



# Odin

ISSUE 20

BRADLEY P. **BEAULIEU**  
SETSU **UZUME** | JESSE **BULLINGTON**  
AIKI **FLINTHART** | FONDA **LEE**  
GARETH **RYDER-HANRAHAN**

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**Artwork**

The cover art for *Grimdark Magazine issue #20* was created by Carlos Diaz based on *The Flight of the Whisper King* by Bradley P. Beaulieu.

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# From the Editor

ADRIAN COLLINS

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While the contents page may look a little shorter than usual this quarter, don't let that fool you. We have a pretty damned epic issue of GdM for you, headlined by another magnificent *Shattered Sands* novella by Bradley P Beaulieu.

You'll remember we've previously published one of Bradley's novellas in our Stabby Award-winning anthology *Evil is a Matter of Perspective* back in 2017. His dark, beautifully imagined, high octane style of writing is really engaging, and I think you're going to love this next big instalment in his four-book world.

This issue also features the first cover by our new artist Carlos Diaz, a Jesse Bullington re-print dug up from another ezine that unfortunately didn't see much action back in 2014, and an original story from Setsu Uzume whose dark fantasy re-prints you've previously enjoyed in GdM's pages over the years.

With interviews and an article on writing female fighters, it's time for you to grab a drink, put your feet up, and enjoy our 20<sup>th</sup> issue. Happy reading!

Adrian Collins  
Founder

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# We Have No Word for Compassion

SETSU UZUME

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On the morning of hawksflight, when the first cool winds were due to blow, Tracker's Cross burned for the second time. We were not there. We were away, fixing ourselves. I had taken Tennin, Avaryt, Maliat, and all the others who might have prevented the raid. A week. One season. Time enough to bring ourselves back into alignment with our families, to be at the same point in time, not distracted by old wounds. All that work, ruined. I cannot stop them. Now, we follow our murderers home.

Under red sky and black-leaved trees, we follow the Sinyrleh—the Twisted, wound so tight they can never heal. Not like we had, when the mind responds to echoes of an ended time. It is a natural experience, like illness—like grey-haired Avaryt, who forgets to eat. She is still on the battlefield, hearing screams that aren't there and smelling blood on clean grasses. Avaryt will never leave that place, as much as she wants to. This is errilat. If she loved that place and didn't want to return, she would be errist, like Tennin. Both are out of alignment, a joint that wants cracking.

When we track a Sinyrleh hunting party, the errist and errilat fight the hardest, cracking bones back into place, feeding living fear to our ghosts. Fithynn was older, her memory longer, and the conflagration pushed her too far. The burning air was a wound to her voice, her throat clotting with her burnt children and

grandchildren. Fithynn fell on the hunters first. Reckless as dead flesh, already lost to the fire.

We keep one alive to answer for the dead. Avaryt binds his hands with a snare, steals his water flask, takes a swig, and tosses it to me. When I drink, I swallow Sinyrleh intentions, their will to survive, caught between the ash clouds and the frozen river that snakes around the roots of the plateau. Tennin, our leader, nudges the fat boar lying still as Fithynn's corpse, hunter and hunted.

Tennin regards the prisoner and speaks in our language. "Secrets should be shared, friend. Aren't you tired of knowing things all by yourself?" He doesn't respond, eyes fixed on his boots, or the dry leaves that cover them.

Tennin has a child's delight when she breaks his knees.

She crouches before him, speaking like a first teacher for babes, all bright eyes and bright smile. This is another word the Sinyrleh do not have, *raast*, the dancing hate, like the shimmer that warps the air above a fire. Tennin orders me to convey her meaning rather than her words. As I speak for her, my voice is low, precise. I want to know if he knew about my arrangement with his leader, but I can't ask directly. Tennin would rather cut out her tongue than speak Sinyrleh, but the others aren't *errist* like she is, and might catch me.

"I'm so happy you're here to talk with us," I say for her. "Tell me, your commander wears no mark of status. Who are they? How will we know who to kill?"

I ask Tennin's question precisely as she worded it, though I know exactly which man we're looking for.

The prisoner drools the same word over and over, blood trickling onto the dirt at his knees.

"What's he saying, *Kreyet*?" Tennin asks. She has a long scar dripping from her temple to her throat, shining with perspiration where her summergrass hair

has been pulled back. Beautiful to us, monstrous to them.

The word is complicated. It's the only command issued by the powerless to the powerful. He wants the pain to stop, and he wants us to grant him his life, as though such were ours to grant. Tennin won't hear or appreciate these subtleties while she's in raast, and I am beyond caring.

"He's saying *ow*," I lie.

Tennin snorts, inscrutable through the raast. "The commander, shitstain. Answer the question you were asked," she says through me.

The prisoner describes Gaddar in a distant way. His bearing, his grey eyes and white hair. No mention of his own scars, or his uneven walk. They take no pride in their marks. I remember that gait, pacing from one end of his tent to the other, agreeing to take eight healthy adults in exchange for giving me passage on an ice-crossing ship. I was supposed to be bound for a Sinyrleh city, away from all this, to teach them our words and end the fighting. They didn't have to destroy us to get what they wanted. Unless that was what they wanted.

The risk is necessary. I have to know, even if the warriors might guess why I ask, "was the burning an accident or an order?"

The prisoner shakes. Tears fill his eyes; he says he doesn't know. I adopt Tennin's raast tones, assuring the prisoner that we will grant him what he asks for. Tennin's grin widens as she brushes his filthy hair from his brow. The prisoner's chest hitches. His gaze passes over his comrades as our warriors drag them into a neat row along the path. Only Maliat lingers, her palm alighting on her kill's forehead while the bone knife in her other hand digs through his soft abdomen, turning him inside out. She isn't errist or errilat, Maliat knows exactly when and where she is as she works through his flesh, tending to suffering with personal,

intimate attention, kesteren—the the worst kind of hate. The deep, personal animus weaned on the heart's blood until it grows monstrous in its longing, long past any memory of who sneezed on whose loom or whose child raped whose father.

Sinyrleh think kesteren means 'braid,' but it's a particular five-stranded weave that looks like two when it's finished. It isn't why Tennin refuses to speak Sinyrleh, that is mere disgust; but it is why we killed all but one. The slaughter will happen, tonight, but the method deserved time and care—to hurt them as badly as possible. This is also kesteren.

Both Tennin and the prisoner hear the promise of spilled blood in my voice, but neither fully understands my words. He tells me there are twenty-five soldiers in his retinue, and that they're heading up to the precipice. He does not know—why Tracker's Cross burned.

Tennin grabs a hunk of the prisoner's hair and throws him face-first into the dirt. His skull cracks on a hidden lip of stone and he groans. She giggles.

"Well then," Tennin says, rising. "Our retreat is not yet over. We left to make sense of ourselves, to find our way, to find wisdom. We found something else, eh?"

Our word for wisdom is ruagh, and it is intentional; honing instinct like muscle memory. Tennin speaks of souruagh, the wisdom never sought. These are potent insights. Rare and treasured, but not something one would wish for. Souruagh isn't forbidden; it is never derided or condemned, but it is always painful. Not like running a foot race, or lifting pots of boiling water bare-handed, or asking a difficult question. It is losing badly enough to change who you are. It is finding the strength to help a loved one die.

I never meant to help them die, but I did. We returned to a shadow of our home, cinders rising like fireflies from rotting grass, our red sky smudged black.

Without our people, there is no us. What Tennin says next is pregnant with all of this, impossible to translate.

“We are dead flesh, with one last duty, one final responsibility.” Her bone knife cuts deep into the boar’s neck, popping the connective tissue between vertebrae. “We are the will of our family, the scream that echoes on from throats charred into silence.”

The others lick their teeth and swallow, submitting to souruagh. Their faces are placid when Tennin kicks the boar’s head clean off its shoulders, a wet, meaty sound. Ureht settles over us, an absolute calm, the opposite of her giddy raast. They want what she wants. It’s the only reason Tennin keeps command.

“The bridge is narrow. They’ll slow.” She drives her knife into the last hunter’s back, opening him. “There’s time to do this correctly.”

They’re to be splayed—thinned and spread out so the earth will claim them before their souls realize they’re free to leave.

Maliat’s hand is hot and sticky on my arm as she beckons me to another corpse, to show me what to do. Her brown eyes are soft as silt under clear water, pure and uncomplicated. It’s the way she looked at me when my people had stolen me back, and I had to relearn our tongue. I was no warrior, but I was unaligned. Maliat was how I convinced them to go on retreat, her face open and welcoming, eyes full of the same intimacy she showed her last victim under the black shadows of jungle trees.

I help Maliat and the other warriors pull the dead apart, their glassy eyes already drawing the attention of biting flies. We fan their skin out in sections like moth wings, intestines spilling like putrid vines, and I choke on the smell that bores through my soot-rasped throat. For once, I have no words. Our feud with the Sinyrleh has been a feast of souruagh, but the Sinyrleh couldn’t learn from it, even if they wanted to. They can’t see the words they’re missing.

They must feel what we feel. They must know the deep sadness, *erfayja*, caused by the plummet from roaring heights of pain and rage. They must know *emekhrei*, the hollow longing, the loss of their friends like the loss of an arm, when they return home as the last of their unit. They only have one word for terrible dreams, unable to distinguish between memories re-endured, *aypresti*, and the *vaidrasti*—dreams that predict danger to help us face it. And when they return to their homes and lay down their weapons, they have no words for the disorientation that sets in once all their training no longer applies. For the way their families become an anvil for their anger. For not knowing who they are without the chain of command. They must pace and laugh and strain, full of tension from *skour*, the unsatisfied promise of violence; but the only Sinyrleh word for this is a weak facsimile that means thwarted sexual desire. They're not the same thing. They need different measures, like the difference between the waiting-silence and the silence that shame forces upon us, which Sinyrleh always translate as 'broken'. I thought language could be a bridge, but the more I learned, the more I understood the limits of what we can convey to each other.

I want to hate them, but their efforts leave them as unaligned as we are at our worst. They flail in the dark. How can they possibly understand what they face when they have no words for any of it?

Tennin, Maliat, and Avaryt are bloody to the elbows, their necks flecked with blood like feast-day perfume. Avaryt suggests going around the Sinyrleh, warning the village of Two Post that they're coming. Maliat chides her, suggesting we harry them since everything narrows at the bridge. Take their scouts and their hunters and leave them splayed and soulless in the mud.

My own path narrows. "We are dead flesh and we have to kill them. All of them," I say. "Let me go in

ahead. I will find their firestarters and destroy the bridge. They will fall or burn. Or both.”

“Both,” Tennin says, turning the word over on her tongue, her voice free of raast for a moment.

I expect the others to object, to say we don't know their stock of weapons, or that the prisoner might have been lying, or what they might do if I get caught. But they do not. Our people are dead, and we have died with them. Without our family, we are nothing, with nothing to lose.

Tennin wipes her nose, specks of dried blood falling from her cheek. She says they'll follow before night falls, but the words she uses describe awakening fireflies, what this season was supposed to be before the burning. She is tied to this place, this moment in time, the raast swallowing the errilat. She waves me off, and orders the others to flense the boar, the only corpse they've yet to brutalize.

The jungle allows me through, helps me ascend during several hours of tracking. It is not my best skill, but there are no other routes, as the cliffs grow sheer and steep on either side of this patch of land. I keep watch for streams and deep mud, sand traps where stinging ants have dug their palaces, and mischievous fallen branches that pop up or snap when you least expect it. The rot hasn't set in as it should, or perhaps I'm misremembering the order of our seasons. Our people mark three times the seasons the Sinyrleh do. How can we be so alike yet so different? They weave clothes from the same skins and reeds as we do. Their bones as broad and solid as ours from eating the same scrubland deer. We tell the same story of the mountains melting, our people meeting, and that the first hand to cross the divide went for the throat. All that came after was true, even if it was built on a lie.

Then I find them. A small detachment gathering tinder. Sinyrleh are cunning and cowardly, and have no word for dead flesh. I can't risk gaining their attention

with words alone. I pick my way closer, and pull my bone knife from my belt. The last man in the column is unwary, and passes right by me without seeing me. I grab his hair and wrench him backward until he stumbles, the point of my dagger digs into his kidney.

“I will speak to Gaddar,” I say, slowly, evenly. “We have an arrangement. Take me to him and I will release your brother.”

Their hands leap to their weapons but a slightly shorter warrior with a shaved head gives the command to stop. “What kind of agreement?” he asks.

“A deal,” I say.

“Give us your blade, and we’ll bring you to him,” he says.

An insult. He knows this. My people would never agree to be denuded in this way, we who commit to becoming dead flesh after the losses he must know we have suffered. Sinyrleh do not have this rapport with their tools. A blade lost; a blade replaced. Lives too, perhaps.

The soldier stumbles when I release him. He rubs his back and curses, while I twirl my knife between my fingers and hold out the hilt. The soldier takes it, and the others close in around me like a fence.

Another hour up the hill. Trees and grasses ring an outcrop of rock before the bridge, curving like a crescent moon. Gaddar’s soldiers hammer and saw on both this side and the far side of the canyon, building the narrow rope bridge into something more. The unit brings me through the camp to Gaddar and the improvised table of cross-bound branches from which he issues construction orders. We pass carrypacks and litters of supplies—everything they took from Tracker’s Cross instead of slaves. I can’t shake the smell of smoke. I can’t go back there. I can’t become errilat. I rub my fingers together in little circles, forcing my mind to stay present with my body.

Gaddar's brows rise when he sees me. "Kreyet, have you come home?"

The words ask if this camp is home, but his tone asks if I witnessed the fire. I must reply as though both are true. Perhaps I could still go onward, dead flesh or no.

"Yes, it's good to be home," I reply. The soldiers do not disperse, and Gaddar doesn't dismiss them. I ask why they've stopped at the peak, before he can ask if I am alone.

"A small mercy," he says. The begging-word of the prisoner. "Reinforcing the bridge to keep us out of the ice. Four or five across instead of one. The faster we move, the more we grow."

The bridge was little more than ropes and uncertain wooden planks. They had been slowed, as Tennin guessed, but she hadn't guessed the reason. The burning was part of some larger strategy. I had to move fast like them, and subtle like us, if I stood any chance of collecting what he owed me. "I see no particular additions to your forces."

"I have what I need." He shrugs a little. "A little work on both sides, meeting in the middle. You know something of the method, don't you, dear heart?"

My skin crawls. Love rests at the base of the voice, not the heart. Sinyrleh affection in every metaphor hits my ear like a description of raast. I will teach them the difference once I'm in their city. "To end the fighting, yes."

Gaddar clears his throat and sniffs. "Why would we end the fighting when we're winning?"

The cook fires are small and scattered; I'm not the only one who smells it. His ice-grey eyes widen as the treetops glow, cinders sparking and dying on the breeze like fireflies rising from rotten grass. Heat shimmers in the treetops, a heart-deep hate that sways and dances. Grey smoke gives way to black billowing clouds that spread like a warning dream across the red

sky. New fires blaze through, and three figures dart out of the tree line, lighting everything within reach. The Sinyrleh did have explosives for clearing rock, and the soldiers are too busy trying to push these supplies off the cliff to stop the warriors in any meaningful way.

Fire laps from oiled tents to vials of spirit and leather polish, bursting their pots and spraying flame and shrapnel at the soldiers. Avaryt brings a reed to her lips and shoots wads of cloth soaked with pig fat at their backs, and the fire seeks them out like a child grabbing at the last scraps of bacon. Avaryt and Tennin must have wet their hair in a stream on the way up, their skin and clothes too soaked for sweat alone. They were the best the village had to offer, fresh from their retreat, and high on raast. They whirl and leap from group to cluster, avoiding combat, letting the fire do its work; and they show no sign of slowing.

Gaddar's soldiers run to stop them, pushing both of us out of the way. The hilt of Gaddar's sword brushes my hand when a flame set by Maliat surges forward and takes his men. One of them curls into himself, agony tearing his voice as his clothes blacken and melt into the sappy clay of his cooking skin—hair, brows, and eyelashes flare and die like dry moss on stone. Tennin kicks him aside like an old branch and throws her torch at Gaddar.

If she had been there, her home would not have burned. Tennin was the best of us before she became dead flesh. Now with her murderer in sight, she runs toward him like a nightmare—memory and warning both.

The torch hits Gaddar and I flinch, the trail of fire barely missing me as I push away from him. Before he can draw his blade, Tennin hits him at speed—driving her sword and bone knife through him. She keeps running, howling like a storm, and with one last vicious shove, she sends him over the edge. His blood arcs,

catching the firelight before dropping to the slurry below. In three breaths, he hits the water.

She turns to me, and I see her as the Sinyrleh do. Not wild and giddy with raast, but centered in ureht—the kind of certainty that emerges only in chaos, the belief in oneself when faith in all else has died.

She raises her bone knife toward me. I hold up my empty hands. “Tennin, I—”

“I find you standing next to him, Kreyet.” She takes a step toward me. Herding me. “Standing like the bridge stands.”

“I hadn’t found the—I hadn’t yet placed the—” An abandoned sword scrapes against the stone by my back foot, startling me.

Tennin pauses, her knife still extended. The bone is longer than most of its kind. That means it is far from her first. Made by her own hand from a creature she killed with great tenderness, guiding its life and strength into her weapon. The edges are keen but the material is dull—even light dies on it.

“We were betrayed, yet we live, Tennin! We could have made peace. I was trying to make peace! Did you think the lull was natural? I did that!” I shout at her. I was so close, and she ruined it. She and Gaddar both. I touch my fingers to the base of my throat. “We are not dead flesh! We breathe and speak. Is this how we end? How our history ends? Our language?”

“Dead flesh understands *mercy*,” The Sinyrleh word is like poison on her tongue. She spits. “It’s not enough, and it’s too late. You did this. Pick it up.”

She had known all along. She didn’t need me to translate. It had been a test—a suspicion confirmed. I could still run. A few steps out onto the bridge, and then cut the ropes before she does. If the slats hold, I might be able to climb up the other side, far beyond the reach of the fire. Assuming I can hold on, assuming my bones don’t break when the bridge slaps me against the cliff

face. I had been certain when I entered negotiations. Now all the certainty is hers.

Fire surrounds us. It will reach the bridge soon. Between the roaring flames and dying Sinyrleh I can't tell if Maliat yet lives. I whirl, grabbing the sword at my feet, spinning through to slice at Tennin, but I am outmatched. I always was. Tennin begins closing the second I move. One step brings her close, and the second slams into my side and she kicks me into open air.

The sword slips from my sweaty palm as I plummet. The chill rush of air makes the moment stretch, slashes of red sky shining pink on the crystalline surface of the river below, grey and glittering with chunks of ice. I pass dull gold rings of strata in the cliff face, and the smell of rich, ripe earth hangs between frozen water and burning sky. We have a word for this awe, the spectacle of world-rending destruction, the feast for the eyes that wounds the soul. Somehow my body has turned, and before I can remember this word, I hit the water feet-first and shatter every bone up through my knees. The frigid water swallows me. The impact drives the air from my lungs, and the bubbles bounce and break against the underside of an ice shelf. I float, aching, feeling for an opening, scrabbling fingers freezing and slipping against the ice. Cold fills my lungs, opening me like a moth's wings. My muscles stop responding. Someone will drink this water full of my language, and I pity them. They will feel everything I have felt, flailing in the dark, and have no words for their agony.**[GdM]**

**Setzu** writes and occasionally narrates dark fiction.  
More at their website, [SetzuUzume.com](http://SetzuUzume.com)

# An Interview with Gareth Ryder-Hanrahan

TOM SMITH

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Salutations shady ones! Today I join you from a dingy tavern in far away Guerdon where I caught up with Gareth Ryder-Hanrahan, author of the exciting dark fantasy romp *The Gutter Prayer*. Grabbing this book was an easy choice for me after reading about all the fantasy heavy hitters who recommended it.

If you haven't picked up this book yet, you need to rectify that. It has incredible world building with new species I hadn't seen the likes of before and a quick moving plot which found me at the end of the book all-too-soon.

**[TS]** Gareth, thanks for taking the time to meet with us!

**[GRH]** Not at all. Thank you for this opportunity to babble semi-coherently.

**[TS]** One thing that jumped out at me right away (besides the delicious darkness of the setting) was the uniqueness in the world building. Ghouls as a living race, the Tallowmen, colonies of worms with a group intelligence and sorcerous abilities, what was your thought process like in creating this unique setting?

**[GRH]** I think that credits me with far too much pre-planning. I really just took a grab-bag of stuff I liked—Lovecraftian ghouls! Lovecraftian Worms That Walk! Aren't Candles A Bit Weird? Victorian engineering!

Weird alchemy! Bells! Politics—threw them in a pile, and then started building connections and context for them. That’s the great thing about fantasy—you can include whatever weirdness you like, as long as you let it deform the baseline of reality sufficiently to feel plausible.

It’s not so much world-building as world-shoring-up-the-steaming-lump-of-weirdness-I-dropped-on-it.

**[TS]** For a fantasy book there was a fair amount of politics and political maneuvering going on in *The Gutter Prayer*, particularly with Spar. In a way his arc reminded me a little of *The Gangs of New York*.

In a grimdark type urban setting, do you find a little bit of political intrigue inevitable? And (without going into too much detail of current events) was any of it influenced by the current state of political unrest in the real world?

**[GRH]** I think it’s very hard to get away from politics in an urban setting. Unless you really restrict the scope of your story to one particular section of the city and use the rest solely as backdrop, you’re very soon going to bump into issues of social class, of wealth and power, of law and order, of how people live together. And once you bump into these issues, you have to address them or consciously not address them.

*The Gutter Prayer* was mostly written in 2015, back in those halcyon days when checking twitter was a distraction and not a survival reflex, so the current political shitshow wasn’t a direct influence. The stuff about the mad gods was partially inspired by the climate crisis—the idea of the stable, orderly, overlooked foundations of the world suddenly turning on us and becoming malicious and destructive. Other elements of the real world have seeped into other books I’ve written, but everything gets chewed up and

digested. Everything you consume influences what you write to some degree.

**[TS]** As I mentioned earlier, I found a lot of uniqueness in this setting which made it hard for me to recognize any influences you may have had from other works—which is a compliment.

