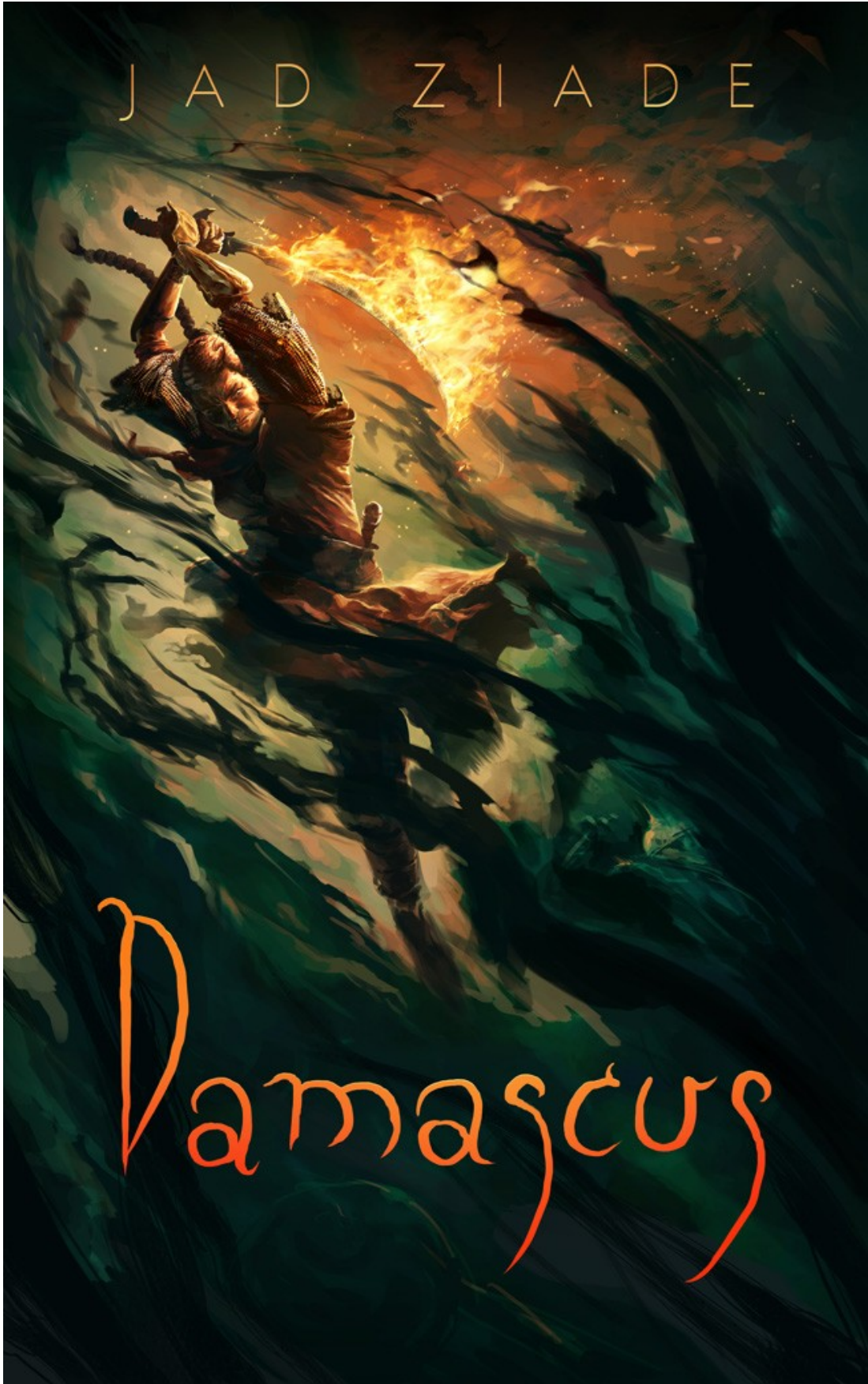


J A D Z I A D E

Damascus



DAMASCUS

Book One of The Syrian Revolution

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Part One: The Ruse

Before the revolutions began, the city of Damascus was ruled by a king. The city was the heart of the kingdom and it was home to wealth and power and culture. It was older than Jericho or Jubayl and the people of the world knew it as the City of Jasmine. The king of the city was proud of his domain and he was also proud of his reign, and so, shortly after his ascension, he issued a decree—one that might have become tradition among kings had the people not brought the monarchy down—he changed his name, officially, to King Dimashq, taking after the name of the city. Official documentation was signed and the deed was done.

This act was celebrated by many—by the Royal Guard, by the king's retainers, by the noble houses and the merchants risen to power, by the provincial aristocracy in the city on vacation, and by all others of affluence and influence. The celebrations lasted from morning to night and when they came to an end, the Damascene nobles convened and inaugurated that particular day to be King's Day. This pleased King Dimashq greatly, for he loved to be loved, and he prized opportunities to show his people how well he worked with his fellow ministers and how much he respected the wisdom of elder statesmen. Henceforth, he swore King's Day would be a grand holiday—one which would bring every citizen peace and tranquility.

It became tradition, then, that every year, upon the approach of that day, he personally oversaw much of the preparation for the festivities and entertainments planned. He chose the food and libations. He chose the desserts. He was the one who drove the knife into the neck of the first beast slaughtered for the feast. And so, in the year in which our tale begins, the king awoke early on King's Day and lay for a moment, breathing gently beneath the soft blankets of his bed, curling his whiskers and rubbing his rotund belly. His queen was next to him, still asleep. He felt no need to wake her, so he slid slowly out, felt upon the rug for his slippers, and left the bedchamber quickly, eager for his breakfast meal.

The king skipped and hopped down the palace stairs, skimming the stone walls with his fingers. Servants passed him, long-awake and busy with their preparations for the holiday. He ignored them, and reaching the palace garden, he removed his slippers and walked barefoot on the wet grass. As he expected, he found his breakfast waiting on a glass table in the shade. Spread out were several small plates of olives, sliced tomatoes, jam, dried mint, flatbread, and labneh. Next to the plates was a bottle of olive oil and a pot of hot tea.

Two servants stood behind the king's waiting chair, and there was already a man sitting at the table eating. He was Ibn Khaldun and he was the king's wazir. When he saw King Dimashq approach, he swallowed his food, stood, and bowed. The wazir was a tall man and his long, straight hair cascaded over his shoulders. “Good morning, my king.”

King Dimashq waved casually and bade the man to sit back down. Ibn Khaldun sat, and the king took the empty chair beside him. He sighed and took a moment to survey the food on the table. Ibn Khaldun resumed his meal immediately, and while the king pondered, a servant stepped from behind and poured a cup of tea. King Dimashq sipped the dark, sweet brew and began breakfast with a dollop of labneh.

“This will be a fine, beautiful day,” he said.

“It will,” replied the wazir. “And this is an important day as well. For the diplomats from Amreeka are expected to arrive before the morning is done.”

“I know,” said the king, chewing a piece of bread, “but tell me something.”

“Yes, my king?”

The lord of Damascus smirked. “Do you imagine they planned for their arrival to coincide with my day?”

Ibn Khaldun shrugged. “My king, I doubt they are aware that King's Day exists.”

The king chuckled and grabbed a fork. “You are probably right, my wazir.” He skewered a small

tomato and inspected the parted skin where the fork had pierced it. "You are a man of consistency. Your character is true; your honesty is unwavering; and your words remind me of your virtues."

Ibn Khaldun bowed his head. "I apologize, my king."

"No. Not at all." The king waved again in his casual way and for a few minutes the two ate in silence. Ibn Khaldun wrapped his food in the flatbread and ate it as a sandwich. The king ate copiously, sampling a little bit of everything. Then he set a half-eaten tomato back on his plate and lifted his cup for one of his servants to fill. "Peasant food," he mumbled. He sipped to check the tea's temperature, and satisfied, he dismissed both of his attendants. When he heard their steps on the pavement, he turned to Ibn Khaldun. "What of the other matter?"

The wazir signaled to where the servants had left. "Do you suspect them? Are they spies?"

"Why wouldn't they be?" the king replied. "They're servants. Their only ambition is gold and their only path to such ambition is treachery, but they are gone now, so what of it?"

Ibn Khaldun nodded. "The other matter will be arriving on your holiday as well, much later in the night. The Circle is handling that tender duty. They've hired mercenaries through channels even I wouldn't be able to follow."

"Good," said the king, rubbing his belly. "The Amreekan diplomats must remain ignorant of the situation. They seek to embarrass me and I don't wish to explain myself or this hocus pocus." He nodded to his wazir as a hummingbird caught his eye. It flew past the two and hovered by jasmine petals not far away. Its wings faintly buzzed. The king sighed and stretched his arms upward, as if to catch it, but it flew away. "I'm going for a walk," he said. "I wish to see which decorations they've chosen for the dining hall. The servants await my approval."

"One moment, my king."

The wazir reached into a satchel by his chair and pulled free a length of paper rolled into a scroll and tied with a bow. "Your speech for tonight is ready, if you'd like to read it over."

"Yes, of course," said King Dimashq, taking the scroll.

Ibn Khaldun stood and bowed. "We must also reconvene after my morning appointments. There will be matters to discuss when my ministers have given me the first briefs."

The king patted his leg with the scroll. "I shall read the speech and return to see what matters of state require us both."

"Thank you, my king," said Ibn Khaldun, bowing again.

"Until then." The king smiled and walked away.

~

Ibn Khaldun sat a while longer in the garden. He breathed the scented air and tapped his finger against one of the breakfast plates where an ant had found its way to the labneh. The wazir watched the tiny insect moving in circles. He knew his secretary would already be waiting for him back in the royal court, ready with a list of appointments, acknowledgments awaiting signature, complaints, punishments, and other duties. Afterward, the Amreekans would have to be met and tended to. And after that, the wazir would be expected to make more than a brief showing at the King's Day festival, and he would be expected to have a speech of his own. So he gave himself a moment to stare at the ant, now bringing company, and he sipped his tea. Then he gazed at the white clouds and stood to walk the king's route back to the palace.

~

At mid-morning the diplomats from Amreeka arrived at the gates of Damascus. They rode in a large carriage pulled by many horses. It was ornate, made of strong, thick wood, and the iron emblem of the Amreekan empire was clasped onto both sides and at the front and rear. The emblem showed a

valiant eagle with its wings spread full in flight. In the bird's left talon were thirteen arrows, in its right was an olive branch, and it clutched in its beak a scroll that read, "Out of many, one." Beneath the bird was a shield of red and white stripes.

The soldiers who drove the carriage were Imperial Legionaries wearing platemail that shined in the sunlight and heavy swords at their sides. Behind them followed a smaller carriage, carrying supplies and private possessions. The whole of the caravan was surrounded by a small troop of Legionaries on horseback. They had arrived in the port city of Beirut two days before, having sailed the Mediterranean on a large warship, and when they docked they took to the road, which they found rough and bumpy, even more wrenching than the rocking waves of the sea.

Sir Henry was the elder of the two diplomats. He was an accomplished and known dignitary who had previously served in Damascus. He wore a gray beard, neatly trimmed. His cheeks were ruddy and his eyes slightly glazed. He filled his brown tweed suit well and his matching patent-leather shoes shined with polish. The younger diplomat was his protégé, a man named Tim. He had a clean, boyish face and a loose shirt frilled at the sleeves. He appeared prone to sullenness, but smiled easily.

