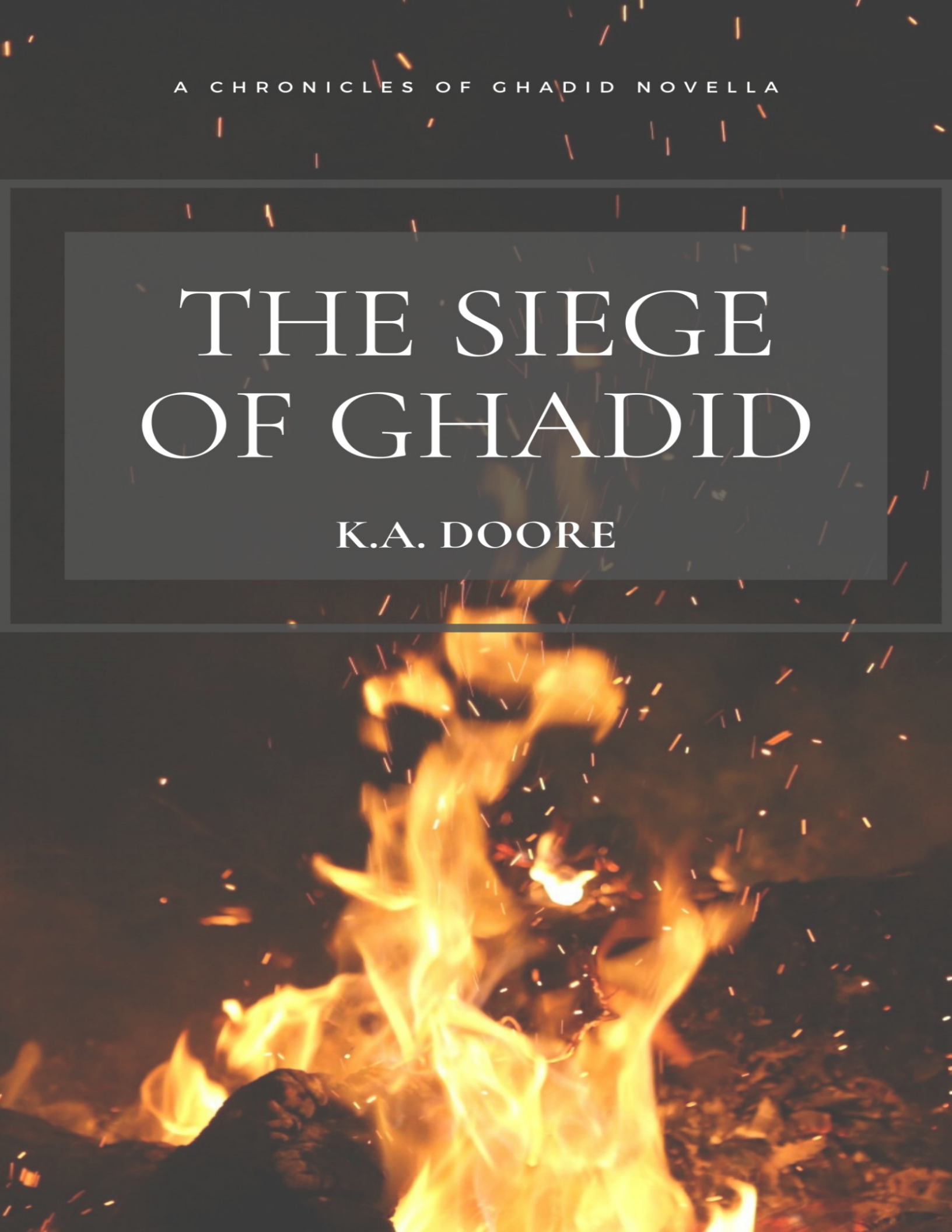


A CHRONICLES OF GHADID NOVELLA

THE SIEGE OF GHADID

K.A. DOORE



The First Wave

At least the intruder knocked first before shoving the door open and filling the dusty room with sticky-hot sunlight. Amastan was still finding his cane and his feet when a voice asked,

“Where is she?”

Amastan squinted against the light, trying to make sense of the shadow at its center. His ankle protested under his weight, even as he leaned most of it on his better foot. He’d been left alone in the room by his sisters and family with nothing to keep him company but his pile of cushions, a few pens, and a stack of scrolls that needed transcribing. For most of the quiet morning, he’d welcomed the reprieve from his family’s constant attempts at helping him, but now a part of himself he could never quiet assessed his chances in a fight, weighing his cast-stiff arm and still-healing ankle against the possibility of a violent intruder.

Instead of advancing, the man stopped a respectful distance away, fingers worrying at tangled stringwork. The door closed under its own weight, cutting off the bright light of midday. The thinned light from the window and the steady light from the hearth took its place, warming the man’s dusty wrap and sharpening his features. He’d tied his tagel in haste, covering his mouth and chin but neglecting his slender nose, and sweat darkened his pits and neck, more than might be expected from a midday walk.

Amastan relaxed as he recognized his visitor. Salid was the charm maker his family preferred, but not one in the habit of making house calls. “Water, sa?”

Salid’s initial brusqueness gave way to a mirror of Amastan’s confusion. He nodded even as he frowned, taking in the cane, the cast, and the fading bruises across Amastan’s arms. More bruises circled Amastan’s neck, but thankfully his tagel hid those from Salid’s searching gaze.

The healers had only released Amastan a few days earlier. They'd stabilized him, made certain he'd live, and even sped up his ankle's healing. But any more than that would've been a flagrant waste of water. He'd been tempted to press more baats on the healers – he had more than enough to pay – but in the end he couldn't justify the waste. He wasn't a drum chief and his particular specialization wasn't required for the ongoing function of the city. Not now, anyway. He had to trust that Thana had all the contract under control.

He had a cane and a limp, but neither would kill him and both would heal fully within the month. He just had to take things slow and allow time to finish the process.

With Thana gone, all he had was time.

"I'd heard you'd been at the healers, but..." Salid trailed off, gaze lingering on Amastan's cane even as he took the glass of water from Amastan.

"If you're looking for Thana, you've just missed her, sa. By a few days."

"How convenient for her," said Salid. "She's the one who dragged this whole mess into the light and now she's nowhere to be found to fix it." He untangled his fingers from the stringwork and shoved the whole of it into a pocket. "When does she plan on returning?"

"Not for some weeks, sa."

Salid grimaced. "Too long. She'll be too late."

"For what?"

"She *told* you, didn't she?"

Amastan tightened his grip on his cane. "Are you talking about the marabi—?"

"—the *en*-marabi—"

"—and the dead men?"

“The bound.” Salid pulled out a chair from the table beside Amastan and slid into it with a sigh as if all the air were being squeezed from his lungs. “We’re on the same page, then.” He drained the rest of his water. “There’s been another.”

“What do you mean?”

Salid didn’t quite slam the glass down, but he did set it on the table with more force than was necessary. “Another corpse that’s refusing to stay a corpse. Except – I don’t understand *how*.” Salid picked up Amastan’s pen and began rolling it between his fingers while staring at the table as if it might offer up an explanation. “One of Drum Chief Talal’s slaves died of a fever last night, but just as the marab arrived to attend her jaani, the slave got up and attacked Talal’s wife.” Salid held up a hand, stoppering any questions. “The wife is fine. Scratched, bruised, and shaken, but *fine*. The marab managed to subdue the dead slave and lock her in a closet.”

“Are they certain she was dead?” asked Amastan. “Fever can addle a mind. Or perhaps she’d been possessed by a jaani.”

Salid was shaking his head before Amastan had finished. “Everything I’ve heard about this has only confirmed my suspicions—”

“How *did* you hear about this?”

Salid suddenly found his almost empty glass of water more interesting than Amastan. “Well, when something like the dead walking happens once in your city, you keep an ear out.”

But Amastan stayed silent and staring until Salid squirmed and finally spat out, “A marabi owes me a favor, all right? And everything he told me about this has only confirmed my suspicions.” He held up a hand and began ticking off fingers. “Unresponsive to verbal commands, inexplicably violent, no indication of awareness, doesn’t react to pain, and – most importantly – the marab have been unable to quiet her jaani.”

“I still don’t understand what this slave has in common with the men who attacked me and Thana. She’s acting strangely, yes, but that doesn’t mean she’s not suffering from some other illness of the mind, or that she’s not possessed. Did she have any markings?”

“No one has been able to examine her,” said Salid, voice tight. “Not since they determined she was dead. And she *is* quite dead – she does not breathe, sa.”

Amastan didn’t need to close his eyes to relive that terrible night again, to see the absence in the face of the man who had effortlessly lifted Amastan off his feet and thrown him into the wall like he’d been little more than a bag of trash. He could still feel those cold, stiff fingers digging into his neck, still taste the acid at the back of his throat as his bravery shattered into terror – and shame.

“The en-marabi is gone,” said Amastan, trying to push away the cobweb cling of memory.

“Nevertheless, the girl is exhibiting the same symptoms,” insisted Salid. “If it isn’t his doing, then I fear we may have a bigger problem.”

“What are the chances of two en-marab, sa?”

“What are the chances of *one*?”

Amastan sat with a heavy *thump*. “What do you want from me?” He gestured at his cane. “I’m in no shape to fight monsters.”

“Not a monster,” corrected Salid. “*Bound*. I came to you because you’re the only other person currently in this city who has met these things face to face. You understand what this means.” Salid stopped fidgeting with his glass and finally set it down, empty. “After Thana left, I spent some time reading up on our en-marabi friend and what rumor claims he’s capable of. Even taking sensationalizing and hyperbole into account, we have good reason to be alarmed.”

“If you have a friend among the marab, you should take this to them.” He gestured at himself. “This is what happened the last time I tried to fight them.”

Salid crossed his arms. “Did I ask you to fight, sa? No. I’m only asking for somebody who understands the very real danger of what we are facing here. I’ve already spoken to the marab – they refuse to listen. To them, this slave is an anomaly, not a warning of what could be coming. Izri... the marab want to handle this themselves, but they refuse to believe that en-marab ever existed, let alone still practice, let alone in *our* city. Even if we could convince them, it’ll be too late.”

“It’s one slave, a remnant from the en-marabi’s attacks. Why do you think there will be more?”

“There was a clear progression to Djet’s work and I fear that this en-marabi – or perhaps Djet himself – will follow the same path. Yes he marked men’s flesh to bind their jaan, but he also experimented with other binding methods, ones that didn’t leave a mark. Before his death, a strange affliction struck a village near Na Tay Khet. Every person – adults and children both – simply disappeared. Around the same time, rumors circled of monsters who couldn’t be hurt or killed who were attacking any travelers who neared the village. These monsters couldn’t feel pain and they wouldn’t stop until you’d taken the head from their shoulders.”

Salid leaned toward Amastan, eyes alight with intensity. “If I’m correct – and I pray to G-d that I’m not – then this may be our only warning, our one chance to prepare. Whatever Djet has done, this slave won’t be the last. There will be more. We must be ready, or else his bound will overwhelm us and our city will become another warning for history. If I’m wrong, then we will have prepared for nothing and lose only our time, maybe some dignity. Do you understand now why I came to you?”

Amastan nodded. “You need a plan.”

“*We* need a plan.”

“All right.” Amastan leveraged himself up and crossed the room to the hearth. “But we’re going to need a lot of tea.”

*

Early evening was coalescing in the air and in the streets all around Amastan as he stood in front of the familiar faded red door. He shook out his wrap and shifted his weight so that he wasn’t leaning so heavily on his cane, despite the exertion from having walked all the way here. Then, when he couldn’t put it off any longer, he knocked.

A minute passed, the street filling even further with those venturing out into the fading light to run the errands they’d put off during the worst of the day’s heat. The air was like the steam off boiling water, except instead of a passing unpleasantness, it was constant. Sweat stuck Amastan’s wrap to his back and peppered his brow as he wished he was anywhere but here.

He knocked again. After another minute, he raised his cane.

The door swung open, hitting the wall with a tooth-rattling *crack*. An older woman with a thick twist of braids and wearing a smoky purple wrap stared him down with eyes the exact same shade of sand-brown as her absent daughter’s. Tamella, the notorious and rightly-feared Serpent of Ghadid and Thana’s mother, took in his cane and cast and then looked past him, scanning the platform center beyond.

When she didn’t find what she was looking for, she eyed Amastan’s still upraised cane with disdain, then yanked it – and him – through the door. Amastan was still trying to catch his balance, pain shooting through his ankle, as Tamella slammed the door shut and flicked the lock into place. Amastan steadied himself on a chair and was just beginning to wonder if this hadn’t

been the more dangerous of his options when Tamella whirled on him, eyes sparking.

“Where’s my daughter?”

Amastan held up his hand. “She’s fine, ma. Thana’s fine.”

Tamella sized him up as if for a fight – which wouldn’t be the first time, at least – but her gaze narrowed as it caught on his cane, his ankle, his arm. She focused on his eyes last, stance shifting so that she was taller, took up even more space. “She hasn’t been home in three days. I know she shared her contract with you. It doesn’t look like that contract is going well. Why didn’t she come with you? Am I going to find her unconscious in a healer’s room?”

“No.”

The knife appeared in Tamella’s hand as if it had always been there. Before Amastan could back away or even raise his cane, she had the blade pressed against his throat. Her breath was close, hot, and her skin smelled of sweet palm nut oil.

“I’m not going to ask again, so you’d best pay attention,” she hissed. “Where. Is. *She*.”

Amastan swallowed and the blade pressed harder against his throat. Tamella didn’t trust fully him, hadn’t for years, not since he’d fought her on a rooftop and, *worst*, questioned her judgement. So he didn’t question her willingness to hurt him. Yet, inexplicably, she’d let her daughter work with him on numerous contracts. Or, if not outright *let*, at least never interfered.

Careful to speak slowly and clearly, Amastan said, “Before I explain, please promise you won’t do anything rash, ma.”

Tamella considered him, her face a blank mask. Then, without warning, she pushed him into the table at his back and slammed his hand against its wood paneling, all the while keeping the knife at his throat. She ground the heel of her hand into his bones, her gaze intent on his, willing him to look

away. It took every ounce of control for Amastan not to wrench away or cry out.

“I don’t think you’re in any position to ask for favors. If you want to keep your fingers, talk.”

The words spilled out as fast as he could form them. “There was more to the contract than we were told. Thana’s tracking the mark by traveling with a caravan to Na Tay Khet. She—”

Tamella leaned on his hand, cutting him off. “She’s left Ghadid.”

“Yes, but—”

“—but you’re still here.” While Tamella had grown deadly calm, she increased the pressure on his hand, yanking a thin whimper from Amastan’s throat.

“I didn’t have a choice!” he gasped out. He sucked in a breath and closed his eyes against the pain – a mistake. Now he could see the bones breaking under Tamella’s implacable fury, stealing even his ability to write. “I would’ve gone with her, but she left instructions with the healers to keep me unconscious.”

“That’s my girl.” Tamella chuckled even if she didn’t ease up. “But how did you end up at the healers?”

“The mark wasn’t what we’d been told, ma. Kaseem had said he was a marabi, but not that he was an en-marabi, that he could bind—”

“You let my daughter go off alone with a jaani thief?” This time, the knife bit into his throat, as gentle as a lover’s kiss. “Cousins are to work in pairs! What is the point of you if you couldn’t even manage that?”

“Please,” whispered Amastan. “Let me explain. I can’t run, and if you still want to break my hand when I’m done, you may.”

For a moment, Tamella looked like she was going to break his hand anyway. Then she stepped back, releasing his hand and removing the knife

from his throat. She still kept her blade loosely trained on him, even as she yanked a chair under herself and sagged into it. Amastan blinked back glitters of pain, breathing through a wave of nausea. Somehow, he didn't think being sick all over Tamella's floor would redeem him with her.