What were some early fantasy influences from you while reading in your formative years?

**[GRH]** Oh, wow. I started out with Tolkien and Lovecraft (and, er, *Nightmare* on ITV, which is alarmingly deeply buried in my psyche). Le Guin's Earthsea. Robert Holdstock's Mythago Wood and Lavondyss. Early Gibson, especially Count Zero. Jeff Vandermeer's Ambergris series, Perdido Street Station obviously. And I've been working full-time on tabletop roleplaying games for a long time, which includes a lot of fantasy elements—I spent years churning out material during the d20 boom, and also worked on licensed games based on Middle-earth, Moorcock's Eternal Champion, Stross' Laundry Files. So, yeah, it's a rich marinade.

**[TS]** While we did have a Saint prominently featured in the story, I felt like we didn't find out a whole lot about the religious system and other clerical type magics. Will we see it more fleshed out in book 2?

**[GRH]** Yes, definitely. The second book, *The Shadow Saint*, has foreign powers—belligerents in the Godswar—running around Guerdon, so there's a lot of saints and sorcery.

I'd quibble, though, at the term "religious system". There are effectively two strands—there's a sort of spiritual physics where the gods are basically semi-sentient weather systems churning around the aether, and then there's whatever people believe about their

god, which ends up shaping the god in return. The relationship between gods, mortals, sorcery and technology evolves over the course of the books; the BIG BOOK ONE SPOILER is an obvious example, but there's also BOOK TWO SPOILER.

**[TS]** As a martial artist, I always pay particular attention to the fight scenes. Granted there aren't many styles that deal with fighting large walking candles with arms and legs or men with stone skin, but I got more of a medieval vibe from the fighting than a more formal hand to hand type fighting.

What martial arts influences did you draw from for combat in this story?

**[GRH]** Hmm. Very few of the characters have anything like formal training. Cari certainly doesn't; neither does Spar or Rat. Aleena does, but yeah—her style would be outdated and quasi-medieval, and rather reliant on being superhumanly strong and fast. Miren's self-taught.

Most of the monsters, too, are so absurdly dangerous that going hand-to-hand with them is futile. There's a reason that Guerdon's got an immensely profitable trade in alchemical cannons and bombs—the only way people can fight the horrors is from a long way away, and preferably from behind a very big wall.

For the combat scenes, I often use the same technique I use for worldbuilding. Take one interesting impossibility—a man whose partially made of stone—and then try to work out how that would change the dynamics of a more conventional fight.

**[TS]** When you aren't writing, how do you like to relax or let loose?

**[GRH]** I have two six-year-old twins, a six-month old baby, and I make my living doing things that are

supposed to be hobbies. I function best as a knot of stress and deadlines. I relaxed once in 1998 and didn't like it very much.

**[TS]** If you were ever given the opportunity to write in a shared universe or to write a series with another writer, who would you want to work with?

**[GRH]** I've already done this, sort of—through licensed games, I've got to play around in lots of shared universes. I've bounced around Middle-earth and Cimmeria, played around the Tardis and Babylon 5 and Arkham, shared a novel credit with Bram Stoker (we rewrote *Dracula* as a technothriller). I've also done some Warhammer 40k material, so that's another bucket list item checked off.

You know, I think I'm going to give a very un-Grimdark answer, and say I'd love to do something with *Adventure Time*, of all things. Although it'd also be really interesting to build a shared universe from scratch—I'm more comfortable with taking existing elements and building on them, as opposed to creating stuff *ex nihilo*.

**[TS]** Different artists require different mediums and lengths of time to showcase their ideas. As a writer, do you decide up front how long your stories will be or do you just go along for the ride? Do you think there is a perfect length for stories, or does it vary by story or writer?

**[GRH]** I am a proud and long-serving hack. The perfect length for any story is, of course, the number of words listed in the contract, plus or minus 5%.

*The Gutter Prayer*, obviously, was an exception to that—it was a rare case of a story I wrote for myself, without a contract or any expectation of selling it. I didn't plan the length of it, but 180,000 words is a nice

length. It's long enough that it's got plenty of room for twists and intricacies, but just short enough that you can make measurable process in an evening's reading. (I'm terrified by really giant doorstoppers of books. I really must make another attempt at Alan Moore's *Jerusalem* once of these days...).

As a general rule—length needs to be proportional to complexity. If you've got a simple story, or a simple setting, and you find yourself writing a long book, then unless you're a brilliant prose stylist, something's gone wrong.

**[TS]** How do you feel that dark fantasy or grimdark stories translate into other medium like TV and movies? Are there any examples of this or even general fantasy that you have enjoyed?

**[GRH]** I'm trying to think of good examples of visual fantasy that I've enjoyed—especially recent ones—and I'm blanking. I think fantasy's easy to do badly—they end up using magic as a clumsy plot device, because magic can paper over any problems. Why can the dark lord only be defeated with the seven plot tokens? Magic. Why is this guy the hero? Prophecy. It ends up feeling very artificial and weightless. Whereas the real joy in fantasy, for me, is either working out the ramifications of those intrusions of the strange, or delighting in their impossibility.

(Also, *Knightmare* was totally grimdark. Throwing kids into the Corridor of Blades?)

**[TS]** What projects do you currently have in the works that you would like to share with our readers?

**[GRH]** In order of GrimDarkNess, and sticking to stuff that's actually been announced...

- Book Two of the Black Iron Legacy, entitled *The Shadow Saint*, is done bar final checks. It'll be out in January of 2020.
- The Borellus Connection, a campaign for the Fall Of Delta Green game, is in playtest. You're playing 1960s spies battling Cthulhu Mythos cultists along the heroin trail, from Vietnam to Marseilles.
- The Book Of The Underworld, a sourcebook for the 13TH Age roleplaying game, covering underground adventuring and weird subterranean realms.
- The Errantries Of The King, a campaign for the One Ring roleplaying game, set in Gondor about forty years prior to the events of The Lord of the Rings.
- I did portions of the dialogue for the Paranoia: Happiness Is Mandatory computer game, set in the not-at-all dystopian world of the Paranoia rpg. It can't be grimdark, of course. It's not dark because of all the flashing warning lights, and it's not grim because The Computer says Happiness is Mandatory and anyone unhappy will be shot as a traitor.
- Just out is Night's Black Agents: Solo Ops, the one-player/one-gm version of the Jason-Bourne-vs-Dracula game of spies hunting vampires.

On top of that, there's a bunch of fiction projects, more game material, and some licensed fiction.

**[TS]** Gareth, thanks so much for stopping by! Now how do I get out of here?

**[GRH]** If I knew that, don't you think I'd have stepped away from this keyboard at some point...**[GdM]**

# Holy Diver

JESSE BULLINGTON

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Black was the blood scabbing the blade of the killer's ax, and black was the metal of the stolen armor she fitted into place. The cuirass and chain suit were stained from the countless years they had spent swaying from chains hanging above the altar's braziers, the pungent smoke of incense and human sacrifice hallowing the sacred armor with a dark, sticky residue. The blood on the ax was a far fresher blot, having flowed from the guardians of the Temple of the Midnight Rainbow but a short time before.

A more fastidious woman would have taken care to clean her weapon as soon as its work was done, but Ido Blackdew was only fastidious so far as her thick black hair was concerned—she had slicked it back with the pigfat pomade she kept in an old iron pot as soon as she'd finished donning the armor that had brought her to this remote temple hidden among the crags of the southern coast, her ax all but forgotten on the onyx altar beside her. She inspected herself in the polished wall of silver that covered the back of the apse, the mirror that the priestesses of the Cult of the Last Day peered into for portents from the Other Side.

"Too fucking right," Ido said to herself, pleased by her reflection. Glancing at the cooling corpse of the priestess who had objected to her liberation of the neglected relic, she said, "Bet it suits me better than it ever did Saint Whatsisface, eh?"

For all the cult's sermons on the dead being able to speak, the mortal remains of their earthly

representative remained silent in the face of Ido's admittedly rhetorical question. No matter. When a woman truly looks her best, she needs no eyes but her own to tell her so. "Bet I look better'n any cunt who ever strutted down the Courts of the Seven Duchies."

In this, as in so much else, Ido was mistaken—while the richly inlaid armor somehow fit her perfectly, she had, as usual, applied far too much grease to her hair, and it was dribbling down one cauliflowered ear.

"To the Crimson Wastes with you, then," Ido told the corpse, straightening the breastplate in the mirror. "You knew anything, you wouldn't have forced my fucking hand. Pains me to kill a naked fool, you ought to know. I'm not as bad as that."

In truth, Ido was as bad as that, and worse, but then the priestess wasn't strictly naked, either. She wore the cured skin of her predecessor as a robe, but not a stitch more, and that hadn't left much to the imagination even before Ido had cleaved her head wide and the garment had fallen open, along with her skull. What'd the priestess expect, though, trying to get her touch on whilst muttering those words what made Ido's ears ache as she rushed the altar? Saint Prudence tells us it's a risky business, acting the holy witch when a bloodied woman you've just seen chop down three temple guards is telling you to stand down or face the same fate. Ido had touched enough hot stew pots in her day to have precious little fucking sympathy for those who hadn't learned the simple lesson of not sticking your hand in a fire unless you fancy a blister. But that right there was the sort of universal truth that never seemed to sink in for those of a religious bent...

Excepting, Ido supposed, the runaway acolyte who had told her all about this here Temple of the Midnight Rainbow and the sacred armor it contained. Ido only had to tell that lippy trull the once not to water down her drinking with talk of ancient gods and forbidden rites, and right enough, the girl had changed the subject to

the more material rewards the Cult of the Last Day might offer a humble pilgrim such as herself. Aye, that Sister Annica had been uncommonly clever for a cultist, but then she must've been to stop off at the Silver Mountain—it wasn't the sort of tavern holy-minded folk frequented.

As she turned this way and that in the mirror, admiring the fine treasure the novice had tipped her off to, Ido felt a pang of regret at not having helped the girl out of her habit by way of thanks. Since Sister Annica had escorted Ido most of the way to the temple before turning off on her own path, the warrior supposed she might catch up to the maid soon enough, now that the deed was done. Give her a token of Ido's appreciation, and all. Readjusting her codpiece, she leered at the thought—not all cultists were so bad, then.

Her reflection rippled, as though the silver pane were a still pond Ido had kicked a pebble into. She blinked at the mirror, taking a step back, and as the distortion dissipated, Sister Annica materialized in the reflection beside her. The curvy wench was no longer dressed in the plain habit and wimple as when Ido had last seen her, but wore a sheer dress of darkest spidersilk, and upon her pallid brow burned a crown of black candles.

Ido smacked her lips at the vision in the mirror, bored already. She had faced down devils and deep-things, and knew well their tricks—she'd turn away from the mirror and the girl would be gone, replaced with some sanity-blasting horror. Yet when she wheeled away from the silver wall, her belt knife already in hand and ready to stab whatever fiend awaited her, she saw the reflection had shown true: Sister Annica stood over the dead priestess, eying Ido with obvious amusement. She stood between Ido and the altar where she had left her ax before taking down the armor.

“We meet again, Sir Blackdew,” said the cultist, every steel hook and jet jewel set in her pierced brows, nose, and lips winking at Ido in the wavering light thrown by the girl’s blazing crown.

“Told you, I’m not a cunt who sleeps on the job,” said Ido, trying to recall if she’d bullshitted the acolyte about being a knight or if the girl’s addressing her as *Sir* was just some quirk of foreign etiquette. “I owe you, turning me onto this gear. The kit looks damn fine on me, eh?”

“Put the Diadem of Stars on a sow, does it make her Queen?” asked Annica, her eyes flashing like a hill-tiger’s.

“Huh. I suppose not,” allowed Ido, disappointed. She wasn’t thick, she kened the score. The girl had put her onto this temple and its relic to have her do all the dirty work, meaning to snatch it for herself after Ido had cleaned house. Well, Ido knew a thing or seven about dirty work, and took a casual step toward the tallow-headed chit before she could undo her with violence or witchery.

“Behind you,” Sister Annica breathed huskily, those cat eyes of hers brimming with mischief. But Ido wasn’t some green knob to fall for such an amateurish ploy, and pain her though it did to stick such a fair maid, Ido Blackdew never shied away from a little hurt if she thought it might spare her a good deal more. Yet as she thrust her knife at the girl’s ample bosom, a cold, wet, and iron-firm whip snatched the wrist of Ido’s kill-hand, yanking her off balance and sending the blade flying away into the temple. She shrugged as she felt all the chill of a winter solstice in Frostland seep out of the whip, crawl up her arm, and settle into her guts.

“Told you.”

Before Ido could seize Annica with her free hand or even glance down and confirm that the tightening noose pulsing against her wrist was no mundane whip, several more icy, slimy ropes lassoed her around the

thighs, waist, and throat. As soon as they had her a terrible pressure pulled on Ido, dragging her backwards. She kept her balance even as she struggled, knowing to fall was to die, but her boots skidded inexorably over the volcanic glass floor of the apse. Toward the silver mirror.

A judicious woman would have bartered or begged, knowing her options were few, but Ido was only judicious when it came to the spending of hard-won coin.

“Bad play,” she barked at the smirking Annica. “You just slit your own fucking throat, you—”

But the rest of her oath turned to a stream of bubbles as she was jerked into a pool of disquietingly warm liquid. The lurching change in perspective made her light-headed; Annica was still standing just in front of her, but Ido was sinking backwards, downwards... into what she had thought was a mirror. In a frenzy of motion, the ropey things that had dragged her in uncoiled, releasing Ido and slithering away into the strange waters as she sank with distressing speed.

In her storied career as a sometime-sell-sword, sometime-brigand, and full-time ruthless asshole, Ido had been obliged to jump into many a moat and swift-moving river to escape death, and she knew this business well. Holding her breath, her hands flitted to the straps of the cuirass and she wriggled free of it even before her chest began burning in earnest. Rather than sinking past her the steel gear floated up, but she was too occupied in squirming out of the black chainmail to properly register this anomaly. Only when she was free of the heavy armor and it too soared upward through the darkening water, carrying her thin tunic up along with it, did the weirdness of it all settle onto Ido’s racing mind.

No time to ponder it, she had heavy boots to get off. She tucked her knees and yanked the buggers off, then began wheeling her arms and kicking her legs.

Yet even with only sheer woolen leggings weighing her down she continued to sink into the warm sea. Far, far above, she saw the heavy metal armor reach the quivering, silvery surface, and vanish.

Deviltry. Of course.

Ido knew a thing or three about deviltry, and the first lesson you learn when you've got a curse or geas on you is not to fight it—that's just what they want, to tire you out. The only smart play for the bewitched is doing what's least expected, trying to slip free rather than busting loose. To this end, Ido wheeled around in the deepening gloom and kicked down instead of up. Right enough, instead of drifting deeper and deeper until her lungs exploded, she shot straight down into the black heart of the viscous abyss. The surface was a nearly forgotten dream, the water as deep and dark as a moonless, starless, shameless night, her chest aching from the strain of keeping in bad air...

And then, through the murky stillness, she caught sight of a distant light, a beacon shining like diamonds at the bottom of the black gulf. A way out, maybe...

No. The light wasn't static, it was bobbing up toward Ido, and her heart lurched in her cramping breast. Something was coming for her.

She could hold her breath a long time, could Ido Blackdew, but she had been too long, and could hold it no longer. It felt near to having a wee orgasm, did clearing her lungs in a swarm of sour bubbles, but even if the ball of light hadn't reached her then she would've known all her earthly pleasures were at an end, that her time was up. You don't have long, once you've blown out the bad and have nothing good to replace it with. As the pale glow bathed her dark flesh, and Ido saw from whence the light originated, she supposed drowning was actually the least of her worries.

The glowing face was human, but that was about all that could be said in its defense. It glided up out of the blackness, surround by a softly undulating bubble that

might have been air or might have been translucent skin. As Ido flailed her limbs about, trying to swim away from this radiant herald of her death, the face suddenly shifted—it was a woman’s visage now, and then it was a boy’s, and then an old crone... the only thing that remained the same was the wan light it emitted. That, and every face in the luminous orb was mutely screaming.

Ido gasped; couldn’t help herself. Choked on the sweetness as she inhaled thick syrup instead of water, honey that burned her nose and lungs as she coughed on it... coughed on it, gasped again, and realized with wonder that she could breathe the sickeningly sugary fluid as though it were air.

Her first thought was she was dreaming, that she’d been drugged in the temple and now swam through the furthest reaches of her own addled skull. There was no other explanation for a woman breathing water like she was a pike sailing around a pond. Yet the pain in her ringing ears and treacle-blasted sinuses told her this was no dream... but then all rational thought was washed away by what next met her horrified eyes.

What froze Ido in the water, half-turned away from the parade of silently howling human heads, was what she now made out at the borders of the orb’s hazy light. Projecting out of the top of the phosphorescent glob was a bristly black rod as thick as an ax handle, and that rod jutted out of a nightmarish, monstrous face, its gaping, needle-filled mouth as wide as Ido herself. All around, at the edge of the light’s reach, whipped countless more of the prickly tentacles that had dragged her into this realm, the true girth of the behemoth only hinted at by the sudden currents buffeting Ido as the leviathan swam lazily upward.

The god of the Cult of the Last Day, the deity in whose honor the Temple of the Midnight Rainbow had first been built.

A more superstitious woman might have prayed, then, but Ido put all her faith in but one power: herself. In Ido's experience, a god was just a monster nobody had managed to yet kill, and she had half a mind to lay this brute out herself.

It wasn't that Ido was above fear of such horrors. If anything, fear was an emotion that had fallen beneath her, something to be hopped over lest she stumble upon it; the woman's brain was tempered by a hundred battles, and had learned to protect itself through a sort of brutish pragmatism. Man or monster, it mattered little to the bruised, brooding lump of jelly lurking behind her greasy waves of black hair and scowling face. A threat was a threat, and a cunt was a cunt.

All Ido had to do was grab that glowing face-orb to make sure she didn't lose the light, and then swing on over and claw out one of the monster's blinking, blind, surprisingly human eyes. Easy. Then she'd just push on through the socket into its brains and—

Before she could put her half-baked plan into action, or even maneuver back around in the heavy liquid, the god of those benighted depths darted up and bit Ido in half. Her legs were in its rough, cold mouth before she even registered what had happened, its gargantuan shark-like maw snapping shut around her waist. The dagger-long teeth punctured her vitals, tore their way loose, and clamped down again half a dozen times before Ido even felt them... but when the pain did arrive, it wasn't anything like an animal bite or a stabbing, both of which she'd had voluminous experience with. No, this was true agony, the only word for it—like a hundred small, dull, red-hot saws being dragged around her midsection.

Ido shrieked mutely into the abyss as it chewed away at her. She was dead, then. No human could endure this. The only thing left was for it to bite clean through her, legs, ass, and treasure gobbled in one bite, guts unspooling behind Ido as her upper half

drifted through the deep, never escaping the damnable glow of its lure before it came for the rest of her...

Yet here, on the edge of oblivion, a queer fact forced its way past the pain, into Ido's reeling skull: no cloud of blood steamed up from the busy mouth that gnawed her; no gore at all chummed the ghost-lit waters. She forced herself to look, and there between the rows of snapping teeth, her modest gut and thick legs appeared no worse for wear. As she gawped the fangs went in and out of her flesh, in and out and in and out and in again, but for all the stinging misery they administered no wounds appeared. Hells, even her dirty leggings seemed intact, despite the onslaught.

Ido might have laughed, then, with relief and scorn, when the creature's jaws shut tight, pinning her in place. To go on the rough, icy tongue now slapping against her waterlogged hose and the bulging of its many pale eyes, the fiend was as surprised by Ido's solvency as she was. The mouth yawned back open, wider than ever, and Ido felt her calloused feet slip in the gravelly interior, her whole body sliding another inch into the gargantuan gullet as a dozen tentacles swam into the light, coiling around her. They ground into her exposed shoulders, chest, and arms, pressing down with the weight of oceans and trying to force the rest of her into the hungry orifice.

Maybe she was dead already, and that's why the teeth did her no material harm, why she wasn't drowning in the sea of treacle. Maybe all that awaited her on the other side of life's mirror was an eternity rotting away in a wicked god's belly. Like some never-ending wheel, she would suffer for all time with not even death coming to set her free from the torment...

Fuck that.

Struggling against the tentacles that crushed her down into the mouth, she slipped an arm free of the appendages and snatched out for something, anything. Her hand closed on the razor-lined stalk of

the lure, and though she felt it cut her to the fingerbones, Ido refused the impulse to release it. She held on for all she was worth, the stalk bowing under her weight and bringing the glowing ball of light down to her level, the half-eaten woman's screaming face reflected in those trapped inside the orb.

The tentacles tightened, digging into her skin, and she sank deeper into its mouth, her feet and then her calves sucked into its gravelly throat, its teeth raking through her belly and back. The orb bobbed down along with her as the god swallowed her alive, the gristly tableau brilliantly illuminated as the gnashing teeth reached her tits. The lure she clung to was so close she could have kissed it, and stretching her neck up to meet the howling faces in the bubble of light, Ido opened her mouth...

Time to teach this fucking fish how to properly bite something. Ido sank her teeth into the blob of phosphorescence, sank them all the way to her gums. It was as soft and slimy as a rope of frog eggs, but the surface of the bubble did not break as she bore down on it. This close to the imprisoned faces, she could dimly hear their screams. The taste of tears clouded her tongue, cutting through the honeysuckle sweetness of the sea, and she tightened her jaw, grinding into the glowing sack.

The effect was immediate. The god-monster spat her out, the tentacles that had pressed her into its mouth now flinging her away with a heretofore only half-suspected strength. A couple of Ido's teeth went loose in her jaw as it hurled her away as hard as it could. She rocketed through the deep so fast that by the time she knew what had happened she exploded out of the water, flying through air far cooler than the blood-warm sea... and then, on the cusp of instinctual, idiot hope, more tentacles slapped her exposed skin, clanking together as they snared her in their web.

Ido tumbled, tangled, then shrieked in pain as one of the tentacles wound tight around her forearm, wrenching her shoulder out of its socket as it arrested her fall. She dangled limply in its grasp, utterly spent... and realized it was not another serpentine limb of the drowned god that had snatched her, but a thick iron chain. She hung suspended from one of the chains that had displayed the armor she had stolen, what seemed like a lifetime ago. She was back in the Temple of the Midnight Rainbow.