The two were good friends. They spent the trip together, laughing, posturing, and drinking wine and brandy. The time had been slow, but they made the best of it with jokes and old stories. A third man accompanied them. He was tucked in the back. His name was Alexander, and he was their scribe and assistant. Mostly, he kept quiet.

As they reached Orchard Gate and felt the carriage slow down, Tim leaned to the closest window and pulled aside the red curtain. He put his nose to the glass and peeked out. The city gate was packed. Through the rising dust he saw sweaty flesh, humble threads, and cowering faces. Peasants, merchants of lower birth, farmers, mill workers, and dogs yelping and chasing children. Royal Guard were spread about the crowd. Some guards inspected cargo and manifests; some interrogated peasants wishing to enter the city; others roamed the crowd with batons in their hand, prodding people along.

An old fisherman by Tim's window approached one of the Royal Guard. His back was bent and he carried in his arms a sack filled with fish of differing colors: red, white, blue, and yellow. He frothed and yelled at the guard and pointed frantically from his bag of fish to the high towers of Palace Dimashq. Tim could not hear the fisherman's words, but he saw on the guard's face only contempt and annoyance. The fisherman continued to yell, and finally the guard grew impatient and pushed the man away. When the fisherman approached again, the guard pulled free his baton and struck the man at the brow. The fisherman fell back in a daze and dropped his bag. His slick, colorful fish spilled out onto the dirt. Many came forward to help him back to his feet and to gather up his fish caked in grit. When he was back on his feet, he glared at the guard, then walked quickly away from Orchard Gate, cursing the man loudly as blood streamed from his forehead.

Then that same guard noticed the imperial caravan. He yelled and signaled to his fellows, and with surprising speed they herded the shuffling crowd away from the gate. There was much complaint and much resentment, but the diplomats were given speedy passage. Timothy's gaze stayed at the window as the carriage moved on, and he eyed the laborers who watched them pass.

"Is this your first time watching Arabs?" asked Sir Henry.

Timothy turned from the window and let the curtain fall back. "Second," he said. "My first time was in Beirut. I saw them from the boat."

Henry looked down and swirled the snifter in his hand. The amber spirit coated the sides of the glass, and he stuck his nose in and inhaled.

"I don't think that's necessary with brandy," said Tim.

The elder diplomat tipped the snifter to his lips. "Your education begins."

Tim laughed and raised his own snifter to meet Henry in a toast. Behind them, Alexander scribbled. In his hand was a dip pen and on his knees rested a thin piece of wood with two piles of paper on it. His inkwell sat on the wood as well, resting in a notch. The scribe paused from his writing, dipping his pen, and taking a moment to glance up at the two men. Sir Henry insisted

Alexander scribe all conversations the man engaged in, for soon Henry would retire from politics, and he looked forward to the writing of his memoirs.

When Timothy spoke, Alexander was ready. "My wife saw one once, back home."

"Saw what?" asked Henry.

"An Arab. Walking down St. Joseph's Avenue. She stood on the sidewalk and he stared at her as he passed her by. She told me the experience frightened her immensely."

Henry chuckled. "She told you that, did she?"

"Yes," said Tim. "When she saw his dark eyes, she saw within him an evil spirit filled with menace. He looked her over from top to bottom and he wanted her—or at least wanted to rob her."

"Well," said Henry, straightening himself in his chair, "I hope no harm came to your wife."

"No, Sir Henry. None did. She is a very brave and clever woman."

Henry nodded, and when he finished the brandy in his glass, he reached down to the wooden chest that sat on the floor of the carriage. It was his private stash, he had told Tim. He opened the chest's lid and fumbled beneath it, pulling free a very small flask. "This might be it," he said. Tim shrugged and Henry tucked his glass between his knees. He opened the flask and emptied it into the snifter and gulped. "We have to be the same way. Same as your wife. Always careful, always clever. More clever than any of them," he said, indicating the peasants outside, "for they are wily and can't be trusted."

Tim nodded and they sipped from their drinks. "Sir Henry?" he said.

"Yes?"

"You've been ambassador to Damascus for ten years now."

"Yes," said Henry. "Ten years on and off. Not the length of my life, but I've learned my way."

"Tell me of these people," said Tim.

"The Arabs?" Henry paused for a moment. He drank, and as he swallowed, he tilted his head back and pursed his lips. "Their hearts are as dark as the desert night. Their skin is as the mud of the oasis. They have foul breath. And they are as hairy as apes." He chuckled as he said this, as though sharing a private joke with himself.

Tim cocked his brow and puffed up his chest as if to argue, but Henry raised his hand and the younger diplomat settled down into his chair without a word. Henry continued. "They are easily angered. Very easily. You will learn this. They enjoy pain over happiness and they value revenge so highly that once their eyes are set upon you, they are fixed for life. What can be done for such a people?"

"Well—"

"Nothing can be done," Henry interrupted, answering himself. "Luckily for us they are just as greedy as they are dim. The procurement of their resources has been a speedy endeavor."

"We've only just entered the city," said Tim, "and you've already told us the whole story." He turned back to wink at Alexander, but the scribe ignored him.

"What else is there to say?" asked Henry.

"It is taught that the Arabs are degenerated. They are in intellectual decline. They're stuck in the medieval past and they fear the modern world."

"Perhaps true," said Henry, "but where have I heard these fancy words before?"

"At Arkham, most likely," said Tim, drinking. "That's where you studied, no?"

"That is where I studied."

Tim coughed. "Our duty, then, is to remind the Arab of the humanity he has forgotten, to help him put aside his outdated, barbaric traditions and embrace the progress humankind has made." He nodded. "This is our burden."

"Perhaps," said the older diplomat, turning to his window. "Is this the whole as you see it?"

"What else would you add?" asked Tim.

"I couldn't tell you. You might be right."

Henry paused as if to speak more and Tim waited, but no more words came. Tim tapped his knuckles against the glass. “Do you think these people will rise against us?”

The old diplomat chuckled. “They are rising already. But you need not be frightened keeping watch of those peasants outside. The Imperial Legion guards every well in this land.” He swirled his glass. “That is what I'll drink to.” But as he raised his snifter to his lips, the carriage hit a small bump in the road and he had to quickly level the glass so it wouldn't spill over. “Yes,” he said, glancing at Tim with a measure of pride, “barbarism and the modern world aside—if there is one language the Arab understands, it is the language of force.”

The caravan continued through the city and when the Amreekan diplomats reached the palace they were greeted by King Dimashq. Ibn Khaldun had guessed correctly: they knew nothing of King's Day and of the festival to be held. The king forgave them, however, and they were able to enjoy the day's entertainments with many of the king's audience. That night they dined in the palace and took pleasure in conversation with the many nobles and high merchants.

~

The events and competitions of the day were many and varied. The swimming pool was filled with warm water and guests swam and played polo while cocktails were prepared by smiling servants. Inside, the billiards room rang with exclamations of victory and joy as the young sons of the aristocracy gambled gold coin on the colorful ivory balls racing over the green felt. The boys were thrilled when the three Amreekans joined them. And in the gardens, tables were placed and chessboards set on them. Many guests played, but no victor dared declare the king dead. Such was the respect for King's Day.

Yet the greatest entertainment was in the king's theater. King Dimashq had directly advised much of the style and presentation for the production. His ambition was high—to fill the whole day with the old stories of Shahrazad. Set design had begun months before and every actor had been interviewed personally by the king. They were skilled and they were beautiful, and the king much desired to see them in the story of the Porter and the Three Ladies. And when it began, and he watched the smashing bull grazing in the basil of the bridges, eating the husked sesame, and galloping in the Inn of Abu Masrur, he felt both pride and shame. But he laughed and hailed the production's success. Thus the king spent most of his time in the theater, leaving only for meals and to walk the garden, smiling and reminding his guests whom the festival was for.

When night came, the king was satisfied. None of his guests wanted for anything. He gathered them by the pool and delivered the speech he had prepared and tucked in his robe. It lasted for ten minutes. There was much applause when he finished, and afterward, many of his guests succumbed to their drowsy eyes and bloated bellies. Some left and were bid farewell, and some stayed and were given quarters. Servants were sent to fetch them tea. These guests sat in their beds and watched out of their windows as hundreds of fireworks flashed red, green, and yellow in the sky. It was the signal that King's Day was over.

~

Many others in Damascus knew as well when the celebration ended. If they hadn't been awake when the fireworks were lit, they were awake after. Some watched bored; others with glee or frustration. Others hid from the light. A lucky few slept right through everything.

In a brothel, deep in Old City, this was not the case. Light and noise came through an open, upstairs window, and the room glowed. Several candles were spread about, lit and melting. Their flames flickered on the dirty walls and cabinets. Shadows played against the light.

A large bed against the far wall was situated to face customers as they entered. To one side of the bed was a table with a bottle of wine and two goblets. To the other side was a closet, double-doored

and slightly ajar. The whore could not be seen. Instead, there was a thin man sitting on her bed with his feet bare and legs crossed. His name was Ghazi. He was the thrice-cursed thief of Baghdad, cheater of the noose. He sat in plain, black clothing with his sleeves rolled up and his eyes closed in difficult concentration. His face was of a man harried, aged beyond his years. His hair was black and gray, cropped close to the scalp and the hair on his arms was thick and furry. He rubbed his temples and his face relaxed a bit. He scratched at the skin of his throat, at the old scar as thick as a collar. His fingers worked back and forth, stretching and pinching the rough skin, and he exhaled slowly, cocking his head upward. "The mercenary returns," he whispered.

The shadows tensed then. A heavy, low rumble emerged slowly from behind Ghazi. It sounded of dust and cold earth and of anger. It hummed and echoed through the room and in Ghazi's skull. He always heard that sound, that grumble of death, the arrival of an old friend.

By the side of the bed a statue of stone emerged, gray in color. It cast a still shadow. The statue's frozen visage smiled widely with pointed teeth, and upon its brow protruded two curved horns. It wore a long beard, curled in the style of the Sumerian kings, and on its shoulders was a cloak of lion's fur. It carried a spear. Its name was Gilgamesh.

"The mercenary returns," Ghazi said again.

"From where does he approach?" said the statue, his voice a low growl.

"Tuma Gate. This room is now his destination."

"You deflected him from the palace."

"Yes, as I said I would."

"Then this ploy will end in trouble, with you once again a fool."

A small grin curled at the edges of Ghazi's lips. "Every year you become more predictable."

The stone ghost did not respond.

"No," said Ghazi. "I sent my whispers on the wind and he answered directly. I bid him come and his needs drove him here. He is no longer warded by the Circle's magic. This is what we in the business call opportunity."

"And his companions?" asked Gilgamesh. "Are they gone? Have you fortune in that?"

Ghazi stretched his arms. "Not gone. Dead."

Gilgamesh growled. "How?"

"Wait one moment." Ghazi closed his eyes and rubbed his temples again. His brow furled. He went deep into concentration and the statue was silent. After a breath, Ghazi lowered his hands and opened his eyes. "His thoughts come quickly. They tell me a tale."