When the nausea subsided, he moved his fingers just enough to confirm nothing was broken. Then, all too aware that he was trapped by a woman who could just as easily take his eye as breathe, Amastan began his story at the very beginning.

As he led Tamella through the events of only a week before, her rigid posture melted and she tilted forward with interest, then back again with concern, but the knife kept her threat clear. Amastan finished his story with Thana's last visit at the healers' and the decision they'd arrived at together: that Thana would leave with the caravan and take a stab at the contract on the sands. Alone.

"I'd have thought that you, more than anyone, understood how dangerous attempting a contract alone could be." Her voice was still sharp, but the blade stayed in her hand instead of Amastan's throat. "Kaseem should never have given Thana that contract. A marabi is much too advanced a mark for a novice assassin. Of course she'll fail."

"Kaseem saw her potential. You underestimate her."

Tamella snorted. "You coddle her."

Amastan bristled. "I treat her as an equal. She was still in training, yes, but this last contract – if you'd seen her, seen the way she'd kept calm when the whole thing was falling apart... well. Maybe you would have been proud."

"I wouldn't have neglected to discover any cross-reactions. She put herself in unnecessary danger."

Amastan shook his head. "It was my contract. That mistake belongs to me, not her."

“She’s only a child—”

“She’s older than I was when I took my first contract and far more experienced than when you had me find Yanniq’s killer. Kaseem knows what he’s doing. Trust him, if not your own daughter.”

Some of the tension finally left Tamella and the knife’s point angled toward the floor. “Fine. But you can’t fault a mother for worrying.”

Amastan swallowed a response – he would have picked a different word than *worrying*.

“Ever since that night...” started Tamella, but when she trailed off, she didn’t continue.

She didn’t need to. Amastan knew exactly what she meant, could still taste the fear from that night. Of course Tamella would always hold the memory of when she’d come within a hair’s breadth of losing her only child within reach, just beneath the surface of her skin. That’s where you kept your failures, so you never forgot. Or forgave.

Tamella’s gaze sharpened. “If she doesn’t come back, I will kill you.”

Amastan let out a breath, but he couldn’t let the reprieve from one danger eclipse the danger he’d come here for. “We need to make certain there’s a ‘back’ when she returns.”

Tamella frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I didn’t come here for you to threaten and berate me.” Amastan rubbed his hand, searching for any fractures or breaks but – thankfully – only finding pain. “A dead slave attacked her master and healers yesterday.”

“And your mark has a habit of making the dead do things.” Tamella shrugged. “Perhaps he left you a little surprise. If you’d only gone *with* my daughter, you could’ve solved this problem by now.”

“The mark departed several days ago. If this were his work, then how many more surprises should we expect to find? And if this wasn’t his work,

then what does that mean for us that there could be two en-marab when there should be none?”

Tamella sheathed her knife and crossed her legs. “You already have a theory. So tell it.”

“We need to be prepared for the worst.”

“You think this will happen again.”

“I pray that I’m wrong,” said Amastan. “But Salid found records of similar events, when the dead did not stay dead, and these never ended with just one. We can’t know what this one is ultimately planning, but from these records, we can plan that there will be more victims. These dead – these bound, as Salid calls them – can’t feel pain and can’t be killed like normal people. According to these records, it only took a handful of these creatures to wipe out entire villages.”

“Sounds like information you should pass on to the drum chiefs,” said Tamella. “They have watchmen just for that reason.”

“You know the Circle won’t listen to any of this, let alone do anything about it.” Amastan crossed his arms. “They’ll say I’m hysterical and then it’ll be too late. The records Salid uncovered – the dead didn’t *stay* dead. Any of them. That’s the core of the problem – one or two bound won’t cause a lot of harm, but more than that will quickly overwhelm. We need to handle this and we can’t wait for the drum chiefs.”

“So what’s your plan?”

Amastan took a deep breath before answering: “*We* need to be prepared.”

Tamella’s eyes widened, just a little, just enough so that he knew she understood. Then she nodded, the violent tension in her posture replaced by something more inquisitive, more serpentine. “The family.”

Amastan nodded. Waited.

Her lips twitched into a smile that was made all the more frightening for its proximity to violence. “Why not? After all, it has always been our purpose to protect the city, even if that purpose got a little muddled over time. And it’s not like we’ll be working outside any contracts. It’s not murder if they’re already dead.” Her smile was slow, but lethal. “It’s been many years since I’ve worked a contract, Amastan. Many would say I’m out of practice, too old. It might not be wise to involve me.”

Amastan held his throbbing hand against his chest. “Now *that*, I know is wrong.”

Tamella spread her legs and leaned forward, hands clasped as if in prayer. “What’s your plan?”

The Second Wave

The scream cut the air like a whip, sharp and sudden and gone in the same instant. Amastan startled, snapping the weed he'd been trying to extract whole at its base. The broken stem glared bright against the black soil as the plant's blood oozed up, milky white. *First casualty*, he thought distantly, even as the panic of the moment seized him.

It was happening.

Amastan tossed the broken weed into the bucket half full of them, then brushed the dirt from his hands, adjusted his tagel, and left the glasshouse. Beyond the walls of glass, the commotion of voices and shouts in the streets below became more than a dull background noise he could ignore. Now he could tease out the rising notes of concern, of confusion, of panic. Another scream and this time it lingered, caught, and spread.

This was what he'd been waiting for.

This was what he'd been dreading.

It had been a week. No time at all and yet long enough for him to plan and organize, to set the family into motion. Long enough for hope: that Salid was wrong; that 'Thana would be back soon, another contract completed and the en-marabi no longer a threat; that he'd overreacted to one dead slave.

Amastan followed the edge of the roof to the back and the street below. The few people walking didn't seem concerned or in a hurry. But then, they might not have heard the screams; sound carried further across the open roofs than the narrow streets. He squinted at the next platform and its bridge, trying to see through the mid-afternoon haze to the blurred figures beyond. Were some moving strangely? Were some running and stumbling while others were slower, more steady and sure? Despite the heat, a cold finger of fear traced the length of his chest.

Thud. Someone landed on the roof behind him.

Amastan spun, his cane already up – as if he could fight anything in his state – but it was only his cousin Menna. She wore her gray marabi wrap, a stripe of purple edging her sleeves and neck to indicate her master status. That normally pristine gray was flecked with black and red: dirt and blood. The cold tightened around Amastan’s chest.

“They’re up, they’re out, all of them – *all of them* – just climbed right out of their tombs and went through the marab that were there like they were nothing.” Menna’s words were a rush as she approached, her hands tangling together like string in a child’s hands. “They made it to the streets before we could stop them – not that I tried, I remembered what you’d said – which, by the way, how did you *know* that was going to happen – but others did despite our warnings and now we have more than just the *dead* dead walking around, we have the just-now and very stupid dead too and–”

“Menna.”

“–not all of the marab even listened to me, those nits, but I came right here because you told me to get you if something like this happened and I don’t know what else to do and *again*, how in all of G-d’s holy names did you know that this–”

“*Menna.*”

“–was going to happen, it’s impossible, I have seen some shit but these corpses don’t even have *organs*–”

Amastan closed the distance between them and put a hand on Menna’s shoulder. Her gaze met his and the words stopped abruptly like a door slamming shut. She was breathing in quick, shallow gasps, pale cheeks flushed and pupils dilated from the sun. This close, Amastan could see that some of the stains on her wrap were actually smears of blood and gore. Perhaps she hadn’t left as immediately as she claimed. He tightened his grip.

“Breathe,” he instructed.

Menna nodded, but a few more heartbeats passed before she took a deep, shuddering breath. Then she took another, and another. Finally she sagged, as if she were filled with sand instead of flesh. When she spoke this time, her voice was much clearer.

“What do we do, ‘Stan? There’s so *many*.”

“Just one crypt so far, right?” When Menna nodded, the ground stabilized beneath Amastan’s feet – just a little. Just enough. “Then the plan hasn’t changed. Find Tamella. She’ll send a runner to alert the others. Then grab as many watchmen who will listen and bring them to this platform. If they don’t listen, tell them to at least barricade their crypts.”

“*Just* one crypt? You don’t actually think–”

“We should be prepared for the worst.”

Menna stared at him, then she sucked in a tight breath. “Okay. Okay – that’s what we do, right? We prepare. But ‘Stan – those things, they’re worse than I thought. There’s a jaani in them, but there’s no *thought*. They’ve shattered all our understanding of the separation between jaani and body. I don’t know what they want – shards, I don’t even know *if* they want. Jaan and guul, they both want the body they no longer have. But these – they just attack whatever’s closest and keep going.” She grabbed his wrist. “Be careful.”

Then she was gone, sprinting across the roof like her life depended on it. For once, it probably did. Amastan watched as she leapt the gap between buildings, no hint of hesitation in her stride.

He pulled back the flat door that led into the building and his home below. He usually jumped into the relative darkness, but his still-healing ankle forced him to use the ladder. He stopped by his room to gather his sword and daggers, strapping on a variety of sheathes to hold them all. At the doorway he

hesitated, then went back to pluck a skin of torch oil and his striker from a shelf.

In their family space, his sister Guraya had cracked open the front door and was peering through it. His father sat at the table, resolutely eating a bowl of porridge, his tagel only half on. Another bowl and cup of tea sat abandoned across from him, spoon balanced on its rim.

“Close the door, ‘Raya,” said Amastan.

Guraya turned toward him, but kept a finger between the door and its frame. “Did you see what’s going on? There was screaming.”

“Monsters.”

His father’s laugh started loud, but quickly turned to ash. He set his spoon down. “You’re not kidding.”

“I’m not.”

He reached the door and stared his younger sister down. When she didn’t move, he gently nudged her aside and pulled the door open wider. A scream cut into the room, loud and shrill and much, much too close. Guraya stepped back, eyes wide.

“Stay inside,” said Amastan. “No matter what, don’t go out until I come back.”

“What if you don’t?” asked Guraya, voice small.

Amastan patted her shoulder in what he hoped was a reassuring way and offered a smile. “I will,” and he wasn’t sure if it was a promise or a prayer. He dropped his hand and added, “You’ve got a knife?”

Without breaking eye contact, Guraya tapped the curved dagger at her hip. For once, Amastan understood the family’s insistence on training all of its members to handle a blade, even if most of them would never find out why.

“Good. Don’t let anyone inside. Protect father.” He paused, fighting with how much he could share without frightening his sister. But when he

lifted his gaze and looked at her – really *looked* at her – he didn't see the young girl Guraya always was to him. Instead, he saw the woman she'd become while he'd been busy, the confidence that had filled out her frame and lifted her chin, sharpened her cheeks and brow, but left her round chin and playful eyes untouched. She was still his younger sister, but now that meant she deserved the truth.

“The dead in the crypts are awake and they're attacking anyone who gets close. I'm going to help stop them and put them back where they belong. But until then, you need to keep father safe and inside. Our plan is to keep them from ever getting this far, but if they do: run. You can't fight them; they don't feel pain and they won't die. Do you understand?”

Guraya held his gaze and nodded. Despite everything, Amastan couldn't help but smile. It only lasted a heartbeat, though. He opened the door just wide enough for his wiry frame.

“Keep the door shut and you should be fine. I'll be back.”

Guraya grabbed his hand before he could leave. “That's a promise.”

Amastan put his other hand over hers. “Yes.”

She nodded and let him go. The door shut with a finality that both warmed and chilled him. He turned to the street, which wasn't as empty as it should be. People clustered in doorways, talking in tense whispers and glancing up the street, in the direction of the screams. There were more of those now, and more consistent, but they sounded like screams of fear and panic, not pain. Not yet.

As Amastan neared the bridge, he met a rush of people coming the other direction. They had bottlenecked at the grounding poles on the other side, pushing and shoving against each other in their flight. A few glanced his way as they swarmed past and one even tried to grab him and pull him along, but Amastan ducked out of their grip. Amastan waited impatiently for the

bridge to clear, envious of Menna and his other cousins who could take a different, higher, path. He traced the glass beads at his throat, counting them and hoping that the charms that kept away the madness of jaan might protect him from the bound.

The rush thinned and the bridge emptied. Amastan crossed, painfully aware of the sound of his cane against the wooden slates and how much he still relied on it. The next platform was empty at first, but the screams and yells and occasional, fleshy thud called him down the street toward its center, where he finally found the worst case scenario.

Salid had argued that they should be ready in case the more recently dead were affected by the affliction, but it was Amastan who realized what that meant for the crypts and the marab who tended them. The possibility that *all* of the dead might be affected, and all at once, had occurred to him, but only as an unlikely worst case situation. He'd still planned for the impossibility and now that impossibility greeted him like a nightmare.

Blood smeared the stones. Two people were prone, wraps torn and drenched with blood. The head of the one closer to him was turned too far, eyes staring at nothing. Half a dozen people drifted around the center without any aim or direction, while more stumbled out of an alley that led to a small courtyard. A courtyard that contained this neighborhood's entire crypt.

Most wore gauzy white funeral shrouds, but some wore nothing at all. On these, two parallel dark lines ran up either side of their chest and a third cut low across their belly: sutures from where the marab had opened their bodies and removed organs. They were dead, all of them, and most long dead, their skin sunken and taut, ashy with desiccation. On one corpse, the sutures had loosened and split and now sand leaked from its slowly-deflating gut. The skull of another shown between patches of shriveled skin, shiny white in the sunlight.

A handful of marab were mixed in with the dead, their skin still fresh and their wraps and tagels in place. But their eyes were flat and unseeing, necks at odd angles or ripped out entirely. They were just as dead.

One marabi, however, was not dead. He entered the center at the same time as Amastan, shouting prayers and swinging a smoking censer on a long chain. A handful of bystanders flanked the marabi, brandishing improvised weapons. One had a chair, another a metal pole, and a third gripped a meat cleaver like it was the only thing keeping her from swooning. None of them looked as if they could win in a fair fight, let alone a fight against the dead.

“Get back!” shouted Amastan.

They ignored him. The marabi lunged at his nearest dead colleague, grabbing his arm and shoving the smoking censer under his nose. A living person would have breathed in the smoke and started coughing, recoiling from both. But the dead man reached through the white cloud and grabbed the prayer-sputtering marabi by his tagel, yanked his head down, and bit into his cheek.

The marabi screamed. The people around him yelled. Two dropped their weapons and fled. The third hit the bound repeatedly over the head with their chair. But the bound ignored them and snaked its hands around the marabi’s head. Twisted. The screaming cut off and the marabi went limp. The bound dropped the marabi and stared at the body, as if confused by its silence. The remaining living person dropped their chair, turned, and ran – smack into another bound.

This bound carried a knife, one that he drove into the person’s arm almost incidentally. The person yelled and tried to pull away, but a third bound reached them just as Amastan did and dug grime-encrusted fingernails into their shoulder. Amastan dropped his cane to draw his sword. Even gripping the hilt with both hands, his arms shook under the weight of the blade.

Shards. The healers *had* warned him. A blow to the head didn't heal overnight, or even a week, and this was his body's way of forcing him to rest. Well, he would rest later.

Amastan swung. His blade caught the third bound in the neck. He didn't separate head from shoulders as he'd been planning, but it was still enough to let the living person slip free. A strike that would have killed a living man now had his sword stuck in the bound's neck and did nothing to actually slow the monster.

The bound grabbed Amastan's arm – or would have if it's lunge hadn't been thrown off by the force of a knife hitting its shoulder. The monster whirled with the blow and Amastan stumbled back, out of reach but swordless. He glanced to the rooftop behind, where the knife must have come from. Illi stood at its edge, sighting along a second knife. She threw again and Amastan heard the fleshy *thunk* as it hit something just behind him. She flashed him a tooth-filled grin, a third knife already in hand.