Blinking away the metallic goo that still burned her eyes, Ido saw Sister Annica standing beside the altar just below her, staring up in wonder. It had felt an eternity since she had gone through the mirror that was once again solid silver at the rear of the apse, but the traitorous trollop had barely finished donning the armor she had stolen from Ido. She tried to laugh in the younger woman's stunned face, but the arm Ido dangled from hurt so badly her triumphant cackle came out as a deranged hiss.

"You... you're alive!"

"That makes one of us," Ido managed through gritted teeth. "You're a dead woman, mark my fucking words."

"You didn't see..." Sister Annica bit her pierced lip and glanced nervously at their reflections in the mirror. "It didn't see you?"

"Oh, he saw me, right enough, but I saw him, too. Takes more'n a crusty cunt and her fishy familiar to undo Ido Blackdew!" Trying to swing her free arm up to the chain that had caught her, Ido nearly blacked out from the pain this motion brought her. She flopped back down, swinging limply in the perfumed air of the temple. Well, shit.

"Impossible!" said Sister Annica. "The cult told me that in a thousand years of sacrifice not a single victim has escaped the Sunken King of Souls!"

“King o’ Souls?” Ido smacked her lips. “That explains it, then. I ain’t got one. Sold mine years ago.”

“Huh.” Sister Annica’s cat eyes gleamed in the light of the crown of candles she had set on the altar beside Ido’s ax. Probably had to take it off to put on the armor, which, oddly enough, given their difference in size, fit the smaller, curvier girl every bit as well as it had fit Ido. That was sacred relics of blasphemous cults for you. “Tell you what, Blackdew—I could have use for a woman of your... fortitude. What say I help you down and we call it even? Go into business together?”

“We’ll call it even as soon as I take my fucking armor back,” said Ido. “And the only business we’ve got to conduct is betwixt you and the dull end of my ax. You’re fucking dead, you loony cultist.”

“I was never a believer,” sniffed Annica. “I took the vows to get inside the temple and steal the armor, but things got... weird. Being a novice has certain expectations I wasn’t willing to fulfill, so I lit out and sought a better means of securing the relic. Enter Ido Blackdew. I trust you remember my warning that tonight was the only time to raid this place, don’t you?”

“Course I do,” said Ido, resentful of the implication that she was thick. “Most of the cult’s off at a sister temple for some ceremony. Only left a skeleton crew to mind the loot.”

“Slightly more skeletal now, thanks to you,” observed Annica, nudging the murdered priestess with her sandal. “I walk out now and leave you hanging up there where the holy armor’s supposed to be, do you really think you can get yourself down before the rest of the cult returns on the morrow?”

“Definitely,” said Ido, not so sure as that, not so sure at all. Her ensnared arm, shoulder, and neck had gone numb while they’d been jawing, and the other chains dangled just out of reach. “You better get away, then, thief, and race for the morning. You can hide in the sun

until I'm free, but soon enough I'll be coming after you, and then you'll really see the light."

"Uh huh." Annica crossed her arms. "One thing my brief time in the cult taught me is that some light can never be seen."

"What the fuck does that even *mean*?" sneered Ido. "Really, do you hear yourself? The shit cults tell their worshippers isn't divine truth, it's gibberish. When I went to war against the King of Cats, his church told me the stripes of a tiger revealed it's cleanliness, like *that* meant something. I showed them what was what when I jumped on one of their warbeasts and rode it straight into the throne room."

Annica looked incredulous. "And what real truth is there, then, oh philosopher? In all your battles, what lessons did you glean that you might offer a novice such as myself?"

"Real truth is hard as steel," said Ido. "Like the truth that once I get down from here, I'm going to kill you twice, just to make sure it takes."

"Well, best of luck, then," said Annica, fitting her crown of half-burned candles back into place and hefting Ido's ax over one shoulder as she eyed the chain that snared her enemy. "Even if you can't... *swing it*, I'm sure the Cult of the Last Day will be sympathetic to your situation. Give my regards to the Sunken King of Souls when they toss you back in."

Ido glowered at her as Annica strode across the blood-streaked floor of the temple, chewing the inside of her cheek. No sense hanging on the principle of the thing. "Wait!"

Only when Annica had come all the way back to the apse did Ido add, "You get me down and give me back that armor, I'll let bygones be gone and all. I'll even hear you out on any other schemes you got brewing."

Annica winked at her, going to a crank set in a nearby pillar. As she worked it the chains began to lower, Ido along with them. She wished she'd noticed

that before, would have made getting the armor down in the first place a sight easier.

“Tell you what, Blackdew,” said Annica with a too-wide grin, “If you can take this armor from me, it’s all yours.”

“Deal,” Ido said as her bare feet reached the cold basalt of the altar and she went weak in the knees to again be on solid land. “I’m Ido fucking Blackdew, tiger rider, king killer, huntress of hearts and sole survivor of the Midnight Sea. I’m a legend in my own fucking time, girly—I wrestled a god, I can wrestle you.”

\* \* \*

Black was the blood clotting the bandage stuffed in Ido’s broken nose as they left the temple a short time later, and black was the armor gleaming in the moonlight on Annica’s smug shoulders. That was all right, though, no one was expected to fight her best with a dislocated shoulder, and Ido was a patient woman. Besides, if she couldn’t get that wee lass out of her armor with just her fists, she’d be able to soon enough with her good looks and her velvet tongue...

In this, as in so much else, Ido Blackdew was mistaken.

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**Jesse Bullington** is the author of three novels that fuse elements of historical, literary, and weird fiction: *The Sad Tale of the Brothers Grossbart*, *The Enterprise of Death*, and *The Folly of the World*. Under the pen name Alex Marshall, he recently completed the Crimson Empire trilogy. The first book, *A Crown for Cold Silver*, was shortlisted for the James Tiptree, Jr. Award.

He is also the editor of the Shirley Jackson Award nominated *Letters to Lovecraft*, and co-editor of *Swords v. Cthulhu*. His short fiction, reviews, and essays have appeared in such diverse publications as the *LA Review of Books*, *The Mammoth Book of Best New Erotica 13*, *VICE*, and *Lost Transmissions: The Secret History of Science Fiction and Fantasy*. He loves metal, spends a lot of time in the woods, and currently resides in North Carolina.

# Fight Like a Girl

## Writing Fight Scenes for a Female Character

AIKI FLINTHART

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One of the joys of writing a female character in a fight scene is how completely random she can be and still be realistic. Women don't fight like men. Agreed, the more training and experience they have, the smaller is the difference. But not all of your characters are going to be hardened mercs with a decade of experience coolly slicing throats and wiping blood and brains off their goggles. And most women will also have to overcome differences in size, strength, and social conditioning before they can win a fight against a bigger guy.

Let's play with a few characters. We'll call them Sarah, Chantelle, and Mallika. To reduce variables, we'll make them all roughly the same age—early twenties, fit and healthy. All with jobs and no kids. Perhaps with a new boyfriend, who will probably turn out to be a werewolf, or an alien, or a spy that tries to kill her. That seems to happen a lot.

Assuming they've all grown up in roughly the same modern Earth culture, all three women will fight their own thinking first. Women must overcome strong social conditioning against fighting and hurting others before they'll resist an attack. Which is harder than it sounds. In the dojo, new female students sheepishly apologise every time they hit someone.

But let's see how Sarah reacts to a workplace invasion. She's had no martial arts training and no experience with violence beyond the usual blokey catcalls and minor annoyances. She's working late and a burglar breaks in. He's a streetwise guy with some fight experience under his belt but no formal training.

Right from the start, Sarah has a problem. She's at both a physical and mental disadvantage. She has no skills, no reflexes, and no psychological preparation. First, she'll act on instinct and plead with him not to hurt her. If he attacks, she may be so terrified that she can't fight back at all, or she may go batshit-crazy tornado-cat on him.

That's her one advantage.

Untrained women, when they're angry and fighting for their lives, go completely ballistic in ways that men don't expect. Sarah will grab any object as a random weapon, she'll also scratch, gouge at eyes, tear hair, and bite anything. (We all know that weird feeling you get in your jaw and the pit of your stomach when your teeth break another human's skin. I'll bet you shivered just thinking about it.). She'll grab for anything handy to use as a weapon.

She'll kick and hit and shred her attacker until she feels safe. Sarah will kill him, and then stab him fifteen more times just to be sure. Possibly smash his head in with something heavy to be on the safe side.

An untrained, frightened, angry woman is a force to be reckoned with because she's so damned unpredictable.

Let's put Chantelle in the same situation. She's had dojo training and maybe a little bit of real-world experience. She's learned to overcome her social conditioning and hit men without hesitation. When an attempt to de-escalate fails, she's smart enough to strike first, hard and with absolute commitment. Because if she hesitates when his broken nose sprays blood in her face, she loses her advantage of surprise.

Being smaller and physically weaker, Chantelle will need to keep her head. Luckily women dump adrenalin slightly later than men, so she may have a couple of cool minutes to do damage before she gets the full adrenalin symptoms: tunnel vision, shakes, muffled hearing, loss of cognitive ability to think, loss of fine motor control. During that time, she may go for throat strikes, elbow to liver or jaw or nose, front-kick to the bladder to rupture it. A rear-naked choke is good if she can hold it long enough (approximately seven seconds for unconsciousness).

A dojo-trained woman has the advantage of surprise and skill, but if she screws up or hesitates, her lack of experience will show. Then Chantelle will revert to instinctive, wild, fighting for survival, claws-and-teeth tactics.

She'll also be deeply affected by her first true fights and will have to deal with the psychological fallout of killing. (As will poor Sarah in the first scenario.)

In the third book of my *Kalima Chronicles* (IRON, FIRE, and STEEL), Alere is a martial artist with some experience under her belt, but she freezes when she's surprised during a night attack. She overcomes the freeze, but her moment of vulnerability causes her to overreact and kill her attacker when she doesn't mean to. Which leads to horrible guilt and then to a refusal to fight. Which, in turn, causes huge flow-on effects in the rest of the plot leading up to the climax. So don't forget the psychological fallout of any given fight scene. It will be different for each character, depending on their experience with trauma.

Where does that leave Mallika? She's a pro. She's military with a few years in the field. She's both trained and experienced. When our bad guy threatens, she'll have no hesitation in using lethal force if necessary. She can switch on the combative mindset that allows her to 'other' her opponent, to treat him as a piece of meat. She can ride the adrenalin rush and use it for

power, overcome any momentary surprise-freeze and go for a kill strike: the 'apricot'/medulla oblongata with a blade-hand to the back of the skull. Or something less lethal: the knock-out points along the jaw and throat with an elbow; the trachea or jugular with airway strangles or blood chokes; knee or ankle with kicks to dislocate or break bones. The liver-strike, I'm told, is far worse than being kicked in the testicles.

She can also switch off that combative mindset afterward (hopefully), and her past experience should make her less vulnerable to post-fight psychological breakdowns or over-reactions. But be wary of making her a cold, unrelatable character. Give her some emotional content during and after the fight scene to keep her relatable.

But what if Mallika is used to working in a team, or with guns from a distance. If she's facing just one person, she'll be ok. But if she's up against several, she'll struggle without her weapon and her team. There's so much more we could unpack in this, but there's just not enough space.

So, how about if your female protagonist is the attacker, not the victim? The biggest change is likely to be in mindset for the two less-trained/experienced women. If they are on the warpath, with less fear and more gut-deep determination to kill, then the combination of wild-cat fighting and grabbing random weapons can completely throw their opponent off his game.

The take-away here is that women—trained or untrained—*can* realistically overcome a bigger male opponent. The most important factors will be:

- a) the utter commitment to both do damage and take damage until she wins (the combative mindset)
- b) skill (how much martial training she has)
- c) experience (which will determine how cool she is under fire and whether blood/gore makes her hesitate/vomit/freeze)

Even without skill and experience, a determined woman fighting for survival is terrifying. When you add training and experience, she becomes a force of nature.**[GdM]**

**Aiki Flinthart** has 12 published speculative fiction novels, and has had stories shortlisted in the Australian Aurealis awards, and has been a top-8 finalist in the USA Writers of the Future competition. In October 2019 her non-fiction book: *Fight Like a Girl—Writing fight scenes for female characters*, will be published. She regularly gives workshops for authors on the topic.

She has trained for 18 years in martial arts and holds multiple blackbelts. She also shoots longbow and horsebow—left and right-handed. After work, she throws knives to relieve stress.

You can attend her next Fight Like a Girl Masterclass (and pick up the non-fiction book of the same name) at the Canberra Conflux Spec fic convention (Oct 5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup>, <https://conflux.org.au/>) or at the Brisbane Genrecon writers convention (Nov 22-24, [www.genrecon.com.au](http://www.genrecon.com.au))

Find her on: [www.aikiflinthart.com](http://www.aikiflinthart.com)

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/aikiflinthartauthor>

Twitter and Instagram: @aikiflinthart

# Review: Knight's Shadow by Sebastien de Castell

EDWARD GWYNNE

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Fun, dark, witty, brutal. *Knight's Shadow* is a masterpiece in fantasy writing that will put Sebastien de Castell on your favourite writers shelf. *Knight's Shadow*, book 2 of *The Greatcoats* series continued from the unrelenting pace of *Traitor's Blade*, but somehow manages to shift a few gears up. There is rarely a chance to pause for breath within this story, where Falcio, Kest and Brasti carry on with their adventure.

"Happiness is a series of grains of sand spread out in a desert of violence and anguish."

These three characters have some of the best dialogue in fantasy that I have read. Sebastien is as consistent at writing fun, witty and thought-provoking dialogue as Brasti is at making an un-modest but hilarious remark about anything and everything. Each page containing these three was a pleasure to read (or listen to, this was an audible listen, Joe Jameson did a superb job).

We follow the changing band of Greatcoats as they are thrown (or seemingly run, walk, shuffle and even amble) into danger, political intrigue, swashbuckling and breath-taking action sequences, duels, immense torture, philosophical conversations and hopeless moments of frustration. There have been references through Book 1 and 2 of *The Greatcoat's Lament*, and the scene in this book is one of the darkest and most disturbing scenes I've read in fantasy. It made me feel

sadness and sorrow that I really had not expected to feel from a Greatcoat instalment.

“Do you always run headlong into certain death?”  
“Sometimes he walks,” Dariana said. “Occasionally he shuffles. Once I’m pretty sure I saw him amble into certain death.”

After having met Sebastien several times, I can see where his witty dialogue stems from. This story is full of moments that had me laughing out loud, much to the odd looks from people around me as I listened to Knight’s Shadow. I really love our three protagonists, and cannot wait to continue reading their journey. Also, a massive shoutout to characters who don’t have as much page time as Falcio, Kest and Brasti, but are equally as enjoyable and unique in their own rights. Valiana’s arc is a breath of fresh air, and Dariana is a force that matches Brasti in his amusing ways. Even a surprise appearance from my favourite torturer turned forgetful law-sayer.

Also, there had to be characters I hated in this story. In the words of Nigel Benn, I actually do hate them. De Castell did a fantastic job in making betrayals feel heart wrenchingly brutal, and made the baddies just an even darker shade of bad. It is rare to find a book that really explores the ‘bad’ characters, their motives and own personalities. Knight’s Shadow did this brilliantly and really made me feel anger and sorrow.

“It’s stories that inspire people to change. It’s stories that make them believe things can be better.”

There was a lot of to and fro and this story, travelling and a lot happened. But it was done in a fantastic way and I really am sold on this story. I’m also sat here wondering, can Falcio (or even Kest) have ANY MORE BAD LUCK?

The answer, presumably is yes. Yes they can.  
Time for Saint’s Blood.

5/5: a swashbuckling adventure that will have you laughing, punching the air, squirming and pondering all of the 'good' and 'bad' in the world. Scenes that will shock people, and others that will make them root forever for the Greatcoats. Sebastien de Castell is brilliant.**[GdM]**

# An Interview with Fonda Lee

TOM SMITH

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Greetings Grimdarkians! I join you today from far off Kekon where I managed to track down Fonda Lee for an interview. Her debut release *Jade City* dropped in November of 2017 and it took a lot of people by surprise. I wouldn't call it grimdark, but it had plenty of action and grimdark like characters. I would describe it as a fictional Asian saga with gangsters and jewel-infused superpowers that came out of the gates swinging.

As a huge lover of Asian culture and martial arts in general, buying this book was a no brainer for me—it was also one of my surprise favorites of the year.

Fonda's new book *Jade War* just came out in July.

**[TS]** Fonda, thank you so much for joining us!

**[FL]** Glad to be here!

**[TS]** One thing I really enjoyed about this book was the worldbuilding. What made you decide to go with a completely fictional world similar to ours instead of just using a modified version of our world?

**[FL]** I actually debated several options; I considered setting the story in a real country, or creating a fictional country located in our world (Sokovia or Wakanda-style). I even briefly toyed with the idea of a story set in the future, in the Canadian Artic. (Canada is one of the

world's largest producers of jade.) What a different story that would've been. Ultimately, I decided on creating a secondary world because of the artistic freedom and the type of story I wished to tell. I wanted to build a truly immersive fantasy world, one that would feel as real as our own but wasn't beholden to our world's history, politics, or cultures. I didn't want jade to be "discovered" in our world, or have it change the course of familiar historical events. Instead, this would be a world where jade has always existed, replete with its own mythology, people, and customs.

**[TS]** In *Jade City* the background is a pseudo Asian society (I get elements of both Japanese and Chinese culture from it). One thing I loved about it is there are strong female characters in what is largely considered a patriarchal culture. Were there any personal challenges for you writing in that setting as a woman of Asian descent?

**[FL]** You're correct that Kekon is a pseudo-Asian society inspired by elements from different cultures in our own world. The patriarchal culture, however, is by no means exclusively Asian. Women have had to contend with patriarchy in our own Western society and still do today. Also, *Jade City* takes place in a time period analogous to our latter half of the twentieth century, so women's participation in areas such as politics and business was less at that time than it is today in most parts of the world. I've spent most of my life in male-dominated fields: from business school, to corporate finance, to martial arts, to writing science fiction. I can recall many an instance when I was the only woman in the room. So I didn't have to work all that hard to imagine what it would be like for characters such as Kaul Shae or Maik Wen, who are carving out their place in an extremely masculine culture like that of the Green Bones.

**[TS]** One thing that struck me right away (no pun intended) about *Jade City* was the fight scenes. They pulled me into the story quickly and reminded me heavily of watching Kung fu theatre on Saturday mornings when I was growing up. Did you or do you still train in martial arts? What research did you do when deciding on the type of fighting you were going to use for your characters?

**[FL]** I started training in martial arts when I was in my teens, and I still practice today. I have black belts in karate and kung fu, and I recently started training in Brazilian jiu-jitsu so I could learn some grappling. The *Green Bone Saga* was very much inspired by my love of kung fu movies and wuxia fiction. I drew upon and codified the superhuman fighting skills I was familiar with from those genres and gave them a grounding in the techniques and principles I knew from my own training. My goal was to make the fantasy fighting seem as real and gritty and dangerous as anything in real life.

**[TS]** Fantasy has taken many new directions in the last few decades, where would you like to see it go in the future?

**[FL]** I'm looking forward to seeing fantasy continue to broaden beyond the traditional medieval European milieu by drawing inspiration from different time periods and cultures. In particular, I'd love to see more fantasy set in industrialized time periods. Many people have commented on the fact that I made an unorthodox choice in setting a secondary world fantasy series like the *Green Bone Saga* in a time period analogous to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Why not an epic fantasy novel set during the Cold War? Or a hero quest in a

secondary world evocative of Gold Rush California? The possibilities are endless.

**[TS]** I found myself unable to compare *Jade City* to any other books I have read any better than what one reviewer described as an Asian flavored Godfather type story (I loved *The Godfather* by the way). What would you say were your influences growing up be they TV, Books, Movies or Comics, whichever, that led to the creation of *Jade City*?

**[FL]** *Jade City* sprang out of several different influences: epic fantasy, crime drama, and martial arts fiction. I was an avid fantasy and science fiction reader from a young age. When *Game of Thrones* came out, I was inspired by the way George RR Martin applied a much darker and more unflinching and political tone to the epic fantasy tradition. I'm a fan of gangster movies from both Western and Eastern cinema, (*The Untouchables*, *Goodfellas*, *Heat*, as well as *Infernal Affairs*, *Election*, *Hard-Boiled*, and so on), and I admire the works of Martin Scorsesse and Johnnie To. As you can tell, I'm a big fan of *The Godfather*. It stands above all other mafia stories because it's not a story about gangsters—it's a story about family (whose members happen to be gangsters). I've wanted to write a dynastic family saga on that level of pathos for some time. And of course I combined all of that with my love for Bruce Lee movies and Jin Yong wuxia novels.

**[TS]** Coming from a corporate background, did that make it a little easier for you to design Kekon's economy and general finances at all?

**[FL]** Yes, I believe so. Because of my business background, I think a lot about the economic underpinnings of my fantasy worlds. Magic, in my mind, must be connected to economics. Jade isn't just

a substance that endows users with enhanced abilities; it's a natural resource, a lucrative export, something that is coveted by foreign governments and the black market. I've been in my share of boardrooms, and I try to write business and political scenes that are as tense as the fights. There's a scene in *Jade City* where Shae uses forensic accounting to uncover the Mountain clan's schemes. I once had a reader come up to me at a signing and thank me for putting accounting into a fantasy novel!

**[TS]** After a little research, one can't help but notice the similarities between real life Fonda and *Jade City's* Shae. Was that intentional or did it just work out that way?

**[FL]** Ha! It worked out that way because Shae and I both have a business degree, so she got a lot of my educational and career background in her story arc. We're not much alike in other ways. She's the youngest of her siblings; I'm the oldest. She doesn't get along with her brother; I do. She rejects jade and tries to leave it behind; I would love to learn the jade disciplines if I could. I do like to think that I'm independently-minded, determined, and pragmatic, like Shae. I suppose I bring some part of myself to every character I write.