"What do you hear?"

"This," Ghazi replied. "He and his men were ambushed outside of the city. Marxists attacked them. It was a quick battle. All the others were killed, but he escaped. He fled, heading for the palace, but before he reached the walls, my spell pulled him away. The poor boy thinks only of women. He is alone and powerless." Ghazi looked up at the statue. "We have more than some fortune, Gilgamesh. He still carries the treasure."

"Then end this," said the statue. "He does not carry joy or wealth. He carries only danger. For your own safety, you must end this game."

"I intend to," said Ghazi, nodding lazily to the door across the room. "He climbs the stairs as we speak."

"But you said he crossed Tuma Gate."

"He did, a while ago."

Gilgamesh thumped the butt of his spear against the wooden floor. "You are both the puppeteer and the fool."

"Enough, mother. He arrives."

Ghazi covered his face with his hands and whispered words of power. The stone creature shook as magical energies gathered. The candles dimmed and the room turned musky. The shadows on the

walls danced slowly to Ghazi's incantation.

The door handle turned.

“Finish the glamour!” said Gilgamesh. “Quickly!”

~

The door did not creak when the mercenary stepped into the candlelight. The man was large and muscular, with brooding eyes. He wore chainmail armor and a dagger was sheathed at his waist. There was a package under his arm. It was wrapped in thick furs, the size and shape of a small barrel. It was obviously heavy, but the man walked with urgency.

A shadow peeled itself from the wall behind him as he entered. Quietly, it pushed against the door and closed it. The handle made a click when it fell into place, but the mercenary did not notice. His attention was on the bed. There was a young woman there. She was beautiful and she was waiting for him. She wore a thin gown that ran down to her thighs, and her breasts were nearly bare beneath the transparent cloth. Pillows were stacked behind her and the bedsheets were on the floor. She smiled coyly, glancing once at the closet door, and then fixed her gaze on the warrior who approached.

His brow was beaded with sweat and his blood was on fire.

Behind him, chaos followed. More tendrils of shadow pulled free from every surface in the room. They mingled with each other, and when the young woman leaned forward and beckoned the man closer, the darkness shuddered and stretched as though in response.

In his haste, the warrior nearly tripped against the bed frame. Remembering the bundle beneath his arm, he bent forward and set it down. His nose approached the woman's bare legs and caught the scent of her musky perfume. It caused him to linger.

She leaned closer and whispered in his ear. “Come,” she said.

But the sound of her voice was like gravel. His shoulders tensed, and he straightened himself.

“Does wine suit you?” she asked, reaching for the bottle.

“Your voice is harsh,” he said. “It sours my appetite.”

She pulled back. “My pardon, good warrior. I will whisper.”

“No.” He unclasped the bracers from his forearms and let them fall, then pulled the chainmail over his head. “I paid good coin for you. Don't speak.” But seeing her eyes and her red cheeks, he became embarrassed and spoke the only apology that came to mind. “Well, you are pretty,” he told her. “That is good.”

He waited.

Grabbing his arms, she lifted herself, and she put her hands on his shoulders. She beckoned him to be silent. Their lips met and they kissed.

Her tongue was sweet and her scent was soothing. She massaged his shoulders and groped his chest. The fatigue in his limbs was gone, and it was as though the flight to this brothel had never happened. When he touched the small of her back, he wanted to lay with her. He wanted to disappear. He wanted to fall asleep with her warm body against him. His hands reached down for her rear, and he kissed her a second time, more forcefully. He groped her breasts and she groaned. He licked her neck and pulled her closer to him. She whispered for him to close his eyes, and when he did, she wrapped her arms around him.

But then, a voice screamed from within. He ignored it, but it hammered against his temples with an animal panic. It demanded he open his eyes and witness what held him. It pleaded that she who touched his skin was not human. It screamed again, and it told him to scream.

When he felt something cold slither up his back, he tried. His eyes shot wide open, but all that came from his lips was a muffled cough. Something was covering his mouth, holding tightly to his face. He pushed away the warm body pressed against his chest. The young woman was gone. There was only a man with a scar around his throat.

“Now,” said Ghazi, already chuckling.

The shadow tendrils tightened around the warrior's limbs. They held his mouth shut and squeezed his chest and bound his struggling arms. Ghazi knelt upon the mattress and met the warrior's frightened eyes. He laughed. “You made this easy,” he said. “See how easy?” he asked, eyeing Gilgamesh.

The statue remained silent.

Ghazi turned back to the struggling mercenary. “Stay still,” he said, reaching for the man's dagger. But the mercenary's eyes followed Ghazi's hand and they filled with rage. His cheeks puffed, straining against the shadow bonds.

“What's that?” asked Ghazi. “Do you no longer find me beautiful?” A mocking smile crossed his face and he laughed again, slapping both his knees and leaning forward. Tears welled at his eyes and his laughter became hysterical.

The mercenary's arm tore free from the shadows. Ghazi flinched back, but the mercenary was too fast. He grabbed the thief by the throat and squeezed his fingers around Ghazi's scar.

Ghazi gasped. He grabbed the mercenary's wrist and tried pulling away, but the man's grip was like steel. There was no escape. He tried clawing the mercenary's face, sinking his nails into the man's cheeks and pulling downward, slowly. The attack drew blood, but the mercenary did not relent.

Ghazi felt weak. His lungs struggled for air as burning needles pierced his brow. He struck the man twice in the belly and the mercenary blurred before him. Ghazi spit forth words, hoping they were clear. He prayed the mercenary understood he had no intention of killing him.

But the warrior's eyes did not soften, and as Ghazi weakened further, the shadows that bound his opponent became frail. The warrior growled, and then roared, for the tendril that had muffled his mouth fell to the ground. His other arm, still bound, inched closer to Ghazi's eyes.

Ghazi tried to speak again, but he could not hear the words. His arms felt immovable, but he willed them forward and gripped the man's waist. The mercenary covered Ghazi's eyes and all was dark. The pressure was immense. He tried to scream. The world was lost.

The dagger. His fingertips brushed the hilt of the mercenary's dagger.

He grabbed it, pulled it free, and thrust it forward until warm blood coated his fingers. He pulled it out and struck again, sinking it deep, and he struck a third time, aiming higher. As he lost consciousness, the warrior let him go, and Ghazi fell backward onto the mattress.

~

The thief's eyes flickered open with blurred vision. Before him, the warrior hung from a lattice-work of limp shadow. The man was dead; blood pooled at his feet.

Ghazi rose and removed the dagger from the mercenary's chest. Its weight was too heavy to bear. He let it fall to the mattress, and then he leaned over the side of the bed. His stomach tightened. Vomit splattered the wooden floor. His head rang with pain and he felt dizzy again. Rolling back onto the bed, he rested with the bloody dagger beneath him.

He struggled to speak. “I didn't mean to do that.”

“Of course not,” replied Gilgamesh. “Of course you didn't.” There was a strain in the creature's voice. “And what of the girl?”

Ghazi groaned. He lifted himself up and pulled his feet off the bed and into a warm pool of vomit. It stuck to the soles of his feet. He reached back for the dagger and eyed the suspended corpse. There was a coin purse hanging next to the blade's sheath. Ghazi cut it free. “There,” he said, looking back at Gilgamesh.

He walked to the closet and opened the double-doors. A girl stared up at him. She was perhaps seventeen years old. Her hands and feet were bound and a cloth was tied around her mouth. Her long brown hair covered her shoulders and she wore an old tunic. Although she trembled and sweat covered

her brow, her piercing gaze did not waver.

Ghazi bent down, smiling, and dropped the bag of coins before her. "Give me time to flee," he said, "then cut yourself loose. And the gods only know—with that bag of money, a new life might await you."

He laid the dagger by the purse, stood and turned away.

"You're leaving her?" asked Gilgamesh.

Ghazi picked up the fur-wrapped package and made his way to a window across the room.

"You're leaving her," said Gilgamesh.

The thief peeked out of the window, looking over the city night. "I'm giving her a chance at living free."

"You're leaving her for death," said the statue. "You are nothing but a coward."

"And you, my friend, are a ghost trapped in the visage of a stone monster."

"No," Gilgamesh replied. "I am only the reflection of one."

Ghazi looked past Gilgamesh and smiled again at the girl in the closet. "You are quite lovely," he said. "There is nothing monstrous about you, is there?"

He stepped onto the windowsill with one foot and grasped the outer edge. "Now I fly," he whispered. And he was gone.

~

A week later, on the balcony of a second story house, a young man stood with his grandmother. They watched the street below, the young man with glee, and the old woman with a stern gaze.

Both were known in the neighborhood. His face was tanned and the long locks of his hair were soft. He was friendly and had an easy manner. She was short and bent and had the face of a withered troll. Her eyebrows were bushy and her pupils were sharp. Her thin lips pursed tightly over old, brown teeth. She was seldom seen without a hard wooden cane in her left hand.

Below them sprawled the commoners' market. The street was covered with booths, carts, and tables. The air was dry and hot. Vendors displayed loose, cotton shirts next to shoddy, second-hand ous and violins, stacks of books, soccer balls, and water pipes. The people were many, sweating shoulder-to-shoulder, haggling and fighting over the cheap goods. Porters shouted over them and dragged pack animals carrying fruits, spools of hard cloth, and dried meats. All around, the vendors vied for attention. Children ran and played games, some stealing from the pastry vendors, and some irritating the donkeys bringing the vendors their wares. And there was food and drink sold on every corner: creamy hummus, felafel, fried eggplant, apple juice and rose water, and savory chicken with a citrus scent that traveled down dusty aisles of small, cheap toys and leather sandals.

"It is busy today," said the young man. "The merchants will be happy."

The old woman grunted in agreement.

He continued: "Hafiz has brought Kentucky jam cake to his tent. Our king is wise to befriend the emperor of Amreeka, don't you think?"

The old woman tapped her cane upon the wooden planks beneath them and said nothing.

"Who knows?" pondered the young man. "What else will these trade routes bring us?"

"They will bring soldiers. They will bring diplomats. They will bring whatever else the emperor wishes. Listen well, boy. The empire takes much more than it will ever give."

The old woman squinted, surveying the people below, and her grandson placed his hand gently upon her shoulder. "Grandmother," he said, "you worry so much for an old woman. When the market clears, I'll go and buy us a chicken. For dessert, we'll eat jam cake."

"Go and eat it with your king," she spat.

"No, Grandmother," he said, smiling. "I shall buy it for us to share, for today we are all fed by the market's bounty." He lifted a jug of water from the banister and raised it over his mouth. Without

letting the spout touch his lips, he let water pour out and swallowed. "Oh, yes. Indeed." He nodded vigorously and waved to the people below. "Even the sewer rats will crawl out and nibble what they can."

"Some are already out," said the old woman.

The young man ignored her. He searched the crowd below, and when he found a familiar face, he pointed and called out. The old woman remained silent as he shouted and waved to others, but then suddenly she hissed sharply and rounded down on him. "Someone comes to knock on our door."