Then her eyes and mouth widened in alarm. Amastan whirled. The first bound missed him by a hair's breadth, but as Amastan tried to avoid its grasping hands, his ankle gave out and he stumbled. Fell. The bound reached, face terrifyingly blank, but just as its fingers grazed his arm, someone slammed into its side and sent it tumbling to the stones. Before the bound could get back up, Dihya was there, bringing her ax down on the bound's neck. The blade bit through skin and bone and muscle, only stopping once it hit the stone beneath.

Dihya kicked the head away, then nodded at Amastan. "You all right?"

Amastan nodded, then glanced around for his cane. Dihya found it first and plucked it from the ground like a flower. She helped Amastan up before pressing the cane back into his hand.

"Thanks," said Amastan.

“Can’t have our leader without a weapon.”

The bound Amastan had attempted to behead rushed them both, Amastan’s sword still stuck in its neck. Before Amastan could even choke out a warning, Dihya had grabbed the sword hilt. She set her foot against the bound’s chest, then yanked and kicked at the same time, freeing the sword and sending the bound sprawling. The stitching across its chest broke and sand burst out, cascading down its front like so much sanitized blood. Despite that, the bound kept coming. Dihya casually kicked it back down again.

She considered the struggling bound for a moment, then held Amastan’s sword out to him, hilt-first. “So. These are the bound. They’re not as strong as I expected.”

Amastan took the sword and sheathed it. “It’s not their strength that makes them dangerous. They don’t feel pain. They don’t respond like we’ve been trained to expect. If you attack them, they won’t flinch or recoil or even stop. They just keep coming. The key to fighting them is remembering all of that. But we’re not here to fight them, not yet.”

“Yeah, yeah. Containment first.” Dihya kicked the bound down again, then followed through with an ax through its neck. This time, it didn’t get back up. “See: I *was* paying attention at the meeting.”

“At least one of you were.” Amastan glanced around. Illi had disappeared from the rooftop. “Where are the others?”

“Ziri’s just down the road on the opposite side of the platform, enlisting help in building a barricade like you’d said. Illi’s was on her way to find our watchmen, see if any of them will get their hands dirty for once. Tamella’s around here somewhere – she and Usaten were going to start another barricade, once I cleared out any survivors. I didn’t expect that to include you.”

“Thank you,” said Amastan, despite the dig.

Dihya wiped the gore from her ax as a fresh surge of bound approached the center from the alley. “Dust and sand, there sure are a lot of them, huh. I thought you said we’d only have a dozen to deal with.”

Amastan swallowed. “I’d hoped so. But there was always a slim possibility that all of the corpses would be affected.”

“All of them... what about the other neighborhoods, ‘Stan?”

“No reports so far.”

Dihya gave him a gentle push. “I’ll hold these little guys off. Go find Ziri and make sure he’s actually constructing a barricade and not a welcoming gate. You know him and fine details.”

Amastan didn’t, but Dihya and Ziri had been close long enough that he knew she did. Beyond Dihya, the bound were amassing, almost as if they did share a few grains of strategy between them. More were still pushing forward from the back of the alley. There were so many of them, and this was only one crypt’s worth.

Even staring forward at the sun-bleached walls, Amastan could see the rows and rows of dark tombs that lined the walls of the crypts. If all of the dead in the crypt for this neighborhood had been affected, that would easily mean over a hundred bound, plus the marab that had attended them and any bystanders.

The marab –

A shape moved on the ground near Dihya’s feet. Amastan shouted a warning as the marabi with the censer surged to his feet and rushed Dihya. The speed of the attack was captivatingly unnatural. A living, breathing person would have taken some time in getting to their feet, would have been briefly disoriented upon attaining it. Even a trained cousin would have paused long enough to get their bearing. But this bound simply *went*.

Dihya barely caught it with the flat of her ax. It forced her back one step, then another. This bound was too close for her to kick or otherwise force some distance, so she kept blocking. Amastan lifted his sword, willing his arms to stop shaking. But before he could commit, Tamella landed on the stones and swept her short sword through the neck of the marabi. His body fell like a dropped sack of grain.

Tamella faced the oncoming bound while standing shoulder to shoulder with Dihya. “Azulay’s got one of the roads blocked already, but he could use some direction. We will keep these creatures occupied until all the barricades are up.”

“You can’t fight them all,” warned Amastan.

Tamella swept out the feet of an oncoming bound, sending it toppling and throwing off the bound behind it. “Then you’d better get working on those barricades.”

Amastan started to protest, but cut himself off. She was right. This was his plan, the one he’d pieced together in the confines of his bedroom before presenting it to a packed room of cousins. Despite all of that work, he couldn’t help but feel a bit useless when it came to a real fight; he’d only endanger those around him. But he could coddle his pride later. For now, he had a situation to control.

Azulay had just finished reinforcing his barricade with a spare table when Amastan arrived. He lazily pressed his fist to his heart before leading Amastan to the next road, where Ziri was dragging a metal chest through a doorway, tossing reassurances to someone inside.

“Yes, yes, I’ll return it as soon as we’re done here. Please – just stay inside.” He turned as they approached, the breadth of him blocking any light that filtered out of the building. “Az’, help me with this, will you?”

Together, Azulay and Ziri carried the chest to the mouth of the road and wedged it into a growing barricade already made up of a mad assortment of chairs and tables. Amastan stood and watched, too aware of the warm handle of his cane under one palm and the dull pain just under the surface of his ankle and arm, ready to flare up as soon as he put any weight on them. From the other side of the barrier came the thud and crack and occasional exhilarated laugh as Tamella and Dihya kept the bound from escaping before the barrier was finished.

Ziri brushed his hands off on his wrap and examined his work. "Yeah. Looks good."

Azulay gave Amastan a lazy grin. "What's next, chief?"

Amastan frowned. "Don't call me that. I'm not a drum chief." He glanced around. "We need to block all the roads out of the circle. We can't risk any bound escaping. How many are left?"

"Az' and me both got one," said Ziri. "Hamma and Yaluz were on the east side. If they also got two, plus this one, then that leaves the alley to the crypt and the road south, the one with the bridge."

"We don't need to worry about the crypt just yet," said Amastan. "Barricade the south road and then let's get Dihya and Tamella out of there."

"Got it, sa." Azulay gave a mocking bow then laughed at Amastan's frown. "Cheer up, 'Stan. We've got this."

Amastan wished he could share Azulay's confidence. He trailed behind. The other two turned the corner just ahead before he did. He only caught a few phrases of an exchange before Illi stepped into view, a watchman on her heels.

"I brought you one," said Illi brightly.

The watchman straightened, one hand on the hilt of her sword, even as her gaze lingered a moment too long on Amastan's cane. "I hear you're in charge of this operation, sa?"

"Ma." Amastan pressed his fist to his chest. "How many watchmen do you have?"

"Five, sa. I can pull more from the neighboring stations if needed."

Amastan glanced over his shoulder at the barricade. "That won't be necessary. They might be needed in their own neighborhoods, if they aren't being called on already. While this is the first crypt to exhibit signs of reanimation, it won't be the last."

"You're saying there will be more, sa?"

Amastan sighed and itched at the salt crusting his elbow. "We need to be prepared, yes. In the meantime, I need three of your watchmen to stay here and help keep things calm while we clean up. Your other two can head north to alert the neighborhoods there. I'll send a runner, too—" he glanced at Illi, who straightened, "—but the drum chiefs may not appreciate the gravity of our situation unless they hear it from a watchman."

"I understand all too well, sa."

"Good. After you send those two north, meet me at the southern bridge with the rest of your watchmen, ma. I want to tell them myself what must happen next."

The watchman pressed her fist to her chest, then turned and left. Illi rocked up and down on her heels, expectant. Amastan flicked a hand in a dismissive gesture; that was all she needed. Illi was off and running, bare feet silent across worn stone, her braids a tightly-contained bundle that hardly moved.

Once alone, all Amastan wanted to do was sink to the ground and close his eyes until this all passed, like a scared child. But the faces pressed to

windows and peeking around doors kept him upright, the weight of their expectations adding to the weight on his shoulders. Some were weary, others worn, but all were watching. Waiting.

Amastan tightened his grip on his cane and straightened. "Stay inside."

Then he started walking. It didn't matter where, not at first, but he realized he'd had a plan regardless when he reached another barricade. Moments later, Tamella and Dihya climbed over, sweaty and sticky with old blood, but grinning and unhurt. Amastan stood with both hands on his cane and waited. Their grins faded as they noticed him.

"Barricades are all up," said Dihya. "None of those monsters made it out of the center."

"Well," said Yaluz, sauntering around the corner with Hamma just behind. "One did. But we got it." She patted the hilt of her short sword, then grinned up at Amastan, all teeth. "What now?"

Amastan didn't move. "Let's wait for the others."

The others came a few minutes later, Azulay and Ziri just as light-hearted as the rest. That left just Menna and Usaten, but if they were following his plan, they were keeping watch from the roof. Amastan's gut tightened with anticipation and unease at what came next. All at once he became aware of the silence in the alley, on the platform, across what felt like the whole of Ghadid. Six cousins and everyone waiting on *him*.

It was fine. It would be fine. Everything was going according to the plan.

"First," he said, drawing a breath with the word, "we behead them."

Azulay slapped the flat of his machete across his palm. "Easy."

"Not without me."

The weight of so many gazes lifted from Amastan to fix on the rooftop just beyond him instead. Menna slid elegantly over the side and shimmied

down the wall like it had been made for her. She dropped the last few feet and touched her fist to her chest.

“Reporting for duty. Sa.” She dropped her fist, a mocking grin on her face. “Oh don’t look so glum, ’Stan. Usaten’s got the roofs. None of those monsters are going to get out. Not before we can get ‘em. Good work on the barricades, everyone.” She glanced around the circle of cousins. “There’re – what – several dozen of them and eight of us?”

“Make that several dozen, *dozen*,” corrected Azulay. “The whole crypt is coming out for the party.”

Menna bared her teeth in a wide grin. “Good.”

“I mean, there has to be over a hundred of those dead things,” Azulay said, this time more slowly.

“I understood that the first time, thanks.”

Azulay widened his eyes at Amastan and tapped his forehead in the Azali sign of *are they sane?* But Amastan ignored him.

“All right,” said Amastan. “Remember they don’t feel pain. Go for the head and stay out of reach. They’re strong and they’re fast and they don’t react if you hit them, so don’t bother trying to wear them down or distract them – go straight for the kill.” He pulled in a breath, feeling as useless as his ankle. “Be careful.”

“We got it, sa,” said Menna cheerfully.

Amastan watched his cousins – his friends, his *family* – climb over the barricade. Tamella was last. She paused long enough to meet Amastan’s gaze. Nodded. Then she, too, was gone.

With all his plans in motion and nothing left to do, Amastan leaned against the barrier, waited, and listened. At first, there was only the *thud* and *thwack* as his cousins did their job, broken up by the occasional verbal jab

between them. Then all chatter died away completely, leaving only the rhythm of the cleanup and his imagination to fill in the rest.

He should be in there. He was a cousin. They needed every spare hand. But even as agitation set him to movement, the memory of his shaking arm, unable to even hold a sword, filled him with fresh shame. On the other side of that barrier, everyone was helping. Everyone but him.

His gaze fell on his cane, bearing the weight of his anger and frustration. Then he leaned the cane against a table and climbed up the barrier until he could see over. It took him a breathless moment to make sense of the chaos, to sort the living from the bound. A third of the bound were already headless, bodies like stones cast across the street. He counted and counted again just to be sure. His cousins were all there. They were still standing.

They were enjoying themselves, even as sweat made wrap and tagel stick to their bodies and weariness ate at their movements. They'd divided the bound into groups and were systematically hacking through them. As Amastan watched, Azulay kicked a head toward Ziri, who barely missed tripping over it. Ziri shot him a glare, but Azulay only laughed and blew a kiss.

One by one, they cut through the bound until the only things still moving were his cousins. The ground was littered with torsos and heads, like a child had upended an extremely morbid puzzle. Few bled. Most of the dead had been dry, old corpses months or years into their deaths. These dribbled sand from the burst bladders that had filled their empty chests. A few pools of blood had been left behind by the marab and the handful of citizens who hadn't listened.

As his cousins circled the containment zone and checked their work, Menna broke away and climbed Amastan's barricade, straddling the top so that her legs hung on either side, kicking freely.

“What’s next, ’Stan? Are the watchmen going to help move the corpses back into the crypt? If not, you might want to give us a few hours to rest. Wholesale slaughter is one thing, clean up another.”

Amastan shook his head. “They’re not going back into the crypt.”

Menna turned her whole gaze on him, lips pursed into a tight frown. “Where the shards else are we gonna put them? I don’t think the drum chiefs will like it if you shove the corpses into the glasshouses. Plus, it’s not very healthy.”

“They’re not going in the glasshouses. They’re not going anywhere.”

Menna’s frown deepened. “They’re a bunch of headless corpses. They’re not going to hurt anyone any time soon.”

“We can’t be sure.”

“They aren’t going to get *more* dead,” said Menna. “The only thing you could still do is burn them and, well, that would obviously be wrong, so you... wouldn’t...” Menna narrowed her eyes. “You *wouldn’t*.”

Amastan started pulling himself up the side of the barrier. “I’m going to take a look.”

“*Stan*.”

But he was already climbing the barricade. Amastan carefully lowered himself down, then picked his way through the puddles of fresh blood and thickened ichor. According to Salid, whatever was creating the bound wasn’t transmitted through blood or saliva, like most diseases, but Amastan wasn’t prepared to test that theory. Still, that left them with little understanding of how it *was* transmitted. No one had touched the slave and the marab who had died and reanimated certainly couldn’t have been affected by the en-marabi, at least not directly.

Not unless they were *all* affected.

Amastan wasn't ready to confront those implications, but he'd have to figure it out before this happened again.

Because it *would* happen again. There were eleven more crypts.

His cousins were scattered around the center, keeping an eye on the unmoving bodies while cleaning their weapons. A quick glance reassured him that none of them had been hurt. *Risking their lives while you stayed safe on the other side of the barricade*, a voice hissed in his head. He touched his charms, but they were no warmer than usual. It had no jaani, only his own voice.

He tightened his grip on his cane. "Pile the bodies in the center."

Dihya finished wiping the blood from her ax with a black cloth, which she shoved through her belt before considering the nearest corpse. With a huff and a nod, she wrapped her arms beneath its, bent her knees, and heaved until the corpse was half off the ground. She began dragging it to the center of the barricaded area.

"Stan."

Amastan heard Menna's feet hit the ground behind him but he didn't turn. "What would you do?"

"Their jaan are still tethered," said Menna, her voice low enough to stay between them, but every word carefully pronounced with concern. "If you burn the bodies, you're going to release their jaan. *All* of their jaan. You know what happened the last time there were wild jaan in the city, and that was only three. Doing this – you'll release *hundreds*."

Amastan swallowed; he knew too well. He and Menna both had watched a wild jaani burn a man alive from the inside out. But that had been almost a decade ago and he knew Menna had been searching for a better way to contain wild jaan.

"What would you do?" repeated Amastan.

“They’re already headless. What do you think they’re going to do? We just put them back in their tombs.”

“Then what?” pressed Amastan.

Between all the other preparations, he’d spent much of the past week trying to trace this thread to a different end, but the conclusion was always the same – a head ultimately didn’t matter when the body was bound to its jaan. He could be missing something vital about the way jaan worked, though. If anyone knew another way, it would be Menna.

“Then...well, nothing.”

“What about their jaan?”

“The marab will continue to quiet them.” Menna frowned. “You can’t possibly think they’re still dangerous.”

“They left the crypts once. What will stop them from leaving again?”

“In case you haven’t noticed, ’Stan, they’re *headless*.”

“Before that, they were dead.”

