

Volume 1 Preview -- Nightmare

It was a warm night in Rene for so late in the fall, which added an extra layer of life to the Old City. In rain or shine there would be regulars making the rounds, locals coming off of the fishing boats and construction sites to catch their late night drinks, but the beautiful evening at week's end brought even New City folk across the bridge and into the split leveled bars and restaurants of the pleasure district. Tonight there would be drinks and food, and then there would be music and dancing, and then there would be fighting and loving until the sun finally rose the next morning to put an end to it.

If they were lucky, the fights would be kept among Old City faithful in the spirit of good fun. They had come from a long line of red-blooded men after all, and to them fighting was only a natural progression to a friendly argument. Blows would be exchanged, bones might even be broken, but in the end there would be a handshake and drinks.

If they were unlucky the two worlds, old and new, would clash, and there would be bodies to bury in the morning.

But on that night, as the dark-haired girl reached the edge of the harbor and entered the pleasure district, it seemed that they would be lucky. With the wind gentle and the sun gone beyond the horizon it seemed that even the hardest New City soldiers and the most grizzled Old City dock-workers had other priorities.

"Who would have thought that whores and wine would finally unite the world?" the girl murmured, as she dodged twin packs of catcalling soldiers and sailors and slipped down a side street.

Hanging a left up a set of stairs, she continued onto a more local-heavy street, where at least she recognized the faces of the men calling after her. The fact that she personally knew most of their wives didn't mean much when she in uniform, but it would keep some hands in laps.

Another few minutes brought a turn up more stairs, a quick walk through one of the hundred-year-old alleys and then a light jump brought her down into the murky half-light of the Access Road. A hundred feet to her left would be the Pit, an arc of casinos, bars, brothels, and restaurants built right into hills themselves to help share the only stretch of flat ground within Old City Limits. There was an saying in the Old City that said that two things flowed downhill -- water and drunks -- and the Pit collected both in torrents.

And to go with the business were the workers, the real owners of the Access Road. Tired of taking their breaks out along with the same people they were serving, a few ambitious earthshiffters had carved a tunnel out behind their restaurant to kill time when off shift, and things had only grown. Within a few short years the Access Road touched around the entirety of the Pit, stretching hundreds of yards into the mountain in places, and had become as much of a tradition as the Pit itself.

Like the rest of the Old City, the Access Road was alive that night, littered with a milling group of waiters, serving girls, working girls, bouncers, musicians and entertainers, chefs and kitchen workers, muscle, dealers, pit bosses, and owners, all out in droves to serve what might very well be the last big rush of the season. The air was filled three types of smoke, there was music

playing, food somewhere, an argument happening between two angry drunk waiters, and all of it pierced periodically by calls from angry managers to lazy workers to get back on shift.

The girl barely slowed down as she set off through the rabble towards *Velvet*, weaving through the crowds with practiced ease. Like in the rest of the city the uniform drew more attention than she'd have preferred, but she made good time anyway. The people here had a mutual understanding -- when people are going to work, you get out of the way.

As she got closer to middle of the access road the girl slowed her pace, taking the time to mingle with the head bouncers, the pit bosses, the working girls she recognized. The main five buildings at the heart of the Pit -- *Eclipse*, *Gold*, *Flare*, *Crystal*, and *Velvet* -- were all partners in one way or another, and the workers there were closer than most.

One man, an old earthshifter with a scar on his eye and a body like an ox, stepped out from behind a countertop with a huge smile on his face, arms crossed in front of his body.

"And where are *you* coming from dressed like that?" he asked.

The girl stopped, cocking a hip to the side.

"I'm coming from wherever I want to be coming from Pors," she said with a smile. "You got a problem with that?"

"Well a fine lady like yourself shouldn't be coming back from the docks this late at night," Pors said. "Specially not dressed for a night on shift at *Velvet*. Them's dangerous parts, never know what's gonna happen."

The girl winked.

"Well I'm a dangerous girl," she said, lowering her voice and quickly running a finger up Pors's collar. Pors shook his head in disbelief.

"I swear, if you... if you was my granddaughter I-" he said.

"-would feel a lot weirder about checking me out," the girl finished, before crossing the distance between them and giving the older man a hug. He laughed a thick laugh and hugged her back, pulling the shorter girl up into the air and twirling her around once before putting her down. The girl stepped back.

"You know I can handle myself Pors," she said. The older man laughed again.

"Yeah, I've seen you before when things go south," he said, and then gave her a wink of his own. "But just because you're my boss, and just because you could kill me with your bare hands don't mean I can't be concerned for ya."

"You're too sweet," she said. "Any bad business gone down tonight?"

"Oh we had a few guys got in a fight over by *Flare*," he said, "but it was nothin' out of the ordinary, just a few dock hands clashing with some high-country boys. We put 'em outside, let 'em settle it, and things went fine."

"Nobody bothering any of the girls?" she asked.

"Nah, been hearing nothing but good news from *Velvet*," he said. "Apparently business is pumpin' and people are lovin'."

The girl nodded.