"I don't hear it," he replied, glancing quickly over his shoulder. He turned his attention back to the crowd below. There was a woman at Hafiz's tent. The young man recognized her and yelled her name, and when she turned her head, he laughed and waved. His grandmother was not pleased. She snarled and brought her cane down quickly, smashing the young man's toe. He yelped and jumped back.

"Go and answer," she told him.

~

The young man whistled as he hopped down the spiral stairway to the first floor, and he peered out of every window on the way. In the last, he caught his own reflection. A lock of hair was out of place. He tucked it behind his ear and rubbed the stubble on his chin, smiling to himself. *There would be adventure today, he thought, in the market and after.*

A loud, insistent knock at the door rang out. He hustled to the front door and the knock grew louder and more severe, as though his visitor could hear him coming. "Well that's a little pushy," he grumbled, with a mind to set his visitor's manners straight. But as soon as he turned the handle, the door smashed against him and a girl slipped halfway in. She was filthy and she stank of sewage. He pushed back, trapping her in the doorway. "Hey!"

The girl was barefoot and wore only a tunic. It was long and torn and covered in mud. Her cheeks were smudged and her long brown hair was clumped with dirt and sweat, covering much of her face. She breathed heavily, as though she'd been running some distance. The young man recognized her. Her name was Soha, and he had visited her many times in the past.

"Let me in!" she screamed, squeezing more of her body into the house. As she struggled, more of her stench came in, and in disgust, he drew his head back and stumbled away. She instantly pushed herself inside and closed the door behind her. She braced herself against it, coughing a few times.

The young man pinched his nose. He stared down at her, first in shock, then in embarrassment. She ignored him, taking in her surroundings, but when their eyes met, he was clearly irritated.

"I did not recognize you," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm sorry," she spoke quickly. "I have no one else. I ran away and I've been hiding in the tunnels."

"What are you talking about?" he blurted, checking himself for dirt and muck.

She reached out to touch him, but he grimaced and stepped back. "Stop," he said, holding his finger out before him.

She looked down. "I'm sorry. I had a sack of coins, but a pickpocket stole it my first day out. I don't have any more money."

The young man stared blankly. The stink was overwhelming. She was nothing like she had been when he saw her last. Then, with another flush of embarrassment, his eyes shot to the stairway, but luckily, his grandmother was not yet there. He sighed and glanced back at the girl. It wouldn't be hard to remove her quietly, he thought. He'd only have to cover her mouth. And she was small. But before he went at her, he thought of something. "Wait one moment," he said. "How did you find my house?"

Soha did not respond.

"Well?" he asked.

But she turned away from him and placed her ear to the door. Her sweaty hands pushed firmly

against the wood. "I think I've been followed."

"You haven't been followed, Soha. Tell me how you found my house."

"It was four months ago—after one of your visits."

"Yes?"

"I sneaked out and followed you home." With her ear still pressed to the door, she smiled unconvincingly. "I meant no harm."

Slowly, the man's brow furled. "You followed me home?"

"Truly, I meant no harm."

She reached for him a second time, but again he flinched back.

"I stole nothing," she said. "After I found your house, I simply returned."

He stepped forward. "Soha—"

"No," she interrupted, raising her hand. "You must let me hide here. My followers wish me harm. I know it."

The young man was perplexed. He put his hands on his hips, but after a moment of thought, he chuckled. "Now I see." He reached forward, past the girl, and gripped the door handle. "And who is this follower, Soha? Someone dissatisfied with your services? Move aside."

"No!" she said, grabbing his wrist and pulling hard. She could not loosen his grip. "No!" She grabbed his shoulder and hoisted herself up and whispered in his ear. "It's the Royal Guard. The Royal Guard is after me."

The young man froze. His eyes widened and his face contorted into a fearful grimace. He seemed ready to scream. Soha had an idea. She unhinged his fingers from the doorknob and pressed them against her breasts. She spoke calmly. "You'll be just fine. I'll keep you safe, but you must let me hide here. Please."

She moved closer, pressing her body against his. But his fear overcame any lust he felt for her. He shoved her hard and she hit the door. He was red. Spit flew from his mouth. "Have you lost your mind?" he said. "Would you have the Guard throw my grandmother in jail? Would you have me sent to labor the fields?"

"I have no money," she stammered, "but you can have me for free every night."

"No, Soha. You will leave right now."

She raised her hands, trying to stall. "Wait a minute."

"Now," he insisted.

She darted past him, but he grabbed her tunic and pulled her back. Again, he smashed her against the door and pinned her there by the shoulders. She cried out in pain and struck him in the gut. It was soft. He doubled over, gasped for air and knocked her aside as he hit the ground.

She fell the opposite direction and toppled a small end table, bashing her knees and face against the floor. But she recovered quickly and was on her feet with the end table in her hands.

She watched him rise slowly, still gasping. He took a step toward her.

"Don't," she warned, but he flew forward. She swung and he ducked, and he crashed into her. They both fell again, tangled in each others arms. They rolled on the wooden floor, clawing and striking at each other.

Neither could gain leverage. With a fierce cry, Soha smashed the young man's head against a great cedar cabinet. A porcelain horse fell from the top and crashed down over his eyes, breaking into several pieces. A curse flew from his lips.

Soha shoved her elbow beneath his chin and pushed hard on his throat. "Stop it," she said, but he grabbed her hair and pulled back as hard as he could.

"You stop!" he cried.

Then, a harder voice than either of theirs cut through everything. "Both of you stop."

Soha jumped and looked back.

The young man's grandmother, with her bent back and hard cane, was at the foot of the stairway.

“This is my house,” she told them, “and not a moment more of this is allowed. Do you understand?”

The two looked at each other, and they let each other go. They both stood up, facing her.

“Good,” she said, tapping her cane upon the floor and eyeing her grandson. “I wish to hear this girl's story. She will tell me all of her troubles, not just those that concern you. Go brew us coffee.”

Her grandson stayed where he was. “Grandmother,” he said, “the Royal Guard are sure to follow her here. This is unwise.”

The floor shook beneath her pounding cane. “You would speak against my word twice in one day?” She snarled at him furiously.

“Grandmother, I wish only to protect us—”

“Out of my sight, boy!”

~

The old woman led Soha into the living room and they sat together on a plush, purple couch. The walls were draped with worn, colorful tapestries, and before the two there was a small wooden table with a glass top. As they waited for the young man to bring them coffee, Soha told Grandmother her story.

Her trial had begun one week before in the brothel. She had been in her bedroom where she had just finished with a visitor who had been twice before. He was from Amreeka, a land far to the west, and he was a soldier in the Imperial Legion. He had been stationed outside of Damascus.

They had spoken a few words when he showed up, and before they undressed, he had made a strange request. He hesitated at first, but then pulled from his satchel a local holy book. He placed it on the bed and opened it to a random page. He pointed first to the script and then to her lips, and back again. Soha understood and began to recite the verses. As she did, she felt as though someone was watching them. The soldier stood behind her, pulled down his pants, and lifted her gown. Afterward, he took his book and left.

Alone, she rested back on one of her pillows and cleaned herself. That is when the stranger arrived. He entered through her window, having somehow climbed to the second story and jumped into her room. He did so silently, but he did not catch her by surprise. Soha saw her window pane open, and when he came through, he glided as though weightless. Although it took no more than a breath for him to approach, it seemed as though he moved slower than time itself. She opened her mouth, but no sound came, and when she blinked, hoping he would disappear, he was already standing over her.

The stranger put his finger to his lips, taunting her to attempt another yell. She knew she couldn't.

She only remembered two things about him: the scar around his neck and his cold, murderous eyes. She was relieved when he tied her hands and legs and dragged her to the closet. From her view, behind the closet door, she watched him climb into the bed and sit with crossed legs, waiting.

~

Soha continued and Grandmother listened intently. The girl could tell Grandmother was weighing every word she spoke, but the old woman was polite enough to hear her out.

“And so,” said Soha, “when the mercenary entered my room, carrying under his arm a heavy package, this assassin was already there, waiting for his arrival. I saw all that happened, and I wonder now if the assassin left the closet door ajar so that I may watch.”

Grandmother nodded. “How did he kill the mercenary?”

Soha paused. She sighed and looked into the eyes of the old woman sitting next to her. “He changed into the form of a beautiful woman. He drew the warrior close. He fooled him and stabbed him to death. And the shadows in the room came alive and aided the assassin. That is what I saw.”

“I see,” said Grandmother.

Her grandson entered the room, holding a tray with a pot of coffee and three small cups. He set the tray down on the table in front of the two and sat in an empty chair close by. "Will both of you drink?" he asked. They nodded.

He poured coffee into all three cups and handed the first to his grandmother and the second to Soha. He took the third and carefully sipped from it.

"It was strange," said Soha. "Several times the assassin spoke to someone—an accomplice hidden somewhere in the room. I never saw him, nor did I hear him respond to the assassin's words. More sorcery, perhaps."

"Perhaps," said Grandmother. "Tell me more."

Soha nodded and sipped her coffee. "After he left, I fled and I've been running since. I hide somewhere new every night, but the Royal Guard have followed me closely. They surely blame me for this murder."

"You're clever to have eluded them," said Grandmother.

"Twice they almost had me, but they won't travel the tunnels beneath the city. I'm sure you can tell that I can afford no such reluctance. I hide in the tunnels every night, but it's difficult to find food below." Soha eyed the young man. "I only came to your door because I knew no where else to go. I'm sorry."

He stiffened. He gritted his teeth and his cheeks went pink. "Young lady," he said, raising an eyebrow, "I have never spoken to one whose trade is in, um—whatever it is you do. You are well spoken."

Soha almost laughed, a wry smile coming to her lips. "I study when I can."

"Yes. Yes, of course you do. You must find your work tiresome at times."

The girl blinked. She was unsure of what to say. She did not know if the man was stupid or sarcastic, and so she remained silent.

"Where is your family?" the old woman asked.

Soha answered quickly. "My parents are dead." And a moment later: "They were executed for treason. I have no uncles or aunts, no siblings, no one else."

Grandmother scrutinized her, and Soha looked nervously down and sipped more of her coffee. The room was silent. Neither the girl or the young man wished to speak so they waited for Grandmother to ask another question. The old woman picked up her cup for the first time and drank.

She held the cup steadily. The skin on her hands was tight over great purple veins. It was the only part of her that looked soft. Soha saw the old woman staring at her grandson. There was no kindness in her eyes. When the young man caught her gaze he started and smiled weakly back, and when he noticed Soha watching them, he chuckled in embarrassment.

The girl felt pity for him. She felt his shame as her own and she wished to rid him of it. She struggled for something to say to take away the old woman's attention, but Grandmother beat her to it.

"You must leave the city," she said. "We will help you."

Soha was surprised. "How do you mean?" She was there only for food and shelter, but she saw no polite way to say this. "I can't leave. I truly can't. Where would I go?"

"Out of the city, child."

"But what is there beyond the walls of Damascus? A brigand's dagger? Or the groping hands of the Imperial Legion? Shall I leave the comfort of my own bed?"

"You're sleeping in the sewers."

Soha shrugged.

"Now, then," continued Grandmother, pointing to the north and west, "I have a brother. He lives in the Cedar Forest, in the mountains past our own. You will hide with him for as long as you need to. And you will begin your journey tonight."