Menna opened her mouth, but nothing came out. After a moment, she closed her mouth and glared instead. The small thread of hope Amastan hadn’t even realized he’d been clinging to slipped from his grasp with a sickening wrench.

“We don’t know enough about what’s happening,” said Amastan. “We don’t yet understand *how* it started. But now we know at least one thing: the dead in our city are being bound to their jaan and forced awake again. It happened to the recently dead first and now it’s happening to all our dead. It started in this crypt and we have no reason to think it will stop here. We don’t know what’s going to happen next, but it’s safest to assume that losing a limb – even if it’s their head – won’t stop them for long.”

“But that’s impossible. This is all impossible. Once the body dies, it can’t be brought back to life. That’s why wild jaan attack the living, not corpses.”

“But guul do.”

Menna grimaced. “These aren’t guul. They *can’t* be. They’re not strong enough. Most should be too weak to even possess a body, let alone move it.”

“But they do,” said Amastan. “They are. The en-marabi is using a technique that allows the jaan to possess their *own* bodies. Salid thinks that’s why they’re so strong.”

“And... that’s why they don’t burn up.” Menna rubbed her forehead. “It’s the same reason why our jaan don’t destroy us when we’re alive; they’re *ours*. There’s no mismatch. If the body were alive and bound like this, they wouldn’t go insane. They wouldn’t die, either. They’d be immortal.” She dropped her hand and stared at Amastan. “That’s what this en-marabi wants, isn’t it?”

“Salid said there’d been experiments,” said Amastan slowly. “It started with marks written on the skin of the dead. That’s what we saw, before...” But he couldn’t finish his sentence. Before Thana left, before he’d broken his ankle, before they’d failed. He swallowed his rising guilt. It’d only get in his way. “The en-marabi has gone beyond that. There’s some other way he must be controlling them now, making them. Something that doesn’t leave a mark and can affect a lot more people.”

“Like a disease. Or a poison.”

“Maybe.” Amastan shook his head. “But how could he have reached all of the corpses in the crypts? I only planned for this because we had to prepare for the worst, but I don’t know *how* he’s doing any of it. How would he distribute a poison to all of them? It’s not like they eat or drink. They...” he trailed off as all the color left Menna’s face. “Menna?”

She covered her mouth with one hand as if she were fighting back the urge to retch. “Oh. Oh G-d.”

“What? What is it?” Amastan glanced around, bringing up his cane as if he could even fight, but none of the corpses were moving.

Menna’s smile was bright and sudden and exactly as if she’d just swallowed a mouthful of bile. “Nothing. I just... it was a thought. But it’s nothing. There’s something we could do about the jaan though. Maybe. It’s too early for them to cross over. They’re just too strong and there’s too many of them and none of our rituals can safely account for either of those. But... they haven’t untethered yet. There’s a ritual we can perform. But – G-d, we’re talking over a hundred jaan here. Over a hundred *people*. If I do this, we’ll lose them to the Wastes and they’ll never be able to cross over. It’s blasphemy.”

“What would you do?” repeated Amastan for a third time, his voice as sharp as his blade.

Menna was silent. Together, they watched Ziri drag the last corpse to the top of the pile. They’d worked together once, Ziri and Menna. It’d been Menna’s last contract.

“It’s too late for these people,” said Amastan. “The least we can do is make certain it doesn’t happen again.” He caught and held Menna’s gaze. “Please. I’m going to need your help.” He reached out, palm up and waiting. “Just like old times?”

She didn’t take his hand, but she met his gaze and her shoulders softened. “We don’t have enough water to do what we did last time.” She sighed and glanced at the cloudless sky. “No convenient storm in sight.” She gave an odd, hitched laugh. “Doing this... they’ll take my marabi wrap away. You would ask me to give that up, too?”

“You’re saving the city. You’re doing your job. They can’t fault you for that.”

“Yeah? Which job?”

“Both.”

Menna shook her head. “I haven’t had a contract in years. But you know that.”

“Once a cousin, always a cousin.”

“Right.” But she didn’t sound convinced.

Menna traced her hand along her belt, pausing over each pouch. Even though Menna wasn’t technically an assassin any more, her belt wasn’t that different from Amastan’s. They both had knives, waterskins, oil, and sand.

Menna sighed, but when she took Amastan’s hand, it was with surprising strength. “This ritual will be simpler. For one, we don’t need to create a seal because these jaan are still tethered. For another, they’re not wild, so we don’t need a storm’s worth of water.” She squeezed his hand. “I’ll need more marab, oil, charcoal, and several sheets of vellum.”

She let go and stepped back, but when Amastan didn’t move, she clapped loudly. “Well, what are you waiting for? If we’re going to commit blasphemy, let’s do it right.”

The Third Wave

It was exactly like talking to a wall, if that wall had eyes. Amastan stood at the Circle's center, trying to guess at the expressions obscured by tagels. Each drum chief wore theirs high, colorful fabric concealing everything but a narrow swath of skin around their eyes. They sat with legs tucked under and hands in their laps, so still that they could have been statues.

Those statues watched him, silent and inscrutable, as he finished explaining what he'd done – and why. The *why* was more important than the what, because the *what* had all but dragged him here at the hands of several watchmen, had put him on this trial, could see him executed. The *why* might save the city, if he could only explain it perfectly.

Amastan folded his hands in front of him, wrist gripping wrist, his explanation fading into a silence as impenetrable as stone. Fabric rustled as the drum chiefs shifted. When one finally spoke, it was as if someone had dropped their kettle in the street.

“What is your profession, sa?”

The voice that asked was rasping and thin and it took another moment for Amastan to pinpoint its source: Drum Chief Ilatig, wearing a yellow wrap rimmed in flames embroidered with black and blue thread. Ilatig was the eldest drum chief and by far the most traditional.

“Historian,” said Amastan, trying to imbue the single word with more importance than he felt.

Drum Chief Ilatig leaned forward. “And what training, pray tell, does a historian have in the matter of jaan? Why does a marabi not stand before us with these explanations?”

“You only accused me, sai.”

“From your own account, you were the one who gave the order.” Ilatig spread his hands, the ends of his sleeves brushing across his knees. “But you have no expertise in this matter. Why should we believe you?”

“Because I’m a historian, sai,” said Amastan. “This has happened before.”

“When?” pressed Ilatig. “Where? And why haven’t we heard about it?”

“Several centuries ago, in a village outside of Na Tay Khet—”

But Ilatig waved a hand dismissively. “Long ago and far away. You will excuse us if we require more evidence than centuries-old hearsay to excuse such blasphemies.”

“You saw the evidence with your own eyes.” Amastan’s fingers tightened around his wrists, yearning for the comforting wood of his cane. “Our own dead woke and attacked us. Their jaan have been bound to their bodies, something only an en-marabi can do. Something only an en-marabi has ever done, *once*, which is why we must look to past events—”

“Yes, yes,” interrupted a second drum chief, her voice a snap across the room. No one moved, but Amastan recognized that voice all on its own: Drum Chief Basil. “So you said. But you’re forgetting: what we saw were walking corpses. That oddity alone doesn’t excuse such blasphemy as beheading and burning the bodies before the seven-year rite. You have ripped the possibility of peace and an afterlife from countless of our own – our mothers, our fathers, our children and friends – and you stand here before us claiming that this is all the work of a monster that we tell our children about to keep them in line?” Her words gradually sharpened until they were a knife at Amastan’s throat, even though she hadn’t moved. “What can you possibly say to justify your actions?”

Amastan swallowed, his chest filling with a paralyzing cold. His ankle had begun to ache from being forced to stand so long, but he’d left his cane at

home so he would appear stronger, more reliable. That had been a mistake.

He'd avoided any mention of his first run-in with the en-marabi and the dead that wouldn't die, how he'd broken his ankle in the first place. He hadn't wanted to risk lying; unlike Thana, he was very bad at it. If only she were here instead. She was better at the people part of things than he, and even a roomful of upset drum chiefs couldn't shake her confidence.

The shadows behind the sitting drum chiefs that had been stuffy with old tapestries and flickering firelight shifted. Moved. Coalesced into another person, this one with hair recently shorn close, her wrap a muted green, and a teasing smirk on her lips: Thana. Amastan wasn't sure if she was an apparition or hallucination, but even the ghost of her presence loosened the fear in his chest.

Thana rolled her eyes skyward and pressed her fingers against the bridge of her nose. *G-d save us from these insufferable gnats*, she said, lips never moving. *How'd you get yourself into this mess*, 'Stan? *Oh right – me*. She dropped her hands and flashed him a reassuring smile. *You're doing fine. You don't have to lie – just tell them a version of the truth. What you think is your weakness is your strength*.

Amastan blinked and Thana was gone, nothing left of her but the shadows that still looked vaguely person-shaped. His eyes itched; the watchmen had summoned him at dawn after he'd been up most of the night helping with the fires. Soot stained his hands like blood and his body ached with exhaustion. It was no surprise he was starting to see things. But – *a version of the truth...*

Amastan looked at the drum chiefs and took a breath. "A few weeks ago, I saw a man fall from the second floor of Idir's inn and get back up, completely unhurt. Then he attacked me."

He sketched out a truth that was close enough to his real experiences and what Thana had told him that it didn't feel like a lie. It was true, after all,

that he'd escaped the man who had attacked him, but he'd been hurt. The rest became simple substitutions: instead of Thana going to the healers and finding similar monsters, it had been him. Instead of Thana talking to Salid and learning about the men's true nature, he had learned the terrible truth.

"...the charm maker recognized the marks in the men's skin," said Amastan. "He'd seen the same thing in a history about en-marab. When he looked into it, he discovered that those marks had been created by a specific en-marabi, a man who had performed both similar and far worse atrocities. When Drum Chief Yugten's slave woke after her death, we realized either that this en-marabi was somehow, impossibly, alive or someone was copying his work. Either way, we knew we had to be prepared."

"For what?" pressed Drum Chief Basil.

"The en-marabi's work had a clear progression," said Amastan. "We've already seen the crude markings on the flesh of men, and the slave was the first instance of an unmarked victim. According to history, the next step was an entire village emptied of its people. So we met and we planned and we realized that if the dead are a danger, then the crypts would need to be contained at some point. Honestly, none of us thought it would be so soon, nor all of them at once."

"A historian and a charm maker," mused Basil.

"So you stopped these 'bound'," said Ilatig. "And you may have saved our city – I'll grant you that. But your blasphemy still stands. The jaan of those dead are now lost and they will never be able to cross over. How can you justify depriving the dead of their right to peace?"

"We cannot risk that they will attack again—"

"They're *dead*."

"Yes, and these were the same dead that the marab had been quieting for weeks or months or even years. Yet that didn't keep them from climbing

out of their tombs and their crypt and killing marab and attacking citizens. Decapitation stopped them in the moment, but would you risk Ghadid on the assumption that it will stop them forever? We still haven't found who is causing this, let alone what."

"And," crackled another voice from the side, "I assume you are in charge of finding this perpetrator, too."

Amastan didn't need to turn to know Drum Chief Yugten had spoken, the oldest and most respected drum chief in the Circle. "Yes."

"That then, is precisely the problem," continued Yugten, his voice like dry leaves rasping in an off-season glasshouse "It is not your place to 'save' our city, interpreting that as you see fit. You will only cause more harm. You are here to answer for your crimes, not decide our future actions."

Amastan grit his teeth. "Then hopefully you will decide the correct future actions. Our city – our *lives* – depend on it. This crypt was the first and it will not be the last."

Several drum chiefs whispered behind his back while the ones before him shifted uneasily. One tilted their head, considering him anew. Amastan bore their gazes better than he bore their questions, but the silence didn't last long enough.

"What will happen next?" asked Basil.

Amastan let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. "Ideally? Nothing. If we are lucky, that crypt was the first and last. If we are blessed by G-d, then that was the last we'll see of the bound. Unfortunately, there is every reason to suspect that will not be the last. The other crypts will rise and we will need to be prepared for them. We will need to undertake the same extreme measures. And even then, we don't know who – or what – is behind all this. And until we do, we will remain in danger. We must remain vigilant." Amastan paused to take a breath and his bearings. When no one shouted their

indignation, he pressed on. “I didn’t come here today just to answer your summons, sai. I came to ask for your support. For Ghadid’s support. If this spreads to the other crypts, we will need to work together like never before.”

“And what, exactly, are you asking for?” asked Ilatig, voice cold.

Amastan hesitated, his gaze slipping between the sitting drum chiefs to the back wall. But this time, Thana didn’t appear. This wasn’t her fight.

“Until we figure out how the threat is spread, we will need to monitor the rest of the crypts closely. We’ll need watchmen patrols to spot potential incidents before they escalate. We’ll need weapons. Every citizen should be armed.” Murmuring broke out anew among the drum chiefs. Amastan raised his voice and kept going. “More important than any of that, we’ll need to follow a new protocol for handling the recently deceased. The marab must sever the head and burn the body immediately after death. Ideally, we’ll do the same to the other crypts before they have a chance to rise. With the time that will give us, the marab will need to get to work on creating a cure. If, and only if, we do all of that, then we will have nothing to fear. Sai.”

Each moment that the silence lasted stretched Amastan’s remaining nerves to their breaking point. Finally, the drum chiefs shifted and Ilatig said, “You are asking us to commit nothing less than blasphemy on the slight chance that there will be more of these... bound, did you call them? But you said yourself that you can’t be sure any of these dire things you’ve outlined will come to be. Meanwhile, what you ask of us will only make our people angry. If you believe someone is behind these blasphemous deeds, why not use our scant resources to find them instead?”

Because my cousin is already hunting them across the sands, thought Amastan. Out loud, he said, “We’re looking, sai, but the likelihood that we’ll find the culprit before they strike again is low. Everything indicates that another crypt

will be affected soon, if it hasn't happened while we waste words. We need to prepare for what is coming *now*, before it's too late."

"You speak of armed guards, shuttered trade, and forcing our marab to commit blasphemy," said Basil carefully, calmly. "Do you have any idea how this will make us look, sa?"

"After what happened last night, you will look in control of an otherwise uncontrollable situation. But only if you follow every precaution." Amastan shifted his weight, trying to lessen the throbbing pain in his ankle. "Ghadid isn't stupid. They know something is wrong. By acting decisively, you'll maintain trust. But if you falter and let this happen again—"

A new voice cut him off, this one crisp and clear. "We've heard enough, sa. It's time for us to deliberate. Watchmen, escort the accused outside and hold him until we've made our decision."

Two watchmen grabbed Amastan's arms. Amastan didn't try to resist, but said, "There's no need to hold me, sai. I'll wait peacefully."

A chuckle cracked like knuckles and Amastan pinpointed the drum chief it was coming from: one wearing an orange tagel, laced with turquoise. Drum Chief Talal.

"In case you've forgotten, you *are* on trial for blasphemy, the penalty for which is death." Talal's eyes caught the torchlight, their flames dancing in his eyes like delight. "So forgive us if we take precautions against you running."

"I won't run, sai," said Amastan. "Because if you don't act, there won't be anywhere to run *to*."

*

In the end, the Circle acquitted Amastan of blasphemy.

They also agreed to increase watchmen patrols and ready some to assist the marab in the event of another crypt uprising. But they stopped well short of taking any meaningful precautions or authorizing the blasphemous practices Amastan had insisted on. It was nowhere near enough, but after being forced to stand outside the Circle's meeting room for several hours while the drum chiefs debated his future and the city's, it had been more that Amastan had expected.

It was on him and his cousins now more than ever to make sure it was enough.

In the following week, the rest of the dead woke. With the watchmen helping, it became almost routine to block the streets and dispatch the bound. But they were stopped short of burning the bodies. For every corpse returned to its tomb, Amastan's anxiety ratcheted up higher. So, too, did his determination to find the cause of this and, if possible, a cure.

