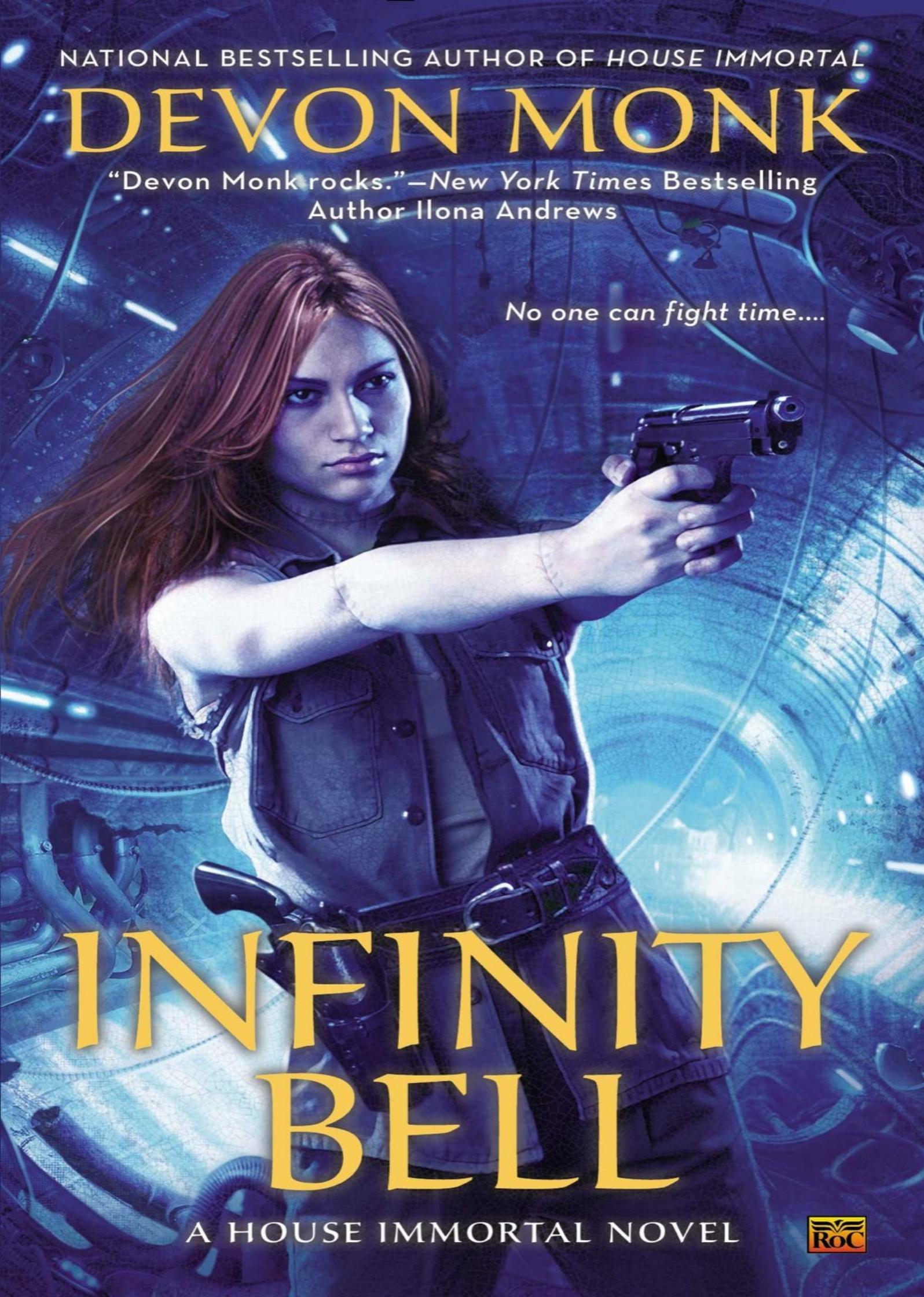


NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *HOUSE IMMORTAL*

DEVON MONK

"Devon Monk rocks."—*New York Times* Bestselling
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No one can fight time....