**[TS]** What is the best book you have read in the last several years? How did it leave an impression on you?

**[FL]** I knew you'd ask this question, and I'd find it impossible to answer. I'm going to name a non-SFF novel: *The Force* by Don Winslow. It's about corrupt NYC cops, but that description doesn't do it justice. It's a tragic drama of Shakespearean proportions, and I was completely sucked in and deeply sympathetic to

these morally gray characters even though I knew there was no way the story would end well.

**[TS]** I think this series would translate extremely well to TV given the success of TV series on premium channels like HBO and subscription services like Netflix. Have you considered working in other mediums or adapting your work to other mediums?

**[FL]** I see myself as a novelist first and foremost, but I also consider myself a very visually-oriented storyteller. I'd love to write comics or a graphic novel, for instance. As for a screen adaptation of the Green Bone Saga...we'll just have to keep our fingers crossed.

**[TS]** What can we expect to see from you in the way of books or projects in the near future?

**[FL]** I'll be focused on *Jade Legacy*, the third book in the Green Bone Saga, for the next year. The cover has already been released, and people are already asking me about it, so I feel no small amount of pressure to stick the landing on the trilogy. I also have some exciting projects in the works that I can't talk about yet. Stay tuned!

**[TS]** Fonda, thanks so much for taking the time to meet with us today!

**[FL]** You're welcome, and thanks for interviewing me.**[GdM]**

# The Flight of the Whisper King

BRADLEY P. BEAULIEU

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Mala stared with disbelief into the eyes of Arük, the magnetic but not-so-bright leader of their small gang, or *flock*, as they were often referred to in Sharakhai. “Forgive me, but I thought you just said you wanted to go to the *garrison*.”

Arük, leaning against a mudbrick wall, grinned that broad grin of his. With his big ears and uncombed hair, he looked like a hyena trying to make friends. “I did, kitten. I did indeed.” Arük knew very well she hated the nickname he’d given her, which was of course precisely why he used it.

“The garrison where all the Silver Spears live?” Mala asked. “*That* garrison?”

Arük laughed his deriding laugh, the one that made him sound like a braying mule. As he pulled out his ram’s head jambiya, the expensive knife with the curving blade he just *loved* to show off, he said, “Haven’t you heard? The Malasani sent their golems storming through it. The Spears are all dead or gone, retreated to the House of Kings.”

The two of them stood just outside the spice market along a stretch of road famed for its food carts. The street, just like the spice market and the bazaar and the streets all across the west end, was eerily vacant. Mala had never seen the like, but then again, it wasn’t every day a foreign enemy fell upon the city like locusts.

The day's heat had been intense, a heat made all the worse by the sounds of battle that had consumed the city for hours. No one thought the walls of the city could be breached so easily, but the Malasani army had brought with them hundreds of golems. They'd stormed past the walls and pushed deep into the city before suddenly retreating to the city's sandy southern harbor near nightfall. With the bulk of the Silver Spears having already fled to the House of Kings and its high walls, and the city's populace waiting out the violence in their homes, the streets had been all but abandoned.

"The Spears may have left the garrison," Mala went on, "but they'll come back sooner or later."

Gripping his jambiya by the blade, a thing any fool would know you're not supposed to do, Arük used the point to clean his fingernails. "I'm sure they will."

"They might be there right now."

"But they aren't." Arük grinned and juted his chin toward the nearby archway, where his lanky second-in-command, Kasha, was swaggering toward them in that long-legged way of hers. More of their flock, three gutter wrens a few years older than Mala's eleven summers, trailed after her. "Kasha's been watching it since the golems stormed through. Haven't you, Kasha?"

Stone-faced as ever, Kasha nodded, as if she couldn't care less what Arük or Mala or anyone else thought. She stopped a few paces away. The three gutter wrens came to a stop as well and watched Arük expectantly.

With a nod like he'd just surveyed his kingdom and found nothing wanting, Arük pushed himself off the crumbling, mudbrick wall. "Let's go. I want to be in and out before the final hour."

His idea was simple: break into the garrison, plunder it for anything they could sell or trade, and get out. But Mala's worries were already growing. The garrison was the seat of power for the Silver Spears,

the infantry who made up Sharakhai's city guard, the very soldiers who were fighting for the city's survival against its invaders, the Malasani horde and their army of clay golems.

It was a terrible, mud-brained idea, but what was Mala to do? She was not only the youngest member of their flock, she was also the newest, a thing Arük constantly reminded her of—nothing she did or said was going to change his mind. So she walked in silence, wary of the crunching of their sandals against the dry ground. She listened for the rumble of approaching cavalry or foot soldiers, peered along every vacant avenue and through every stone archway for signs they were being watched.

When they reached the hulking stronghold, Mala's gut began to churn worse than it already was. The garrison was crude compared to the buildings around it, so much so that it looked incongruous, a glowering bull in a herd of graceful oryx. The front gates were intact, but when they headed around to the back they saw that the sturdy, reinforced service doors had been sundered, crashed inward, surely by blows from the massive golems. It was terrible luck. Mala had been hoping the garrison would be locked up tight.

As their small flock huddled some twenty paces from the entrance, Arük nodded to Mala. "Go on, then."

As she'd known he would, Arük was asking her to go in first. It was why she was part of their flock. Oh, she was decent enough with a blade, but she excelled at being quiet, at being *unseen*. There was something about this place, though. The garrison's darkened entrance looked like the maw of some mythical beast ready to devour her the moment she came near.

Arük shoved her into motion. "I said go *on*."

Mala glowered at him, then went through the silent ritual she always performed when a bit of sneaking was required. She drew the shadows around her, wove them tight, then wore the resulting darkness like a

cloak. Her instincts screamed for her to run as she crept carefully toward the yawning black entryway. Like a fool, she quashed them and stepped inside.

Despite all Mala's worrying, Kasha was right. The garrison was empty—of the living, in any case. Men and women in the uniforms of the Silver Spears lay strewn about the stone floor, their white tabards filthy with dirt, blood, and gore. All were dead. The stink of it made Mala gag.

Dozens of corpses were concentrated around a large clay body, a golem from the war. Its *flesh*, which felt like potter's clay, dry but not *too* dry, was cut in dozens of places. A spear jutted from its chest. Mala stared at the carnage and shook her head. So many trained soldiers, and they'd only managed to kill a single golem.

The large room before her, lit in ghastly relief by the light filtering in through the broken door and several high windows, was clearly the armory. Weapons of all sorts—swords, spears, bows, arrows, war hammers, and more—hung on racks mounted to the walls. A smithy's table, complete with anvil, forge, and all manner of hammers and chisels, sat in one corner. She left the armory and searched the other rooms on the first and second floors. Finding them empty, she let go the shadows and waved Arük and the others in. They entered and began rooting among the dead, collecting necklaces and rings, digging through the leather purses strung to their belts. The dead soldiers had surprisingly little. A few silver six pieces, a handful of copper khet.

"A rahl!" said Rennek, holding the golden coin high for all to see. In the dim light, the golden coin was a near match for his tawny hair.

It was rather thick of him, Mala mused. If *she'd* found a rahl, she would have slipped it, with no one the wiser, beneath her trousers into the tiny pouch she'd sewn into her knickers. But she had surprisingly poor

luck. She found a pile of coins, a silver necklace, a twisted copper torque, and a few rings, one with Bakhi's symbol stamped onto it, a ward against death—nothing worth risking a beating over.

She wondered about these men and women, the sort of lives they'd led. She wondered about those who'd survived them. They must have had wives or husbands they'd left behind, daughters and sons, lovers and friends. Gods, some of those were no doubt still unaware of the soldiers' deaths—their bodies had hardly cooled since the battle hours earlier, after all.

Then she came across the body of a girl who looked to be the same age as Jein, Mala's five-year-old sister. The girl wore a simple blue dress that was clean and well made and which, unlike the vast majority of the dirty, blood-stained clothes adorning the dead, was surprisingly pristine. The girl had no wound Mala could see, until she crept to her opposite side and saw that her skull was misshapen near the back, pressed inward, a blow from a golem's fist, perhaps.

Mala felt tears welling as she stared into the girl's lifeless brown eyes. Why had she come to the garrison? Had she been visiting her father? And how had she been caught inside the armory? Was the golem's attack so quick she'd had no chance to hide?

"Her, too."

Arük crouched several paces away, tugging hard on a man's ruby ring, which was apparently refusing to come off. He widened his eyes, pulled his jambiya, and used the tip to point at the dead girl. Seeing the tears in Mala's eyes, he shook his head and lowered his knife toward the dead man's ring finger.

Mala turned her back to him and made a show of checking the girl's corpse. She refused to so much as touch the girl's skin, however, or the cloth of her pretty dress. The girl might have passed on to the farther fields; that didn't mean Mala had the right to defile the body of one so young.

When they were done looting the armory, they lit lanterns and split up to search the other rooms. The garrison was poor in things like silver and gold, but there was plenty of value, medicines chief among them, but also papyrus, spices and cutlery from the kitchens, a lustrous aban board with pieces crafted from ivory, ebony, and red jasper.

“Down here!” came Kasha’s voice from the floor below.

They all rushed down to the small room Kasha had found. Built into the wall directly across from the entryway was an impressively large metal door, a vault with a keyhole, mounted on hinges as big as Arük’s balled up fists.

Kasha, wonder breaking across her normally rigid face, waved to it. “I reckon there’s enough in there to let us live like Kings and Queens for the rest of our lives.”

“Sure,” said Arük, “but how do we get in?” He was gripping his knife, twisting it this way and that while glaring at the door as if it were as simple as prying the massive thing off its hinges. He must know that none of them were going to be able to open it. He must. Even Mala could see it was hopeless. How many thieves in the city could manage it? Three, maybe four? People an idiot street thief like Arük would never even have met.

“Did you see any crowbars in the armory?” Arük asked.

The others mumbled replies, some offering ideas of their own. Mala, meanwhile, rolled her eyes and stole away with a lantern, preferring to explore the rest of the lower floor. She checked several rooms before arriving at one filled with shelves upon shelves of books, a library of sorts or, given the similarity between many of the leatherbound books, the garrison’s archives, the place where the Spears kept their annals.

“They’re not *all* annals, though,” Mala breathed. “There are other books here, too. Books filled with stories.”

Mala’s mother had taught her how to read when she was young, just like she was teaching Jein. They owned few enough books, but the ones they *did* have Mala had read dozens times. And here were hundreds more to choose from. Which to take, though? And how many would Arük *allow* her to take? He couldn’t read and was jealous of those who could. He’d pestered Mala mercilessly for weeks after she’d brought a book with her on a day they were meant to run scams on the patrons in the bazaar.

He’d snatched it from her hands when he’d caught her reading it, then threw it onto the dry, packed earth. “Leave it,” he said. When she’d tried to pick it up, he’d shoved her back. “I said *leave it*.”

“But it’s *mine*.”

“You can have it back when we’re done.”

“But that’ll be *hours*. It’ll be gone by then.”

Arük had shaken his head. “I won’t have it distracting you when we’re here to earn money.”

When she’d tried to pick it up anyway, he’d grabbed her and slapped her across the face. “It stays,” he said, putting his hand on that ridiculous knife of his.

He proceeded to lead them to another area of the bazaar to purposely move away from the book. Mala had hoped no one would notice it, but of course they had. When she returned at the end of the day, it was gone.

In the depths of the garrison, she stared up at the shelves, stared at the bindings. She took a few down and paged through them, then chose two that looked to tell tales from myth, her favorite type of story. She’d just spotted a thick tome with a green snakeskin cover, and was wondering what sort of gems she might find in it—not to mention how she might manage to get it

out without Arük's seeing it—when she sensed something wrong. Something odd.

Just as Mala was gifted with drawing shadows around her, she knew when she was being watched. She turned and shivered, let out a small squeak, for there, lying in the corner, was a woman in a battle dress and turban, both dyed rusty red. The dress itself was cut in the style of the Kings' Blade Maidens, but the Maidens all wore black.

*So why is this one wearing red?*

A name came to Mala: Kestrels, the fabled band of swordswomen who were more highly trained than even the legendary Blade Maidens. *She must be one of them*, Mala thought.

Mala approached the woman, thinking surely she must be dead. She had a host of small wounds on her arms and chest that appeared to have been hastily bound with bandages, all of which were stained the deep crimson of dried blood. Worse were the two arrows sticking out of her. One was wedged in her chest, the other in her left calf. The arrow shafts had been snapped off near the point of entry—an attempt to allow her free movement, perhaps?

When Mala came within two paces and lifted the lantern high, she realized the woman's chest was rising and falling with breath, though only shallowly. Oddly, there were a number of books lying on the floor. They'd clearly been toppled from the nearby shelves, though why that might be, and what the Kestrel might have been looking for, Mala had no idea.

When Mala swung her gaze back to the Kestrel, a terrible shiver ran down her frame. The woman's eyes were open. And the expression on her face... Gods, she looked like she wanted to draw her sword and cut Mala down. It made Mala stand up from her crouch and take a half-step back.

"Mala?"

It was Arük, calling from the other room. Mala was too frightened to utter a word, though.

“Mala?” Arük called, louder this time.

Without taking her eyes from the Kestrel, Mala swallowed and called, “Yeah?”

“Get back here. I need you to get some things from the armory.”

“All right,” she said, but remained rooted to the spot.

She should tell the others. She should tell them there was someone here, someone still alive. But if she did that, Arük would kill her. He’d say they couldn’t afford to have any witnesses, and then he’d draw his jambiya and use it to slice the woman’s throat. She thought about simply leaving, but the result would be the same: one of the others would come to this room eventually, either before or after their failed attempt at opening the vault, and kill her then.

She thought about dragging the Kestrel away, hiding her in a large foot locker or a wardrobe, but she didn’t know if she could actually find a place that would remain untouched until they left. And besides, she wasn’t sure if she could drag her anyway. The Kestrel was a woman fully grown. Mala was only eleven. And even if she *did* manage to hide her, the Kestrel’s wounds would likely kill her. She needed a physic badly.

“Mala?” Arük’s voice was louder, angrier. He was searching for her.

Staring into the woman’s eyes, Mala shrugged, shook her head. She didn’t know what to do.

The Kestrel stared beyond Mala at the open door, then gazed up at the shelves, above the gap where the books on the floor had once been. She licked her lips, swallowed, then seemed to come to some sort of decision. She lifted one arm and pointed to the highest shelf. “The blue one,” she whispered, “pull it.”

Mala had no idea what she meant—what earthly good would pulling a book from the shelf do?—but she

could hear Arük's footsteps coming closer. She had only seconds in which to act. Deciding the Kestrel must know what she was doing, Mala pulled the blue book and heard a click, and the shelf swung outward ever so slightly. A hidden passage, Mala realized, a thing she thought only existed in books. She pulled the shelf out to reveal a dark passageway.

The Kestrel held out one arm. "Help me in."

Arük's footsteps were close. They were heavy. Clomping. Angry.

Mala took the woman's arm and pulled with all her might, but the going was too slow. Arük was going to arrive at any moment. He would enter the room and see the Kestrel. And then he'd kill her and likely beat Mala for the trouble.

She pulled harder and managed to get her halfway into the passage, then all the way. As she stepped out and pushed the shelf closed, she caught a glimpse of the Kestrel's face—worry mixed with gratitude. Then she clicked the shelf shut just as Arük came strutting in.

"What sort of mud has gotten into that skull of yours, Mala? I said I needed you." He stared at the books—the ones on the shelves and the ones on the floor. "Oh, not *that* again."

Mala breathed a sigh of relief. He thought she'd been caught up in the books. To complete the ruse, she took up the ones she'd found earlier, knowing precisely what was going to happen next.

True to form, Arük slapped them from her hands, then slapped *her* upside the head. "Go to the smithy's table we saw upstairs. Grab any crowbars you find, plus hammers and chisels."

Her ear stinging from the slap, Mala picked up her lantern and left, but not before sending a quick glance toward the far corner of the room. The Kestrel would likely die, but at least she wouldn't die because *Mala* hadn't tried to save her.

\* \* \*

Bright, burning pain woke Shohreh from unconsciousness, which was ironic since it was the pain that had caused her to pass out in the first place. She lay in darkness just inside the hidden passageway beneath the garrison. The girl, some street thief from the looks of her, had dragged her from where she'd fallen unconscious in the annalist's room, deposited her in the passageway, and left. And not a moment too soon. The girl had been speaking with someone. Shohreh hadn't been able to hear the words—she'd deafened herself on the orders of King Zeheb, the Whisper King, years ago—but the look on the girl's face had told Shohreh all she needed to know. The girl had been worried that she'd be discovered sheltering a Kestrel, which meant that the one calling for her would likely have killed Shohreh where she lay and punished the girl for her deceit after.

It made a strange sort of sense that it was a handful of gutter wrens who'd decided to descend on the garrison like locusts. Any of the larger gangs that ran the city's west end would think twice about stealing from the Silver Spears—they knew the sort of reprisals that would come were it discovered that they'd set a single foot inside the garrison's walls. A flock of young ones, though, unattached to a larger gang? They just might be dumb enough to do it.

They'd get their due. The Crone would make sure of it. The Crone was, after all, akin to a hidden monarch, a buried queen, and the garrison was for all intents and purposes the upper reaches of her palace. She was the House of Maidens' High Matron, the ancient woman Shohreh had been trying to reach when she'd fallen unconscious, and she would brook no insult like this, not without a measure of blood to balance the scales.

With a grunt Shohreh failed to stifle completely, she levered herself up against the cold stone wall. Stars

filled her vision, but she managed to keep her feet, thank the gods. Each limping step she took along the passageway made the pain in her calf flare. She tried hopping on the other leg to lessen the pain, but that only fanned the flames of pain from the arrow buried in her chest. The stars came rushing back. Her vision swam until she stopped, took slow breaths, and waited for the spell to pass. It was a near thing, and more grave than she wanted to admit. Pass out again and surely the lord of all things would tire of the game and come for her.

With painstaking care, she wended her way along winding passages that grew more mazelike the closer she came to the Crone's lair. Eventually she saw a dim light, heard the crackle of a fire, smelled the strong incense the Crone preferred: river iris with a faint but distinct note of black lotus.

She came to a large room that had been carved from the stone in precise, square angles. Hanging around the room were all manner of maps. Some were old, some were new. Some were of Sharakhai, others of the kingdoms that bordered Great Shangazi. Many detailed the desert itself, or parts of it. All were lovingly framed, all lovingly cared for.

In the center of the room was the massive, round table that held a topographical rendering of Sharakhai. Every street, every building was rendered in sandstone, carved by the Crone herself after taking painstaking measurements on one of her forays into the city. Beneath the tabletop were seven drawers that could be pulled out to reveal the hidden byways beneath the city. Each drawer corresponded to a certain level of depth, and revealed all known structures: manmade tunnels, natural caverns, secret grottos. Even this place, the Crone's own inner sanctum, had been meticulously rendered there.

*The way a city grows or shrinks, the Crone had once told Shohreh, and how quickly it does so, tells you as much about its history as any text ever written.*

The map room was the place Shohreh most associated with her life after becoming an acolyte at the age of eight and, later, a fully fledged Kestrel. It was the place where the Kestrels received their missions, the Crone often using the maps to direct them. The room was empty, however, the Crone missing. Shohreh nearly laughed. She'd come all this way—from the slopes of Tauriyat, where King Ihsan had ordered his Silver Spears to slay her, to the walls around the House of Kings, to city streets thick with fighting, to the garrison itself, shortly after the pitched battle with the golems—only to find the one woman who could save her gone.

Had the Crone been called away by the Kings? Had she gone to learn news of the invasion? There was no telling, but it was inconvenient at best. Shohreh didn't want to die again. She'd done so three times already and each time was worse than the last. She didn't want to experience that pain again. She didn't want to go through the madness that accompanied her reawakening.

But what could she do? Staring into the fire in the hearth, she reckoned a bit of warmth would be nice after the grasping cold of the tunnels. *It's as good a place to die as any*, she thought as she limped toward it.

She made it only halfway before collapsing on the carpeted floor.

\* \* \*

When Shohreh woke again, it was to a rocking sensation. She was being carried by someone with a heavy, lumbering gait. Who, though?

With great effort, she managed to lift her head to find the Crone herself carrying her like a baby.

The Crone had wrinkled skin and a severe expression on her dour face. A starburst tattoo marked the center of her broad brow. Another tattoo of a constellation—the one she'd been born under, Shohreh assumed—spiraled like a threatened cobra on her right cheek. A veritable bazaar's worth of jewelry adorned her ample frame. She had a silver headdress, a cascade of necklaces, a host of earrings, nose rings, and bracelets glinting under the light of the lamps being held by the cadre of young girls following in her wake.

The girls were the Crone's acolytes, her fledglings, those who might one day prove themselves skilled enough to become Kestrels like Shohreh. They watched with keen interest—*benign* interest, Shohreh was sure, though just then they looked like a pack of hungry jackals, each hoping Shohreh might fall that *she* might take her place.

Sülten, the eldest of them, held Shohreh's gaze. "*All will be well,*" she said. Shohreh couldn't hear her words, but she'd long since learned how to read lips. "*The Crone will save you.*"

In her bewilderment, Shohreh thought she was being carried to her own room to rest, to sleep for a time, but it soon became clear they were heading toward another room entirely. They passed beyond the rooms reserved for Shohreh and her sisters in arms, headed along a dark passage, and arrived at a large, circular room with a high ceiling: the Sepulchre.

The Sepulchre's ceiling was supported by nine spiraling stone columns. Between the columns, at the room's exact center, was a pit that looked like a grave waiting to be filled. Flanking the pit were a pair of large stone basins on stout iron legs, each filled to the top with ochre sand. A set of well worn shovels, brooms, and metal dust pans leaned against the basins.

This room was a special place in Sharakhai, a special place in the desert, and yet only a bare handful

knew of its existence. It was where Shohreh had died as an acolyte and been reborn as a Kestrel. It was where she'd awoken two times since being slain, her body retrieved and returned there by her sister Kestrels.

When the Crone reached the side of the pit, she dropped to her knees with a grunt—a thing Shohreh was unable to hear but could easily feel resonating in her chest. After lowering Shohreh onto the stone floor, the Crone motioned for the girls to disrobe her. The girls complied with efficient haste, tugging at the ties of Shohreh's battle dress and the laces of her tall leather boots.