He spent his waking hours with the charm maker, combing through the books Salid had and the books he'd borrowed and the books he'd "found." He would have spent more time with Menna, but his closest cousin shoed him away every time he stopped by her small, one-room home, a feverish intensity to her gaze and her wrap increasingly disorganized and dirty. During one brief visit, there were brownish red spatters dried on her gray sleeves – blood, if he hadn't known better.

Then, one day, the strained quiet that had filled the city since the first crypt had emptied cracked. The blood and soot was scrubbed from the stones, the barricades dismantled. People began to leave their homes. Another week, and it was as if the attacks had never happened. In two, Ghadid pulsed again with its healthy rhythm.

Even the dread that had gripped Amastan's heart for those first few days, that first week, began to ease. He had more good days when he barely

needed his cane than not. His dizziness and fatigue faded and, even though Dihya still refused to spare with him, he could hold a sword without shaking.

It was enough to give him hope. Enough to make him wonder if the drum chiefs had been right, if he had been too careful, too paranoid.

At night, he sat on a roof at the eastern edge of the city and watched the first edges of dusk thicken fully into night, as the unwavering stretch of sand faded from pale brown to gray to black. He watched and he waited.

Thana was out there, somewhere. She should have reached Na Tay Khet by now. If all had gone well, she'd finished her contract and was already on her way back. Amastan smiled. The stories she'd have when she returned. And she *would* return.

He just had to keep Ghadid safe until then.

*

In the end, it wasn't enough.

They came at dusk. Amastan sat on the roof's edge as he'd been doing for the last two weeks, watching the pylons' shadows stretch further and further with the setting sun. A twitch of movement to the north caught his attention. As the light faded from the world, he stared and what he'd hoped he'd seen, what he'd dreaded, and willed the sands to give up their secret.

They came together like spilled sand: a mass of scuttling shadows scrambling across the sands like too many large ants. Hope spiked in his chest: a caravan? But the movement was too chaotic and caravans never arrived after dusk.

The hope fled, replaced by a growing dread. The shadows crept closer, their numbers easily in the dozens, with however many more hidden by the darkness. They didn't approach from the east as a caravan might, either, nor

the west as the Azali would, but from the northwest – from the direction of the other cities in the Crescent.

Amastan felt the world drop away. He'd planned for everything, every contingency, every possibility... but this. They'd been so focused on the danger within their own walls and crypts, they'd never once thought to reach out to the other cities.

Amastan slipped from the roof with as much grace as he could muster. He picked up his cane that he'd leaned against the wall and half walked, half shuffled as quickly as he could. It still took him longer than he'd like to walk several neighborhoods and arrive at the too-familiar red door. He took a moment to gather his breath, ignoring the stitch shooting pain up his side.

He was struck by a strong sense of déjà vu as he lifted his fist to knock. The last time he'd searched out this particular door after sunset, he'd found a body.

He knocked. The door swung open immediately and Tamella peered at him, her expression grim.

"It's happening," he said.

"Can't you come to me with something positive, for once?" Tamella shook her head. "Which neighborhood?"

"They're not in Ghadid."

Tamella pursed her lips. "Amastan," she said with a note of warning.

"They're coming across the sands, but they'll be here soon."

Amastan stepped past her and into the familiar space beyond. The room smelled of old vellum, dust, and dried ink: a safety and past he ached for. Barag sat at his table on the side of the room claimed by shelves upon shelves of scrolls. He was watching Amastan with ink-stained fingers and a pen still in hand and weariness visible despite his tagel.

Next to the hearth stood a girl, her braids just brushing her shoulders. The firelight on her face and her overly serious expression sent a shock of cold through Amastan's chest and across his skin. For a second, two moments over a decade apart overlapped and then only one remained and Amastan could breathe again, could pick out the differences in height, in dress, in posture.

In another moment, this girl looked nothing like his memory of Thana. For one, her braids were longer, tied back with a length of green ribbon that matched her wrap. For another, her features were rounder, more youthful, her skin several shades darker and her nose sharper. But her eagerness was the same.

"Illi," said Tamella. "Go. Tell everyone to meet here."

"And run as fast as you can," added Amastan.

Illi gave Amastan a withering look, but placed her fist over her heart. Then she was gone, slipping through the door like a gust of wind. Tamella pulled a chair from Barag's side of the room to the hearth and settled in, sliding a dagger from its sheathe to let it dangle between her legs.

"You'd better be wrong."

"I hope so."

Tamella studied her blade, turning it this way and that. "The sands. What does that mean – that they're coming from the iluk caravans?"

"The other cities," said Amastan. "We should have realized we weren't the only ones affected. If they didn't know about the crypts..." He trailed off, unable to give voice to the too-real fear clawing at his throat.

"They wouldn't have known what was going on, not in time to stop it," finished Tamella. "They'd have been overwhelmed. Let enough of those things loose in a city and eventually there would be too many of them to win. No one would survive." She tapped the blade against her knee, then straightened and pointed it at Amastan. "They can't get up here. They can't climb cables."

“I don’t know what they can’t do,” said Amastan. “I think we should assume the worst.”

“We can secure the carriages.”

“We need to do more than that. We’ve got to barricade the carriage stations, block them off completely. Then we’ll take them as they come up.”

“What *is* this, Amastan?” asked Tamella, her sand-pale eyes boring into him. “Is this what you let my daughter tackle alone?”

“No. This is worse.”

The door slammed open and Menna stumbled into the room. She gave them an apologetic half-smile, then carefully shut the door. She wore her marabi gray, but her belt held a long sword, two daggers, and several leather pouches. A wildness whirled about her, a barely contained excitement that made Amastan wary.

Menna crossed to the hearth and poured herself a cup of tea. “What’s the plan, ‘Stan?”

“I’ll explain once everyone gets here.”

Menna shrugged and leaned against the wall while Tamella spun her dagger, staring into space. Thankfully, they didn’t have long to wait.

Ziri arrived next, his large ax strapped across his back, a half dozen daggers hanging off his belt. Dihya and Azulay walked through the door within seconds of each other and immediately began trading verbal jabs. Usaten slipped in after them, long and lean and silent as a cat. Hamma sauntered in a few minutes later, her unstrung bow under her arm and a quiver of arrows slung over her shoulder. Yaluz was at her elbow, a whetstone in one hand and a curved sickle in the other, her lips pressed tight as she focused on sharpening while she walked.

Last came Illi, out of breath and a sheen of sweat across her brow that was half dry by the time she reached the hearth.

His cousins gathered around the hearth, a fresh pot of tea already steeping. Barag had joined them, bringing as many cups as he could carry. Amastan took his cousins in, a full range of generations and ages. Aside from Tamella, Azulay and Dihya were the eldest; it felt like ages ago since the three of them had trained together. Ziri, Hamma, and Yaluz were all Thana's generation, so recently turned assassins that they hardly had any blood under their fingernails. Usaten and Illi were the youngest and both still years away from their tests.

For a moment he was tempted to send Usaten and Illi away, to keep them safe. But even young, they were more capable than watchmen, and Amastan would need every pair of hands that could be spared. Besides, he wouldn't be able to guarantee anyone's safety if they didn't act and act fast.

Ten pairs of eyes watched him, waiting. Ten people who trusted that he had a plan. Ten cousins who believed he could stop this, fix it, save them.

Amastan's fingers tightened around his cane. Doubt swept through him, catching and tossing away the words he'd planned. How could they count on him when he couldn't even fight? When he'd walked into a contract so unprepared that he'd been pulled out with a broken ankle and arm?

He wished Thana was there. She was the leader they needed, not him. But she wasn't and he was all they were going to get. He closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he'd found his words.

"Ghadid is under attack."

*

There were more than a half dozen carriage stations, but Amastan didn't want to risk spreading their already thin force any thinner. So he sent his cousins out in groups of two and three. They would just have to be quick.

Amastan went with Tamella and Illi to a station on the eastern edge. He didn't know what to expect when they reached the station. Would there be nothing at all, because they'd been quick enough or because he'd overreacted? Or would the platform be overrun, swarming with the bound? He steeled himself to expect anything.

Despite the cool night, they passed few other people on their way, for which Amastan was grateful. Perhaps some of his warning had gotten out to their citizens after all. Aside from cluster of loudly whispering youth and a man in a red wrap, it could have been a mid-Season day.

The station was empty, the carriage locked in place for the night. Its metal cable extended over the lip of the platform and down, down to the sands below. Tamella examined the carriage while Amastan peered along the cable. Darkness obscured where it met the sand, along with any movement. He laid two fingers on the cable, but felt no vibrations, only the constant thrum of the wind.

Had he imagined the figures on the sands? Was he wasting their time, burning through the trust his cousins had in him? It'd been two weeks since their own dead had risen – could the same thing have really affected the other cities without any word or refugees finding Ghadid?

But he'd already committed to this plan, sent his cousins across the city. There was no way to know now, not until morning – or until it was too late. Amastan swallowed his doubts and helped Tamella barricade the road with barrels and boxes left behind by merchants for storing and carrying their wares. In truth, Illi did most of the shoving and lifting for him while Amastan directed.

Within an hour, the road to each carriage station had been blocked and the watchmen for those neighborhoods alerted – sometimes stirred from their beds, grumpy but willing. They believed him now that he'd been right once,

but Amastan knew he was burning through any remaining good will he had with the watchmen. Even while part of him dreaded being right, an equal part of him worried he was wrong.

So when Hamma reported that she'd seen someone climbing their cable, equal parts relief and guilt flashed through him. She'd shot them in the head with an arrow and they'd slipped free, plummeting to the sands below. There'd been no further sign of them or any other bound. But if there were more, they'd be trapped behind the barriers. Amastan and his cousins could pick them off one by one.

So why did he still feel so uneasy?

It was that unease that kept him moving, sent him to check the barricades again, despite Tamella and Menna insisting he go home and rest. His cousins were already taking watch in shifts, they didn't need him. But they didn't know what to look for, either.

When she was unable to dissuade him, Tamella came along. The first two barricades were fine, no sign of bound. At the second, Usaten waved at him from a nearby roof before returning to his conversation with a chuckle that bounced off the streets. Amastan reached the third feeling a little foolish and more than a little exhausted. He'd go home after this one, he promised himself.

At first, he didn't even notice anything wrong. Torches lit the street, deepening the shadows at the same time they lifted the darkness. Ahead, the road ended in a precipice of stars. Furniture and crates made up the barricade, extending inwards from both sides of the street but not quite meeting.

Amastan rubbed his eyes and looked again. Stars? Darkness gaped in the center of the barricade, a hole that shouldn't have been there.

Tamella cursed under her breath and picked up her step. "Did they really leave it like this? Those dust-for-brains—"

But Amastan didn't hear the rest of her sentence. He'd hurried ahead, pulse thudding too loud in his ears. The barrels and crates and boards had been peeled back piece by piece and shoved to the side. This wasn't an oversight by his cousins; someone had made a way through. A watchman they hadn't alerted, perhaps, or a merchant after his wares. A kid, even. Any number of innocent possibilities.

All he had to do was help Tamella close the gap. It was fine. Everything was fine.

His sandal scraped across sand. That in itself wasn't notable. The winds carried sand even up here, and its dust coated every inch of Ghadid, seeped under windows and doors during storms. But that sand was fine and soft and swept up by eager glassmakers.

Amastan brushed his hand over the stones. Coarse sand stuck to his sweat-slick palm. Too heavy for the wind to carry this high. It had to have come off an iluk's clothes. But the carriage was locked in place and the stones would have been swept clean hours ago.

"When you're done staring at the ground, I could use some help with these crates," snapped Tamella.

The streets were empty, the silence deafening. If bound had broken through, there should have been screaming. And they wouldn't have peeled away the barricade from this side. A person in Ghadid had done this.

Someone screamed.

The scream was thin, distorted by distance and walls. Tamella dropped the board she'd been wedging into place and unsheathed her sword. She glanced at Amastan. He nodded. She climbed a barrel and disappeared over the roof's edge.

He hurried down the street as fast as his protesting ankle would take him. Most of his strength had returned over the past weeks of rest, so when he

crossed the bridge to the next platform and found four bound at its center, he wasn't completely out of breath.

Tamella had already dispatched three. Before he could free his own sword, she'd turned and cut through the neck of the fourth. It toppled with a heavy thud to the stones, as lifeless as a shattered bowl.

A man huddled, hands over his head, against one wall. Blood streaked his fingers, rolled down his arm, and splattered the stones around him, but he was breathing and alive. While Tamella crouched next to him and whispered quiet reassurances, Amastan examined the nearest decapitated body. Its clothes were tattered and stained – with blood, yes, but also with dirt and dust. As if they'd walked a long way through the sands.

The style of its wrap was different, too. The knots had been tied further back, pulling the fabric tighter and higher than was the style in Ghadid. He'd seen this style among the iluk who came to their markets. It was popular in several of the other Crescent cities.

Amastan straightened, brushing the dust from his hands. The other three wore the same style, which meant they were from the same place. A chill coiled in Amastan's gut, a mixture of dread and certainty. He'd been right.

Tamella helped the injured man to his feet and shooed him out of the circle. While he clutched at his arm, he seemed otherwise fine. Tamella turned to Amastan, but her gaze slipped past him. Narrowed.

"You need to go back inside, sa," she said.

A man was watching them from the shadow of a doorway, arms crossed over his chest. In the darkness, his tagel was almost black, but the torchlight caught an edge of fabric, revealing that it was, in fact, a bloody red. His eyes, as dark as the shadows, assessed them over the top of tagel tied high enough for a drum chief.

Then he dropped his arms and stepped toward them. When the light sharpened his build and picked out the gold that threaded his red wrap, recognition settled in Amastan's throat. He'd seen this man before. This same night, yes, but again even earlier, when season had ended and the storms had rolled across the city and Amastan had infiltrated a party to kill a drum chief. There'd been other faces he hadn't recognized that night, but he remembered them all. Especially the man in the blood red tagel who had not bothered to mingle before disappearing once the chaos started.

That this man had been there the same night the en-marabi and future mark had also made his first appearance was not a coincidence lost on Amastan. *What are the chances of two en-marab*, he'd asked Salid.

That chance now became their reality.

The man lifted his clenched fist and blood dripped from between his fingers. His tagel fluttered with soundless words. A necklace Amastan hadn't noticed before sucked in the light around them and glowed with a flickering resonance.

Then the dead poured over the rooftop at his back.

Amastan didn't have time for panic. He grabbed Tamella's arm and, ignoring the pain that shot up his ankle, ran.

The thud of bodies and feet behind them kept going on and on, like an endless storm that chased them out of the platform's center, down the street, to the bridge. Curious and terrified faces peaked out of the windows they passed, but thankfully the doors stayed shut. If they had any sense, the people here would lock their doors and hide until the worst was past. Amastan could only hope they did, because that was the only way any of them would survive this.

On the other side of the bridge, Amastan let go of Tamella's hand and pivoted, sucking in a breath as pain stabbed up his leg. But worse than the pain

was the sight on the platform they'd just left, which was worse than he'd let himself imagine. Bound surged through the street, clothing in tatters, bodies twisted with desiccation and injury, eyes dead. Most were intent on him and Thana, but the sound of glass breaking cracked across the gap, followed by a scream.

Amastan checked his impulse to run back across the bridge. Two cousins alone couldn't stop that many bound, even if one of them wasn't still nursing an old injury. Going back would be suicide.

Amastan ran his fingers along his belt until he found a small, reinforced skin. Freeing it, he undid the knot at its neck and released a pungent odor: torch oil.

Tamella had slid to a stop further down the street, finally realizing Amastan wasn't with her. "What're you doing?" she snapped.

"Containment."