"How will I find him?" asked Soha, a bit irritated. "I only know the streets, the tunnels, and my own bedroom. It wouldn't matter if your brother was the mayor of Antioch or the Lord Ghul of the

Desert Below. I would be lost and doomed halfway to his house.”

“Don't worry yourself. There is a horse in the stables beneath my house. He is smart and obedient. I will teach him the way and he will take you. I know a route only a few still travel. Also, I will give you food and new clothing, and the Lord Ghul is a fairytale. You will be safe.”

Soha gave a short laugh, but she wanted to cry. She wanted to fall to her knees and bury her face. She looked at the young man and he stared back, blankly. She felt sick. She set her coffee down and stared at her hands, wondering what to do. The old woman was right; she dreaded another night in the dark, filthy sewer. She dreaded the growing hunger and longed for good sleep.

Those were her choices then. Suicide or a slow death. She closed her eyes and thought quietly to herself. After a moment, the young man reached over to nudge her shoulder, but his grandmother hissed and he pulled back quickly.

“I don't know what to say,” said the girl. “Old woman, you are kind and generous. How may I thank you?”

Grandmother smiled. “Don't try. Not yet. And don't call me old woman. Call me Grandmother.”

“Thank you, Grandmother.”

“Good,” said the old woman. “Very good.” She set her cup down. “Now, then. I give you a mount, provisions, and safe destination. These are three favors you owe me. After you return—”

Three thunderous blows shook the front door and the young man jumped to his feet. “You didn't hear them coming?” he said to his grandmother.

“No,” she replied.

“Are they the Royal Guard?”

“What do you think?”

The young man yelped. “Get down,” he whispered to Soha, and in frenzied haste, he pushed her forward and knocked over the pot of coffee. Wet silt covered the floor. Soha bent down to her knees and tried to collect it back into the pot. She used her cup as a shovel, but the silt was spread too thin.

The young man stepped over her and grabbed his grandmother's shoulder. “The Royal Guard is at our door. I told you they would come, but you didn't listen.” He was frantic. “Now what do we do?”

She struck his wrist with her cane and he let her go. “Calm yourself. I will chit-chat with them myself.”

Slowly, the young man sat back down. His eyes were wide open and his mouth agape. He shook his head slowly back and forth. Soha moved next to him and tried to comfort him, but he didn't respond.

“Both of you stay here,” Grandmother told them. “And stay quiet. Don't worry about the mess.”

“Should we hide?” asked Soha.

“Yes, but stay in this room. Hide behind the couch here. You, too, boy.”

The young man nodded and crawled behind the couch, pulling Soha by her arm.

“Quiet,” the old woman repeated.

~

Grandmother's house was a large house. It was two stories tall and the front door was on the side opposite the balcony over the market. There were other houses next to it, built wall-to-wall on both sides, and they ran the entire city block. Behind them, there was still the clamor of the market, but on the street all was quiet. Except for the knocking.

Her handsome grandson's worries were justified. The visitors were Royal Guard and there were three. The one who knocked wore an inspector's blue uniform, a goatee, and an oiled mustache. His face was gaunt and his eyes burned. The two behind him were armored in platemail of Amreekan design, and they each held a morning star and a shield. Helmets covered their faces.

The three stood at ease, and when the inspector heard footsteps from the other side, he quit his

knocking and waited. The sun was bright and he sweated at his armpits.

~

Grandmother opened the door without hesitation, catching the inspector as he tugged at one end of his mustache.

“Yes?” she asked. “What do you want here?”

The man cleared his throat and took a moment to size up the old woman. Her head barely reached half a foot over his belt buckle. He eyed her with contempt and spoke slowly. “You do know we're from the Royal Guard?”

“Yes, I know,” she said. “I'm not blind. Are you?”

His lip curled as if to snarl. “No. I'm not.”

“Then what do you want?”

“We're in search of a fugitive. A murderer.”

“And you're searching here?” asked the old woman.

“Yes.”

“Why?” she said, glancing back. “Is there a killer hiding in my house?”

“No. Not exactly.”

“What, then?”

“The killer is a whore,” he said, and the old woman paused.

“What are you saying?” she spat. “Speak clearly with your accusations!” She rapped the man on the foot with her cane, but quickly, he bent forward and grabbed the weapon out of her hand.

“Don't do that again,” he said, “or my two friends will strong-arm you.”

“They will do nothing of the sort.”

“They will do it and more, if I ask.” He revealed from beneath his jacket a short whip that hung from his side. Its ends were laced with shrapnel. “This will break more than your bones. Have you not heard the stories?” He smiled.

Grandmother's face went dark. She touched her left forearm. “Yes,” she said, “I've heard the stories.”

“Good,” he replied, hiding the whip. “What I want is your cooperation. I'm here to ask questions and receive answers. After that, I'll leave you be. Will you help me?”

“I will,” she said.

A rage boiled in the old woman, but she hid it well.

“And you will answer honestly?”

“I will.”

“Very well,” he said, adjusting his cravat. “As I told you, the murderer is, or was, a whore. She worked for a brothel in Old City. That is where the crime occurred.”

“Why have you come here, then?”

The man chuckled. “I will tell you, but I fear to bring an old woman shame.”

Grandmother scowled. “Do my cheeks look flushed, inspector?”

“A little bit. The pimp who ran the parlor kept very good records.”

“And his records have revealed to you my grandson visited the place often.”

The inspector raised his brow. “So you already knew.”

“I know the boy. He thinks I'm blind, but I know everything he does and everywhere he goes. I've had many years to sharpen these eyes.”

“And they are quite sharp, madam,” he said with a slight bow, “but don't worry yourself. He won't be the only one we question.”

“Who else?” she asked.

“The locals who visit that brothel are few, and only a handful have seen our murderer more than

once. We will talk to all of them, of course.”

“So you already know she did it.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Have you caught her? Are you looking for witnesses?”

“No,” he said. “Unfortunately not. So far she has us baffled. We don't know where she's hiding and we don't know where she's been. But she is dangerous. We've put our hope in her old clients.” He peeked inside. “Perhaps she revealed something to one of them.”

The old woman smiled. “If that is your hope, my boy will be of no use.”

“Why not?” asked the inspector.

“He's dumb. He's daft.”

“Still, I want to question him. Is he here?”

“No,” she said.

The man eyed her carefully. “Where can we find him?”

“If not in the brothel then around the block at the market. He left earlier to buy a chicken and some jam cake.” The inspector glanced sideways in irritation.

“The market?”

Grandmother sighed. “Should I send him over when he returns?”

He nodded. “That might work best.” He pulled from his pocket a small card. “Here,” he said. “Take this.”

Grandmother took the card. “May I have my cane as well?”

“Of course. But one more thing before I go.”

“What?” said the old woman.

“The man the whore killed—he was in the service of the king. In the service of King Dimashq.”

“The one and only. I know.”

“No, old woman. You don't. If I hear you've had some involvement in this, or your grandson has, I won't come back for more questions. Do you understand?”

Grandmother's gaze was unshaken. “I do.”

The inspector stared down at her for a moment, then he nodded, satisfied.

“My grandson is innocent,” she said.

“Many a whore has turned the mind of an innocent young man.”

“Oh?” she said. “Have you found this to be true, inspector?”

But the man did not answer. He threw back her cane and Grandmother snatched it out of the air.

“Don't trifle with me again,” he said, and before she could reply, he turned to face the two men. “Go, we search elsewhere.”

~

The old woman walked back inside and closed the door behind her. She leaned back against it, and her head dropped. She breathed slowly. For a moment, all was still. Then she looked up to find her grandson and Soha peeking from behind the couch in the living room, staring at her. She perked up and stood tall.

“Well,” she said, “they didn't follow you here directly, but they're on your trail.”

“Will they return?” asked the girl.

“It doesn't matter if they do. You'll be gone by tomorrow morning. And you as well,” she said, pointing the cane at her grandson, “but where to send you, I haven't yet decided.”

The young man almost pouted. “Why? I don't want to go.” The old woman smiled.

“If there is one truth I told that wily policeman, it's about you. You are daft. Your hands are oiled, and your spine is as thin as thread. Nothing would be worse than to leave you here.”

“But why, Grandmother?” he said, quickly glancing at Soha. “Why are we helping her?”

“Because you are no innocent young man, and because I still dare to call the king dead.”

~

They waited past midnight before sneaking down to the stables beneath the house. Soha had cleaned herself beforehand. She had slept for three hours and her belly was full. Yet perhaps because her mind was once again clear, her anxiety heightened.

She stood with the young man by a small horse—the smart one Grandmother had taught—and while the young man, clearly irritated, stuffed provisions into the horse's saddlebags, Soha held a lit candle. No other animal was in the stables with them.

The young man grumbled quietly while he worked. He asked Soha if her arm was tired. She said it wasn't, but then she put the candle in her other hand. Grandmother insisted he carry and stow the supplies. Soha was to save her strength.

The young man walked to the other side of the animal and stowed the remaining supplies. His grumbling stopped, and his mood appeared improved. When he was done, he smiled and rested his elbows on the saddle. “I wonder,” he said, “what it will be like without you. I had wanted to visit you one last time.” His locks fell from behind his ears and they framed his large, beautiful eyes, shining in the candlelight and gazing at her.

~

When the girl left, there was a light rain coming down. She drew up the hood of her cloak and patted the horse as they silently crossed the marketplace. The horse was unruly, but her way was clear. The carts were boarded; the tables were hidden, and few dared walk those streets at such an hour. In Damascus it was said that those who live in squalor don't fear the night, but it wasn't true, least of all the day after a visit from the Royal Guard. So Soha's flight from the city was observed by only two pairs of eyes.

From above, the old woman and the young man stood upon their balcony and watched her struggle with the horse's reins, become frustrated, and eventually let the animal carry her into the darkness. She disappeared quickly, for there were no street lamps where the horse took her.

“Do you think we'll see her again?” asked the young man.

“I'm sure of it,” said Grandmother.

~

It began to rain more heavily. Water poured from the rooftops, and in the Aisle of the Moon, the sewers overflowed and ran into the street. There was a coffeehouse in that neighborhood, still open. People called it The Evening's End. Patrons sitting under soft lights could be seen from the windows and when the club's doors opened and one of them emerged, scented smoke billowed out.

Out front there was a troop of Royal Guard. They waited beneath the street lamps. They were five in number, all on horseback, and they watched each patron walk away in the rain. They were not heavily armored, and although each wore a heavy cloak, they shivered as they waited. Four were lost in thought, staring at the water dripping from their hoods or petting their irritable horses. The fifth, however, remained vigilant. It was his first night in command.

One of the others reached over and tapped his shoulder.

“What is it?” he said.

“Forgive me, sir. How long will this take?”

“As long as need be. He hasn't yet arrived, has he?”

“And when he does?” the guardsman asked.

“When he does, we wait for him to leave. Those are our orders.”

“Yes, sir,” said the subordinate, gloomily. The door opened and the guardsman perked up, but it was just another patron leaving for the night. Again, smoke billowed out, and it had the scent of watermelon and lime. The guardsman's eyes watered, yet he still wanted to dismount and go in. He turned back to his commander. “I heard a rumor, sir.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, sir. The man we wait for is the thrice-cursed thief of Baghdad, the cheater of the noose, Ghazi al-Khalid. Have you heard of him?”