"Good, the girls'll be happy to have some extra cash for the winter," she said.

"Who knows, you might even find yourself convinced to join in a little bit of the business," Pors suggested. "I know it ain't your thing, but everyone can use a little money to help bridge the off season, and god knows people been askin' about-"

“Are you trying to buy me, Pors?” the girl asked, with false shyness.

The Pors’s face flushed for a moment, but then he laughed harder than he had before.

“Nah, it’s a tempting offer but I’ll have to decline,” he said. “Wife’s enough for me thank ya.”

The girl winked again.

“Gonna head upstairs,” she said, and with another hug she was off, waving to two more girls and then slipping in through the back door to *Velvet*.

The air inside the club was filled with the sweet smells of perfume and incense, a necessary feature to cover up the odor of the general mass of humanity. The scent had a tendency to stick to the skin long into the night, which -- apart from getting a few dumb men into hot water with their wives -- was far better than the alternative.

There was music playing too, thick dance beats heavy with drums and brass, pumping out from the second floor balcony onto the crowded dance floor. Above them, the girl could see the third floor VIP area already filled over capacity, and even the private floors almost overrun.

“He wasn’t kidding,” the girl said, as she wove through the throngs of clubbers towards the nearest staircase. Contrary to a normal night she could barely see any of the girls out among the crowd, but that just meant that they were all upstairs working. Dodging an overzealous buyer and two girls trying to pull her in for a kiss, she reached the staircase and headed up to the second floor.

The bar-level wasn’t much better, filled nearly to overflowing with drunks partygoers of all shapes and sizes. Making her way across the room was slower going with the lines of people waiting for drinks, and the girl only managed a quick nod of acknowledgement to the bartenders, who were working at double time.

Another quick nod brought her past the bouncers to the next staircase, and then into the overfull VIP area. Judging from a quick scan of the room, most of *Velvet*’s entire staff of girls were there in VIP or the rooms above, which would have made security easy had the room not been over capacity twice and then some. The upper levels -- despite the quieter music, the bouncers guarding the stairs, the dense population of girls, and the thirty-silver cover charge -- were where most of the serious problems ended up coming from, and with this many people here that risk was shooting through the roof.

Sliding through the crowd more quickly and brusquely than before, the girl made her way to the bar, stepping behind as a waitress going the other way stepped out.

“Wayver,” she said, stepping up next to the bartender. The thin, dark-skinned aquatic was doing bar tricks for three girls and their potential customers.

“You’re back already,” he said, eyes still on the interlocking circles of water in the air. “Swear I saw you less than an hour ago.”

“Delivery went fine,” the girl said. “Where’s May?”

“Last I heard she’s in her suite,” Wayver responded, before finishing his tricks and handing the drinks down with a wave of the hand.

“Thought so,” the girl said, giving a hug and then working her way towards the back, and the final round of bouncers, the Vesos. The girl had never heard them speak more than two words at a time, but she knew on instinct that they were a rare breed of man who looked exactly as dangerous as they were. Six and a half feet of pure muscle on each of them, bodies covered in tattoos, matching braids and long beards, and eyes like apex predators.

The *Velvet* uniform was enough to grant her passage even if she hadn't been their boss, and the girl simply pointed to the left staircase, the one to the fifth floor, before the Vesos stepped aside, bowed their heads slightly, and let her pass. The girl nodded back in mutual respect and continued up the last set of stairs to the fifth floor, which consisted mostly of rooms for the girls, but also the balcony lounge, where May, *Velvet's* owner, enjoyed spending her evenings drinking expensive wines and watching everything from above.

It was much quieter on the 5th floor, a necessity for workers in a club that ran until sunrise, and the girl's footsteps carried down the hall as she approached the lounge, currently filled with not only May, but also two men that the girl didn't recognize, each accompanied by one of *Velvet's* top working girls. As the girl approached, two men stepped in front of the door, blocking her way.

"Private business matters going on right now," one said, bowing his head. "Unfortunately we can't let you through."

The girl looked at their uniforms, quickly finding the insignia of the Lyra family, one of the oldest mafias in the city.

Conversation in the other room lulled briefly, and then May's loud and clear voice came out from the other side.

"Step aside boys, she's got more dangerous secrets than anything we could talk about," she said, without turning around. "Beside, we're almost finished here anyway."

The two guards looked at each other and then at the men in the room, who motioned for them to step aside.

The girl gave each a nod as she went past, no love lost, and made her way to the other side of the lounge, taking a seat on the couch closest to the balcony as May began to speak again.

"So we're all clear then?" she asked. "We can hash out the details of the schedule later, but we'll up cross-promotion by a third in the coming off-season, and open at most three establishments per night. Anything else?"

"The partnership program for our men," a tall broad-shouldered Juverran responded. His partner, an Icelandic, nodded in agreement, and May waved a hand with a laugh.

"Yes, yes, can't have your boys all blowing each other just to get a nut off. Twenty-five percent off for them on off nights," May said.

"We agreed on thirty five," the icelander responded.