Amastan poured the oil over the bridge's wooden slats, then stepped back onto firm ground and freed the striker from his belt. The bound were feet from the bridge and showing no sign of stopping. His sweat-slick fingers fumbled the striker. He took a breath and tried again. A spark fell. Touched the oil-soaked wood. The world took a breath.

Then flames whooshed up, tall and fierce. The heat pushed him back even as a hand grabbed his shoulder and pulled.

The bound reached the bridge. The one in front stopped, almost alive again as flames danced across its eyes. But the bound behind it didn't stop. They pushed forward, shoving the first into and through the fire. Its clothing caught in a rush of heat and air, but that didn't stop it. Burning hands reached for Amastan.

Thunk.

A thin shaft sprouted in the bound's eye. It tumbled sideways off the bridge, a blur of flashing light that fell and fell and fell until it hit the sand far below and finally went out. Its abrupt departure shook the bridge, tumbling the bound standing on it. Another fell forward and through the fire, but the rest fell back.

Tamella shoved Amastan out of the way. Her sword cut the air and the bound's neck, sent its head spinning across the stones. Tamella kicked the body over the platform's edge. But more bound were surging across the bridge, unconcerned by the flames. The wood cracked and creaked, but it wasn't giving up, not yet.

"Up here!"

An arm waved wildly over the roof's edge. Amastan sheathed his sword, stuck his cane through his belt, and found the first handhold. Tamella stayed on the ground and guarded his back, dispatching any bound who chanced too near. Amastan hadn't scaled a wall in weeks, not since he'd broken his ankle and arm. He doubted he should be doing so now, but he gritted his teeth through the pain and forced himself to keep moving.

A hand extended into his field of view. He took it. Someone pulled him the rest of the way up. It wasn't pretty, but it was effective. He allowed himself a moment of gasping pain before standing. He looked up, then up again, into Ziri's gentle gaze. The larger man's brown tagel was spattered with blood, but otherwise he appeared fine.

Behind him, Tamella climbed over the lip of the roof. Hamma was inches from her, leaning out as she shot another arrow into the bound below. Then –

Cra-a-a-a-aack!

The bound still on the bridge vanished in a puff of flames and smoke as the wood finally gave way. A few more toppled over the side of the platform,

but the rest pushed back, proving they had some sense of self preservation, if small. Hamma picked off two more on their side, notching and firing in quick succession. Then she slipped the bow over her shoulder and gave them a tight-lipped smile.

“And you said I’d never have reason to shoot a bow,” she said to Tamella.

“Under any sane circumstances, you wouldn’t,” returned Tamella.

Hamma shrugged. Then her smile dropped like the bridge. “We’ve got to hurry. Those demons got through the north barricade. Azulay and Dihya were there to stop them, but... one got Az’. We took him to Illi’s home—it was closest—and got him a healer, but he’s lost a lot of blood. He’s gone into shock.”

Hamma might as well have punched Amastan in the stomach. He took a shuddering breath to clear his head.

“Take us there.”

*

Blood drenched the front of Thiyya’s blue wrap, darkening it to a glossy black. Sweat dribbled down her forehead, but she didn’t bother wiping it away. A blue haze seeped around both her and Azulay, but the calm Amastan associated with healing magic was missing. Azulay was choking, his body heaving under Thiyya’s light touch. His throat had been torn open and its jagged edges fluttered with each gasp as the healer tried to hold his skin together. Blood pulsed fresh across the table they’d laid him on, running down its legs and puddling on the stone floor.

All at once, his body heaved upward from the table, only to thud back down and go still. The blue haze deepened and Thiyya’s hands went to his wrist, his chest, the other side of his neck. The water in the bowl at her feet

was only half gone. Thiyya leaned over Azulay and put her hands on his chest. She pushed, hard. The haze pulsed. She pushed again. Something cracked. Azulay didn't move. Thiyya pushed again.

Menna alone in the crowd of watching cousins moved. Put a hand on the healer's arm. "Thiyya."

Thiyya pushed again, ignoring her. The blue was slipping off of Azulay now, the bowl almost empty.

"Thiyya."

She let her arms drop. Her body shuddered, threatening to break. She closed Azulay's eyes, her fingers trailing blue. The haze dissipated all at once, as if blown away. Metal clattered on the stones. They all turned to look, several cousins, including Amastan, reaching for a weapon.

Dihya had dropped her ax. She sank to her knees next to it, a keening moan coming from between her closed lips. Her hands opened and closed as if trying to hold onto something, but they found nothing.

Amastan could only stand and stare at the body, at his cousins. The room felt suddenly too small for all of them and their grief, the fire in the hearth too hot, the sharp scent of tea mixing with blood and death into a nauseating blend. But he didn't dare seek relief outside.

Nothing felt real. That wasn't Azulay's body on the table, that wasn't his blood on the floor, on Thiyya's hands, smeared across Ziri's wrap and spattered on Dihya's face. Only an hour earlier, Azulay had listened to Amastan's plan, had been eager to stop the bound, had been boasting about how many he'd get. According to Ziri, they'd doubled back to check their work. A kid had pulled apart their barricade and bound were already swarming up the cable. They'd tried to stop them. Azulay had just gotten a little too close.

Thiyya's fingers found the end of a bright yellow salas that was entwined in her hair, a symbol of one of the many lives she'd saved. But before she could pull it free, Menna closed her fingers around Thiyya's, stopping her.

"It was too late," Menna said. "He was past saving."

But Thiyya shook her head and yanked the yellow salas free. "I failed him."

She tied it around Azulay's wrist, then stood, the water bowl clutched to her chest. Her gaze flicked across the assembled family, found Amastan's, and fell to the floor. Menna patted Thiyya gently, if awkwardly, on the back. When Thiyya stepped away, Menna stayed where she was, hands fumbling with her sleeves, watching Thiyya with a mixture of pity and regret and pain.

Amastan glanced around the room, too. All of his cousins were varying shades of stricken. Tamella dabbed at her eyes while tears rolled freely from Ziri's, staining his tagel. Illi sharpened her dagger over and over again at the table while her mother made a fresh pot of tea, even though no one had touched the first one. Yaluz hugged her knees on the floor and Usaten checked the window every few seconds. Hamma sat, still as stone, and stared at the body. Salid stood like a shadow in the corner, hesitant to intrude on the family's pain.

"We failed him," said Hamma, voice hollow. "He shouldn't have been fighting these monsters. None of us are any match for them. None of us have trained for this."

Dihya regarded Amastan with red-rimmed eyes. "She's right. This isn't our job. Why should we sacrifice ourselves for this city? We're cousins, not – not watchmen or guards or soldiers. The drum chiefs should be handling this. Not us. Not Azulay."

Amastan shook his head. "They refuse to handle it. Which means that this is our job. We help Ghadid when no one else can, we've been training for

this our entire lives.”

Dihya made a spitting noise. “This? You trained with us, ‘Stan – I know you didn’t learn how to stop the dead.”

“Not stop the dead,” said Amastan. “Protect the living. Protect Ghadid. This family was originally a part of Ghadid’s militia and when the city forgot why it needed a militia, we continued to protect Ghadid from itself. We’re the first and last line of defense. Right now, we’re all that stands between Ghadid and the bound. Do you really think the drum chiefs will act in time to save this city and its people?”

Dihya slowly got to her feet. “Why should I care about any of them?”

Tamella clucked her tongue. “Because you swore to, when you passed your test and became one of us. That was part of your oath. So if you’re not ready or willing to lay down your life for this city, then lay down your weapons and walk away. But if you do, you can no longer say you’re a Basbowen.” She looked around the room, her gaze finding each cousin in turn and piercing them through. “That goes for all of you.”

The cousins shifted and avoided looking at one another. Dihya met Tamella’s gaze, her lips pressed tight. After a moment, she picked up her ax.

“I’m not doing this for Ghadid. I’m doing this for Azulay.” She turned to Amastan. “How do I stop him from turning into one of those – things?”

Amastan cleared his throat. He glanced to Salid, then Menna for reassurance, but was met with a red-eyed stare. “When the marab quiet a jaani, they treat the body’s head. It’s my understanding that the jaani is tethered to the head. Which means–”

But Dihya cut him off with a nod. “I understand.”

She spread her feet. Hefted her ax. Menna made a noise in the back of her throat and turned away. Thiyya braced herself on Menna’s arm. Dihya raised the ax above her head. Hamma started to say something. Dihya swung.

The crunch of bone, then the ring of metal on metal, was as final as a drumbeat. A fresh wave of blood spilled from the table to the floor, but it quickly slowed to a trickle, then nothing. Azulay had already lost so much.

Dihya pulled a cloth from her belt and wiped the blood from her ax. She turned to the assembled cousins. “I’ll do the same for any of you.” Then she walked through them to the door, where she paused long enough to add, “Sorry about your table,” before leaving.

After a long moment of silence, Hamma asked, “So how do we stop these demons?”

“They’re not demons,” said Salid, speaking up for the first time. “They’re bound jaan. They’re not evil, not on their own. We need to find the en-marabi did this to them. That’s the only way they’ll be stopped.”

The man in red. Amastan could still see him clearly, bloody fist raised as the bound poured over the roof. Stupid, foolish—Amastan had planned for the mindless bound, not for someone controlling them, directing them. He took shallow breaths, thinking fast, trying to salvage the plans they’d made.

At least two barricades had been compromised. They’d already lost a chunk of time in retreat and recovery, and every second that trickled through the glass was another second that man – that en-marabi – Djet? – had to secure his foothold in their city. He had the advantage.

But he was only one man, and they were a family.

“We’ll need the whole family,” said Amastan. “Everyone, including those who didn’t pass their test, didn’t choose to be an assassin, and weren’t chosen. We need to cut the bound off and evacuate those in danger. We need to contain this. We don’t have much time – any time. So: who wants to evacuate and who wants to burn bridges?”

Amastan stood before an empty bridge. Four watchmen barred the other side, weapons drawn.

“Who told you not to let us cross?” asked Amastan.

At his back was a large group of people they’d gathered from a single neighborhood, their anxiety compounding with each second they were kept from moving forward, from fleeing. Ziri and Dihya had secured this platform for now, but the bound were only a shattered bridge away. They needed more distance and more time. They needed to cross.

“Drum Chief Yugten ordered that no one be allowed onto this platform,” said the head watchman, the sash across her chest indicating her rank. “We can’t risk the corruption spreading here.”

Beside Amastan, Salid laughed humorlessly. “It’s not spread, sai. Everyone already has it. This city is full of walking corpses, some just don’t know it yet.”

Amastan shot Salid a sharp glance. Salid shrugged as if to say, *you know I’m right*. He’d caught Salid and Menna exchanging tense words only to go dry as soon as anyone drew close enough to hear more than a few times. He knew they weren’t talking about him, but he also knew better than to push them. Menna was an expert in jaan and Salid knew more about en-marab than anyone else in their city. He had to trust them; they’d come to him if it concerned anything he could do.

Still, Salid’s implications were unsettling.

Twisting his cane under his fingers, Amastan said. “Look, we’re only passing through. There’s no other way across, we’ve already burned the other bridges, and the bound are on the next platform. If you don’t let us cross, we’re trapped here. These people will die.”

One of the watchmen shifted uneasily, but the others didn’t move. The head watchman shook her head. “Orders, sa.”

“Let me handle this.” Tamella shoved past Amastan. She faced the watchmen with a thin-lipped smile. “Step aside. Those are your new orders.”

When the watchman laughed, Tamella drew her sword. “I’m willing to back my claim. Is your drum chief?”

The head watchman raised an eyebrow. “Don’t be foolish, ma. You’re only one to our four, and more watchmen are within call.”

“I agree,” said Tamella. “It’s not fair at all. For you.”

“Stop it,” snapped Amastan. “We don’t need more bodies.” When Tamella didn’t sheathe her sword, he stepped in front of her and held up his empty hand. “Let me speak with your drum chief, sai. He’ll know sense.”

“Of course,” said the head watchman. “You may both see him, because I’m arresting you for threatening watchmen.”

Two watchmen darted across the bridge and seized Amastan. Tamella hissed, raising her sword, but Amastan caught her gaze and shook his head. Tamella relented as a third watchman gingerly took her arm.

“Salid,” said Amastan as the watchmen guided him across the bridge. “Keep an eye on things, will you?”

Salid pressed his fist to his chest, expression solemn. The watchmen pulled Amastan and Tamella down the street, through the platform’s circle, to a broad wooden door. They knocked and the door was opened by a slave wearing the yellow of Drum Chief Yugten. He ushered them inside and led them on quiet, bare feet to a back room. The room was sumptuously decorated in bright colors and soft fabrics, a large hearth holding a roaring fire. It was too hot, stiflingly so, but the room’s lone occupant didn’t seem to mind.

Drum Chief Yugten wore a thick wool wrap, its yellow dye so rich it was all but leaking onto the rugs around him. He held a cup of tea in his leathery hands and an expression of disinterest in his eyes.

“What’s this?” he asked in an equally leathery voice.

“These two were threatening—” began the head watchman.

“We need to cross,” interrupted Amastan. “The bound are only a platform away and there are people trapped between who are in danger. If you don’t let them cross, they’ll be overrun. They’ll die.”

Drum Chief Yugten took a sip of tea, his eyes never leaving Amastan’s. “If I let them cross, they will contaminate my neighborhood.”

“This isn’t a disease, sai,” said Amastan. “It’s not spread. Only the dead can become bound. If you let those people die, you’ll have that many more bound trying to cross your bridges. And they won’t listen politely to watchmen.”

Yugten squinted at Amastan, then he set down his tea. “You’re that man who came before the Circle a few weeks ago, spouting this same nonsense. You convinced the other drum chiefs that we should let you get away with desecrating the dead. I don’t know where you’re getting all this from,” he waved a hand in the air, “but I didn’t vote to listen to you then and I’m not about to listen now, when my own neighborhood is at stake. My watchmen saw those demons take Talal’s neighborhood. Closing the bridges saved us. I’m not about to open them and risk my people.”

“It’s not nonsense,” said Amastan. “It’s an invasion. Every person who dies becomes a part of their army. By helping us, you’re helping your people. In return, we can show your watchmen how to stop the bound.”

But Yugten was already shaking his head. “By taking off their heads and burning them? No, I already saw your version of ‘helping.’ My duty is to my people.” He clapped his hands, a dozen bracelets jangling beneath the folds of his sleeves. He gestured to the watchmen. “Escort them back over the bridge whence they came. Don’t let anyone else cross.”

As the watchmen grabbed them again, Amastan said, “Your duty is to all of Ghadid, not just your neighborhood.”

Yugten scoffed. “And who are you to lecture a drum chief on their duties?”

A man who just watched his friend die, thought Amastan. Aloud, he said, “A historian. Every drum chief is duty-bound to do what’s best for the whole. And it’s the duty of the Basbowen family to take up the slack when the drum chiefs fall down on their duty.”

“Basbowen,” said Yugten, chewing the name like a dry date. “I haven’t heard that name in years. Now where...”

Yugten’s gaze slid past Amastan and his fingers spasmed. If he’d still been holding his tea cup, it would have fallen and shattered. He staggered to his feet, finger pointing like a knife.

“Watchmen! Get that woman out of here!”

Amastan looked to Tamella, expecting a sword, a knife, anything to explain Yugten’s fear, but Tamella was only smiling. She hadn’t even freed herself from the watchmen’s grip.

“You remember me,” she said with a touch of glee.

“How could you be so stupid as to let the Serpent in here?” demanded Yugten, his voice rising with fear. “She’s dangerous – a murderer, an assassin – ah!” Yugten gasped, clutching at his chest. “You’ve finally come for me!”

Tamella rolled her eyes. “I’m not here on contract, sai.”

Yugten gestured at the watchmen. “What are you standing around for, fools? Get her out of here! Lock her up in the pumphouse for now, until we can sort out how to deal with her.”