INFINITY BELL

A *HOUSE IMMORTAL* NOVEL



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The Age of Steam

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Cold Copper

INFINITY BELL



A HOUSE IMMORTAL NOVEL

DEVON MONK



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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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For my family

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my awesome editor, Anne Sowards, for once again helping to make my stories shiny and strong. I'd also like to thank the many wonderful, talented, hardworking people inside Penguin who have gone above and beyond to support and create this book. To my agent, Miriam Kriss, thank you for all that you do. And to the excellent artist, Eric Williams, thank you for bringing Matilda and her world to life.

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But mostly, dear readers, I'd like to thank you for letting me share this story, these people, and this adventure with you.

I thought you were an angel burning in that dark night. I thought you had come to save me. Maybe you did. But I never wanted you to die for me.
—from the diary of E. N. D.

The sound of the seaplane’s engine growling low and loud as it came in for a landing jarred me awake.

I sat, still half asleep, reaching for my duffel, my gun, or anything I could use as a weapon. The seat belt dug into my hips painfully, and a warm, soft cloth slid down away from my chin.

“We’re coming into San Diego, Matilda,” my brother, Quinten Case, said from behind me.

Right. Seaplane, running for our lives from the Houses who thought we were behind the murder of Oscar Gray and Slater Orange. Houses who ruled all the resources in the world, and were, at this moment, using those resources to sift through the world to find me, my brother, and Abraham Seventh.

To be honest, the chances of us slipping their notice weren’t great. The chances of us slipping their notice before the Wings of Mercury experiment—an old time machine my ever-so-great-grandfather had built—triggered and killed me, Abraham, and all the other galvanized in the world was right near zero.

Still, I was a Case. And we Cases never gave up when saving the world.

It was dark outside. Night. I must have slept for hours. The rest of the blanket covering me fell away as I lifted my hands to rub at my face.

“How much longer?” I asked.

“Just about to land.”

I straightened and dug at the knots in my neck, rubbing the ache out of it. Then I glanced back at my brother. He sat with a blanket around his shoulders, cradling a thermos cup between his hands. His dark curly hair was mussed, as if he’d been pulling his fingers through it. Even in the low light, he was too thin, too pale.

Captivity had not sat well with him, somehow sharpening his features and movements and cornering that restless-genius mind of his.

“Coffee?” he offered.

“I didn’t know we had any on board.”

Corb, who sat in the rear of the plane, raised his voice over the lowering rumble of the engines. “We were saving it for when we made land. A victory celebration.”

The big man and his pilot wife, Sadie, had come to our rescue and smuggled Quinten and me out of Hong Kong in their little seaplane. They’d also rescued my

farmhand, Neds Harris, who was sleeping in the seat next to me, and Abraham Seventh, the man I might be stupidly falling in love with and who was passed out in the cargo area.

Travel had been less than kind to Abraham. He had a sort of rugged handsomeness about him, dark wavy hair above a broad face with piercing hazel eyes, and a strong jaw covered in scruff. But now his skin was yellow between the bruises that covered it. The stitches that held him together, crossing his face, neck, torso, arms, and legs, had nearly disintegrated in just a few hours. Loose threads poked up out of his skin like sun-seeking maggots in rotted fruit.

At first we'd thought he'd been soaked in Shelley dust, a substance possessed by the heads of Houses and used as a means to control galvanized—people like Abraham, people like me, who were made of bits stitched together. Shelley dust on the skin would burn through the stitching.

Then Quinten had found the bullet holes in Abraham's chest. Abraham had been shot with Shelley dust, which meant it was doing as much irreparable damage to his internal organs as his stitches.

Quinten thought we could negate the dust's effects if we got him to a doctor soon enough. I didn't know how soon would be soon enough. But I knew he didn't have much time left.

Along the tattered lines of Abraham's broken stitches were new, thin silver threads holding him together. That thread was my father's own invention, made of nanos and minerals right out of the soil and water of our farm.

Quinten had sewn Abraham together last night with the spool of thread I'd packed with me. So far Abraham had remained in one piece. The thin silver stitches were precise, clean, and beautiful in their way. My brother had an artist's hand with stitching.

I should know. He was the one who had stitched me together when I was just a little girl.

But along with the unstitching, Abraham had lost a lot of blood. Too much. The heavy blanket we'd wrapped him in was soaked with it, and it was seeping out of holes we could not patch.