“No.”

“You haven't?”

“No, I haven't,” he sighed. “What are his three curses?”

“I don't know, sir. I can only guess.”

“Then stay quiet.” He pointed toward the end of the street. “A man approaches down the way.”

~

Ghazi peeked out from the alleyway, and seeing the five guardsmen, he stepped out and walked down the Aisle of the Moon. Until that point, he had stayed quiet, traveling in secret in the alleys behind. But the coffee shop had no rear entrance. To enter, he would have to reveal himself. *Perhaps this was engineered*, he thought. His contact was intelligent and had chosen a meeting place that afforded Ghazi safe travel to the very end. *So be it*, thought the thief. He walked in the rain with his cloak wet and his feet wading through the current. The street was slippery, but it didn't slow him down.

When he reached the guardsmen, he stopped and bowed. “I am to notice you, I suppose. You are the strength of his majesty, King Dimashq—should anything in the coffeehouse go wrong.”

“Yes, that's right,” said the commander.

“But who awaits me inside?” asked the thief.

To this, he received no reply.

“Very well,” he said. “You haven't yet been ordered to answer. I sympathize.” He untied his cloak and pulled it off his shoulders, revealing wet clothing beneath. “I shall return shortly. If the building does catch fire, ride away. I want no more on my conscience this week.”

The commander gritted his teeth, but Ghazi winked quickly and turned to open the door. He disappeared into the dim glow and thick smoke.

~

The coffeehouse was filled; tables were packed and those leaving or heading for the toilet had to squeeze between others sitting or standing around. Most were commoners. Each table had a coffee pot with small, porcelain cups, and many had water pipes as well. People laughed and argued and inhaled deeply from the pipes. They blew thick streams of smoke into the air. An old, rustic melody began; it came from a record player sitting next to the toilet, and with it came an old, soft voice. Ghazi recognized the tune and hummed a bit as he peered through the haze for his quarry. He found the man quickly.

His contact sat across the room, alone at a small table with one empty chair opposite him. His face was bearded and his hair was gray. His clothing was finely cut. He was already frowning. Ghazi pushed through the crowd, and coming closer, he saw that the man wore an insignia identifying him as a learned member of the Circle. The magician's clean hands rested on the table. There was nothing else upon it but an untouched water pipe.

Ghazi walked forward and put his hands on the back of the empty chair. He waited until the man's eyes rose and then he spoke. “You intercepted my note.”

"Of course we did," said the man unceremoniously.

"And the dignitaries from Amreeka?"

"They sleep in the palace. Comfortably, I hear. You are not to attempt contact with them again."

Ghazi pulled the chair out, elbowing a man out of his way, and sat down. "If I do?"

"You die," said the mage.

"Then why do I still live?"

"The package you stole from us—"

"Intercepted."

"Pardon?"

"No pardon necessary," said the thief. "I intercepted your package as it traveled toward the palace. Just as you intercepted my note as it traveled to the same destination. Are we now even?"

The magician scoffed. "If your note had reached those diplomats we would surely have killed you. You would not be sitting here now."

"Truly? The foreigners scare you more than I thought."

"No, they don't. Listen. You play a game and you don't know the rules. They are beyond you."

"Which? The rules or the foreigners?"

"Both."

Ghazi laughed. He pulled the lid off the top of the water pipe. The coals resting beneath were dead, so he fetched a book of matches from his pocket, but they were all wet.

"I apologize," said the mage. "I didn't know you smoked. I would have asked them to keep it lit."

Ghazi waved his hand and waited for the man to continue speaking.

"That package you stole. King Dimashq promised Emperor Amreeka it was safe in the royal vault months ago."

"So?"

"You have studied it, haven't you? Peered inside?"

"Yes," said the thief.

"You know what it is?"

"Oh, yes. It's a prize just beyond my imagination."

The magician chuckled. He spread his fingers over the unlit coals, whispering a minor incantation. Flames burst forth from his fingertips and danced down to the coals. The pipe was lit, and the smoldering coals had a lilac scent. "You understand, then, why I'm here."

"Yes, I think I do."

"What say you, then?"

"I say this." Ghazi lifted a hose from the pipe's body and inhaled, and blew sweet smoke across the table. "I say you are an arrogant fool, wizard. You betray critical details before our bargaining has even begun. I walked in knowing almost nothing and now I know it all."

Gilgamesh appeared behind Ghazi and he placed a hand on his friend's shoulder. The thief's eyes stayed fixed on the man across from him.

"Again, no," said the mage. "But I will explain it to you." He tapped his fingers on the wooden tabletop. "You are here right now only because we want you. If we didn't, you could run anywhere and we would find you. It wouldn't matter. You would wake to a dagger in your throat."

"Yes, you keep threatening me, yet still I live. Someone more important than you clearly understands my value," Ghazi chuckled.

The magician smashed his fist into the table. "Do not mistake this for a negotiation, thief. You live only by our mercy."

"He speaks the truth," said Gilgamesh, and with that, Ghazi held his hands up in surrender.

"Of course," he said. "Of course. But you will pay for your lost treasure."

"Despite my objections, we will."

The thief smirked. He winked up at the ghost behind him and smoked again from the water pipe.

This time, he blew the smoke up above, and in an old tongue unknown to the mage or to anyone else in the room, he spoke to Gilgamesh. “No negotiation, indeed.”

“But tell me something, thief.” It was the mage who spoke. “Would it surprise you if I told you we've chosen to retain you for further service?”

Ghazi smiled more widely. “So this tale begins with an action worthy of the king.”

“Some were impressed with your daring.”

Ghazi leaned forward. “Will I be given fine dress like yours, O Wizard of the Circle? Will I attend court with you?”

“I pray never, but you'll lie and steal and we'll pay you more than you're worth.”

“I need time to consider,” said Ghazi.

The mage shook his head. “No.”

“No?”

“None.”

“Then I accept, good scholar. I accept.” He pointed at the mage with the mouthpiece of the pipe. “They have told me—those above my station, that is—that the eldest son rules the house while the second born is sent to join the Circle. Is this true? My curiosity burns and your magnificence blinds my peasant eyes.” Ghazi raised his hands before himself in mocking pantomime and peeked at the magician from between his fingers.

The mage stood. He lifted a cloak from the back of his chair and wrapped it around his shoulders. “Your first task is simple. Deliver back what you stole. The men outside will bring you home safely. Do not molest them.”

“It will take time for me to retrieve the item, for I have hidden it well.”

“Whatever it takes,” said the mage, and he walked past Ghazi's reclining form.

The thief smiled. The work was done.

~

After King's Day, Tim and Sir Henry spent the week in meetings and preparations. There were many functionaries to meet, and the two were expected to address the king's parliament. Neither had yet left the palace walls. Henry ordered Tim to read and learn all the treaties of the past, but he declined to do the same. When Tim raised the point, Henry claimed to have witnessed many of them at their inauguration. “I never relive the past,” he said. So, while Tim studied, Henry passed the time on his balcony or in the gardens.

This drudgery quickly stifled the young diplomat. “Why do we not live in the embassy?” he asked.

“There is no embassy here,” said Henry. “The palace is the embassy. They are one and the same.”

So Tim decided that day, at that very moment, he would leave the palace and go for a walk in the royal district, to see for himself how this land compared with its fairytale stories and pictures. And he would get some unofficial work done as well.

Leaving was easier than he thought. He walked directly through the main gates. Henry knew of his other duties and had barely noticed him leaving. The guards recognized him and allowed him immediate passage, stepping away and bowing as he passed.

Soon, the young man was walking in the fresh air, the breeze caressing his arms and chest. The day was warm, but he was dressed in light finery and sandals. He searched for a small theater—one a parliament minister had told him of the day before—and entered the plaza of the royal district. It was of a kind unknown to the others of this story so far. There were no stalls, carts, or tables, and there were no dirt roads. The streets were cobbled, and the merchants sold their wares from inside beautiful buildings whose age was only betrayed by their classical design and ancient mosaics. There were restaurants and parlors, and small parks for shoppers and passers-by to set their bags down and sit on

soft, shaded grass.

Tim watched everyone around him. They strolled carelessly, and although there were several of the Royal Guard about, none showed fear of the police. Here the Guard truly were their servants. These people put Tim at ease. He smiled, and forgetting the theater, walked to one of the parks. He walked barefoot on the grass and savored the sensation. He sat and stretched his legs.

Two children ran past him, laughing as they chased each other. Their older sister sat close by, and she called to them periodically. There were two lovers sitting at a bench further down, kissing while others passed by, and there was an old woman picking an apple from a tree. She munched on the piece of fruit.

Past her, Tim spied someone else. A woman who stood at the end of the park, where the grass ended and the cobblestones began. She was young and she wore a short, green dress. Her short, brown hair curled around her ears and her legs were firm. She held a stack of paper and gave a sheet to each person who passed her. Most took the paper but discarded it when they were within polite distance.

He watched her do this several times, then made to walk past her himself. When he neared, she spoke. "Good afternoon," she said in a soft soprano.

He turned his head and smiled, meeting her green eyes. "Hello."

The young woman returned his smile and handed him a paper from her stack. He skimmed it quickly. It was written in Arabic, an advertisement, and it indicated five candidates running for parliament, four men and one woman—all from the Liberal Party. Beside each was the politician's illustration and a statement of qualifications.

"Goodness," said Tim. "I forgot the elections were so close."

"How could you forget?" the woman asked.

"I'm an out-of-towner. And I also forget," he said, bowing slightly, "how no corner of this city escapes political life."

"No," said the woman, chuckling. "It cannot. Not right now."

"I'm Tim," he said.

"And my name is Nadine," replied the woman.

He extended his hand and Nadine shook it.

"You work for the Liberals?"

"I volunteer every weekend."

"Why, if I may ask?"

"A Liberal victory is paramount," she said. "For the sake of the country, the king, and the people. This nation cannot abide another Conservative win."

"No, I suppose not."

"And with the oil workers going on strike, that simply makes it more serious. The Conservatives don't understand the plight of the working people."

"Again, I suppose they don't, but to speak the truth, the strikers are one of the reasons I'm here."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

Tim coughed. "I'm the senior aide to Sir Henry, the diplomat and representative of Emperor Amreeka." He stepped back and bowed low and stepped forward again with another smile. "I hope my work here will strengthen your nation's defenses and ensure a continued modernization and economic fluidity. That's why I'm here."

"I didn't know," said Nadine.

Tim looked more closely at her dress. "I'm also interested in your culture. The Arabs have always intrigued me. There is a nobility in your ways."

Nadine gave a small laugh. "I hope there is nobility in yours as well."

"There is," he assured her.

She nodded. "Perhaps, then, you might speak of the Liberal Party when you meet next with Sir Henry. I'm confident we'll gain the majority in parliament."

"I'm confident as well."

"Then tell him our victory is necessary if this oil strike is to be resolved peacefully. After all, the beliefs of the Liberal Party state that all people deserve justice and respect, no matter how low they might be."

"It is a belief I share," said Tim.

Nadine shook her head. "Not all your people share it."