The Crone, meanwhile, stared down at Shohreh stonily. *"Hold still, child. It will all be over soon."*

When Shohreh lay naked on the stone, the Crone flicked a hand to Sülten and accepted from her a wooden box. Within the box were a set of gleaming surgical instruments that she proceeded to apply to the flesh around the arrow shaft wedged deep in Shohreh's calf.

The pain that followed was deep and strong as the Haddah in spring. Shohreh grit her teeth against it. She shivered from head to toe. She refused to scream, however, refused to so much as moan. She concentrated instead on the curving wall, on the frieze near the ceiling that showed a gathering of old gods dancing a ring around Tauriyat as the sun crested the horizon.

With dogged efficiency, the Crone liberated the first arrowhead, then bent her attention to the second, the one in Shohreh's chest. Shohreh tried to bear the extraction in the same manner as she had the first, but the arrowhead, the sort of wicked device that was disinclined to be liberated from flesh once buried, caught against the ends of her broken ribs. This time Shohreh *did* scream. She felt weak for it, embarrassed before the Crone and the young ones—she always

tried to provide a good example, and here she was showing weakness against pain she knew very well how to combat.

Daring a glance, she found the fledglings watching her with varying amounts of horror, all save Sülten, who gazed down with much the same look as the Crone, eyes hard, lips curled in disdain.

Finally, blessedly, it was over, and Shohreh was left with an all-consuming ache and the feeling of warm blood trickling down her skin. Then the Crone lifted her and lowered her into the grave.

*“Quickly now,”* she said to the girls.

*“Yes, High Matron,”* the girls replied.

Their shovels at the ready, they used them to dig into the ochre sand in the stone basins situated on either side of the pit. Shovelfuls of sand thudded against her chest, her waist, her legs and her head. She felt its grit as it weighed her down and pressed her against the hard stone. Her blood mixed with the dry sand, adding a fresh dosing of red, which was the precise reason it was colored ochre—the sand had once been the natural amber color of the desert, or so the Crone had told her.

It was said that the sand was once a block of simple sandstone. Cut and liberated from the site of fallen Iri, one of the elder gods, after he'd left this world for the farther fields, the stone had been pulverized, and the resulting sand was found to return the dead to life. How long it would continue do so Shohreh had no idea, perhaps until the end of days.

Ever harder the sand pressed, robbing Shohreh of breath. It was a strangely comforting thing. She and death were no strangers, after all, and she found the idea of being released from her pain a sweet and heady thing.

So it was that as she let her breath go, she did so as she might with a dear friend: with a fond farewell, knowing their parting would be brief.

\* \* \*

Shohreh woke with a sharp inhalation that tickled her throat even as it filled her lungs with sudden, sweet breath. The screaming in her mind faded, as did the wild dreams that always accompanied her rebirths. It felt like it went on for hours, though she was certain it was much less. As the dreams faded at last, a keen ringing filled her ears, a phantom sound, a strange visitation that harkened back to the days when she could still hear.

The fledglings were gone. Only the Crone remained. As had been true the other times she'd awoken in the Sepulchre, the grave was completely empty of sand. The fledglings had removed it. Shohreh herself had been painstakingly cleaned so that none of the precious sand was lost. It was back in the basins, awaiting the next Kestrel to die or, if her body couldn't be recovered, an acolyte ready to take her place.

As had been true in the past, Shohreh was still deaf. The sand, for whatever reason, never healed old wounds, only those received recently, which was one of the reasons, she supposed, the Kings had never used it. Well, that and the fact that each rebirth seemed to steal a bit of vitality from one's soul. What did the Kings need with such things, anyway? They were practically immortal, granted long life and vigor by the gods themselves.

*As it should be*, Shohreh thought. The Kings weren't perfect, no mortal was, but their rule had been anointed by the gods. They'd seen Sharakhai through four centuries of peril and threat. Gods willing, they'd see it through another four and more beyond.

The Crone held out a hand. *"Up."*

Shohreh gripped her hand, and the Crone helped her to her feet. Nearby was a wooden rack with a dress laid over it—not her red battle dress, but a sensible blue abaya. Shohreh donned it, then the leather sandals at the base of the rack. Finally, she tied her

long, dark brown hair back and wrapped a white hijab around her head and shoulders. The clothes were welcome. The cold of the Sepulchre was rushing back now that she'd awoken fully. So was the familiar ache, the uncomfortable sensation that felt like her flesh was being stretched over a rack, ready to dry in the sun. The feeling would intensify soon. It would reach down into her muscles, her bones, discomfort blossoming into an ache that would debilitate her for days, a malady that grew worse each time she was reborn.

Holding Shohreh's hand in hers, the Crone led her to the map room, where a lively fire flickered in the hearth. After depositing Shohreh in one of the padded chairs near the fire, the Crone sat in the other, the one whose padding had long since molded itself to her shape. The fire's warmth was welcome, but a touch of sadness accompanied the feel of it on Shohreh's skin—she'd long since resigned herself to her loss of hearing, but gods how she missed the crackle of a fire.

She went on to tell the Crone of her mission, how Çedamihñ and her Blade Maiden allies had been flushed from Eventide, the highest of the thirteen palaces on Tauriyat, how Shohreh had given chase, how King Ihsan had shown up, dressed as a captain of the Silver Spears of all things, and ordered his men to shoot her through with arrows.

The Crone listened with only half an ear, which felt like a betrayal—breath of the desert, a King had ordered a Kestrel to be murdered! When the story was done, she said to Shohreh, *"Ihsan's fate will have to wait. He was taken by the Malasani. It was thought he'd died in a smaller battle in the northern harbor, ridding us of one thorn in our side, but whispers have come. The golems took him and delivered him to the Malasani King himself."*

"Let me go, then, High Matron. I'll find him wherever they've stowed him and slit his throat as he sleeps."

“No,” the Crone said flatly. “*We have more to worry about.*”

“But—“

“*I said no.*” Dour-faced, the Crone licked her teeth, her deeply wrinkled lips mounding as she did so. “*You have no idea how dire things have become. War has arrived in the streets of Sharakhai. None can say how the coming battles will play out, but with so many of the elder Kings dead, some are hoping to use it to raise their standing. And now this...*”

The Crone handed a stiff sheet of papyrus to Shohreh. On it were various entries written in clear, precise script. Each entry contained a few words, a sentence, sometimes a short paragraph. All had dates and times written next to them, indicating when each of the entries had been recorded. Shohreh was familiar with these sheets. They were transcriptions of King Zeheb’s ravings. Zeheb had been driven mad by listening too closely to the whispers, conversations heard from afar that most thought to be secret.

There was once a time when all in Sharakhai feared being overheard by him. He’d been a powerful ruler, then, and a truly impressive man. The Crone and her Kestrels had all reported to him, often being sent on missions to verify the whispers he’d heard or to act on them. Shohreh had been proud to serve him and, through that service, help lift Sharakhai to greatness. She’d dedicated her life to it. She’d been *glad* to put out her ears so that Zeheb would have some measure of protection against Ihsan, the King with the honeyed tongue who Zeheb feared would one day move against him.

Much had changed since those days, when Zeheb’s sun had shone its brightest. Many of the Kings lay dead; they’d been *given back to the desert*, as the saying went, several at the hands of Çedamihñ the White Wolf. The Crone hardly knew which King she reported to anymore. When Zeheb had gone mad, the

chain of command had been handed to King Husamettín and, after *he'd* been lost in the desert, to Kiral the King of Kings. Even Meryam, the Qaimiri Queen, told the Crone what to do from time to time, a privilege King Kiral allowed and the Crone despised.

Zeheb, meanwhile, had been reduced to this: tomes filled with random snippets of conversation or sometimes lone words whispered within his cell, all of them unattributed because Zeheb no longer had the presence of mind to say who had spoken them. It was why many had begun calling him foul names like the Burling King or the Mad Bull of Sharakhai.

Shohreh read each of the entries, confused as to why the Crone had given it to her, until she came to the second to last. *On the night of moonless skies will they kill the Whispering King.* It sounded more like prophecy but wasn't. Zeheb did this sometimes, encapsulating conversations instead of repeating them verbatim.

Shohreh looked more closely at the dates. "These were recorded three days ago."

"Just so," said the Crone.

"You're taking this seriously?"

"We must."

"But the moonless night was last night. I assume he's still alive?"

"*He is, but that may have been because word of this particular whisper had spread. The transcriber noticed and alerted both Zeheb's house and the other Kings. Precautions were taken.*" The Crone pointed to the sheet. "*Whoever planned on killing him last night would surely have delayed their plans once they learned of it.*"

Shohreh flipped the papyrus over, hoping to find more clues about who he'd been listening to when he'd spoken those words. "It could be anyone," she finally said.

The Crone nodded. "*It may be, but I've since learned more. This morning, I spoke with our Lord*

*King's daughter, Anann. The King's own house abounds with rumors that her brother, Temel, wishes to formally declare his standing as a King of the city. It is blasphemy, plain and simple. Our King, not yet taken to his final rest, lies trapped beneath Eventide. Temel has been satisfied to leave him there thus far, but no longer. Not with the chaos caused by the war and the fact that his father's crown remains unworn. Anann fears he is the one Zeheb was referring to, and that he will try to have Zeheb killed, and soon, so that his claim to the throne goes unquestioned."*

For more than four centuries, King Zeheb had commanded the Crone and, through her, the Kestrels. He was also the Crone's father, and she was fiercely loyal to him. She prayed daily for his return to sanity. It made sense, then, that she would want to see him safely protected against such a threat. But—

"Temel was always loyal to his father," Shohreh said.

*"True, but power blinds, my pretty little bird. Never forget that. A treasure he never thought to call his own now stands before him, and the only thing keeping him from it is his father's tenuous hold on life. We must protect Zeheb from this threat. You must protect him."*

"I will do my best, of course"—she waved beyond the hearth, toward the Sepulchre—"but you know what it's like after waking." It was already growing worse, the feeling of tightness in her muscles, the ache. "Are any of my sisters near? Can I depend on their aid?"

The Crone shook her head, a motion that sent her host of silver earrings to swaying. The Kestrels of Sharakhai numbered nine in all, but most had been sent on missions to blunt the advance of Mirea or to gather intelligence on the Malasani army's weaknesses. *"They're all gone,"* said the Crone. *"I fear several are dead. You must do this alone, Shohreh. You will save our Lord King, by any means necessary. Make it your sole focus."*

Shohreh rolled her shoulders, trying and failing to work away the soreness. She was just about to ask for the particulars—what was known of Zeheb’s situation in Eventide, where he was being kept, and the like—when she felt something at the edge of perception.

She turned and stared through the arched entryway, the very one she’d stepped through hours ago after making her way from the garrison. She was met with only darkness, but something felt strange. As was true of the Blade Maidens, Kestrels were taught how to feel for heartbeats. Shohreh did so now, reaching out, searching for the answer to this curious riddle. Even focusing so carefully, it took her long moments, but eventually she felt it, the faintest of heartbeats. It seemed distant, but Shohreh knew it wasn’t so. Someone was masking themselves from her.

Whoever it was must have sensed her searching—why else would their heartbeat have spiked so? Then, of a sudden, she was there, her wide eyes and round face lit faintly by the ruddy glow of the fire. It was the girl. The one from the archives. Realizing she’d been unmasked, she sprinted away.

Part of Shohreh wished the Crone hadn’t seen. Part of her wished that stupid, curious girl could go free and live out whatever life the fates had in store for her. But those were dreams of a more innocent world, dreams that were banished when the Crone turned her gaze away from the now-empty archway, fixed her furious stare on Shohreh, and uttered two simple, devastating words.

*“Kill her.”*

\* \* \*

Mala sprinted along dark passageways, wending her way back the way she’d come, pulling the darkness around herself as tightly as she could.

*Why* had she gone back to the garrison? *Why* had she returned to the archives and like a mud-brained

fool entered the tunnel where she'd left the Kestrel?  
Why had she continued until she'd heard the voices?

*Stupid, Mala. Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

She'd just been so curious over the woman's fate. She thought maybe she might get a reward after Arük robbed her of hers.

"You're new," Arük had said when they'd met a few hours later outside the bazaar to split the earnings from the garrison. "This is how it works, kitten. You start out, you pay your dues, you get paid when you've proven yourself. Isn't that right?" he asked Kasha.

Kasha, looking more than a little like a hook-nosed turtle under the faint light of the crescent moons, shrugged noncommittally, then gave a nod that spoke of unadulterated indifference.

Arük mugged a smile. "See?"

"She's just nodding because she knows it's what you want to hear. I went. I made sure it was safe before you came in. I collected money and gave it to you. I got your stupid crowbars and your stupid chisels, which we all knew was going to do fuck all against that vault door."

Arük dug in his purse and took out a handful of tarnished copper khet. "Here's something to tide you over."

The way he said it, like he was doing her a favor, made Mala so angry she slapped the coins out of his hand. "I deserve more. I *need* more."

Arük's face turned hard. "Remember your place, kitten. You're the youngest in this flock of ours. You've got potential, I'll grant you, with that little trick of yours. You get to be older, maybe take my place after I've moved on to bigger and better things, *then* you get the leopard's share of things. Until then..." He looked meaningfully at the coins glinting in the dirt. "Unless you want to go back to running the streets like a dirty little gutter wren."

He stood there, waiting for an answer. Mala wanted to punch him in the nose for it. She wanted to pull that ridiculous knife of his and cut him as he'd forced *her* to cut a woman just to enter the ranks of his flock. But she needed the paltry money that working for Arük brought in. She had a sister and a mother to take care of.

Breathing hard, she stooped and began picking up the coins.

"Thought so," Arük said, and walked away. The others followed, several sending predatory smiles in Mala's direction before turning their backs on her.

Mala returned to her home in the Shallows to find her mother, Sirina, still awake. She was sitting in her rocking chair. Her dress was pulled up to her thighs and she was rubbing the dark spots on her swollen knees. The spots, swelling, and pain she'd been experiencing for weeks were signs of Bakhi's curse, a disease that had swept angrily through the Shallows, the largest neighborhood in the city's western quarter and the poorest by far.

Her mother swallowed hard. She looked at Mala expectantly. "So?"

Mala closed her eyes and opened her hand, revealing her paltry take. When she'd summoned the courage to open her eyes again, she knew what she would see, but the vision still gutted her. Her mother's eyes had gone red. Tears were forming.

They'd been trying to save up for a medallion from Bakhi's temple that would heal her affliction, a special medallion that came with a blessing from the priests. It was expensive, though. Day after day with the affliction growing worse, Memma had been unable to work at the carpetmaker's and Mala's take from her days running scams with Arük had brought in little more than what she'd once got begging with a cup along the edges of the bazaar. They were barely bringing in enough to feed themselves.

“Go see Ganesh in the morning,” her mother said. “Use it for chickpeas and lemon and flour, a bag of rice if there’s any left over.”

It was a relief. Mala thought she’d been about to ask her to buy a bottle of araq so she could drown her pain in liquor. “Couldn’t we go to the King’s men now? Surely they’d give us *something*.”

Mala’s father had been a simple laborer in the city quarry—a laborer and one-time thief, her mother had admitted late one night during a drunken binge. “He said he used to wear shadows around him when he stole about,” her mother said in one long slur, “which is absolute rubbish. If he could do that, why wasn’t he the richest man in the city? Why did he never lavish me with pearls?”

After her mother had admitted his life as a thief to her, Mala had asked around the Shallows. He’d been caught trying to thieve from a drug lord. His left hand had been lopped off as punishment, and he’d been told were he to be caught again, not only would *he* die, but one of his daughters would as well. “The drug lord even told him he’d get to decide which one before he killed him!” the old storyteller had told Mala, as if it hadn’t even occurred to him how terrifying it might be for the girl standing before him.

Before hearing that story, Mala had often considered telling her mother about her ability to weave shadows, a power she’d apparently inherited from her father, but after hearing what had happened to him, she swore she’d never tell anyone, not even Jein. Arük knew, but only because she’d used it so often in service to the flock.

Her father was long since dead, the victim of a fall in the quarry, and had left no inheritance save a sizable tab at the nearby oud parlor that Mother had been forced to pay. *Jein’s* father, however, was none other than King Mesut. She was an illegitimate child, a bastard, but even so...

“The House of Kings would give us nothing but misery and woe.” Before Mala could object, she went on. “Chickpeas, lemon, and flour, and a bag of rice if there’s any left over.”

“Yes, Memma.”

Her mother hardly paid attention to Mala’s reply. She’d gone back to rubbing her knees and rocking back and forth with a pained expression on her face. Mala tried to sleep, but she shared a bed with her little sister, Jein, who woke when Mala slipped into bed.

“I missed you,” Jein whispered sleepily while snuggling closer.

“I missed you, too,” Mala whispered back.

Jein fell back to sleep quickly, but she had restless legs and kept kicking Mala beneath the blankets. With that and her mother’s moaning, Mala was a thousand leagues from the land of dreams.

Visions of the Kestrel haunted her. Mala wondered if she’d died. Maybe she hadn’t. Maybe she needed help. Maybe if Mala gave her some, she might give Mala a reward. And even if she didn’t, Mala might still scavenge the garrison for *something* to sell.

With that faint hope in mind, she’d returned to the garrison. With the coming dawn a warm promise along the eastern horizon, she’d snuck in and found it still blessedly empty. After pulling the darkness around her, tight as a funeral shroud, she wended her way down to the archives, opened the door in the bookshelf, and walked along the tunnel. She’d found rooms. People *lived* there, deep below the city. Transfixed by her own curiosity, she’d gone farther and eventually heard voices. She came to a room that looked like a mausoleum. It was circular and had stout columns, intricately carved friezes on the walls and, in the center of the room, what looked to be an open grave. Within the pit was the woman, the Kestrel, naked as the day the desert had breathed life into her.

Beside the pit, an old, heavysset woman with enough jewelry to weigh down a pack mule was speaking to the Kestrel. She helped the Kestrel to stand and, wonder of wonders, her wounds had been healed! Instead of arrow shafts sticking from her flesh, she had only two angry, puckered scars on her bronze skin.

Mala should have left then. She should have backed away and returned to the garrison. She courted ruin by remaining. But this was all so very strange. She wanted to learn what had happened. She wanted to know who the old woman was. She wanted to know what would become of the Kestrel. So she followed them. She listened to their conversation in the room with the maps, how King Zeheb was in danger, how they planned to steal him away from Eventide in order to save his life.

But the fates, ever cruel in their ways, conspired against her. It was the very realization that she would be killed were it discovered that she knew the information being passed between the two women that caused Mala's concentration to slip. The moment it did, the Kestrel's head snapped to where Mala was crouched within the passageway.

Knowing she'd been spotted, Mala turned and ran, faster than she'd ever ran before. The Kestrels were stronger than bone crushers, could run faster than a sprinting akhala, so how Mala made it beyond those subterranean passages to reach the garrison proper, she couldn't say. She knew one thing, though: Bakhi had smiled on her that day. As she reached the crisp morning air and began sprinting along the streets of the old city, she promised herself she'd go to Bakhi's temple and offer up a bit of copper, even if he *had* cursed Memma.

She knew she couldn't go home—the chances of the Kestrel somehow following her trail was too high—so she went to Arúk's home instead, the one he shared

with his senile old grandfather. Kasha and Rennek were there too, the three of them lounging on massive horsehair pillows. Between them, on a small, round table, was the best of the loot they'd taken from the garrison. Given the three small piles near their feet, it was clear they were divvying up the spoils. They also had a bottle of cheap, piss-yellow araq at hand. Each of them had a glass of it to call their own. This was a celebration, she realized. Arük clearly thought this some grand occasion.

"Can we talk?" Mala asked him.

"Not if it's about your share, kitten."

"Stop calling me kitten. And it's not about that."

"What, then?"

Mala's gut had already been roiling, but now it was threatening to boil over. "I don't want to say."

Arük laughed his biting laugh. "You don't want to say?"

She waved to Rennek and Kasha. "Not in front of them."

At this, Arük picked up his glass of araq, downed the lot of it, and sent the glass to clacking on the table. "Anything you want to say to me you can say to them."

All three waited, staring, uncaring, while Mala fumbled with her words. "I'm in trouble," she finally said. "I need a place to hide."

"What are you saying?"

"I went back," Mala mumbled.

"What?"

"I went *back*."

Aruk's heavy brows lowered. A storm was building inside him. "To the *garrison*?"

Mala nodded and told them about finding the Kestrel, about helping her into the passageway and returning to find the Kestrel reborn, about how she'd been spotted and the Crone had commanded the Kestrel to kill her.

Arük flung one hand in the air. “Enough! Not one more word, Mala!” The expression on his face was no longer one of anger, but of abject fear. He looked every bit as scared as Mala. “First you lie to protect a bloody *Kestrel*—that was enough to put us all in danger, you know that, don’t you? But that wasn’t good enough, oh, no! You had to go back, and instead of leaving when you should’ve, you let them see you. And now you have the gall to come here and tell *us* the story?”

“The old woman ordered her to come for *me*, not you.”

“You think the Kestrel will stop at your death once she learns you’ve told others?”

“How would she know?”

“Gods willing she never will!” Arük stood and stalked toward her. He was a whirlwind of fury and righteous purpose. He grabbed her by the neck, marched her through the door, and threw her onto the narrow, dusty alley.

Mala turned over, feeling betrayed and utterly lost. “I need *protection*. That’s what a flock is for!”

Arük loomed over her while Rennek and Kasha stared from the doorway. “You don’t *get* protection, not when you’ve betrayed us.”

“I need a place to hide,” she called as he stalked away.

“Use your little trick!” he called over his shoulder, then walked back inside his grandfather’s home and slammed the door, leaving Mala lying there on the dirt.

Hardly a moment had passed before Mala felt laid bare before those who’d witnessed the exchange. Women stared down from the ranks of windows above. Two men eyed her from a darkened archway. Had they heard? Would one of them sell her out to the Silver Spears?

She was terrified of being alone in the streets, but she knew she couldn’t go home. Arük had been right. She *had* put them in danger by going to them. Go home

and she'd put her mother and sister at risk too, more than they already were. She'd lie low in one of her old hiding places in the spice market; she'd return home at night and convince her mother they needed to stay with aunt Mindra for a time.