At least he couldn't feel pain. None of the galvanized had full sensation.

Well, except for me.

"Matilda?" Quinten held out the cup.

I pulled my thoughts away from Abraham and took the steaming, fragrant drink from my brother. Coffee wasn't my favorite hot beverage, but right now anything liquid and warm would do me fine.

I took a couple sips, the bitter liquid spreading through my empty stomach like a heat wave, then noticed Neds were watching me.

Neds Harris was a man put together in the nonstandard configuration of two heads side by side on one body. He'd been with me for two years now, and had left my off-grid farm when the Houses had discovered not only that I was off grid but also that I was something they wanted to own.

I offered him the coffee.

Right Ned took a sip of it, offered it to Left Ned, who shook his head. "I'm good," Left Ned said.

The plane dipped suddenly and I almost missed them handing me back the coffee cup.

“Need some help up there, Sadie?” Left Ned called out to our pilot.

“From you?” she called back. “I can handle this with two eyes twice as good as you could with four.”

“Except I wouldn’t hit every pothole in the sky,” Left Ned muttered.

“I heard that,” she said. “Not another peep out of you, or I’ll tell my husband to escort you overboard.”

Neds held up their hands in surrender, although Left Ned was grinning. They both settled back a bit and closed their eyes.

I took another sip of coffee and passed it back to Quinten. “How are you feeling?”

In the dim light my brother’s sharp features were a little blurry, but I could make out that irritated frown of his. “I’ve been thinking about what we need to do.”

When Quinten used that tone of voice, nothing but trouble came of it.

“Get Abraham blood?” I suggested. “And cleanse his system before his organs fail?”

“No. Well, yes, but not that. The break in time. How to fix it. We talked about this,” he admonished, as if I’d been sleeping through a class lecture.

“No,” I corrected, “*we* haven’t had time to talk about anything. We’ve been running. I guess just you and your genius were comparing notes in your brain again.”

He slid me a quick smile. “All right. Well, we need to talk about it.”

“Now?”

The plane bucked again, and Sadie corrected with a tip of the wings that had me grabbing the armrest of my chair to keep from sliding into Neds.

Neds, eyes still closed, chuckled and Sadie cursed.

Outside the windows I could barely see the city lights through the fog. I sure hoped Sadie had a better view than I did.

“Maybe after we land,” he said.

Better idea.

We held on tight as Sadie brought the plane down into the water, slowing against the drag until we had turned and were trolling over to the dock.

San Diego glowed distant and fuzzy in the fog that was so thick, it seemed to swallow the world whole.

“This is it,” Sadie said, her hand busy over switches and toggles as the little plane came to a rest alongside an unlit dock. She unlatched her seat belt and shifted in her chair so she could look back at all of us. “As far as we can get you. I wish we could do more. . . .”

“You’ve been great,” I said. “Above and beyond, and then some. Thank you so much for all of your help. I don’t know what we would have done without you.”

She smiled. “A friend of Neds is a friend of ours. Always.”

“You are good people, Sadie,” Right Ned said around a yawn. He rolled the stiffness out of his shoulders. “And a decent pilot. I owe you one.”

“You owe me nothing,” she said. “Just see that you stay alive.”

“I’ll put in an effort,” Right Ned said.

Corb opened the rear door and the plane shifted and rocked as he exited and lashed the vessel to the dock. The sharp salt and oil scent of the bay wafted, cold and wet,

into the plane.

Left Ned nodded at me. "Give me a minute to find us transport. I'll be right back." He unlatched the side door and hopped out onto the pontoon then over to the dock.

It was a little strange having Neds do all the legwork to get us home. I was usually the one coordinating escape routes for the people of House Brown. I knew all the ins and outs for the off-grid families to avoid the direct gaze of the other powerful Houses who didn't think House Brown or the people in it should have freedom or a voice.

But my knowledge and contacts had not been enough. Neds knew Sadie and Corb, and, with them he had gotten us out of Hong Kong. He said he knew people who could get us across the country quickly and without notice.

I didn't know if those people were a part of House Brown, or were perhaps people like Sadie and Corb, who flew so far under the radar, they didn't even claim House Brown.