"No," he answered, "not all of them do." He looked down to his feet and a frown came upon him. "You must know something about me, Nadine," he said, placing his hand on her shoulder. "I abhor racism in any manifestation, and it shames me to see this behavior in the soldiers of the empire. Although it's to be expected, I suppose."

"If it's expected, teach them differently."

"How?"

"I don't know," she said, shrugging her shoulders, "but you must."

"Then walk with me, for I do not wish this lesson to end."

Nadine laughed again. "Very well."

He extended his hand and she took it and they walked, circling the park several times. They talked and Nadine continued to hand flyers to passers-by. Tim asked her many questions, about her life, about her family, about the Liberal Party and how long she had volunteered for them. She answered his questions until all the papers she held were gone. Finally, Tim turned and reached for both of her hands. She stopped to meet his gaze.

"Will you meet me again?" he asked.

"If I do, will you allow me to ask questions of my own?"

He feigned reluctance. "Yes, I suppose."

"Then, yes," she said, smirking. "I will meet you again."

"Wonderful," said Tim. "Where?"

"Let me take you somewhere you've never been before. After all, you are my guest, and while you do represent the emperor, I represent the city."

"Tomorrow, then?"

At first, she hesitated. Then she spoke. "I'd love to."

"Good," he said. "I'll meet you here at this same time and you'll take me somewhere special."

She laughed. "I will."

"Good," he said again, and as he bent forward to kiss her on the cheek, he thought he saw her blushing.

~

Five revolutionaries made camp on Mount Qassioun outside Damascus. They had come on horseback a week before, carrying daggers, scimitars, and composite bows. They hailed from the city of Homs and they were members of the Marxist Party. The sun shined brightly where they hid, but they lay safely in wait, for the trees were tall and the bushes thick, and their camp could not be seen from the trail below.

Two stood by a horse. The elder of the pair was Delarum, a tall, trim woman with gray streaks in her hair and a worn face. She held a map against the horse's side and inspected it with a stocky woman named Daria. She had hair shorter than her shoulders, large cheeks, and a nose the size of a plum. The map showed the mountain and valley below with the river that ran through it. It showed the towns and the cities close by and the connecting roads between them. The two women made a rough estimate of their location and plotted a route home that would avoid Damascus or any of her heavily traveled roads.

Two more of the group sat close by and rationed out dried fruit and salted meat along with the scavenged edibles they had found in the rocks close by. Their names were Humfrid and Alima. He

was a convict fled from the north of Europa, broad-shouldered, with a heavy mustache above his lip, and she was a doctor born in Homs, north of the capital Damascus. She had a long, calm face and her eyes moved quickly as she worked. The two had married two months prior to this expedition, and only two months before that, Alima had returned from Europa with Humfrid alongside her. Since then, the Syrian sun had turned his skin red and his hair pale and often he grew sullen and despaired. She was the only one who spoke his Norse tongue. They huddled as they worked, mumbling quietly to each other.

The last of the group was Abdullah, and he was not with the other four. He lay at the camp's edge, where he peeked down over a gigantic, flat boulder and surveyed the mountainside trail below and the valley beyond. He was the youngest, still a boy. His lanky limbs stretched over the flat rock, and from where Delarum stood, the only sign of his head was his ruffled black hair. But his eyes were sharp and he saw details in the valley the others could not. While he watched, he fingered the blade of the spear laying beside him. He ran his fingertip along the sharp edge up to its point. When he grew bored, he turned to watch Delarum and Daria argue over their map. Although they were a ways off, he heard them easily.

“Look,” said the younger woman, “luck is with us, briefly.” She pointed to the map and Delarum followed. “Our flight has left us north of Damascus, and farther north is our home. When we leave, we need to travel as quickly as possible.”

“True.”

“Then the valley is fastest. The road along the river is clear and Abdullah says he has seen no travelers.”

Delarum shook her head. “The danger is still real, Daria. We stay among the rocks, even if it costs us another day or two.”

Alima raised her chin from the fruit and the dried meat. “I second that.”

Daria scowled. “And if it costs us another day to simply sit and wait for our comrades? It has been a week.”

“So be it,” Alima snapped from below.

“Then when do we leave? When the food runs out, or when the water does? Or do we leave at all?”

“We leave when the others return.”

“No,” corrected Delarum. “The motion is this: we wait one day and vote to wait another. If we leave, we travel the hidden route through the mountains. Understood?”

She looked at both the women and they told her they did.

“One more day, then. All in favor?” She raised her own hand.

Daria scoffed and raised hers, and after Alima translated for Humfrid, the two raised theirs. Abdullah, watching the interaction, did nothing.

“It's almost unanimous,” said Daria. “It must have been preordained by the gods; the starvation of five Marxists.”

“All opposed?” asked Delarum. She eyed the boy across the way, waiting for him to acknowledge the procedure, but he stayed still.

“Then it is passed,” she said. “We wait one more day.”

She rolled the map up and put it in a wooden case inside one of her saddlebags. Daria walked away, spitting and cursing the heat, and Delarum sighed. She turned to pet her horse's neck. “We've waited long enough,” she said. “Let them come quickly.”

~

“Delarum?”

The boy sneaked up on her. She turned to face him with weary eyes.

“Come and look,” he said, indicating the boulder where he kept watch.

She nodded and followed the boy back. They both placed blankets beneath them, for the rock had become hot, and they lay with their heads peeking over the edge. “Someone is out there,” he said, pointing to the mountainside trail below their camp.

“Where?”

“Down there, farther, where the trail curves and there's the rock shaped like a nose. Where we all agreed, remember?”

Delarum squinted. “I see no one.” She gripped the boy's shoulder for leverage and leaned farther out. The breeze was cool and the view was clear. Yet she saw nothing. She was always anxious when the boy warned her of danger she could not yet see. “You are gifted,” she said, “and I am blind.”

“Look there!” He pointed again. “The traveler rides a horse. He's wounded. He rides slowly.”

“Is he alone?”

But Abdullah fell silent.

“Is the rider alone?” she asked again.

The boy stammered. “The rider is Yusef and there's blood on his chest. I think it's dry.”

Delarum shook the boy's shoulder. “Is he alone?”

“I see no one else,” he spoke quickly.

Delarum stood quickly and left to gather the others. They returned to the boulder in seconds, each wielding bow and arrow and taking positions near Abdullah's post.

“Keep your eyes behind Yusef,” she told the boy. “Tell me if any follow him.”

~

The man Yusef rode the mountainside on a horse that trembled. There was a long, open wound from his collar to his belly. Abdullah's eyes saw true; most of the blood was dry, but the wound itself was still wet and seeping. The blood caught the sunlight, and where it dried, sweat mingled with the reddish crust.

Yusef had suffered another blow as well, across the cheek, but the cut was more shallow and less bloody. Twice he forgot it was there and scratched his face only to wince.

Escape from Damascus had been difficult; he had hidden for days and waited for the opportunity to pass the gates. He rode now with sunken eyes and a cracked, dry mouth. He counted the blue pebbles on the trail to keep his mind busy.

“Where are you, camp?” he rasped.

The trail appeared the same as the others before it. He passed the nose-rock and he couldn't remember if it was a marker or simply a stone with an odd shape. All memory grew foggy. He coughed twice. His chest shook and he hacked in pain, doubling over. Blood from his wound wet the horse's mane. Tears welled in his eyes and the reins fell from his slack fingers. He slid and tipped over the side of the horse. He grabbed weakly for the saddle's horn, missed, and fell roughly upon the ground with his foot caught in the stirrup. The sky was clear and blue and seemed like bliss. A curse came to his lips, and he spit blood. The horse didn't move at all.

~

Shortly afterward the Marxists brought him back to their camp. He was unconscious, and they laid him on a straw mat. A sour stink rose from his body. Humfrid and Daria cleaned his wounds as well as they could, removing much of the grit and dried blood, while Alima prepared needle and thread. Humfrid glanced at his wife. Her back was bent and her fingers were shaking, and her face was in a concentrated grimace. She held the needle high above the dirt, but she knew it was a futile consideration. Humfrid leaned close and kissed her on the cheek. She smiled at him.

When Daria saw this, she scowled. "Tell him to concentrate on the wound, alright?"

Alima grunted in response. Her husband understood the other woman's meaning and returned his attention to Yusef's wound. "I apologize," he said in a dead tone, waiting for Alima to translate. "My mind wanders to the mystery that awaits us. Our contingent is broken and the others are gone, probably dead. Now I wonder, does the king hold the prize we so dearly sought?"

Alima translated, and Daria answered the man: "The mystery will be solved when Yusef opens his eyes." She pointed down to their comrade's bloody chest.

Humfrid quickly nodded, and Alima cursed quietly in her husband's Norse tongue.

"She's right," the man told his wife. "She's close to snapping, but she's right."

"We're all close to snapping," said Alima.

"Yes, it's true. The heat and the blood don't help. Nor does the vain errand we're on. If this man dies, the bauble's whereabouts are lost."

"He won't die."

"Don't lie, my wife. That wound is festering."

"Are you the doctor?"

He chuckled. "No. You are the doctor. Yet we will soon again be five comrades, not six."

He turned to wring his rag, but when he returned his attention to Yusef's chest, the wounded man slowly opened his eyes and blinked several times. He gasped, then coughed. His chest shook and blood swelled from the cut and ran down his ribs. He grabbed Daria's wrist, but she stumbled back, frightened, and cried out. She looked frantically for Delarum and shouted for the older woman.

Delarum soon approached with Abdullah in tow.

~

The five Marxists crowded around their wounded comrade. Their shadows covered him, and when he looked into the eyes of his friends, he saw his near death reflected in them. He bade Delarum closer and she bent down and knelt by his head.

"Forgive me," she told him. "I was afraid the monarchists let you free to set a trap."

"No one followed," he said, staring at her.

Delarum found it difficult to meet his eyes. She looked at his wound, and when that became too painful, she looked away. "What happened?" she asked.

"Our ambush failed. We slew all but one of the mercenaries, but the one who survived fled into the city. He carried the prize with him."

"He was the one who hurt you?"

He coughed. "No. I was unscathed in the attack. I hid in the city for almost a week waiting for my chance to flee. I thought I was out of danger. Bandits attacked me on the road here. This morning. They cut me open," he said, fingering the edges of his cut flesh. He broke into another coughing fit and more blood seeped from his wound. When he calmed, he continued: "I brought my horse to the ground and hid for hours. The beast woke me when it rose."

"And the others?" asked Delarum. "How do they fare? Are they alive?"

At first, he did not answer. He looked away and breathed more quickly, shivering as his chest heaved. "Delarum," he whispered, and she came closer. He grabbed her by the shoulder, his cold, wet fingers against her skin. "The others . . ."

"Yes?"

". . . are not . . ."

"Yes, Yusef?"

No more words came. His parted mouth was slack.

She waited, staring into the man's dim eyes. The color in his cheeks was gone. His fingers fell from her shoulders, and his chest was still. A final rasp came from his lips.

Delarum felt the weight of her comrades' eyes. They all leaned behind her, nervously. Humfrid uttered something in his foreign tongue and Alima answered quietly. Daria laid a hand on Delarum's shoulder. Abdullah remained silent.