The watchman holding Amastan let go and grabbed for Tamella. But before he could, she shook her head and slipped free of the first watchman. She unsheathed her sword in a single, fluid motion and the watchmen backed away.

“Right,” she said, turning on Yugten. “Last I checked the laws, speaking to a drum chief wasn’t a crime. So no, you’re not going to lock me up in your pumphouse.” She pointed her sword at him. “But turning your back on your city – that’s a crime.”

A commotion broke out beyond the shut door. The watchmen only had time to turn and draw their swords before the door burst open and Illi entered, her breath coming in quick, sharp gasps. Her gaze tore around the room before landing on Amastan.

“The bound broke the barriers to the east. Ziri and Dihya are doing all they can, but there’re too many of them. We don’t have much time and these shards-cursed gadflies still won’t let anyone across.”

Behind her, four watchmen appeared, flustered and out of breath. Two grabbed her arms, twisting them behind her back. Illi yelped and struggled, but couldn’t get free.

“Sorry, sai,” said a watchman in the back. “We tried to stop her but she was too fast.”

“There are four of you and one very narrow bridge,” said Yugten slowly. “Are you that incompetent?”

“She jumped, sai,” said the watchman. “From one rooftop to another. Then she just kept going.”

Yugten’s wrath mellowed with astonishment. He peered at Illi anew. “Who are you?”

“Let our people through,” said Amastan. “*Your* people.”

Yugten wrapped his arms around himself. “No. I can’t risk it. I won’t.”

“So you’ll let them die?” asked Tamella, voice cold.

Yugten’s gaze snagged on Tamella’s sword. “Arrest that woman and get these people out of here. I’m done.”

Tamella's laugh was as dry and humorless as the sands. "Yes, you're done. Flee, little mouse, into the safety of your house and never dare call yourself a drum chief again. Since you are no longer willing to fulfill your responsibilities as drum chief, you are no longer fit to be a drum chief."

Yugten sputtered, backing away. "You have gone mad, woman. Watchmen, arrest her!"

But the watchmen didn't move. The one holding Amastan had let go and was now shifting uneasily.

"We can't let those people die, sai," said one watchman quietly.

"You don't listen to her!" spat Yugten. "You obey me!"

"As a protector of this city," continued Tamella, "I willingly take up that burden myself. With G-d as my witness, I renew my oath and the oath my family has made for every generation to protect Ghadid and rid it of corruption - "

"Watchmen!" yelled Yugten, frantic now, backing away, hands searching for a weapon that wasn't there. "I will see you executed if you don't obey me!"

" – starting with you."

Tamella crossed the room with the swiftness of a snake, her sword tip striking the drum chief just below his chin and settling there like the threat it was. Yugten froze. Tamella flicked the tip and it caught on the chain around Yugten's neck. Keeping the blade by his throat, Tamella leaned forward and smoothly pulled the chain over Yugten's head.

A set of glittering rings hung from the chain, the seals that held the real power of the drum chiefs. Between the rings was a golden trinket in the shape of a drum, the miniature version of the very real drum that was passed down from generation to generation. But those drums were prone to cracking, ripping, and being destroyed. The rings and their power had persisted through centuries of storms and seasons.

Tamella slipped the chain over her head. Then she sheathed her sword and turned her back on Yugten. She pointed at the watchmen.

“You – help those people across. Illi, go with them. Tell the others we’re regrouping here.”

The watchmen placed their fists over their hearts, then left, Illi trotting right behind. That left just Amastan, Tamella, and Yugten in a room that was even smaller than it had been moments before. Tamella turned back to Yugten, her expression considering. Amastan glanced at Tamella, trying to read her intent; she’d already killed one drum chief in her lifetime. But then, so had he.

“You’re welcome to join us, sa,” said Tamella. “As long as you obey my orders.”

“I’ll take my own chances, ma.”

“Mai,” corrected Amastan. “And your own chances will be slim. The bound are coming and I’m not sure we can stop them.”

Tamella glanced at him. “We were going to stay here, Amastan.”

“I’m not sure that’s going to be enough anymore,” admitted Amastan. “If the bound are already on the next platform, then it won’t be long before they’re here, too. We’re stretched too thin. There simply aren’t enough of us. We’ll be able to hold for a while, especially with the help of those watchmen, but at some point the winds will change. We’ll be overwhelmed.”

Tamella’s lips pressed into a thin line. “Then what do you suggest?”

“We leave Ghadid.”

The Final Wave

Yugten's drum smoothed their way.

With the flash of the rings around her neck, watchmen obeyed Tamella's every order. Even some of the drum chiefs cooperated. In the face of advancing chaos, they were more willing to give up any remaining grains of leadership for the flickering hope of safety.

Within a few hours, they'd established a perimeter of evacuated platforms, their streets barricaded and their bridges cut. They'd scrapped together a moment to plan, to breathe.

But they couldn't rest for long.

Amastan sat on the top of a barricade, one that would be moved into place to block the road and slow the bound once they left this platform, watching and directing the preparations around him and trying to ignore the smoke curling into the sky. People were in line at the pumphouse to go below and fill their water skins while others gathered supplies from the nearby buildings. They'd need everything they could carry if they were going to survive on the sands for any amount of time. A few days or a few weeks – it was impossible to know. But they'd reclaim the city. They had to.

But first they had to leave. Ghadid's unique structure had made it unassailable and unconquerable for centuries, but that same structure was now a death trap. Each platform only had three or four bridges, three or four ways on or off. So far, they'd used that to their advantage to corral and contain the bound. But every bridge they cut or burned was another escape route gone. The man controlling the bound only had to wait for them to back themselves into a corner, then he could overwhelm them in a flood of monsters.

Amastan couldn't let that happen. While they'd cut most of the bridges, there was still a run of untouched ones that would lead them north, to the closest carriage station. Unfortunately, between them and that station were still

several platforms teeming with bound. Amastan had to find a way to clear those platforms and get everyone who had survived so far, who had listened, who had been rescued, who had trusted him to gather in these few, safe platforms, to the sands and safety.

“We have to burn it.”

Amastan started but didn’t turn. He hadn’t noticed Menna approach, but then, she’d always been as silent as a kite. Now she settled onto the barricade next to him, her expression guarded.

“I mean the city, of course,” she continued. “Unless you had another plan for clearing out the bound? Because they’re not going to go away, ‘Stan.”

“No,” admitted Amastan. “I’d come to the same conclusion. I’d only hoped someone else would say it first.”

“What would you do without me,” said Menna. “Then I’m saying it: if we just leave, the bound will follow us down as easily as they came up. Even if we behead every single one of them, we still need to do something about their jaan.”

“But it’s blasphemy,” said Amastan dully.

Menna hit his arm. “Don’t you dare.”

Amastan gestured at the expanse of the city. “I haven’t been able to figure out how. It’s too many platforms, too many people, too many bound—”

“There you go, overthinking it like usual,” interrupted Menna. “We just need a committed crew. And I’ve got one.” At Amastan’s surprise, she laughed. “What, you think you’re the only one planning here? You’ve got enough on your hands. Just get everyone to the sands. Let me handle this. I can take on a little more blasphemy.”

“Thank you.”

Menna winced, looking away. “Don’t thank me yet. We’ve got a long night ahead of us. And then...”

She trailed off and the bustle below rushed in to fill her silence. Amastan waited, hands in his lap, feeling the weight of whatever Menna was wrestling with, if not its shape. After a while, she took a deep breath and let it out in a long *woosh*.

“Look, ‘Stan,” she said, her voice pitched low, her words just between them. “There’s something I need to tell you.” She stared at her hands, her fingers fidgeting with the air. “I think... I know how this magic is being transmitted. And it’s not going to stop once we reach the sands.”

“Why not?” asked Amastan, even though he had never hoped the solution would be that simple. He’d just planned on dealing with it later.

She pulled her gaze from her hands and met his eyes. “It’s the water.”

Amastan felt his understanding melt and come together into one cohesive whole. The corpses, the crypts, the dead, the other cities –

“Not just the water,” he breathed. “The aquifer itself.”

Menna nodded grimly.

“We can’t tell anyone,” he added.

“They would panic,” agreed Menna. “It’s why I hesitated to tell you until I was sure. It’s too late to save anyone from it, but if word got out, people would still try to avoid drinking any water.”

“And they’d get sick and die and add to our problems anyway,” said Amastan. He frowned. “You’ve known for a while. You kept this from me.”

Menna started to protest, then pressed her lips tight and looked at her hands again.

Amastan sighed. “But what could I have done? You’re right – our other problems are more pressing. You have told no one else?”

“Only Salid. We’ve been trying to figure out how to break it. I have to admit, this might be beyond me.”

“Nothing is beyond you,” said Amastan.

“Right,” said Menna brightly, but it seemed too sharp, too forced.

“The important thing right now is getting down to the sands. After that, we’ll deal with any other problems when they arise.” Amastan watched the bustling crowd below, his chest tight. “Who’s your committed crew?”

Menna counted off on her fingers. “Salid, Zdan, Usaten, and Illi.”

“Salid and Zdan aren’t cousins, and Usaten and Illi aren’t done with their training.”

Menna shrugged. “I’m not a cousin, either. Not really. And you need all the fighters you can get. We won’t need to fight, we’ll just need to be fast.”

“Yes,” said Amastan. “We won’t be able to wait for you. We can only clear the platforms ahead of us. We won’t be able to help you or come back for you. You’ll be on your own.”

“Not the first time. You focus on getting everyone out of here. I’ll focus on making sure we can return.”

“I trust you.”

Menna smiled. “I know.”

A drumbeat thudded to life below, echoing through the streets like a pulse. It was time.

Menna slipped to the road, then offered her hand to Amastan. He ignored it, trying to slide down the barrier on his own. He almost managed it, but then his ankle gave as he landed and he stumbled, slamming his knee hard into the stones. Pain spiked through his leg and he bit his tongue hard enough to taste copper and salt.

As he dragged himself upright, a fresh rush of exhaustion threatened to pull him back down. He’d been pushing himself too much, too fast. If he wasn’t careful, he’d reinjure his ankle and set his healing back days, if not weeks. Then he’d be useless.

“You’ve got to take care of yourself,” said a soft, familiar voice.

Thiyya materialized out of the crowd, her healer's blue wrap muted in the darkness. She led a donkey, its long ears flicking this way and that, picking up on the ambient panic. She held its lead out.

"Here," she said. "I thought you could use this. We've got to get it out of the city, anyway."

Amastan shook his head. "Someone else will need it more than me."

Menna had hung back as Thiyya approached, but now she grabbed the lead from the healer and pressed it into Amastan's hand. "Don't be thick, 'Stan."

"*You* need this," said Thiyya. "And we need you. You've already done so much; we can't risk losing you now." She put one hand on her hip. "If you won't listen to reason, at least listen to your healer. You're not doing those injuries any good, limping as fast as you can from here to there. Get on the donkey, Amastan. Healer's orders."

Amastan looked at the lead in his hand and swallowed his reluctance. Thiyya was right. He had to see this through, which meant leaning on others when he could and not letting his pride get in the way. He turned to the donkey, which was prancing in place, shedding unease with each step. Its nostrils flared and its eyes darted back and forth. Could it smell the bound nearby? Or just the fear thick in the air?

"You okay?" asked Menna.

Amastan started to answer before realizing Menna wasn't talking to him. He pulled himself onto the donkey's back while trying not to listen.

"As okay as I can be," answered Thiyya.

Menna reached out and took Thiyya's hand, holding it between hers like it was precious. "Keep an eye on him for me, all right?"

"Menna." Thiyya made the name both a warning and a plea. "What are you going to do?"

“What I have to.” Menna squeezed, then dropped Thiyya’s hand.

“Menna—”

“And ‘Stan – you keep your sister safe, all right?’” Menna gave them both a playful smirk. “Don’t make my jaani haunt you.”

“*Menna.*”

But Menna had already slipped away, letting the crowd cover her tracks. Thiyya started after her, but Amastan goaded the donkey into movement and the *clop* of its hooves drew her back. When caught up to him, her eyes were bright with accusations and tears.

“She’ll be all right,” he said, knowing the truth of it at the same time he felt her fear and pain. Thiyya and Menna had been together, once. Even though that once was now a long time ago and he’d never learned what had happened between them, Amastan understood how feelings persisted, how you could still care deeply about a person who had hurt you.

Thiyya glanced up at him, opened her mouth to speak, then hesitated and shut it again. She patted the donkey’s side instead and together they walked in silence. The evacuees parted around them, making room even as they shot him curious – and occasionally envious – glances. Under his tagel, Amastan burned with embarrassment. But his sister stayed by his side and he was grateful for that.

Tamella and his cousins had gathered before the last bridge between them and the bound. Planks and chairs and tables were stacked on the other side of the bridge, blocking both the way and the view beyond. But Hamma was on a nearby roof, relaying what she saw.

“—ten, no twelve, of the sand-blighted things, all just standing there. Like they’re waiting for some sign. It’s unnerving.”

Amastan dismounted. Five heads turned toward him. Yaluz was nearest, spinning a dagger around her fingers. Ziri and Dihya were stationed on either

side of the bridge. Tamella stood between them, one hand on the hilt of her sword. She clucked her tongue at him.

“Don’t even think about it, Amastan.”

“I can fight–”

But Tamella was already shaking her head. “How long will you last? How long will I last, if I have to watch out for you? No, Amastan. You’ve fought enough. You’re needed here, to lead.”

“I’m no leader.”

Tamella raised an eyebrow. “Then what have you been doing these past few weeks?”

Amastan frowned, but he had no answer for that.

Tamella closed the gap between them, any semblance of amusement gone in an instant. She took the drum from around her neck and slid it over Amastan’s head. “You need to lead and you need to live. You’re going to find my husband and you’re going to take his hand and get him through this chaotic mess. You’re going to save all these people.” She gestured expansively. “You’re going to lead them to safety and, when the streets are free of those monsters, you’re going to help them rebuild.”

“You’re not going to die,” insisted Amastan.

“I will,” said Tamella with a tight smile. “I’m not immortal. I don’t plan on dying today, but facing these demons, there’s every chance – well, I need to know someone will survive this and find my daughter. And that someone is going to be you, Amastan. You’re going to rebuild Ghadid and you’re going to find Thana and you’re going to take care of her. These demons are no match for the Serpent, but I need to be certain that you will live and find Thana.” She lowered her voice to a hiss. “That’s my revenge, Amastan: *live*.”

“They’re rousing,” called Hamma, dropping down from the roof.

“Something’s got them agitated. If we’re going to do this, now’s a good time.”

Tamella nodded without breaking eye contact with Amastan.
“Everybody remember the plan?”

A chorus of affirmatives came from the cousins. The plan, the plan *he’d* come up with, was deceptively simple. Stick together. Clear the platform. Signal Barag, who would remove the barricade with Ziri and usher the evacuees across. Heal those who were hurt. Move to the next.

Tamella grinned. “All right.” She turned and unsheathed her sword.
“Let’s go!”

Amastan watched as his cousins surged over the barricade, feeling helpless and alone, even with his sister at his side. They could do this. They would do this.

They had to.

*

One platform.

That was all that stood between them and the carriage station and freedom. Amastan waited, his fingers tight around his donkey’s lead, a hundred voices murmuring at his back, and stared at the barricade as if he could see through it. He couldn’t, but from the steady thwack and thud of weapons beyond, he knew that everything was proceeding as it should.

His plan had gone off without a hitch. His cousins had been able to clear each platform, letting the evacuees advance closer and closer to safety. Smoke stirred the air, thickening as Menna and her crew set more and more platforms alight. They were going to be all right. They were going to make it.

A hand waved over the barricade: the platform beyond was clear. Amastan hardly even needed to gesture anymore; the nearest evacuees knew the drill. They began dismantling the chairs and the tables, tearing apart the barricade.