What I knew for sure was we had to be moving, and quickly for everyone's safety. Anyone helping us right now was putting himself directly in the line of fire.

"What about Abraham?" I asked.

Quinten glanced down at the unconscious man. "We'll carry him. Hopefully Neds can find an accommodating vehicle."

In just a couple minutes, Neds did find an accommodating vehicle. A dark late-model box van with two seats in the front and plenty of cargo space in the back.

Between Neds, Quinten, Corb, and I, we strapped Abraham securely to the stretcher, then transferred him from the plane to the van.

I was glad it was dark and foggy and that the dock was secluded. But security cameras could be anywhere. We needed to be gone fast.

Quinten took the driver's seat, a stocking cap on his head, covering his curls. He was already rolling away from the dock before I got the side door closed.

Neds rode in the back, sitting on the floor next to Abraham. I decided that might be a good place for me to stay out of sight too.

"Gloria's?" Quinten asked.

"End of the world, she'd be top of my list of safe harbors," I said. I didn't know why he had to ask me. He'd spent time with her. I'd never even met her in person.

"I think," he said, "well, it may be *an* end of the world, but there could be a fix. We can fix it. Us Cases. You and I. That's what I need to tell you. I think I know how. Brilliant, actually, but we don't have all the pieces yet, so there are some challenges involved."

"Pieces to fix Abraham?" I asked. "Or save the world?"

"No." He glanced up in the rearview mirror, and I wasn't sure quite how much sanity shone behind his eyes. "Time. We need to fix time." The way he said it made me feel like I was a second-grader who hadn't learned to count yet.

"We can do that? Fix time?"

"I think . . . yes."

Impossible? Probably. But, then, it wouldn't be the first impossible thing my brother had done. I was living proof of that.

"All right," I said, "We'll fix time. But first we need to get to Gloria's for Abraham, right?"

"Yes," he said. "Of course, yes." He turned his attention back to the foggy road,

taking us away from the harbor and toward Newport Avenue.

I stared at his reflection in the rearview mirror. He carried a tightness around his eyes, and in every line of his body, really. As if he expected something to jump out at him from each dark corner we passed. I just hoped captivity hadn't rattled his brain too hard. It had been three years since I'd seen him, and his imprisonment could not have been easy.

Gloria's place was about thirty minutes away, a squat, square building crammed between an antiques shop and a restaurant space that constantly rotated through owners, unable to stay in business long enough for the new layer of paint to dry.

The faded sign above her shop windows said she sold books and odds and ends. While I knew she did do that, she also had one of the most advanced secret medical facilities known only to House Brown beneath her shop. We made sure it remained secret and advanced by sending her monetary support, equipment, and tech whenever we could get our hands on it.

Because of that and Gloria's skills, a lot of people in House Brown had received care the other Houses would never have provided.

I'd never been here, but several years ago, Quinten had spent a year working with Gloria, learning basic and maybe even some advanced doctoring from her.

He'd never told me why he'd decided to leave her tutelage. That was not long after our parents had died, when he had been intent on absorbing the best on-the-road education House Brown could scrape together for him.

He parked the van back behind the shop. "I think this is bad . . . well, not the worst idea," Quinten said, "but it might not be a good idea."

"Fixing time?" I asked.

"No." He frowned at me and shook his head slightly as if he couldn't understand why I wasn't following his mental leaps. "Coming to Gloria," he said. "She's . . ."

His voice faded and his eyes went distant.

This was no time for him to check out.

"She's what, Quinten?" I asked.

He shook his head again, and this time his eyes cleared. "I suppose it doesn't matter. We do have wounded, and some of us are House Brown. All right. Stay here a second. I'll make sure she wants to see us."

He got out of the van, and Neds and I sat in silence a bit, the engine ticking off heat in the cooler air of the night.

"This might be a strange question," Left Ned said. "But how much do you trust your brother?"

"Completely," I answered truthfully. "Why?"

"Besides I don't know the man?" Right Ned answered. "He just seems like he's got an awful lot of things buzzing around in his head and not a lot of it making sense."

"He's been gone for three years. A prisoner." I had to pause so I could swallow down my anger. "Might take him more than one night on the run to pull himself into civilized manners."

