alias, and you prefer to hide your abilities. Some people change names to hide a criminal past, but you are not among them."

Dalton took slow, steady breaths, hoping the Asukans couldn't sense his accelerated heartbeat. Karlissa was absolutely correct—in every detail—but that didn't mean he had to acknowledge it.

"Well, I'm relieved," Mallory said brightly. "My husband's not secretly a criminal on the run. But I've been signing my name Mrs. Smith for over a year. I'm pretty sure I didn't marry the wrong guy."

Dalton glanced at her, his warm smile genuine. "I couldn't agree more, Mrs. Smith."

Karlissa's lips quirked into a trace of a smile. "I like your wife, Speaker. You've chosen a worthy companion. But I can't allow her attempt at distraction to derail our conversation."

"You're persistent, that much is obvious." Dalton sensed the growing impatience from Karlissa's silent companions. Twilight deepened, and her aides were little more than darker shadows in the alley. But he felt their presence and had little doubt they were tiring of his verbal fencing with Karlissa.

*And in the dark, Asukans have the advantage.*

A streetlight popped into life half a block away, painting the sidewalk with its wan glow. Karlissa's vertical pupils narrowed slightly.



Dalton decided to go on the offensive, at least verbally. “I’m not a fortune-teller. If that’s what you’re looking for, there’ll be several booths at the Wharfside Market this weekend. I’d suggest trying there.” He held his tongue from adding, *There’s plenty of mystics to choose from in the Sunken City, too.*

Karlissa’s face dissolved into a wide smile, and she laughed. Dalton tried not to flinch, alarmed that his face might have betrayed his unspoken thoughts.

Her laughter faded, but her smile remained. “Well, at least you’ve stopped lying to me. I’ll call that a win for this evening, Speaker.”

Dalton frowned, wary of her sudden levity. “That’s it? You give me your calling card, bring along a couple of enforcers, but you’re not going to tell me what you want?”

She laughed again. “You’re not convinced yet, Speaker. You’ve moved”—she raised a hand, thumb and forefinger an inch apart—“about this much. My calling card has achieved its purpose. I’ve caught your attention.”

Dalton couldn’t resist. “And your hired muscle?”

Karlissa half-turned to indicate her companions. “This is my brother.” She pointed at the protective Asukan who’d stepped forward to shield her. “And his best friend, who had nothing else to do this evening and said he’d tag along.” The two shadows behind her didn’t shift position or relax. “They’re here for my protection, Speaker, not as a threat to you. A girl shouldn’t walk alone after dark.”

Dalton wasn’t sure how seriously to take her explanation. Karlissa was an enigma, cryptic and aloof one moment, and relaxed—almost flippant—the next. Mallory’s grip on his hand telegraphed her unease, and he trusted her instincts as much as his own.

“In other words, we’re free to go.” He took a cautious half-step back, not breaking eye contact.

Karlissa smiled. “Of course. We’re not preventing you from doing anything. Your curiosity holds you here.”

Dalton felt his cheeks flush, and he knew the Asukans could see it. Busted again. Karlissa’s ability to get under his skin was impressive. He backed away, but Mallory tightened her grip, refusing to budge.

“You didn’t stage all of this just to impress us,” she said, and Dalton loved that she instinctively included herself. “How do you plan on finding us for act two, whenever or whatever that is?”

Karlissa retreated into the alley, barely visible in the shadows. “You’ll come looking for me. Neither of you is fully convinced yet. That will change once the dead begin to rise.”

“The dead?” Mallory’s voice held an incredulous disdain. “Dalton’s right. Go see the Wharfside mystics if you’re chasing zombies.”

Guffaws erupted from the alley. All three Asukans were laughing now, their disembodied voices echoing in the confined space.

Treehawke

“Zombies? Oh, I like your wife, Speaker. Please bring her with you when Heskora rises.”

The laughter faded. Dalton squinted, but the darkness in the alley was absolute. He was fairly certain the Asukans had withdrawn, but if so, their footsteps were silent.

Mallory leaned close, her voice lowered to a whisper. “What’s Heskora?”

“I have no idea,” Dalton answered honestly.

A moment passed. A dark, silent moment. Mallory nudged him with her elbow. “I think we’re staring at shadows. We should leave.”

Dalton nodded, eyes fixed on the empty alley. “I’m taking the scenic route home.”

“I’m counting on it,” she replied, tugging on his arm.