“That’s it, then,” said Barag, standing near the donkey’s shoulder. “After this platform, we’re at the carriage station and we’re on our way down.”

“We’ll still have to hold off any bound that attack,” warned Amastan. “But that should be a lot easier.”

Barag patted the donkey’s side. He glanced back at the long line of evacuees, at the flicker of far-off flames, at the smoke obscuring the sky. Amastan couldn’t see the stars anymore, couldn’t be sure what time it was, only that they existed in some point between dusk and dawn. It felt like the night would never end.

But it must and it would. They would get through this.

Amastan and Barag led the first evacuees across the second to last bridge. The platform beyond was empty. At the beginning of this long march, Amastan had expected bodies to litter the street, but his cousins were nothing if not thorough. They’d piled the bodies off on side streets and back alleys and now around corners and streets, Amastan caught the warm light of the fires.

When Menna came over the edge of the roof, Amastan nearly had a heart attack. She fell with all the grace of a sack of sand, but not because she was injured. She was carrying an angry, writhing girl: Illi.

Menna stumbled under her burden but didn’t let go. Illi let out a piercing shriek, clawing at Menna’s shoulders, hands, arms. Menna looked like she’d been through fire and hell – her wrap was torn and smeared with soot and sweat and blood and there was a wild look in her eyes. Amastan was glad Thiyya had peeled away earlier to take care of some hurt evacuees. The people around Amastan faltered and slowed.

“No!” snapped Menna. “You’ve gotta keep going.” Her gaze snapped to Amastan’s. “They’ve gotta go faster. They’re coming—*he’s* coming—”

“Let me go,” snarled Illi, trying to scratch at Menna’s arms.

“What’s going on?” asked Tamella, appearing at the edge of the crowd.

Illi went still. “They’re still back there, they’re trapped, we have to help them.”

“We were overwhelmed,” said Menna. “Someone’s controlling them. The bound ambushed us. We—” her voice broke, faltered, “—Usaten didn’t—”

“Where’s Salid?” asked Amastan, fear clawing at his throat.

“He’s catching up.” Menna gestured at Illi as best as she could when she was holding the younger girl over her shoulder with both hands. “I had to drag Illi away. The bound kept coming but she wouldn’t leave.”

“Because we need to find them,” said Illi. “My parents—”

“I came to warn you,” interrupted Menna. “The man—whatever he is—he’s bringing the bound here. All of them. He must’ve figured out what we were up to. We don’t have much time.”

The evacuees around her were stirring and a murmur was passing down the line as quick as a sneeze. If they weren’t careful, they’d have a full-on panic soon.

“Can we not discuss this here?” hissed Amastan, voice low.

Tamella glanced around, then put her hand on Barag’s shoulder. “Warmth of my fire, I trust you’ll keep everybody in order.”

Barag grimaced but nodded. “You know me. Full of order.”

Amastan followed Tamella and Menna away from the line of people. When they were nearly to the platform’s center, Tamella held up a hand and turned to Menna.

“Put her down.”

Menna slid Illi off her shoulder and set her on her feet. Illi immediately tried to run, but Tamella had her arm. No matter how Illi twisted or pulled, Tamella’s grip stayed firm.

“Stop that,” said Tamella firmly. “I’ll let you go and you can run back if you want to and get yourself killed, but you will listen first. I chose you for a

reason. You're smart. Which means you know you can't go back. You know if your parents haven't found a way to join the rest of the evacuees, it's too late. You know you're being foolish. You are upset and angry and grieving and if you think you're alone there, you're even more foolish than I thought. Bottle that anger, Illi. You can mourn later. You can do anything you want later—yell at Menna, fight me, work your grief into a weapon. But that means surviving, and that means staying with us. You can't do anything for your parents. They're dead. But you can live.”

Illi slowly stopped struggling. When Tamella finished, she let go. Illi didn't move. She also didn't meet Tamella's gaze.

A cough came from the platform's circle, gentle and almost polite. Tamella's head whipped up. Across the circle, standing on the other side, was a man, all in red. Amastan's chest filled with a heavy chill.

“Oh shards,” said Menna.

The man stood with his arms crossed, a pale sphere hanging from his neck. It glowed with a thin, feeble light no brighter than the stars.

Tamella hissed and drew her sword. “I'll stop this.”

But before she had made it to the circle's edge, the bound arrived. They walked down the streets opposite Amastan and his cousins and into the circle, first a dozen, then a second dozen, then more than Amastan could count. His mount shied under him, backing away even as he fought it forward. The bound were disturbingly silent. Even their steps were little more than a whisper.

As they came, the sphere around the man's neck brightened, bathing his face and the area around him in a sickly, too-pale light. His tagel still covered most of his features, but his dark eyes were bright, calculating. Was this Djet, the man who had died and should've stayed dead over several hundred years

ago? Or was this another en-marabi who wanted to be him? Amastan didn't know and didn't really care. They would stop him either way.

As the bound poured into the platform's center, Amastan noticed more wrong with them than just their silence. All of them were bloody, covered in soot and dust, their wraps and tagels askew or gone completely. And there was something wrong with their necks. They were twisted and scarred and it looked as if –

Horror filled Amastan. These were the bound they'd decapitated, but not burned. The bound the drum chiefs had insisted on putting back into their crypts. The en-marabi had been busy: their heads had been shoved back into place, some secured by a tagel but most oozed a dark, viscous glue around the seams.

Amastan hated that he'd been right.

"Shit and dust," said Hamma, joining them.

Ziri and Dihya were right behind her, Ziri solemn while Dihya almost looked giddy as she drew Azulay's machete. Yaluz ghosted behind, as silent as ever, but her gaze focused, ready. Amastan counted his cousins and started counting his own weapons before he noticed that Tamella was looking at him, expectant.

Live.

He backed his mount up and turned its body so it was blocking the road. He wouldn't join their fight, but he wouldn't abandon them completely, either. Menna pushed Illi toward him before drawing her sword. Illi caught herself and glared up at Amastan. He offered her a hand. She ignored it and turned to face the bound. But she didn't leave him.

Hamma notched an arrow, fired. The arrow split the skull of one of the standing bound. It toppled, fell. The man in red looked up. The sphere turned a sickly green. The man opened his hands. The mass of bound began to move.

They surged forward, now numbering near a hundred. Amastan's cousins met them like a well-armed wall. The bound fell. More took their places. His cousins had developed an efficient method of cutting the bound down, but there were still more and more of them.

Tamella pushed forward, Dihya and Ziri at her sides, but the bound only grew denser before them. They hacked and slashed and heads rolled and bodies toppled but there were still more, always more.

Exhaustion crept into their movements.

Illi hissed and spun. A bound had broken through and now rushed them. Illi met the bound with her sword, but she only managed to push it away. It recovered unnaturally quick and was running at them again when it abruptly spun and fell, an arrow sticking out of one eye. Amastan looked up, found Hamma on the rooftop. She thudded her chest with her fist, then turned, notched, sighted, and hit another bound close to Tamella.

"Amastan!"

The voice came from behind. Amastan turned as Salid raced down the street. The older man stumbled to a stop a few feet away, his tagel loose and his chest heaving as he fought for breath. He lifted his head and his gaze slid past Amastan to the chaos beyond. He wilted.

"Oh. I'm too late."

"Menna warned us," said Amastan.

"Yes, of course she did." Salid stopped next to the donkey and peered into the swirl of bodies, as if he might discern meaning from it. His eyebrows drew together in a frown. "Did she also tell you about the sphere?"

Amastan picked out the glow on the opposite side of the center, the one thing that hadn't moved since the attack had begun. "What about the sphere?"

But even as he asked, he knew. The answer was so bright and painfully clear that he wondered how he hadn't realized it before.

“That’s how the en-marabi is controlling these bound,” said Salid. “If we break it, we’ll sever his control. They’ll still attack, but they’ll attack him too and they should have no coordination. We’ll have a chance.”

Amastan slid from his donkey. His ankle held his weight even as he trembled a little from the accumulated exhaustion. He unsheathed his sword. “Illi – tell Tamella. They need to get that sphere.”

Illi hesitated, glancing at Amastan’s shaking arm. Amastan took a deep breath, widened his stance, and the shaking diminished.

“I’ll be fine,” he insisted.

Illi didn’t look convinced, but she nodded and then she was off, darting between the bound like a mouse through the stalks in a glasshouse. She reached Tamella and leaned close, whispering something into her ear. Whatever she said was lost in the noise.

“I can only hope that’s enough.” Salid placed his fist over his heart and bowed slightly. “Thank you. But another thing – the en-marabi’s assault interrupted our work. We didn’t finish burning the southern neighborhoods. We can’t leave that unfinished.”

Amastan didn’t glance back. “We don’t have anyone to go with you.”

“I can protect myself.”

Now Amastan turned. “No. Absolutely not. The likelihood you’ll get hurt–”

Salid held up a hand. “Every single one of us is risking our lives tonight.”

Not me, thought Amastan, but pity didn’t suit him.

“Let me do this,” continued Salid. “And afterwards, when I find you again, you can tell me how stupid I was, all right?”

A lump lodged in Amastan’s throat. “We can’t wait for you. If you’re not back in time...”

“Then I’ll find my own way down,” said Salid. “We can’t let these creatures have Ghadid. We can’t let that man have these people. It’s the only way to stop all of it.”

Amastan turned, unable to look at Salid. “Go.”

Behind him, Salid made a noise in his throat. Then footsteps retreated. Amastan focused on the fight ahead. The cousins had shifted their positions. They no longer formed a line of defense, but had become a spear with Tamella at its point. Ziri and Dihya flanked Tamella while Yaluz and Illi covered her back. They stabbed through the bound, clawing their way closer to the en-marabi, but it was like pushing against a storm.

The man stepped back and more bound filled the gap between him and the cousins. Bodies piled before him as Dihya slashed and Ziri jabbed and Tamella cut. They forced the en-marabi back, step by step. He motioned with his fingers and more bound pressed into the circle, climbing over the bodies of the dead. The bound nearest Amastan turned and surged back toward the center, all of their attention on his cousins.

Amastan lurched forward to join them, even brought his sword up, before Tamella’s order echoed in his ears: *live*. He wouldn’t stand a chance in this fight. It wasn’t his.

He could only watch as Hamma picked off the bound between Tamella and the en-marabi, as Dihya swung and swung and swung, as Menna whirled and Illi stabbed. Exhaustion slowed their movements and minute errors began to pile up. They couldn’t keep going forever.

Then Tamella cut down the last bound between her and the mark. Before another bound could take its place, she lunged. Her sword grazed the en-marabi’s chest, its tip snagging the chain. The metal links held for a heartbeat, then the chain snapped and the sphere fell, meeting the stones and shattering into a hundred shards of glass. Its light winked out.

Sudden silence. The bound faltered. A shudder ran through them like a breeze through a glasshouse. Ziri lowered his ax an inch. Tamella raised her sword.

Then the bound began moving again, but any order they'd had was gone. They lashed out at anything nearby, including the en-marabi. He stumbled back as bound slipped again between him and Tamella, then turned and shoved his way through them. Tamella growled, cutting through the bound as she went after the fleeing en-marabi.

The bound nearest Amastan turned on him. One grabbed for his arm as he swung his sword. He caught its neck and swung again. An arrow sprouted from its ear and the bound toppled. Amastan gave Hamma a grateful wave and then turned to rebuff the next bound.

Ziri's gasp cut through the chaos. His ax faltered mid-swing and he tilted his head down to stare at his own stomach. A spear protruded from his gut. Behind Ziri, a confused bound jerked on the spear, yanking Ziri to his knees.

Tamella hesitated at the sound and the en-marabi claimed another foot of space between them. Her sword cut through bound instead of her mark. The en-marabi slashed his palm with a small knife. He dodged a bound, then fell to the ground and dragged his bleeding hand across the soot-stained stones, leaving a line of blood behind. Another bound lunged for him, but slammed into an invisible wall.

Dihya screamed. The bound around her fell back as she pushed through them to Ziri. She lopped the head off the bound holding the spear, then cleared a circle around Ziri as he struggled to stand. Menna and Illi were left to fight on their own, back to back in a sea of bound. Tamella was on her own.

The en-marabi straightened. Tamella stabbed forward with her sword, driving the blade into his stomach. Or she should have, but while her blade cut

forward, her shoulders stopped abruptly short, as if caught in a barrier. The same one that had just rebuffed the bound.

The bound seethed and Amastan only caught what happened next in flashes between their bodies. Tamella hesitated, confused. Then the man stepped close and, in one small motion, slid his knife across her throat. The sword dropped from Tamella's hand. Blood spilled down her front. She took a step back before falling to her knees.

Menna saw. Menna screamed. Her movements became wild. She slashed her way through the bound, but she couldn't get to Tamella. The en-marabi stood alone in his circle of blood as the bound swarmed around him. Then Ziri surged to his feet, the spear still in his gut, and swung his ax in broad strokes. He cut a wide swath through the bound, an oncoming storm himself, heading for the en-marabi.

The en-marabi turned and fled.

The bound were broken. They still attacked, but now they struck each other as often as they tried to hit the living. Dihya waded through Ziri's wake and scooped up Tamella. The Serpent's body hung limp in her arms, dripping blood.

"Come on!" she snapped at Ziri.

But Ziri ignored her. He faltered and stumbled as he fought his way through the bound, following the path the en-marabi had taken.

"We've got healers!" yelled Dihya again, this time with a higher note to her voice.

But Ziri shook his head like a confused dog. "Not enough water," he grunted. "You'd only be wasting what you have. I can get him. I can make him pay."

Ziri smacked two more bound out of his way and then he stood at the mouth of the road the en-marabi had fled down. Blood stained the front and

back of his wrap, but the spear was still protruding from his body, still keeping him from bleeding out. From everything he'd learned from his sister, Amastan knew Ziri should have been unconscious by now, or at least in shock. Yet somehow, he was still going. Ziri stumbled down the street, leaving a trail of blood in his wake. Amastan almost pitied the en-marabi.

"Ziri," protested Dihya. But she let him go.

The bound milled aimlessly, stumbling into one another but no longer lashing out. Menna and Illi guarded Dihya as she crossed the circle to Amastan, but they didn't have to do much. Dihya draped the body over the donkey's back. Amastan helped tie it in place with trembling hands. Once the body was secured, the surviving cousins went about the grim task of clearing the platform of any straggling bound. It was much simpler now and they'd been honed to efficiency. Even exhausted, it took little time at all.

When they were done, the way was cleared for the evacuees.

They had won.

Covered in blood and silence, they fled to the sands.

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The two fires complemented each other. The one, their city burning in the sky. The other, the bodies of their fallen burning on the sands. Amastan's eyes blurred from the smoke, but he had no energy left to cry.

Others sobbed for him. Hamma squeaked and hiccupped at his side, her arms wrapped tight around her. Dihya stood far from the survivors, her back to the light. She stared south, toward the burning city. Occasionally, her shoulders shook.

Ziri hadn't reappeared from his headlong pursuit of the en-marabi. No one could find Salid, even though Amastan could have sworn he'd seen the charm maker's wrap in the crowd after the bound had been broken. More were

missing, civilians and cousins alike, but someone else would count them and there would be time enough for mourning.

The survivors were silent, watchful. The sun rose as if this were just another day. Amastan's fingers found the chain around his neck and felt the weight of the tiny drum. It was surprisingly heavy for such a small trinket.

Soon, they would have to leave the heat from the funeral pyre and head north. They couldn't risk more of the bound coming from the city. Amastan hoped to make the nearest well before the sun went down that evening.

There, they would hide and wait for the fires of their city to burn down. There, they would rest and heal. There, they would count their wounds and their dead.

And at some point, they'd have to come back and rebuild.

That would come in time. Now: silence.