"It's not the manners so much that bother me," Left Ned said. "Does he seem . . . right to you?"

"Not to say your brother's a problem," Right Ned amended. "We just want to know *you* think he's in his right mind. That he's the same man you could trust when you last

saw him three years ago.”

“He is,” I said. “I trust him.”

“Good,” Left Ned said. “Because if I were thinking of turning us in, it’d be here, now that we’ve reached the mainland. And it’d be at a House Brown safe house like Gloria’s.”

“Really, Neds Harris? You were a spy for House Silver.”

Left Ned winced at the tartness of my tone, and I regretted letting the words carry anger. I was tired. I was worried.

Abraham was as near to dying as a galvanized could be. My brother wasn’t wholly himself.

“Ex-spy for House Silver,” Right Ned said quietly.

“I know,” I said, drawing my fingers through my hair. “I’m sorry. I trust you. You did just drag our butts out of the fire. I don’t think any of us should be doubting our motives. We’re pretty much all in this together. Unless you want out, which I’d totally understand.”

“No,” Right Ned said. “My point is that we were spying on you and you trusted us. Just like you trust your brother now.”

“He’s saying you might not be as good a judge of people as you think you are, Tilly,” Left Ned said.

“I got that,” I said.

I stared out at the dark edges of buildings against the night sky, thinking. Quinten had always been a little distracted when he had his head in books too long.

I was used to his nonlinear trains of thought. But he was my brother. He’d done everything in his power to save me when I was hurt and dying as a child. He’d spent his life protecting me. I knew he was easy to laugh, had a hell of a singing voice, and hated losing at board games.

And I knew without a doubt that he loved me and would never betray me.

“No,” I said quietly, “I don’t think I’ve ever trusted anyone like I’ve trusted my brother. I like you, Neds, even after I found out you’d been keeping an eye on me for Reeves Silver. But my brother . . .” I pushed my hair back behind my ear with one hand, the stitches that lined my wrist glowing with mercurial light in the darkness.

“I’ve always trusted him. Looked up to him. He’s a force of genius in my life who never got anything wrong.”

“He got captured and imprisoned,” Left Ned noted. “Not a lot of right about that.”

“I know,” I said. “He’s made mistakes, but morally he’s solid. I still trust him. I always will.”

Neds nodded. “That’s good enough for me,” Right Ned said.

Left Ned didn’t say anything. I was pretty sure he didn’t agree. But it was nice of him not to say so.

And, ultimately, we didn’t need trust. We just needed to save the world.

HOUSE ORANGE

Slater Orange knew his enemies, these heads of Houses who gathered in this small, private, fortified chamber. He had once been one of them.

They were mortals who wielded the power of their station, their Houses, and the world. Mortals looking for the key to eternal life—a key he had found.

Slater wore the galvanized body that had once belonged to a servant of his named Robert Twelfth. He was almost used to Robert Twelfth's stitched body now that it had been carrying his mind, his thoughts, his life for more than a day. And while the body wasn't born of House Orange bloodline, it had bestowed upon him the one thing all the other heads of Houses would never be strong enough to claim: immortality.

When he had been Slater, head of House Orange, he had changed the laws that ruled his House. Now the power he had once wielded as the head of House Orange was his, even though the other Heads of Houses thought him to be the lowly galvanized Robert Twelfth.

"This meeting will now come to order," John Black, House Defense, said.

All the heads of Houses sat at the curved table that edged the chamber, a wall at their back and a clear view of the other people in the room. The heads of Houses had never trusted one another, though they hand in hand and more often knife in back, ruled the world together.

Slater—or Robert, as he must be called now—stood at the other side of the room, four of John Black's men next to him and unseen laser-locked weapons aimed at his head. He was the enemy here, the other, the galvanized.

But not for long.

His gaze ticked over the gathered: four women and four men. Troi Blue, House Water; Aranda Red, House Power; Kiana White, House Medical; Feye Green, House Agriculture. Troi Blue, who appeared to be twenty but was decades older than that, carried the most power of them all. She looked just as angry and on the edge as the rest of those who were gathered here today.