Ignoring the stares from the windows and the archways, she headed down one of the narrow, winding alleyways the Shallows was famed for. The moment she was alone, she pulled the shadows close. More than simply a way to avoid being seen, the shadows were a balm against her fears. The Kestrel would move on to other things when she was unable to find Mala. Mala was certain of it.

Her heart lifted ever so slightly, she headed for the end of the alley, but pulled up short when the path ahead was suddenly blocked by a woman wearing a white hijab and a blue abaya with elegant, winglike sleeves, the very clothes the Kestrel had donned after rising from the pit.

Mala was normally good at sensing danger. She'd always been the first to run when the Spears or local enforcers or rival flocks showed up, and once she started running, she rarely got caught. Standing there before the Kestrel, however, she felt useless, a lamb gone stiff under the stare of a black laugher.

The Kestrel, however, wasn't looking at Mala with anger in her eyes. Rather, she looked intensely curious, like a collector of rare birds who'd discovered some new, previously unknown breed of river finch. "How do you do it?" she asked.

"Do what?" Mala stammered.

She waved to the alley around them, to the shadows. "Hide like you do."

Mala paused, not wanting to give away her secret, but visions of what the Kestrel would do to her were she to remain silent soon eclipsed those fears. "I've always been able to do it."

The Kestrel seemed to be watching Mala's lips closely, like Sama'an the deaf beggar did whenever someone spoke to him. "I asked you *how*, not how long."

What could Mala say? "I pull the shadows close and people look away."

"Can you do it whenever you want?"

She was staring so intensely at Mala's lips it made her uncomfortable. "Can you hear?"

The woman frowned. "Just answer the question."

Mala swallowed, embarrassed. "Yes."

"Good, because you're going to do it for me."

"What?" Mala was dumbstruck. "Why? Where?"

"We'll not speak of that here."

"But the old woman. She ordered you to kill me. I heard her."

"I owe you a life, little one, and I've had quite enough of killing innocents for the time being. Now, come with me. One of your Kings needs you." With that she turned and walked away, expecting Mala to follow.

Mala's fears hadn't ebbed in the least. She was nearly as afraid of what the Kestrel wanted her to do as she was of the consequences of not doing it. She could run away. She could try to hide. But what good would that do? The Kestrel had already found her once.

Swallowing her fears, she trailed after the Kestrel.

\* \* \*

Mala's power over shadow was far from absolute. It was all but useless in patches of bright light, or suffused light like often came during the desert's rainy season. The spell could be broken if she grew careless and moved too quickly or allowed her footfalls to make too much noise. She could be spotted if her clothes clashed with her surroundings, which was why she often wore muddy colors to better blend in with the mudbrick and sandstone that dominated the architecture in Sharakhai's west end. King Zeheb's

palace being made of granite, travertine, and marble, she'd decided to wear an outfit of light gray for her mission to spy upon Temel, the King-in-waiting.

She crept along a broad hallway filled with bronze statues and lanterns hung from decorative sconces. She paused to read a plaque mounted on one of the plinths: *Fatima II, Vizira to Our Lord King Zeheb, serving from the 280<sup>th</sup> year of his reign to the 302<sup>nd</sup>.* The next was of Baüd, a man who had served as the city's secretary of public works and spearheaded the project to create the city's water reservoir. Others had similar declarations of accomplishments. Mala had never seen Zeheb before, but the statues, renderings of King Zeheb's offspring from his more than four centuries of rule over Sharakhai, gave her a rough impression. They had broad foreheads. Hawk noses. They were *large boned*, as Zeheb apparently was.

Realizing she was wasting time, Mala hurried to the second statue from the end on the right-hand side, and none too soon. She'd no more than stepped behind the statue than she heard voices. They were filtering in from the high, horseshoe archway at the hallway's end. Mala made herself small as two men in rich khalats of green and amber silk passed beneath the archway and into the hall of statues.

"Mark my words," one was saying, "they've returned our Lord King home so he can help with the war effort. It's why they're in the great hall. They're hoping familiar surroundings will help."

"As you say," said the other, "they surely fear the golems' return, but—"

"Well of *course* they fear the golems' return."

"Yes, but—"

"And mark my words, it's going to happen soon. The Malasani are nearly ready to march again."

"Yes, *but*," the other said loudly as they passed by Mala's hiding place, "I heard King Ihsan ordered them

away. He used his power on them. So why would they return?”

The first laughed as only the highborn can laugh. “Haven’t you heard? King Ihsan was *taken*. He’s a captive. More likely the Malasani king has paused the assault while he plies Ihsan for secrets.”

Mala breathed a sigh of relief as the heavy doors at the far end of the hall banged shut and their conversation dropped. She immediately began searching the stones behind the statue for the one Shohreh had described to her, the one with the small nick in the corner. When she found it and pressed it, a section of the wall swung inward to reveal a darkened passage. She stepped inside and closed the door, hearing a loud click as the tunnel plunged into darkness.

After days of careful preparation, the Kestrel, Shohreh, had taken Mala to the mysterious, maze-like set of caverns and tunnels beneath the city. They’d spent an hour traversing those hidden passageways, Shohreh leading them doggedly and confidently ever higher through the caverns and tunnels. All the while it was becoming more and more clear that even walking caused Shohreh pain. And it was growing worse the more she moved.

“It’s your rebirth, isn’t it?” Mala had whispered, fearful of being overheard in that vast subterranean place.

When Shohreh didn’t answer, Mala tugged on her sleeve and repeated the question. Shohreh was deaf, Mala had learned, and she was still getting used to making sure Shohreh could see her lips before she asked questions.

Shohreh’s answer was a curt nod, but it was the terrible grimace on her face that made it clear just how painful the days after a rebirth were. “It will pass in time.”

Eventually they reached a spiraling stairway that led to the lowermost reaches of Zeheb's palace. Shohreh was supposed to take her up, but as she reached the base of the stairs, she set their small lantern down, curled up on the bottom steps, and uttered a long, pitiful moan.

Mala could only stand there, feeling powerless. "Do you need some water?"

"I *have* water," Shohreh managed through gritted teeth, then waved Mala toward the stairs. "Go on without me. You know the way."

Mala shook her head. "We should come back another night when you're better."

"We can't." She curled up and began sucking breath through clenched teeth in the sort of rapid rhythm that spoke of pain spiraling out of control. "Zeheb is being brought there tonight," she said between gasps. "You have to listen, hear what he says. Tomorrow might see King Zeheb being given back to the desert."

Mala felt terrible for leaving her like that, but Shohreh had likely been right. If they were to save King Zeheb from being assassinated by his own family, which would, in turn, save Mala and *her* family, it was crucial they learn more.

In the darkness, Mala's fingers brushed the cold stone walls of the passageway as she shuffled unsteadily toward the palace's great hall. She'd never felt claustrophobic, but she was nervous and the passage was narrow as a goat chute. It made her feel as if the walls were ready to press inward and squeeze the life from her.

Ahead, a pinpoint of light appeared. It grew brighter and brighter the closer she came, until she reached the end of the tunnel and a wide wooden panel, at the center of which was a peephole. Even standing on tiptoes it was difficult to peer through, but she managed it and saw a massive room lit by lanterns hung from

tall, pewter stands. This was the palace's great hall, yet not a lick of wood or stone could be seen. Every wall was hidden by thick curtains, the floor a layered sea of carpets. Even the vaulted ceiling was obscured by bolts of cloth—hung as they were beneath the support beams, they looked like the sort of childish waves she used to draw with Jein in the sand.

Luckily, or perhaps it was by design, the peephole itself was situated between two hanging curtains, allowing her a view of the room beyond. In the center of it, a dozen men and women dressed in finery—curled slippers, silk khalats, bejeweled jalabiyas, embroidered abayas and the like—spoke softly with one another. From her vantage behind the wooden panel, Mala could hear only faint reverberations from the women. When the men spoke it sounded louder, like distant thunder.

Not far from the group of highborn stood four Blade Maidens in black battle dresses and turbans. Veils hid their faces. Each had a hand on the pommel of her sword. The King himself sat at the center of the Maidens on a wooden throne. He looked poorly, to say the least. His eyes moved languidly. He was slumped to one side. His lips were moving, though Mala had no idea what he was saying. She doubted the others did, either. They were ignoring him. Whatever they'd brought him here to do, he seemed to be failing at it miserably.

Just then one of the women returned to him while the rest fell silent. With the hall quiet, Mala could just make out her words. "Can you remember, father? Can you remember who were you were listening to?" She was holding up a sheet of papyrus. "'On the night of moonless skies will they kill the Whispering King.' That's what you said. Please tell us who spoke those words."

The woman was surely Anann, Zeheb's daughter and the one most willing to believe that he might one

day be cured of his madness. Again and again she pleaded with him, but Zeheb only stared beyond her, through her, his lips moving ceaselessly, caught as he was by the whispers.

“Enough,” said one of the men.

This had come from a coxcomb with a pretentious, peacock-feather brooch pinned to the front of his emerald green turban. With his square face, full lips, and a stocky, somewhat ungainly body, he matched Shohreh’s description of Temel, Zeheb’s son and the would-be King, perfectly.

Anann looked crestfallen. She’d clearly been holding out hope she might find the one responsible for the threat on her father’s life. Ignoring her brother, she tried several more times, until Temel placed himself physically between the two of them, forcing Anann to regard him. “It’s time father returned to Eventide. You know how taxing this is for him.”

Anann glowered at him. “As if you care about his *comfort*.”

She spun and made for the hall’s entry doors. Half of the assembled group followed—Anann’s allies, Mala supposed. Meanwhile, four servants in Eventide’s livery slipped long wooden poles through steel loops in the side of the throne and proceeded to pick Zeheb up and bear him toward the door. The Maidens accompanied them.

Mala dropped down off her tiptoes, relaxing her aching calf muscles. When Shohreh had first mentioned the peephole, Mala had found it strange. The King would certainly have been aware of it, after all. Why would he have allowed it to remain? When Mala asked about it, Shohreh told her it was King Zeheb himself who often went to the peephole to spy on those who’d come to meet with him.

She lifted herself back up and peered at the King sitting so crookedly in his throne. “What a scared little

man you must be,” she whispered, “to spy on those you call friends.”

Just then Zeheb’s gaze sharpened. His head lifted and swiveled until he was staring straight at Mala’s position behind the wooden panel.

A sheet of cold fell across Mala’s skin. She stared into his eyes for a long while—too long—then finally had the sense to drop down out of sight, just as several of the courtiers were turning their heads to see what had caught the King’s attention. *Stupid, Mala. Stupid, stupid, stupid.* The King had heard her. He’d heard her whispers. Now he knew he’d been spied upon.

She was scared to look. She wanted to sprint away and go back home to her mother and Jein and forget any of this had ever happened. But she couldn’t. She’d hardly discovered anything yet. And besides, if the King *had* warned the others, it would be better to know how many were coming for her.

She lifted herself back onto her tiptoes and peered carefully through the peephole. King Zeheb was gone, as were the Maidens. The remaining richly dressed men and women were leaving, save two, who stood in silence as the doors boomed shut.

One was Temel. The other matched Shohreh’s description of Drogan, an ambitious young man, Zeheb’s one-time vizir, now Temel’s closest ally. His pointy beard and pronounced chin, coupled with an otherwise-round face, lent a distinct acorn shape to his head.

Temel was staring at the closed doors. “I wish it hadn’t come to this.”

“Don’t feel badly, my lord. You’ve been more than patient, but it’s time we all face facts. Your father is not only unwell, he’s unlikely to ever get better. Pretending otherwise *harms* Sharakhai, not helps it. Ensuring there is someone to rule the affairs of our family unquestioned isn’t just prudent, it’s essential.”

Temel smiled sadly. "Well, we may not have a city to rule soon."

"No," Drogan said with an emphatic shake of his head. "When the Malasani resume their attack, the old walls will hold, and when they do, *you'll* be sitting your father's throne, ready to rule this city as it should be ruled."

"Yes, well..." Temel's voice trailed off. He looked as though he'd rather be doing anything but having that conversation. A moment later, however, he said, "Has all been prepared on that front?"

"It has." Drogan walked to a section of the wall directly across from where Mala lay hidden and pulled aside one of the long curtains, revealing a door with wavy glass panels built into it. He opened it to reveal a lush garden beyond. "After you, my lord."

The two of them left the great hall and entered the garden, their voices fading until Mala could barely hear them. The very thing they were about to discuss was why Mala had come. She'd learned nothing new yet. Not really. She needed to learn not just *who* was going to try to kill Zeheb, but when and hopefully how.

Her fingers trembled as she placed one hand on the cold metal lever that would open the door. She made no move to pull it, however. She courted death by merely having stepped foot in the palace. It felt as if opening the secret door would act like a spell, conjuring up a death sentence.

"Kill her," Temel would say, just as the Crone had, and this time, no miraculous pardon from an infirm Kestrel was going to save her.

Mala's fingers slipped from the lever. She turned. Took careful, soundless steps into the darkness. She'd heard enough, hadn't she? She'd confirmed that Temel and Drogan were conspiring to kill Zeheb. Shohreh could do the rest. *She* was the Kestrel, after all. Who was Mala but a useless gutter wren, a street thief, a girl with a knack for not being seen?

Except there may not be *time*. For all Mala knew they were planning to kill Zeheb that very night. The information she had might not be enough to save him, and if he *was* assassinated, there was no way in the great wide desert that the Crone would listen to Shohreh's promised petition to allow Mala to live. Gods, Shohreh might still kill Mala herself if this all went badly, a thing that would doom not only Mala, but Memma and Jein as well.

So it was that Mala found her footsteps faltering in that cold, dark corridor, then halting altogether. She turned slowly, made her way back to the door, and once more placed the tips of her fingers on the lever. After a deep breath to calm her fraying nerves, she pulled it and snuck into the great hall.

Never had she felt more exposed than she did tiptoeing across the fine, layered carpets. Luckily, the door to the garden had been left cracked open. Mala slipped through it and dropped behind the row of manicured bushes to the left of the door. The twin moons, slim as wood shavings, shone down from above. Several lanterns burned along the palace wall, shedding golden light on Temel and Drogran where they stood speaking near a marble fountain.

And they were no longer alone. There was a third person standing beyond them. A feminine form. It was too dark to make the woman out clearly, but Mala could tell she was wearing a turban.

*Bloody gods, Mala thought, a Blade Maiden.*

It made sense, she supposed. The Kings were all assigned several Blade Maidens as personal bodyguards. Surely Temel, as the King-in-waiting, had received one too. Likely she was as loyal to him as Drogran was. *Mount Tauriyat was like a snake's nest, the saying went, fangs and poison everywhere.*

Just then the Maiden bowed to Temel. "Anann has arranged for Zeheb to be broken out of Eventide. Their

plan is to do so when the Malasani attack resumes, which looks to be soon.”

Temel’s reply was lost as he led the three of them toward a low wall, where he motioned to the desert beyond. In the distance, pinpoints of light were arrayed across the dunes, a veil of honey-colored stars. They were the fires of the Malasani encampment, and they were numerous beyond count. Again the voice inside Mala’s head screamed for her to leave. She might not know *how* Zeheb would be killed, but she knew when. It would have to be enough.

And yet she found herself drawing more darkness, found herself draping it across her shoulders like a cloak. Moving lithely as a desert fox, she parted the bushes and stepped onto the beautiful green lawn, the lush existence of which warred with everything Mala knew about life in the desert. When she reached the fountain, she could once again make out their voices clearly.

“But look at where they’re camped,” Temel was saying. “Less than a league from the entrance to the caves. They may already have taken it.”

“But they haven’t,” replied the Maiden. “I’ve just come from there. The caves remain untouched. The Malasani either don’t know about it or have chosen to overlook them for now.”

“It still seems odd. Anann must know they’ll be spotted and chased, which makes me wonder if your story is true.”

“It’s all true. I’m certain of it. Why else would your nephew have contracted with a Kundhuni warlord? Why else would the warlord’s fleet be waiting to the west, ready to protect Zeheb against any Malasani ships that might follow?”

Temel waved the information away. “Your suggestion is to attack him when he reaches the cavern, then?”

“He’ll be most vulnerable on the way there, but since I don’t yet know which path they’ll take, yes, I think waiting for him in the cavern would be best.”

After a moment’s consideration, Temel shared a look with Drogan and walked away. He passed within two paces of Mala, thankfully without so much as a glance in her direction. When he was back inside the palace and out of earshot, Drogan said, “Very well. Take Zeheb in the cavern.”

He started talking about the particulars—which ship Zeheb would be taken to, where it was situated in the cavern with respect to the others, even the cabin he would likely be given—but Mala was listening with only half an ear. This was it. This was what Shohreh needed. She was saved!

But then, as it often did when she was scared or excited or both, her cloak of darkness slipped. It was only for a long heartbeat, but that was all it took for the Blade Maiden to silence Drogan with a lift of a finger and peer into the darkness. Insects chittered. An amberlark cooed. Time passed in slow, agonizing increments, the worry inside Mala building with each passing moment. Soon it became too much and Mala’s cloak slipped again. The Maiden immediately placed her hand on the hilt of her shamshir and began stalking toward the fountain.

*Gods, oh gods, oh gods.*

Mala didn’t know what to do. She wasn’t prepared for this. She might sprint for the palace, try to return to the hidden passages, but what good would that do? The Blade Maidens were fleet as falcons. Mala couldn’t outrace her.

*Think, Mala. Think.*

She thought back to the hours and hours of poring over the maps of the palace Shohreh had shared with her, the drilling of possible ways to enter and escape before Shohreh became comfortable that Mala could handle the mission.

The slope beyond the garden wall, Mala recalled, was not a sheer drop—not for some distance beyond the palace, in any case—and yet it was steep enough that she might slide along it quickly and suffer only scrapes.

*Reach the wall, Mala. Reach the wall and you stand a chance.*

As the Blade Maiden approached, Mala prepared herself.

“Come out, little wren,” the Maiden said. “There’s no leaving this place now.”

As she rounded the fountain on one side, Droган paced along the opposite, clearly hoping to pinch Mala in place. It was a foolish mistake. Droган was no warrior. He was a vizir. His reactions would be slow and awkward, a thing Mala could use against him.

While pretending to focus all her attention on the Maiden, Mala shifted toward him. When he reached for her, as she knew he would, she snatched his wrist, lifted his arm high, then pirouetted while twisting hard. In a blink, she was behind him, wrenching his arm up in a tight lock while gripping his khalat with her other hand to guide his movements.

As he cried out in pain, Mala pointed him at the Maiden and shoved him for all she was worth, then sprinted like a springtime hare toward the low garden wall.

She was too scared to look back but could already hear the Maiden’s footfalls chasing her, closing the distance fast. It sounded so loud Mala was convinced she was about to be cut down from behind—she could practically *feel* the Maiden’s ebon blade slicing through the air—and yet, miracle of miracles, her speed was enough to carry her to the wall.

With a mighty leap off the lip of the wall, she soared through the chill night air. She flew so far that she lost her balance and landed awkwardly. She tried to recover, but it was too dark. She couldn’t see the

ground properly. She tripped forward and struck the rocky ground hard. She rolled to blunt the impact, as she'd been taught, but it still felt like she was being trampled by a herd of angry oryx.

When her tumble down the steep mountainside finally slowed, she twisted, oriented herself so that her feet faced downslope. Then she was up and running, sliding, teetering down the mountain as she tried desperately to keep her feet.

She'd managed to put a bit of distance between herself and the Maiden, but her pursuer was already closing the distance. The Maiden was twenty paces back, then ten, then five. With the wild glances Mala was sending over her shoulder, she could see the dark length of the curved shamshir gripped in the Maiden's right hand. Against the starswept sky, it looked like a whip held high, ready to lash out.

"Stop now and it will go better for you, girl!"

But Mala couldn't. She was too scared. And in any case, the Maiden was likely going to kill her. Why make it any easier?

A moment later something struck Mala's right foot, which had the effect of knocking it awkwardly against her opposite foot. She tripped, went flying, arms flailing, and struck the slope face first. Rocks tore into her clothes and skin as she slid and rolled. She managed to right herself, but before she could take another lumbering step downslope, the Blade Maiden caught up and seized her neck in a grip so strong Mala squeaked like a useless, frightened dune vole.

The Maiden forced Mala to face the upward slope and the twinkling lights of the palace. Gods they'd come far in their short flight. "You see how far I've got to drag your sorry hide now?" The Maiden shook her like a mongrel dog with a rat. "I'm tempted to gut you here and leave you for the jackals."

In a fit of wild fury, Mala reached for the knife at her belt. *I'll gut you instead, or at the very least give you a*

*scar to remember me by.* But the Maiden was ready. She snatched Mala's wrist and wrenched it until Mala dropped the knife. As it thumped against the earth, the Maiden backhanded Mala so hard her ears rang and her vision dimmed, obscuring for a moment the moonlit landscape around her.

Suddenly the Maiden's sword lay against Mala's neck. She could feel the weight of it, could feel its honed edge. She imagined it being drawn across her throat, her lifeblood spilling, the warmth of it draping down along her chest, her belly. A river of it would tickle the skin along her legs. Perhaps that was exactly what the Maiden had in mind. More likely she just wanted to put a scare in her.

Mala would never learn the truth of it, for just then something dark came streaking though the night, embedding itself in the Maiden's shoulder with a meaty thump. An arrow, Mala realized, though where it might have come from she had no idea. The Maiden spun as another clipped her arm, retreated as a third bit into the earth near her feet.

Mala didn't need an invitation to keep running. She turned and fled as more arrows streaked through the night. The Maiden grunted as she retreated further. Soon Mala reached a sheer drop-off and a path that led around a massive shoulder of rock.

"Here," she heard someone whisper. Only a few paces away, Mala spied a form hunkered low. It was Shohreh, moving stiffly, waving Mala closer. "Hurry now."

Mala went, and together they scuttled around the mountain until they were hidden from sight from the ground higher up. The Maiden, thank the gods, gave up the chase. Gods willing, she was dead, but Mala already had a suspicion she wasn't. The fates loved to play their games altogether too much to allow so easy a solution as that.