"Ah, yes," May said, waving him off again as she reached for her glass of wine. "As I said, this is not the time for fine details. For the meantime, I offer a toast to you, and to a gentle winter."

She held up the glass of wine, and all four of them responded by raising theirs as well.

"To a gentle winter," they all repeated, and each drained their glass. With that, the two men stood up to leave, flanked by the two girls, Lektra and Vyren, and with a bow to May made their way back down the hallway, leaving just the owner and the girl.

"And now to my favorite employee," May said with a smile, turning back to the girl and reaching for the bottle of wine. Everyone was aware that *Velvet's* owner was old, having run the establishment as long as most people could remember, but she looked like a woman who had never aged past forty, long flowing hair and tall, elegant figure leaving her more beautiful than women half her age. The girl appreciated that, even in a club known for outright decadence, May kept an old-world beauty to her that belied something ancient and wild in her, like a

goddess straight from the heart of the Southern forests. She wore a modified version of the *Velvet* uniform, which managed to maintain the form flattery of the working girls while showing far less skin, choosing sleeves and gentle silk over the tight ribbons and tassels.

She pulled a glass from under the table and set it down, filling the glass to full and sliding it to the girl.

“Generous pour,” the girl responded, lifting the glass and examining it.

“You’re a generous girl, making that delivery for me on such short notice,” May responded, tilting the glass in a half-toast. The girl responded in kind and took a sip of the wine, whose quality not lost on her.

“But seriously B, you’re a lifesaver, those letters had to get down to Rafa by this evening and I don’t trust a single courier in this town,” May said, and then looked the girl up and down.

“Although you certainly made yourself conspicuous. Wearing the *Velvet* all the way down to the docks? I imagine you got some looks.”

The girl shrugged.

“I didn’t want to waste time, and besides, it wouldn’t be the first time our girls have paid a housecall,” she said. “We’re understaffed on security for this many people, and even with Pors on duty and the extra men he brought in, there’s nobody checking upstairs.”

“And what makes you think,” the older woman asked casually, taking a sip of her drink, “that I wasn’t paying attention while I’ve been up here?”

The girl paused, choosing her next words carefully. *Velvet*’s owner was sweet and generous, loved by all around her, but could be a winter storm if her ire was aroused.

“My job as your head of security is to make sure you don’t *have* to keep an eye on things,” the girl responded. May smiled.

“Good answer,” she said, and sipped the drink again. “But regardless, I like to be aware of what’s going on, especially on nights like this. I trust Pors informed you there haven’t been any incidents?”

The girl nodded.

“Then allow me to personally offer you a break,” May responded. “I’m enjoying things up here, and I can respond to whatever presses me with any force necessary. You’ve done good work for me tonight and all this season, so I’d like to give you the night off. Pop a fireball, enjoy the festivities, get some business with that lovely body of yours, or take up some of the girls yourself. Quite a few of them have been interested in you, so any of them are on me if that’s your goal.”

The older woman winked, and the girl smiled, shaking her head.

“You’re too much for me at times May. I’ll take you up on the offer to relax, but I’ve never been quite the type for our customers’ lifestyles,” she said.

“A woman after my own heart,” May said, raising the glass of wine, before thinking twice.

“Although who knows, maybe there’s a young bronco out there who could hang with this old thing.”

She ran her hands down her body, pondering.

“There’s not a man in the world,” the girl responded, finishing the glass of wine and standing up.

“No, not a human one,” May agreed.

It was late morning by the time the last patrons stumbled out of *Velvet* and the girl was there to see them out.

“Real great of you to help with this B, but I’ve got it for now,” Pors said with a yawn, directing traffic as his remaining security helped close up. There was still cleanup to be done, more than in months, but that was a job for later.

“Nah, I just wanted to keep you company,” the girl said.

“Can’t believe you’ve got energy still,” Pors said, shaking his head. “What is it, three hours past dawn?”

“Something like that,” the girl responded, before offering the big man a hug. “But even I have limits. I’m off for now.”

The big man hugged her back.

“Sleep tight,” he said, and the girl made her way upstairs, past the now-silent second and third floor, the cleaned-out fourth floor, now devoid of the few customers and girls who had fallen asleep, and up to the private rooms at the very top, making her way all of the way down the hall to her personal quarters. On request, she had gotten a room deep in the mountain, and on request, shared it with no one, paying double rent for the pleasure.

The door opened into a cool, dark room, which the girl relished as she stepped in, letting the door slowly fall shut. There would be time for a bath later, but for the meantime the girl quickly stripped down and changed into her nightclothes, ready to let sleep take her.

But as the door went shut, something bothered her eyes. Normally, the room would go pitch black without candles, but there was a light coming from her desk. Opening her eyes, she made her way over, opening one of the drawers just as the faintest gray light emanated from inside. She reached in and pulled out a simple, iron bracelet, watching it closely.

Surely it had been a trick of her mind, a side effect of the long wait until morning.

But as she began to doubt, the iron bracelet glowed softly once more.

The Machine King was coming.