Of the remaining heads of Houses—Gideon Violet, House Faith; Welton Yellow, House Technology; John Black, House Defense; and Reeves Silver, House Vice—Slater was only remotely concerned about one of them: Reeves Silver.

Reeves Silver was the snake in the apple orchard of this world. He had appeared upset over the killing of Oscar Gray, who had been the head of House Gray, and shocked at the murder of Slater Orange, but Slater knew that was a ruse. Reeves Silver had been making deals, connections, and bribes within the Houses for years on end.

He was, in his own way, positioning himself to rule them all. And only Slater had

the brains to see through Reeves Silver's lies.

He played the stage, patient as a spider, waiting for the strings of his web to tremble with the struggles of his foes. Years of blood stained Reeves Silver's hands, though he had kept his brutality carefully hidden and blamed on others.

Yet now he sat with all the eyes of the Houses upon him, to hear judgment on the murder of Oscar Gray perpetrated by his galvanized, Helen Eleventh.

That shooting, along with Slater's own false murder at the hands of Abraham Seventh, had terminated the treaty between the galvanized and the Houses.

To say that the Houses teetered on declaring open war upon each other was not overstating the tension in the room.

Slater had his stake set in that conflict too. He was the only person in position to rule House Orange. He had made sure of that before he was transplanted into the galvanized body.

In time, he would have the power of all the Houses. He would rule and see Reeves Silver deposed, killed, and buried.

"It is clear from the treaty between Houses and galvanized," John Black continued in his low voice, "that the murders of Oscar Gray and Slater Orange have made said treaty null and void. This leaves us with the decision of punishment. House Black will hear from each House. House Black will also note that House Gold, Money, has exempted itself from these proceedings, citing their noninvolvement in galvanized ownership. House Blue, please begin."

Troi Blue wore a pale blue dress that made her coal-black skin glow with a youthful sheen. Her hair was braided away from her temples to reveal flawless, innocent features.

Slater knew she presented herself in such a manner to flaunt her manufactured youth, the formulas of which she had bought at heavy cost from House White, Medical.

"It is House Blue's stance that all galvanized shall remain imprisoned, bodies separated from brains, for fifty years," she said. "At such time, we shall reassess their use to the Houses."

"House Red agrees." Aranda Red, Power, was quick to echo House Blue's decree, which wasn't like her. It was no secret that she lusted to replace Troi Blue as the most powerful House leader. Why side with her now?

Slater frowned. He had been perhaps too concerned with getting rid of his disease-riddled body to pay attention to the shifts in allegiances among the Houses this past decade.

"House Silver also agrees," Reeves Silver said. "With an option to free the galvanized before the end of their sentence if their skills are needed."

"I agree," Feye Green said. "House Green agrees," she amended. "With a further modification. We will allow reassignment of galvanized to the Houses when and if they regain their freedom."

"Yellow is opposed," Welton Yellow said. "Just because Reeves Silver's galvanized shoots someone in the face doesn't mean all the galvanized have gone crazy. One mistake should not be a debt all the galvanized pay."

Of course that boy would be opposed to locking up the stitched. He treated his own galvanized, Foster First, as if he were a robot toy built for his amusement. Welton

Yellow had never taken ruling his House seriously. Unfortunately, there were very few other members of House Yellow stable enough to be put in charge of all the technology in the world.

“It is how the treaty is written,” John Black said. “If one falls, they all fall.”

“House Faith also opposes galvanized imprisonment,” Gideon Violet said. “And further suggests that we each, as individual Houses, decide and carry out the punishment of the galvanized under our keep.”

That wasn’t a surprise from the head of the House that ruled all faith and faithful activities in the world. Gideon was showing his age, and perhaps his favoritism for Clara Third, the galvanized who had served his House since even before the beginning of the treaty.

“Medical opposes body-removal imprisonment,” Kiana White, head of House Medical, said. “Removing their brains from their bodies will lead to mental instability. If we want the galvanized to remain viable for our use, we will offer them the same imprisonment conditions as humans.”

“House Defense also opposes,” John Black said. “There is language in the treaty that can be argued against a combined sentencing. Which means this decision rests four to four. I move we incarcerate the galvanized in humane prisons while we sort through the matter. We will reconvene on the issue when Houses Gray and Orange are in possession of ruling members to put forth a voice.