\* \* \*

"*You saw a Maiden...*" the Crone was saying.

"Yes," replied Shohreh. "She'd gone to the palace to deliver the news."

The two of them were in the map room. Shohreh stood at attention, hands clasped behind her back while the Crone paced before the hearth.

"*It's hardly a surprise,*" the Crone said absently. "*There have long been cracks forming in the sisterhood of the Maidens, Kings choosing daughters unfit to serve.*"

The ranks of the Blade Maidens, as the Kestrels, were fed exclusively from the daughters of the Kings. The Crone had never said so, but she seemed to look down on the Maidens, feeling them inferior to the more extensive training of her Kestrels.

It was strange, though. Shohreh had spent nearly her entire life with the Crone. She'd long since learned the subtle clues that shed light on her moods. She looked angry and concerned about Shohreh's news, but less so than the Kestrel would have guessed. Truth be told, Shohreh had expected her to fly into a rage, but she merely stared into the fire, contemplating.

Shohreh, meanwhile, was doing her best not to seem in as much pain as she actually was. As always after rebirths, the pain was bad, but this time it was coming in waves, and just then she was riding the crest. Her entire body felt like a rag left too long in the sun. Her joints were afire. And her muscles... Gods how they *ached*. They were tight as ratlines, refusing to stretch unless she worked them every waking hour, which only intensified the pain. She wanted go to her bed and curl into a ball until this latest spell passed. She couldn't, though. Let on too much and the Crone would begin to question everything. After all, if she was in so much pain from her rebirth, how had she managed to reach the garden? Was her debilitation what had allowed her to be observed by the Blade

Maiden? And how, if her infirmity was so pronounced, had she managed to escape?

The eldest of the Crone's acolytes, Sülten, entered the room. After sending an uncharitable glance in Shohreh's direction, she placed herself so that the Crone's body blocked Shohreh's view of her. Sülten knew very well that Shohreh was deaf and was ensuring her lips couldn't be seen, effectively blocking Shohreh from the conversation.

The two of them spoke for some time. As often happened when the Crone was deep in thought, shadows seemed to flicker about her head, a strange effect that the Crone had never once spoken about, despite Shohreh having asked her about it many times. "Never you mind, child," she would always say. "Never you mind."

Occasionally Sülten would glance at Shohreh over the Crone's shoulder, an act that made Shohreh extremely uncomfortable. She was certain that whatever Sülten had come about had to do with her mission.

Eventually, having interrogated Sülten to her satisfaction, the Crone sent her away, then rounded on Shohreh. "*The girl... You told me you'd killed her.*"

"I told you I'd dealt with her. And I have."

"*Oh?*" More than angry, the Crone looked fiendish, wicked, as if she were about to devolve into the sort of murderous rage she was infamous for. It was the sort of reaction Shohreh had been expecting when she'd delivered the news about King Temel and the Blade Maiden. "*How so?*"

"I'm using her," Shohreh said evenly, which was the only way to approach the Crone when she was in one of those moods. "She has a gift, a gift I decided to use to save your father from the danger he's in."

At the mere mention of her father, King Zeheb, the Crone's eyes relaxed ever so slightly. Her gaze roamed Shohreh's face, trying to ascertain just how

much truth lay in her words. *"You were given an order. To kill the girl."*

"An order I've not abandoned. But the truth is we have only days, perhaps mere hours, to stop the son of our rightful King from committing patricide. As much as it pains me to admit, I'm not as fit as I will be in several weeks' time. With at least one Blade Maiden working against us and my sister Kestrels gone, we need all the help we can get. When this is all done, the girl will get her due."

*"She'll get her due now,"* said the Crone.

"High Matron?"

*"Your sole focus will be the girl. Her and her band of miscreants. Her and her family."*

"But Zeheb—"

*"You're unfit for that duty. I'll deal with the Maiden."*

Before Shohreh could say another word, the Crone turned, her jewelry glinting wildly in the firelight, and strode toward the far tunnel that led to the acolyte's rooms. She paused at the entrance and turned her head so Shohreh could read her lips. *"The girl, Shohreh. You deal with her."*

With that she was gone, leaving Shohreh feeling cold and alone and perfectly heartless.

\* \* \*

It was still night when Mala arrived home. Jein was sleeping. Memma was in her rocking chair, snoring loudly, a bottle of cheap araq tipped on its side on the chipped mosaic table next to her. A puddle of liquor glinted on the warped slats of a floor that was otherwise scuffed and dull.

"Oh, gods, Memma," Mala whispered into the chill night air.

The blanket had spilled around Memma's hips, so Mala laid it over her afresh, but the night was chill, so she grabbed another and laid that over her as well. After kissing her mother's cheek, she took the bottle of araq and poured all but a dram's worth through their

small window onto the dirty alley outside. Mala had learned not to dump all the liquor. Do that and her mother would blame *her*, but leave a little and she'd think *she'd* drank the rest of it.

Mala knew she probably shouldn't have come home. She should have stayed away for a few days. Shohreh had said that Mala was safe for a time and that she'd deal with the Crone, but Mala wasn't convinced. The Crone seemed like a force of nature, a thing that wouldn't be denied once its course was set. And who was Shohreh anyway but a servant to the Crone's whims?

It was just that Mala had been so lonely. She'd stayed away for a full day after the scare on the mountainside, and she promised herself she'd leave before sunrise. She just wanted, she *needed*, to make sure Jein was all right.

After stripping out of her dusty trousers and shirt and pulling on her night dress, she retrieved one of the cloth-wrapped bundles from the leather purse at her belt. As she lay down in their shared bed, Jein opened her eyes.

"You're back," she said.

"I'm back," Mala replied, and handed her the bundle.

Jein unfurled it and her eyes went wide. "Kanafeh!"

Mala felt terrible about being gone for so long but seeing Jein's smile took away a bit of the sting. "There's another for Memma in the morning. Will you give it to her when she wakes?"

Jein nodded, but she was hardly paying attention. She was already wolfing down the wedge-shaped slice of sweet, sticky, cheesy pastry. It was gone in moments, and she was sucking on her fingers. When she started sucking on the cloth as well, trying to get every last bit of syrup off of it, Mala chuckled at the absurdity of it.

"Will you stop?"

When Jein didn't, Mala snatched the cloth away. Jein only giggled. "It makes my tongue happy!"

Mala giggled with her, which devolved into a long fit of laughter, the sort that built on itself until their stomachs hurt from it. When their laughter had faded, the two sisters huddled close beneath the blankets and Mala said, "Do you promise to give it to her and not eat it? She's hungry, too, you know."

"I know. I promise." Jein snuggled closer. "When are you coming home?"

"Soon," Mala lied. In truth, she had no idea when it would be safe for her to be home.

"Good," Jein said, and they fell asleep in one another's arms.

Mala woke just before sunrise. A warm breeze was blowing. It was going to be a hot day. Leaving Jein curled up, Mala rose and began pulling on her clothes. She'd just belted her trousers when Jein's eyes shot open. She stared about the room as if she had no idea where she was. She seemed frightened. Terrified.

Her head lifted and swiveled until her round eyes landed on Mala. "They're coming," she whispered.

"Who's coming? What are you talking about?"

"I hear them fighting in the hallway. They're coming for me."

"Who?"

"Please," Jein said in an attenuated whisper, "save me."

Mala stood stock still. In that moment, Jein looked like no one so much as King Zeheb when he'd stared at the peephole. She didn't know how the King might have done it, but she was certain King Zeheb was speaking *through* Jein.

Mala felt scared and useless. This was all too big for her. "I don't know *how* to save you."

But Jein's eyes had already begun to lose their crazed look. She whispered no more and curled up in the bed, breathing peacefully, asleep, none the wiser

that she'd just been used by one of the Kings of Sharakhai.

Mala threw on the rest of her clothes. She didn't know what to do exactly, but she knew someone who would.

She left her home and sprinted through the streets as the city was waking. She raced along the winding streets of the Shallows, passed through gates into the old city and the merchant's quarter, wended her way through the collegia grounds though it was forbidden to anyone save faculty, students, and their family to enter. Her legs burning, her breath ragged, she finally came to the wide street where the garrison crouched like a bone crusher sleeping off its latest meal.

She stared at it in abject horror. The place was teeming with soldiers: Silver Spears holding pikes, shamshirs, and shields, standing in formation, ten by ten. More men and women wearing plain-looking armor huddled loosely nearby. Even cavalry men on horseback gathered along the collegia's wide lawn. All were listening to a speech being given by a man in bright steel armor on the garrison's front steps.

*The Malasani*, Mala realized. *They must be preparing for the renewed assault.* No sooner had the thought occurred to her than a great roar came from the south. Gods, the Malasani were already on the march.

Mala needed to find Shohreh. She *needed* to. Her life depended on it. But she was never going to get inside that building. Not today. There were too many people running about.

A man at the head of the cavalry blew a horn, and they set off at a gallop. The Silver Spears followed, then the ragtag infantry.

*Maybe after they're gone*, Mala thought, then someone grabbed her by her braided hair and yanked her painfully away from the corner of the building she'd been hiding behind. Mala thought a Silver Spear had

found her, but it wasn't a Spear. It was Shohreh, dressed in a blood-red battle dress and turban. "Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

"I— I—"

Shohreh shoved her away, toward the Shallows. "Hide, Mala. Hide your family as well. The Crone will be coming for you soon."

"I can't," Mala said, but Shohreh had already turned away. Feeling like her fate was slipping through her fingers like so much sand, she ran, grabbed Shohreh's arm, and spun her around. "Zeheb spoke to me!"

Shohreh frowned at first, then paused. "You're mad, child."

"It's true! He spoke to me through my sister, Jein."

Shohreh's eyes thinned. "What did he say?"

"He said they're coming for him." She pointed to Mount Tauriyat and the many palaces perched upon its slopes. "He said there was fighting in the halls."

Shohreh stared at the House of Kings. She studied the infantry marching away from the garrison. Then she snatched Mala's wrist and dragged her in the other direction. "Come with me."

\* \* \*

Beneath the bright red hull of a racing yacht, Shohreh crouched on the sand, hidden behind one of the two aerodynamic struts that stretched down from the hull to the starboard ski. The skis, made of fabled skimwood, were slick as eel skin, especially against sand, allowing ships to glide easily over the desert.

To her right, beyond a broad towing lane and a curving row of a dozen more sandships, lay the cavern's entrance, which was narrow, barely the width of one of the yachts inside the cavern, but also tall, easily four stories high. The morning's light poured through it, illuminating the cavern, its sandy floor, and the fleet of ships housed within. It was, in effect, a bay of hidden ships.

Beside Shohreh lay a repeating crossbow, already cocked and loaded. Beyond it, crouched behind the same strut as Shohreh, was Mala, her gaze fixed on the mouth of a darkened tunnel, the only other entrance to the cavern. Shohreh's first instinct had been to come alone, but she believed Mala's story—that King Zeheb had somehow spoken to her through her sister. Shohreh didn't know *how* Zeheb had managed it, but she believed he had, and that he might do so again, which was why, despite her better judgment, she'd allowed Mala to come.

Aboard the yacht, two of the crewmen had just finished folding the protective tarp from the deck and stowing it. Three more crewmen were hoisting the sails. Assuming all went as planned, the ship would spirit King Zeheb and his family away, and Shohreh intended to make sure it happened in precisely that manner. As strange as it was to admit, the safest place for Zeheb was far, far away from Sharakhai. Only then would Anann, his daughter, be free to try to heal his addled mind. And whether or not that effort succeeded, she could negotiate for Zeheb's return and ensure his living arrangements wouldn't consist of four stone walls and a locked door beneath Eventide.

As the crew finished setting the mainsail, Mala tugged on Shohreh's sleeve and pointed to the tunnel. A moment later, a large group of people, four of whom bore a litter, came rushing from the shadows. Anann was at their lead. Behind came another of Zeheb's daughters and her barrel-chested son. The litter had its curtains drawn, but surely King Zeheb sat inside it.

On the double they marched over the sand toward the yacht's aft hatch, which had been lowered to the sand. The moment the litter was lost from view, the crew closed the hatch and began pushing the ship on its slick skimwood skis out from its mooring pole toward the towing lane between the ships.

Shohreh could hardly believe her eyes. They were going to escape with hardly a fuss. But how? It all felt too easy. The rogue Blade Maiden knew very well they'd planned to take King Zeheb to the bay of yachts, so where was she? Did she plan to follow the ship, kill Zeheb in the open desert once they were beyond the many eyes of Sharakhai? It was possible, but risky—let the ship go and she might lose them to one of the sandstorms that plagued the open desert.

The ship had just begun to nose out from its sandy berth when silhouettes appeared at the cavern's entrance. A black arrow came streaking in, embedding itself in the ship's hull near the bowsprit. Storming in through the cavern's entrance were a trio of Blade Maidens on tall horses and a dozen Silver Spears, also on horseback. Behind them, a team of two horses hauled a sleigh on fat skimwood skis with an enclosed compartment at the rear, the sort the city's harbor inspectors used to confiscate contraband or stowaways found on ships.

Archers aboard the yacht readied bows and arrows. Others dropped swords and shields over the side of the ship, which were then taken up by guards on the sand. They proceeded to set up a coarse line of defense against the coming soldiers, but they looked ridiculous, a row of children hoping to stop a charge of mounted knights.

The Blade Maidens, Silver Spears, and the sleigh all came to a stop. Only then did the lead Maiden, a warden, drop her veil and pull her shamshir, a length of curving, ebon steel. She used the sword to point to the ship's hold. *"You have something that belongs to us. Give it back and no harm will come to you."*

*"What we have is my father,"* Anann called from the foredeck, *"and he is no one's prisoner. Now stand aside before this comes to blows."*

Shohreh couldn't hear the tone of her words, but she didn't need to. Anann's body language spoke

volumes. She was a proud woman who'd had enough. She was going to take a stand today, for good or ill.

*"Your father is a traitor,"* said the warden.

*"That has yet to be proven."*

*"Only because your father is mad. Come now, Anann Zeheb'ava. Let's be reasonable. No one needs to get hurt over this. In the months Zeheb has resided in Eventide, he has been treated fairly and will continue to be. Give him to us now and I swear to you by sand and by stone we'll find a way to put this behind us."*

Anann was neither tall nor regal—she was a plain-looking woman under most circumstances—but just then she looked like the Queen of the Desert. *"My father is coming with us. Now make way or my next words will be an order for my men to cut you down."*

The warden's horse was an akhala, a mighty beast with a coat of silver and fetlocks of glinting iron. It threw its head back and shook its mane. It stamped its hooves, thumping the sand as if itching for battle. The warden pulled the reins to bring it back under control. *"That would be a most unfortunate choice."*

Anann stood tall, silent as a gravestone.

The warden looked like she regretted what she was about to do. *"So be it,"* she said, and replaced the veil over her face. At a flick of her hand, one of the Silver Spears behind her spun a clay pot on a rope and launched it high into the air.

As it arced toward the ship, Anann yelled, *"Take cover!"*

Some did. Others released arrows at the Blade Maidens, who had just then kicked their horses into motion. The guards on the sand moved into a rough defensive formation, though what they hoped to do against so many well trained soldiers Shohreh had no idea.

Shohreh reached for the crossbow, but Mala, surprisingly battle ready for her age, was already holding it out for her to take. With a crisp nod, Shohreh

took it and raised it to her shoulder. Aiming carefully and gauging the speed of the warden, she pulled the trigger. A thin bolt streaked through the air and pierced the warden's thigh. The horse continued its charge, but the warden herself leaned forward in her saddle, then slumped to one side and fell hard against the sand, victim to the poison Shohreh had laced on the crossbow's small, dart-like bolts.

The flying pot struck the ship's hull. The clay shattered, sending a fine black powder bursting into the air. The cloud it created spread so quickly and was so difficult to see through that the entire ship and those to either side of it were swallowed, lost from view.

Shohreh's aching muscles were slow to respond as she cranked the lever to load another bolt. Pressing the crossbow to her shoulder, she fired again and caught the second Blade Maiden along her back, just above the kidney. Like her leader, the Maiden soon slumped backward, slipped from her saddle, and fell awkwardly to the sand. The third and last bolt narrowly missed the only remaining Maiden, sinking instead into the horse's flank. The horse pulled up and reared, nearly throwing its rider. The Maiden, fighting the reins hard, was soon lost from view, swallowed by the cloud of dust.

The Silver Spears were just heading into the cloud when Shohreh felt a tug on her arm. "What?" she asked Mala, angry over being interrupted.

Mala was jabbing a finger toward the cavern's entrance. "*The sleigh. It's gone.*"

Oh gods, she was right. Shohreh scanned the cavern frantically, but the sleigh was nowhere to be seen. Then she caught sight of it, beyond the row of ships across from her, along the far side of the cavern.

*It's the rogue Blade Maiden*, Shohreh realized. *She means to take Zeheb from under our very noses.* "Stay here," she said to Mala, and began running for all she was worth along the cavern wall, using the moored ships to mask her approach.

As she neared Anann's ship, the cloud of dust was showing its first signs of dissipating—silhouettes of men and women fighting, some near, some distant, could now be seen clearly—but it was still thick enough to hide Shohreh's movements. She skirted the fighting to reach the back of Anann's yacht.

As expected, the hatch was no longer secured, but lowered against the sand. She approached it carefully, ignoring the sweet, amber scent of the dust while peering into the darkness for signs of Zeheb or the rogue Maiden. At the back of the hold, beyond the abandoned litter, a ladder led up to an open hatch and a passageway. Shohreh squinted into the gloom, where several cabin doors were barely visible. At the far end, a body lay unmoving—dead or unconscious, Shohreh didn't know.

She ascended the stairs with care, then advanced with all the caution the situation demanded, yet she was still taken off guard when the hatchway of the nearest cabin door flew open and a figure dressed in the white tabard, mail, and helm of a Silver Spear came flying out.

It was difficult to see in the dimness, but Shohreh could detect a feminine frame beneath the uniform. Surely this was the rogue Blade Maiden in disguise. She bore no sword—the passageway was too narrow to use one effectively anyway. She stepped forward instead and snapped a quick but violent kick into Shohreh's chest. Shohreh tried to block it, but her rebirth and her aching muscles had left her too slow, and she took the full brunt of it.

She flew backwards, arms flailing, into the hold. Her head struck the corner of the enclosed litter. A sharp, blinding pain rocked her skull. A low thrumming filled her deafened ears. As the hold and its open door swam before her, she became vaguely aware of two forms walking past her. The Maiden and... Gods, she

couldn't think. Who was the second? Why had she come here?

Slowly, the dizziness faded. The pain ebbed. The dust, having dissipated further, made her painfully aware that precious moments were being lost, but she could hardly stand on her own two feet.

King Zeheb, she finally realized. The rogue Blade Maiden had just snatched King Zeheb.

She stumbled from the hold and looked to her right. Rounding the curve of the long row of ships was the sleigh. It was just entering the final curve toward the cavern's soaring entrance when Mala appeared between two of the ships, sprinting hard toward the sleigh's rear.

*Mala, no!* Shohreh screamed from within.

The sleigh was moving fast by then. Shohreh thought surely it had pulled too far ahead for Mala to reach it, but at the last moment Mala leapt and grabbed the stairs, which had been swung into their stowed position against the door at back of the enclosed compartment. She'd just pulled herself onto the lip when the sleigh was lost from view.

Pushing the dizziness away, willing her body into motion, Shohreh ran hard between the next two ships. Beyond them, in the cavern's central aisle, was the warden's silver warhorse, waiting dutifully by its charge. Shohreh mounted and kicked the horse into motion. The akhala fought her, but Shohreh was no newcomer to a saddle. She gripped its sides with her legs and held the reins tight, giving the powerful beast no ground, and soon it was obeying her commands and they were hurtling toward the entrance.

They burst from the cavern and into the blinding sunlight, chasing the sleigh at a speed mundane horses could only dream of. The distance closed quickly. Mala, still on the back of the sleigh, held a knife and was using the point against the lock on the door, clearly hoping she might pry it open. Surely realizing it

was hopeless, she abandoned the effort, clamped the blade between her teeth, and climbed the back of the sleigh to reach the roof. Once there, she hunkered low, gripping the knife with its point facing down, and stalked forward across the roof.

*Breath of the desert, she's going to try to take the Maiden from behind.*

Shohreh wanted to scream for her to stop, but doing so would only alert the Maiden, so instead she crouched in her stirrups and whipped the reins across the akhala's rump, urging it into a faster sprint.

Ahead, Mala squatted at the roof's forward edge. The Maiden was on the driver's bench just below her, an easy target, and yet the girl hesitated. She was clearly having trouble summoning her courage.

*Good, Shohreh thought. Leave her to me.*

Shohreh had nearly pulled even with the back of the sleigh when Mala dropped, falling upon the Maiden, stabbing with her knife as she went. How well the knife struck Shohreh couldn't tell, but a moment later, Mala was flying off the driver's bench and onto the sand.

Shohreh was so close by then her horse nearly trampled Mala where she lay, but the beast was trained for war, as any Blade Maiden's horse would be, and leapt over her cowering form. Shohreh finally reached the back of the sleigh and did as Mala had done. She leapt onto the roof, then drew her shamshir.

The Maiden was ready, however. She'd been looking back to see what had become of the girl and saw Shohreh there. She immediately pulled hard on the reins.

Shohreh knew very well she was about to be thrown from the roof, but there were no handholds to speak of and so, as the sleigh swung left, she was swept from the top like slops from a butcher's block. She struck the sand and rolled over one shoulder, tumbling like a wayward boulder. Then she was up and running, sword in hand.

The Maiden was whipping the horses, trying to get the sleigh back up to speed, but Shohreh was coming on fast—too fast for her to escape cleanly—so she abandoned the reins, leapt off the driver's bench, and met Shohreh's fierce first blow with a blinding draw and block of her own ebon blade.

Only then did Shohreh recognize her. "Nadiin?"

By the gods who breathe, it was her. The rogue Blade Maiden was no Maiden at all but a Kestrel, one of Shohreh's own sisterhood. But how could that be? The Crone had said they were all gone. Surely that was what Nadiin had *wanted* the Crone to believe—how else to hide her treachery? And yet the very idea of a Kestrel turning traitor seemed ludicrous.

