

## CHAPTER 1

# The Night of Seven Fires

Twenty-five years before the events of this book, the harbor district of Cassaria burned for one night, and by morning there was one less family in the Republic of Aurelia.

Mara did not remember the fire the way people imagine a child remembers such things — not as a wall of heat, not as a roar. She remembered it in pieces, the way a broken plate is still a plate if you keep all the pieces in a box. She remembered her mother's hand, dry and very strong, closing around her wrist hard enough to bruise. She remembered the smell of the harbor at night, tar and salt and diesel, and under it, that evening, something sharper. She remembered being carried down a set of stone stairs she had climbed a thousand times in daylight and had never once seen in the dark, and how different they were with no light in them at all.

She remembered her uncle Teo counting the stairs under his breath, not because he needed to, but because a man needs something to do with his mouth when he is carrying a child away from her own house for the last time.

"Twelve," he said. "Thirteen. Almost there, little captain."

He had always called her that. Little captain. Her father owned the harbor — or had, until that week — and from the time she could walk she had insisted on standing at the prow of the launch when they went out to meet the freighters, one small hand on the rail, giving orders to men three times her age about which

line to throw and when. Aldo Nazario used to laugh so hard at this that the deckhands stopped pretending not to laugh too.

That was the last ordinary thing Mara remembered about her father: laughing at his own daughter's imitation of him. Everything after that belonged to the fire.

She did not see her father die. She was told, much later, in a small measured voice by a woman she barely knew, that this was a mercy, and for many years she believed it. It took her most of her adult life to understand that it was not a mercy so much as a debt — one more thing the Nazario family was not permitted to keep, not even the manner of its own ending.

What she did see, from the little boat that Teo rowed out past the seawall while the sky over the harbor district turned the color of a healing bruise, was the house. Not burning, exactly — not yet, not at that distance — but wrong. Every window lit at once, every door, and figures moving against the light in a pattern that had nothing to do with a house going peacefully to sleep. She saw the customs tower, which her father had always said was the true heart of the port, throw a long orange reflection across the water, and she understood — the way small children understand large things, all at once and without words for it — that this was the last time she would see her home standing.

"Don't look, little captain," Teo said, not unkindly, and kept rowing.

She looked anyway. She would spend the rest of her life looking anyway.

The seven men and women who met that same night in the vaulted room beneath the Old Customs House did not think of themselves as murderers. This is worth stating plainly, because it is the first thing that outsiders get wrong about the Compact, and the wrongness of it has protected the Compact for a quarter of a century.

They thought of themselves as the last responsible people in a country that Aldo Nazario was about to burn down around all of them.

It was true that Nazario controlled the harbor, and had for three generations, and that a Nazario harbor was, in its own brutal way, an efficient harbor. It was also true that in the eighteen months before that night, Aldo Nazario had begun to behave less like a man who ran a port and more like a man who believed he could become the government of Aurelia in fact, not merely in the shadows where every one of the seven houses agreed such power ought decently to remain. He had bought two members of Parliament outright. He had let it be known, in rooms where such things echoed, that Piero Solenne's election machine could be replaced with Nazario's own, if Solenne did not care to share its profits more generously. He had, worst of all, gone to Anton Kessler's father and proposed — calmly, over coffee, as though it were an ordinary matter of business — that the two of them together could simply dispense with the other five houses within five years.

Kessler's father had said nothing to Nazario. He had said everything to the other five.

What followed was not a spontaneous riot of the righteous. It was, in the manner of everything the Compact ever did, a vote. Seven houses, seven votes, and the outcome recorded — this detail would matter enormously, decades later — in a ledger that Judge Ceresi's father insisted on keeping, over the objections of at least two of the others, because Emeric's father did not trust six other people to remember an atrocity the same way twice.

The vote was six in favor, one abstaining. House Marchetti abstained; old Marchetti wanted no part of the killing, though he took his fifth share of the harbor contracts readily enough once it was done, a hypocrisy his granddaughter Elena would spend her whole adult life trying to outrun without ever quite naming it.

The six that voted in favor did not do the burning themselves. That work was contracted, the way the Compact contracted everything, to men who were paid in cash and silence and who were, within three years, all quietly dead of causes that closed the matter further. By the time the fire took the customs tower, Aldo Nazario had already been found in his study with a single shot to the chest, at a range that made it clear he had known the person who fired it. His wife had not been in the house. She had taken their daughter to the small boat two hours earlier, on a warning that arrived, depending on which of the seven houses you ask even now, either from a guilty conscience or from a calculated decision that a dead man's whole family was a harder thing to explain than a dead man alone.

Either way, Teo rowed the boat, and the boat carried Mara out past the seawall, and the woman who had been Aldo Nazario's wife did not survive the crossing to Marisent — a stroke, the doctor there said, brought on by grief and cold water, though Mara would wonder for years whether grief alone can stop a heart that fast, or whether her mother had simply decided, somewhere over deep water, that she had delivered her daughter far enough and could stop rowing herself.

By dawn, the seven houses that remained held a meeting that was, in every practical sense, the true founding of the Compact as it exists today. They agreed to divide the Nazario holdings — the harbor went to Varno, whose ships already worked those docks and whose silence could be bought with the deed to them. They agreed that the empty eighth chair at their table, the one that had always been Nazario's, would not be filled, would not even be removed, but would stand against the wall of the chamber as a permanent reminder of what happened to a house that forgot its place in the arrangement.

They agreed, finally and above all, that the fire had never truly happened — that it would be recorded, in Bianca Doria's grandfather's newspapers, as a tragic

accident at an old customs warehouse, faulty wiring, four dead, a shipping family lost to grief and moved abroad.

For twenty-five years, that was the story Cassaria believed.

For twenty-five years, in a country on the far side of the strait, a girl grew up believing a different one — that her family had been murdered by seven houses who had never once, in all that time, imagined she might come home to collect what was owed.

She was wrong only about one thing. She did not want, in the end, merely to collect it.

She wanted to burn the arrangement down the way it had burned her.