“Is there a claimant to House Gray?” John Black asked.

“I claim head of House Gray.” A man stepped forward into the room. Hollis Gray, Oscar Gray’s younger brother.

Slater had seen the smooth-faced, snake-thin man many times and knew, as all the Houses knew, that he had stabbed and slandered his way up the ladder in House Gray, positioning himself to take over when his brother stepped down.

But what Slater had never noticed before was the satisfied smirk Aranda Red hid away at the sight of him. She wanted him in place as head of the House. She might have even been behind Oscar Gray’s killing.

Wasn’t that interesting? He had thought Reeves Silver had killed the soft old man, but perhaps Reeves had been hired to do so.

Reeves did so like a game.

“Hollis Gray,” John Black said. “You are the next in line to succeed House Gray. Are there any objections?”

It was only a perfunctory question. The Houses had long ago decided it was best to let each house choose their own successors. After a moment of silence, John Black continued. “Welcome to the head of House Gray, Hollis Gray.”

Hollis simply nodded once, putting forth a cool smile that did not reach his dark eyes. “It is my honor to fulfill the duties of House Gray,” he said. “All contracts currently in place between Gray and other houses shall remain so for ninety days. After which term they can be negotiated.”

Also standard procedure. Hollis Gray strode to the table and took the empty seat there, next to Gideon Violet.

“Now we must move on to the issue of House Orange rulership,” John Black said. “Robert Twelfth, please step forward.”

Slater crossed to the center of the room and stood under the gaze of those who had

just hours ago been his peers. No: his inferiors. They all thought they were above him now. But they were so very wrong.

“The records of House Orange clearly state Slater Orange intended for you to speak as the head of House Orange. Permanently,” John Black said. “In light of the recent deaths—both Oscar Gray and Slater Orange—at the hands of galvanized, we are reluctant to allow you to stand as head of House, no matter what Slater Orange signed into law.”

“I assure you, I have only the interests of House Orange in mind,” Slater said.

“You have not been asked your opinion,” Troi Blue snapped. “Stay silent until you are asked to speak, galvanized.”

Slater tipped his head down, hoping it might look like obedience, even though he was fuming inside. How dare she speak to him as if he were nothing? He had done something none of them had dreamed to achieve: transferred his mind into a body that would never die.

He was immortal.

Troi Blue and the others would die, no matter how many chemicals they injected to keep their false youth. He was above them. He had always been above them.

John Black continued. “Unless another House wishes to assume the debt and responsibility for Robert Twelfth as head of House, we shall place House Orange and all dealings with and from House Orange on hold until such time as a new head of House is in place. Will anyone stand with Robert Twelfth of House Orange?”

Slater knew the answer to that question. None of the Houses would stand by a galvanized acting in a human role. And yet the law within each House was not within another House’s control. Lawfully, by House Orange laws, he was already head of that House and it was a mockery to think they could take that away from him.

“I will stand with Robert Twelfth.”

Slater turned, surprised, and gazed at Reeves Silver.

The man was lean, tanned, and wore his white hair as a sort of prize, even though he didn’t appear to be much older than thirty. His gaze was unreadable, self-satisfied, and brief, before he turned his full attention to the other heads of Houses.

“House Silver will stand responsible for Robert Twelfth’s decisions with House Orange for a full year,” Reeves said. “If he fails, we will settle his debt and appoint a suitable head of House from within House Orange.”

The silence in the room said more than words could. Reeves Silver never did anything out of charity. Of course, neither did any of the other heads of Houses. There was something in this for him. But for once, Slater didn’t know what it was.

“So witnessed,” John Black said. “So shall the decision stand for review in one year from this date.

“As for the matter of the galvanized, they will be surrendered to House Black for imprisonment until a final vote is taken.”

“I didn’t agree to that,” Welton Yellow said.

“Nor did I,” Gideon Violet said.

“Gentlemen.” John Black dropped the formalities. “I don’t give a damn what you want. Two heads of Houses are dead—killed by galvanized. Turn yours in to me so they can be locked up and observed, or be prepared to step down as head of your House. You know it’s within my abilities to force this issue.”