Shohreh thought back to that night on the slopes of Tauriyat. It had been dark. She hadn't been able to see clearly, nor had Mala. Had they been able to, they would likely have seen that the woman speaking with Temel and Drogan had been wearing a *red* battle dress, not black. She would have known from the beginning that a fellow Kestrel was working against her.

Nadiin, grimly silent, pressed her attack, sending Shohreh stumbling backward, forcing Shohreh to use all her energy just to keep her head upon her shoulders.

Nadiin might have won quickly had she been at full strength. But she wasn't. Far from it. A swath of crimson stained her white tabard along one shoulder, evidence that Mala's knife had bitten deep. It was large and wet and spreading quickly. Nadiin was a Kestrel, though. She'd been trained to fight under such circumstances and thundered blow after blow against Shohreh's defenses.

Shohreh might not be wounded as Nadiin was, but the soreness that came with a rebirth in the Sepulchre still weighed on her. It wasn't so bad as it had been in the beginning, though, and it had gotten better with the

simple, physical act of running to the ship and riding the akhala hard to catch up to Nadiin.

Nadiin's breath became labored. The copper skin of her face turned pale, surely from the loss of blood. She deftly blocked one of Shohreh's swings, released a battle cry, and unleashed a terrible flurry of blows, but Shohreh had been expecting it. She blocked every wild blow, waiting for her opening. At last, Nadiin took an ill-advised swing at Shohreh's midsection. Shohreh beat the shamshir wide, stepped in, and swung her sword two-handed, up and across Nadiin's guard. It cut deep into Nadiin's side through her ribs.

Eyes wide, Nadiin staggered back, shivering from the terrible blow. She dropped her shamshir and collapsed to the ground, twisting and clutching the wound. She laid both arms over it and pressed, but it would do her no good. A wound like that couldn't be staunched.

Shohreh had hardly noticed the sheer heat rolling across the dunes, but just then, as she stared down into Nadiin's soft, unbelieving eyes, it hit her full force. It felt like the desert itself had taken note of their clash and had felt its heart racing, as Shohreh and Nadiin's hearts had been only moments ago.

"Sister," Shohreh said, old habits dying hard.

"*Sister*," Nadiin said back.

"Tell me who sent you."

"*Who sent me?*" Nadiin asked.

"Yes." Shohreh waved toward the cavern's entrance in the distance behind her. "Recover a bit of your honor before you die. Tell me who sent you. Tell me who convinced you to turn traitor."

Nadiin split her pained grimace with a smile. "*You always were a bit thick, Shohreh. I'm no traitor.*"

"How can you say that? You were ready to kill our Lord King, the man you served since you were a child!"

"*I think in time*"—she swallowed hard—"even you'll be able to work it out."

Just then a gust of wind kicked sand over Nadiin's prone form. In that moment, she went perfectly still. Her eyes went glassy.

*Gods, Shohreh thought, to be so close to solving this riddle only to have Nadiin's death stop her. She needed to know the answer to the question—the Crone needed to know—but there was no time to work it through. King Zeheb must be escorted safely from the cavern.*

Mala was suddenly there, standing beside her, staring at Nadiin's unmoving form with a look of cold shock.

Shohreh went to the akhala, which had stopped to chew on a bit of ironweed nearby, and took up the reins. "You can't be seen here," she told Mala and held the reins to her. "Take the horse. Skirt the city to the east. Tie it up near the northern harbor, then make your way home."

Mala blinked. She waved at the sleigh. "But the King..."

"I'll take care of the King." She helped Mala into the saddle. "Go home. I'll find you when this is all over."

Mala stared at the cavern's entrance behind them, then nodded numbly. She left, cantering toward Sharakhai, a shimmering monument of ochre and kohl, impressive even from this distance. Shohreh, meanwhile, guided the sleigh toward the cavern. One hand raised warily, Anann met her near the yacht. With the Maidens taken down by Shohreh, they'd been able to overwhelm the Silver Spears.

After freeing Zeheb from the locked compartment at the back of the sleigh, they returned him to the ship. He seemed as frail and confused as ever, and spoke only once as he walked up the gangplank. "The Honey-tongued King! The Honey-tongued King!" he shouted with a crazed expression on his face. "Let's see if it tastes like honey!"

No one knew what he meant by it.

*“Thank you,”* Anann said to Shohreh after she explained what part she’d played in their escape. *“We owe you much.”*

Shohreh bowed her head. “I serve at the will of the Kings.”

*“Yes, well, the Kings are a multi-headed beast. Sometimes their will isn’t all that clear, is it?”*

Shohreh felt like she’d been struck by lightning. Anann was right. The will of the Kings *wasn’t* always clear. They worked at cross-purposes at times, and so did their servants.

Suddenly everything was crystal clear: who had been behind the attacks, who had ordered Nadiin to kill Zeheb. The reasoning behind Shohreh herself being sent to stop it even made a strange sort of sense.

*“Are you well?”* Anann asked.

“Go,” Shohreh said as she ran toward another Maiden’s horse, this one a proud copper akhala. “See our King safe.”

With that she was on the horse, riding hard for Sharakhai.

\* \* \*

As Shohreh had bade her, Mala left the akhala along the quays of the northern harbor, but she didn’t go home from there. She had nothing to bring back to her family, nothing to offer besides grief and another mouth to feed. As much as she hated to admit it, she needed to go to Arük. She needed to tell him she’d made things right. She’d make him see, and then she’d ask for a job, any job at all, so she could earn a bit of money. She’d save enough for the medallion from Bakhii’s temple. She’d see her mother cured of her ailment.

She went to Arük’s grandfather’s house, hoping to find Arük there, preferably without Kasha—Arük had never said so, but he liked Kasha, and was always showing off for her, which often meant being cruel to Mala.

When she reached the dusty alley, it was strangely empty. Eerily empty. Normally there were a few dozen locals, children playing, men and women standing about, talking, walking, going on about their lives. But no one lingered, nor stood in the mudbrick archways, nor sat at the sills of their windows, staring down. There was only silence and a slowly building feeling of dread.

Mala came to a shuddering halt when she saw Arük's front door was cracked open. A crude depiction of a red, clawed hand was painted on its beaten wooden surface, the sign of the Crone. Mala had never seen it herself, but she'd heard stories of it, heard about the things that accompanied it. Murderous rages, people screaming, homes choked with the dead.

As she approached, her mouth went dry. The hair on the backs of her arms arose in a sudden, chilling wave. She felt like a walnut was lodged in her throat, and no amount of swallowing could clear it. By the gods who were left behind, the sign was still wet. It had been drawn in blood.

Mala knew she should run, knew she should hide herself somewhere, anywhere, in the city, but she couldn't. She had to know, because if the Crone had done what Mala thought she had, she wouldn't stop there. She would do it to Mala. She would do it to Memma and Jein as well.

She stepped onto the warped wooden porch. She pushed the door open, careful to touch neither the red sign nor the splatters of blood on the door's dry, crumbling surface. Inside the room lay tipped-over tables and furniture left askew.

And blood. Swaths of it. Great, terrible smears of it. In the center of the room, three trails of crimson converged into a river, which led to the back room, the home's simple kitchen.

Lips quivering, hands balled at her sides, Mala approached. And found them. Arük, Kasha, Rennek,

and Arük's wizened old grandfather splayed out on the floor in a grotesque display of twisted limbs, torn flesh, and dark innards.

Tears fell from Mala's eyes. Streamed along her cheeks. She heard them patter against the floor, the only sound in the entire city, the entire world.

Until she heard the creak of the floorboards.

Her entire body spasming with fear, she turned to find a figure bathed in shadow at the end of the hall. As Mala watched, the Crone's bent form with her panoply of jewelry resolved from the darkness. "You're not the only one who can wrap yourself in shadow, child."

Mala tried to run. She truly did. But the Crone was already streaking down the hall like a dark revenant. Eyes wide with glee, mouth spread in a toothy leer, the Crone fell upon her.

\* \* \*

Shohreh pushed her akhala hard into the city, skirting the growing sounds of battle, wending her way ever closer to the Shallows. She came at last to the street where she'd found Mala, and the place the leader of their pitiful flock called home. It was nearer than Mala's own home and the more likely for her to go to first, so Shohreh had decided to visit it.

The moment she saw the Crone's bloody sign on the door, she knew that whoever lay inside was dead. The leader of Mala's flock of gutter wrens, surely. Likely some of the other wrens as well. Perhaps the grandfather he lived with too.

Her footsteps heavy, Shohreh prayed she'd been wrong, that Mala had gone to her home first, and that it would take time for the Crone to find.

Nevertheless, she stole through the front door. Saw the blood. Saw her hopes dashed. For there, in the sort of twisted display the Crone was infamous for, lay five bodies, Mala's among them. She cried in that small room in the city's poorest quarter. She knelt and lifted Mala to her chest as a bright, burning fury raged inside

her. She was furious with herself. Furious with the fates and their cruel ways. Most of all, though, she was furious with the Crone, the woman she'd sworn to protect and obey.

"But one does not owe fealty to the wicked," Shohreh said into the stillness. "Isn't that what the Al'Ambra says?"

She'd given her life to the cause—to protect the Kings and the city above all—and the Crone had twisted it with her perversions, her taste for blood, her thirst for power. No longer. Sharakhai was changing for good or ill. Perhaps it was time for the order of the Kestrels to change as well.

Gazing down into Mala's lifeless eyes, Shohreh wondered if she was ready to go through with this. Yes, came a voice inside her. *The time for change has come.*

Hoisting Mala's body over her shoulder, Shohreh carried her to her waiting horse, laid her carefully over the saddle, then mounted and rode west.

\* \* \*

A thousand and one visions warred within Mala's mind. Visions of running the streets, of stealing food, of fetching water for a bit of copper, of slitting the purses of strangers and taking out a handful of coins, or cutting a larger hole and sprinting away so that her friends, other gutter wrens, could snatch the coins up when her mark chased after her.

She saw her mother at the first onset of Bakhi's curse. She saw the worry in her eyes, worry over so much more than the pain about to befall her. Memma knew, as did Mala, that their very existence in Sharakhai would be threatened if she wasn't able to bring home the money her work at the carpetmaker's earned.

She saw her sister fetching water from a well, then slipping in because she was trying to reach for the bucket too early. Long terror-filled moments had

passed before the local cobbler came running from his shop and helped pull Jein from the well. Her skin was marred by cuts and scrapes suffered during her fall, but she was so happy to be out she laughed nervously, as if it had been her fault she'd fallen in and not Mala's. Mala received a beating that night from Memma, but she didn't care. Jein was safe. That was all that mattered.

A hundred more memories flitted through her mind, but they were slowly replaced by the feeling of weight on her chest, the sensation of immobility. Something was pressing down on her, but what?

She realized she couldn't breathe. She panicked. She fought.

And through her struggles found that whatever was holding her in place was not completely rigid. It gave as she moved. She felt some of the weight being lifted. A hand grasped hers. She was pulled up until the sand—she'd been buried in sand—fell away and she opened her eyes to the sight of the circular room beneath the city, the one with the high ceiling and stone columns and the frieze rendered in a band at the top of the curving walls.

Shohreh was there, kneeling beside the pit, but Mala's mind was so lost in the visions she couldn't say a word. The memories refused to banish themselves, a thousand faces talking to her all at once.

"The madness will pass soon," Shohreh said, helping Mala to her feet.

Mala stared down at her body. She turned her hands over. Stared at her palms. She flexed her fingers, wiggled her toes. "I'm alive."

"You are," Shohreh said with a smile.

"But the Crone. I saw her coming for me... She ... she... killed me." She took in the room anew, saw the girls standing near the tunnel that would lead them toward the map room. "You brought me back to life."

"I did," Shohreh said, then tugged on Mala's arm until she stepped out of the grave. She ran her hands down Mala's naked body, brushing the sand from her in sheets. Her tangled hair took the longest. Mala wanted to be done with it, but Shohreh was diligent. "This is a precious resource," she said, though Mala didn't really understand what she meant by it.

When they were done at last, Shohreh waved to a rack, where fresh clothes had been laid out. Sirwal trousers. A simple shirt of coarse, tan cloth. Leather sandals. They were not so different from what many children wore in the west end, including Mala, but were made of much finer materials. When Mala was dressed, Shohreh led her from the room, but said to the watching girls in passing, "Clean it carefully, as you always have."

They moved to obey, save one, who stared at Shohreh, then Mala, beneath softly but deeply furrowed brows.

"You'll do as I've asked, Sülten," Shohreh said, then pinched the girl's ear and tugged hard until she began moving, albeit reluctantly, toward the pit.

Shohreh and Mala retreated to the map room, the one with the complex, topographical map of the city. A fire flickered in the hearth, which Mala went to immediately to chase away the chills. "You saved me," Mala said to Shohreh, making sure to face her as she spoke. "Why?"

"I told you, a life was owed."

"No," Mala said. "There's more to it than that."

Shohreh considered for a time, the firelight playing across her strong chin, her broad cheeks. "Because it wasn't right, what the Crone did to you. But it isn't over yet, child." She pointed to large map of the city, toward the Shallows. "She's still out there. She's looking for your family." Shohreh always seemed like such a powerful woman, but just then she seemed small,

unsure of herself. "I'm going to stop her, Mala. Do you wish to help?"

Mala knew exactly what Shohreh meant to do, not the details, of course, but she knew what the result would be. If Shohreh had her way, the Crone would die.

"Yes, I'll help," Mala said resolutely.

"It won't be easy."

"I know."

Shohreh considered her a while, then nodded. "Then come with me."

She turned away, but Mala tugged on her sleeve so she could see Mala's words. "I need something first. A weapon."

"That's not what I need you for, Mala."

"No," she said firmly. "I need this. Take me to Arük's."

Shohreh paused, considering, then nodded. Was there a bit of pride in her look? She led Mala through the tunnels, back to the streets of the western quarter. Once there, they made their way to the Shallows and the sight of the massacre. Mala stepped beyond the door with the red claw upon it and into the sitting room. In the small kitchen, she made her way to Arük, heedless of the blood she was stepping over, and took the jambiya from his belt. It felt heavy in her hands, but also good. Arük had never been very nice to her, but he'd saved her from some pretty bad scrapes too. And he hadn't deserved this. None of them had.

Stuffing the knife into her belt, she turned to Shohreh. "I'm ready."

\* \* \*

It had taken time, but eventually the Crone found the home of the girl's mother and sister. She'd given this next step due consideration. Questions might be asked. The young one, Jein, was in fact the daughter of King Mesut, may he find peace in the farther fields. But in the end what matter was that? Mesut was gone

and his family would care little for a bastard child from the Shallows.

Dusk had arrived. The snaking alley leading to Mala's home dripped with shadow. Knowing the time was upon her, the Crone put her thumb and forefinger to her lips and whistled in the manner of the Blade Maidens. All scattered.

Alone with her dark thoughts, she drew the shadows in around her and stole toward the door. She reached it and paused, flexing her fingers several times, digging her claws into the palms of her hands while the anticipation built inside her. As she reached out for the handle, a voice called from behind her.

"Stop!"

The Crone turned, knowing who she'd find. Shohreh stood ten paces away, dressed in her red battle dress, her ebon blade held easily in one hand.

"Well, well," the Crone said. "Here you are, fresh from another failure, I presume."

"No failure," Shohreh said as she stepped closer. "I found the King. I saved him from Nadiin. *Mala* saved him."

She let the words linger between them, the implications clear.

"A cancer runs rampant in the House of Kings," Shohreh continued, taking another step over the packed earth, "a cancer that has been growing for centuries, eating its flesh, only now becoming apparent as the Kings' children backstab one another while vying for their fathers' thrones."

The Crone chuckled. "You think you *know* me, girl? You don't. You know less than nothing."

"I know enough. You're a woman who came to see your own father as an impediment. You conspired against him with his son, Temel. You sent Nadiin to kill him. The only thing I couldn't figure out is why you sent *me* to try to save him."

The Crone said nothing. Shohreh could flap that mouth of hers all she wished. The Crone preferred to bide her time, to tug on the shadows and make them ready.

“The only thing that makes sense is that you were undone by Zeheb’s whispers. He heard you plotting with Temel, didn’t he? He found you out and whispered it aloud, knowing those words would be recorded and read by both you and Anann. He raised the alarm, and when that happened, you couldn’t be seen as indifferent. And then *I* showed up, standing on death’s doorstep. You saw it as an opportunity. With the other Kestrels supposedly gone from the city, you sent the only resource you had, me. But I was freshly risen from the grave. You *wanted* me to fail. You were counting on it. But if things didn’t go as planned, if you and Temel failed to kill your father, you could point to me and say *you’d* been the one to save him.”

“Very clever, girl.”

“I’m no girl, and your reign ends here.”

Shohreh stepped forward warily, lifting her sword as she came. But the Crone was no stranger to battle. And she had more powers than even Shohreh knew about.

She drew the shadows about her, sent them hovering around Shohreh’s head and eyes, blinding her. Shohreh immediately retreated, knowing that to remain would make her vulnerable to the Crone’s wicked claws.

The Crone followed, wary of the wild swipes from Shohreh’s blade. She was patient and needed only the smallest of openings. When it presented itself, as she knew it would, she lunged and clawed Shohreh’s armor, ripping leather and skin alike, cutting all the way to bone.

Shohreh grunted against the pain. She rolled away, retreating farther, rolling back when the Crone struck with another powerful swipe of her claws.

And then she fell. And the Crone swung, a blurring, vicious blow against Shohreh's sword arm. Shohreh's blade went flying.

The Crone cackled. She was about to deliver the killing blow, but paused when she heard footfalls behind her, heard a scream. She tried to pull the shadows in around her but found them strangely resistant. Then they suddenly and inexplicably vanished, and the soft light of the coral sunset returned to that crooked, west-end alley.

The footfalls became a girl with a knife sprinting with abandon toward her. By the gods, it was Mala, the very girl she'd killed only hours ago.

The Crone raised her hand to strike the girl down, but her wrist was caught from behind—Shohreh, the gods damn her. Fearing Shohreh's blade, she dared one glance behind and felt a burning pain in her abdomen. She turned to find the girl twisting a knife, a curving jambiya, deep into her gut.

The Crone hardly moved at all when the girl pulled the knife free. Mala stabbed again, this time between her ribs. She fell to one knee as Mala freed the blood-slicked blade. When she brought the knife down again, it pierced the Crone's neck.

She collapsed to the ground. Blood flowed, hot against her skin. Staring at the brilliant clouds above, she understood. The girl had been reborn. Shohreh had taken her to the Sepulchre. She nearly laughed at the grand irony of it all. All her dreams, undone by a useless little wren, one of her victims returning to kill her in the manner *she* had killed so many others.

She tried to speak, to ask Shohreh what she hoped to do now, but her body failed her.

And then her world went dark.

\* \* \*

Shohreh watched as Mala knelt and gave herself over to rage, using the knife to stab the Crone's unmoving form over and over again. Shohreh let it go on for a

time—the girl needed to vent some of it lest it fester inside her—but then it became too much. There was a point at which catharsis became something else, something that would one day eat at her soul.

“Enough!” Shohreh said, pulling Mala back. “Enough!”

Mala stood there, breathing heavily, the bloody jambiya gripped tightly in her right hand.

The one saving grace was that Mala, freshly risen from the Sepulchre’s grave, wouldn’t be thinking clearly just yet. Often the hours and days before and after one’s death became hazy over time. Shohreh hoped it would be so for the girl; she didn’t deserve to have such memories haunting her forever.

Eventually Mala went still, then turned her eyes on the door to her home, a festive door with childish scribblings rendered in bright purple and yellow paint. “*What now?*” she said.

“That’s up to you.” Shohreh waved to the door. “You can go on about your life, live it as you please.”

“*But the other Kestrels might come after me.*” She stared at the Crone’s still form. “*Surely they will after what I’ve done.*”

“I’ll do my best to ensure they don’t.”

“*And the other choice?*”

“Join me. Join the sisterhood. Become a Kestrel yourself.”

Mala stared at her as if she were mad. “*They wouldn’t take me. I’m no daughter of a King.*” She waved again at the cooling corpse. “*I killed their leader!*”

“Many of the Kestrels are dead. So is the Crone.” Shohreh pointed east toward Tauriyat, where a strange glow was emanating. “The rule of this city is about to change drastically, and unless I’m wrong, *we’ll* have a say in it. You and I and the others, the acolytes who will one day become Kestrels themselves. We have a chance to forge the path Sharakhai will take.”

Mala paused. *“Who will lead us?”*

“I will.” She shrugged glancing toward the glow in the east. “Beyond that, I cannot say. Not yet.”

*“And my family?”*

“The families of Kestrels are well cared for. Yours will be as well.”

Mala stood there for a long while in the gathering darkness. Then at last, she nodded. *“Where do we begin?”*

Shohreh smiled. “You begin by going to see your family.” She reached into her purse and took out a handful of golden rahl. “Get them food. Get them medicine ... and *not* the fake medallions they sell in Bakhi’s temple. Get your mother to a proper physic. Understand?”

Mala nodded.

“I’ll find you, little one.” And with that Shohreh turned and began walking away.

A moment later she felt a tug on her arm. She turned to find Mala standing there, looking shy. Then she was rushing forward and wrapping her arms around Shohreh waist, enveloping her in a fierce hug. Shohreh had become a stranger to touch. She’d forgotten how good it felt. Slowly, as the walls of her discomfort began to crack, she gave in to the feeling and squeezed Mala back.

*“Thank you,”* Mala said when she broke away. Then turned and went into her home.

Long after the door had closed, Shohreh stood there, wishing she could hear their reunion.

Then she smiled and lost herself in the streets of Sharakhai. **[GdM]**

**Bradley P. Beaulieu** is the author of *Twelve Kings in Sharakhai*, a sweeping, Arabian Nights-style tale about a young woman who rises up to challenge the cruel kings of the desert. Brad's novels have garnered many accolades, including two Hotties—the Debut of the Year and Best New Voice—on Pat's Fantasy Hotlist, a Gemmell Morningstar Award nomination for *The Winds of Khalakovo*, and over twenty “Best Books of the Year” for *Twelve Kings in Sharakhai*. For more, please visit [www.quillings.com](http://www.quillings.com).

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