Delarum closed Yusef's eyes. She cupped his cheeks with both of her hands and slowly kissed each. The stench from his wounds grew worse. She shut her eyes, hoping no tears would show.

After a moment, she heard the others stand to their feet. She knew they waited for her to join them, but she couldn't yet. She lifted her head and stared up at the blue sky, and the cruel sun blazed. Her forehead beaded with sweat, and the tears in the corners of her eyes stung. She lowered her head a second time, kissing Yusef upon his closed eyelids. "We wait," she said. "We wait through the night for our comrades. If they do not return, we leave for Homs."

She stood and wiped the tears from her eyes. "Agreed?"

Her friends nodded. "Agreed," they all said.

She turned to the young one. "Abdullah. Come here, boy."

He stepped forward. "Yes, Delarum?"

"Sleep now if you can. When darkness falls, you watch over us."

"Too dangerous for campfire?"

"Yes," she said.

"Very well," he replied. He took his spear and left for a shady spot beneath a tree. The others began to dig a grave.

~

Ghazi and Gilgamesh walked shoulder-to-shoulder, underground, in a tunnel somewhere beneath Damascus. They were led by two members of the Royal Guard, and behind them two more followed. All four of the police were armored. Amreekan swords hung from their belts and they carried torches to light the way. Under his arm, Ghazi carried the bundle he had taken from the dead mercenary. The troop kept a quick and steady pace.

The tunnel had been rough at first, damp and musty, but the walls were hewn now and the floor flat. The air was stale, but it no longer smelled of earth. The only scent was the smoke from burning torches. It was a labyrinth; they had turned left or right so many times that although the thief's memory was sharp, he was lost. He could guess at the ultimate destination, though, and if he was right, there was no return from it. He glanced at the ethereal creature beside him. It kept its pace quietly, with eyes forward and with its sharp-toothed smile fixed.

Ghazi whistled. "Do you remember when we first met?" he asked. "I will never forget that day."

"I remember," replied Gilgamesh. "You were afraid, then. And young."

"Of course I was. It was a long time ago."

"Not so long."

Ghazi shrugged. "It was a while back."

"I misspeak," said the statue. "The past is the present. You are still young and you are still afraid. But now you hide your fear. You think you hide it well."

The thief spat. "This errand? Right now? I'm scared?"

"I speak the truth, always," said Gilgamesh. "I will not let you forget."

"Forget what, fool?"

"Murder."

Ghazi stopped, his face red with anger. He turned to face his friend. "Do not insult me today," he said as the rear guards bumped into him from behind. The thief ignored them.

He continued: "Or do you never tire of it? We go now to conclude our greatest adventure and you have nothing but insults."

"Have you gone blind?" asked Gilgamesh. "Your stride is eager, but you hasten only into chains

heavier than any you've ever worn before.”

“I see fine,” said Ghazi, indicating his angry eyes with two fingers. “I see perfectly.”

Finally, one of the rear guards spoke. “To whom do you speak?” he asked. But Ghazi still ignored him. He waited for Gilgamesh's rebuttal. The guardsman scowled and reached for his weapon, but his companion stopped him and silently shook his head. He pointed discreetly at the two guards ahead who had stopped and turned around. When the forward guards returned, they found Ghazi staring at the stone wall, now nodding his head, looking satisfied. One of them offered Ghazi his free hand. “Are you well?” he asked. “Do you require assistance?”

Ghazi shook his head. “No.”

“I heard you speak,” said the guard, “but I could not understand what you meant.”

“My apologies,” replied the thief. “I've been mumbling a poem, trying to remember the verses, but they're lost to me.” He waved ahead. “Please continue.”

“You'll follow?”

Ghazi nodded.

“Very well.”

The guard turned back and they resumed their urgent pace.

~

They marched silently and Gilgamesh reappeared and called the thief's name. Ghazi did not respond. Gilgamesh called again, more loudly, but Ghazi remained quiet as he proceeded. He did not glance at the creature or make any acknowledgement; he simply looked ahead glowering. Gilgamesh did not relent. The creature's voice boomed through the tunnel. It shook the stones, and Ghazi's bones rattled and his shoulders pinched. He cursed loudly.

“You are a child,” he said. “What do you want now?”

“I wish only to warn you. The magics in the chamber you approach are powerful. Do not anger those inside or they will kill you.”

“They might kill me, yes. There is always risk with reward.”

“I won't be able to follow you in,” said the statue. “I'm powerless here.”

Ghazi laughed. “You're powerless everywhere.”

Gilgamesh thrust out his spear, blocking Ghazi's path. The thief cursed and stopped to face his ghost friend again.

“Do not forget fear,” said the creature. “Your life depends on it.”

“I know,” said Ghazi. He turned to the guards and shrugged apologetically, repeating himself, “I know.”

Gilgamesh withdrew his spear. “Heed my words. That is all I ask.”

Ghazi grimaced. “I'm not a fool. Can you not see this?”

“No,” said Gilgamesh.

“Fine, my friend. Fair enough. I will die old and happy in a warm bed somewhere, under your watchful eyes. But for now, we continue.”

~

Ahead, there was a thick, wooden door, trimmed and studded with iron, and there were two more Royal Guard defending it. They saluted as the troop approached and the two in the lead saluted in return. No words were spoken and the six guards together formed a gauntlet, three to a side.

Ghazi walked through their formation and waited as one of the guards opened the door slowly. It rumbled and scraped the ground. Ghazi stepped through the threshold into darkness and behind him Gilgamesh dissipated into nothingness. As Ghazi looked around, the same guard pulled the door shut

behind him.

~

The thief could see and hear nothing. He did not stumble or fall, but advanced to where he guessed was the middle of the room. He stopped and set the bundled package down. The air was heavy and smelled of incense and blood. The floor felt dry. He felt around for a chair or stool but found nothing.

“Hello?” he said.

From high above, several small lights flickered to life. They were dim but brightening to show a round chamber. There were twelve in all, hung from the walls at equal spacing. Ghazi could not see the ceiling above, nor the ground below.

“Hello?” he asked again.

The twelve torches flashed suddenly, and their light revealed everything. The chamber was large, and others stared down at him on all sides from a great stone gallery hugging the wall high off the ground. The gallery had a massive iron railing, and behind it stood the dark figures shoulder-to-shoulder with cowls pulled over their heads. Some leaned forward in silence, with their gloved hands on the railing. Others whispered to each other, but Ghazi could not catch their words.

One of them pulled a golden scepter marked with jewels from his dark robe and raised it into the air. He bellowed for the others to be silent, and they obeyed. Those close to him shifted away to give him space.

Ghazi waited for this man to speak again, but when he did not, the thief stepped forward.

“Who are you?” he asked, and in response, all the lights dimmed except for one, shining above him with the scepter. Shadows fell all around.

The man gripped the railing with one gloved hand and pointed the jeweled scepter down at Ghazi. He addressed the thief in a deep voice that filled the chamber: “Ghazi al-Khalid. Thrice-cursed, cheater of the noose, born of Canaan, and thief of the mountain.”

“Yes,” said Ghazi. “You know much about me.”

“You stand now in judgment before the Circle.”

“In judgment?” The thief shook his head. “I brought you your treasure.”

“Show us,” said the scepter holder.

Ghazi pulled a small knife from his tunic and bent to cut away the rope and furs that wrapped the treasure. He revealed a large, three-gallon glass bottle, and inside of it was a miniature city. There were minarets that reached high to tiny stars in an inky night sky. There was a palace with a colorful garden and the greenery inside swayed with a cool breeze. Barracks and small houses surrounded these larger structures and smoke billowed from their chimneys. The city was surrounded by a defensible wall and tiny guards walked the perimeter. At the gate, merchants and donkeys waited for entrance, coming from a road that led nowhere. Trapping everything inside was a large cork stopper plugged deep into the bottle's lip.

Ghazi tucked the knife back into his tunic and lifted the bottle with both hands, holding it over his head and turning to show everyone in the room.

They gazed in entranced silence.

Ghazi set the bottle down again, and took a step back. “Here it is,” he said. “What of my payment?”

The speaker nodded once. “I am pleased with you.” He waved his scepter to the others. “We all are, and we will grant you gold for the prize you have brought us.”

Ghazi bowed. “The Circle honors me.”

“And you will honor us,” said their leader, pointing down at the thief, “with the completion of your second task.”

“So quickly? What would you have me do?”

“Those who ambushed our mercenaries, those who failed to steal the prize by your feet—”

“Yes?”

“They are usurpers,” spoke another from the crowd. “They seek advantage over the throne.”

“They seek chaos,” said the holder of the scepter. “Anarchy.” He put the scepter down upon the railing and tightened his gloves over his fingers. “They want the death of the monarchy and the death of the state. They want the aristocracy gone, replaced by councils of . . .” His voice became acidic. “. . . common workers.”

“Their rise would be bloody chaos!” Ghazi heard from behind.

And from another, “They bring the kernel of a disaster. A plague!”

“Find them,” said their leader. “Kill them all.”

“Kill them all,” repeated the crowd. “Kill them all.”

Ghazi looked over his shoulder, to where Gilgamesh might be, but there was no one. His eyes dropped to the ground. “Honored Speaker of the Circle,” he said, “I do not see why this task is given to me.”

Their leader took the scepter back into his hand. “You are chosen because you are capable.”

“Must it be me?” asked the thief. He bowed again. “I mean no contention, Speaker. I apologize for raising the point, but if this task requires murder, why not hire an assassin?”

A soft voice came from his left. “Is this impudence?” it asked.

There was a murmured response, but Ghazi did not hear it.

“You might have me pick a merchant's pocket, or plant evidence on a noble. I'm skilled at such tasks as that—”

“This one speaks too often,” said one from the right.

Others concurred, and the murmuring began in earnest. Ghazi scanned the stones up to the ledge of the gallery for footholds and handholds, and without thought, his hand made for the hidden knife. He palmed it and quickly hid it in his pocket. It was likely no one noticed.

The murmuring continued. Ghazi waited.

Finally, the speaker brought silence back to the room. He lightly tapped the butt of the golden scepter against the railing, and although he tapped lightly, a thunderous boom filled the chamber. No one spoke.

Ghazi recognized the trick. He had used it himself a time or two for profit or protection. It was illusory magic, not very difficult. It gave the thief a laugh that a sorcerer of the Circle would use a street urchin's cantrip. *So be it*, he thought, *let these magicians wield their flames and magics, for they will quake at the sight of shadow giants.*

The speaker addressed him then, calling him “little man of the hills,” and Ghazi wondered if it would be appropriate to feign a shudder. He didn't.

“Have you killed before?” asked the speaker.

“Yes,” said Ghazi.

“Why?”

Anger flashed across Ghazi's eyes. “To refrain would have been death.”

“It was a necessary act,” said the speaker.

Ghazi nodded.

“And what necessity do you feel here, in this chamber, right now?”

Ghazi shrugged. “I don't understand.”

“You grope in the darkness,” said the speaker, “and we give you light. From this moment on, we are your mother and we are your father. We shall punish or reward as we see fit. Do not presume one or the other.” He tapped his scepter again against the iron railing and sparks flew from the jewel at its top. “I would enjoy breaking your will.”

Ghazi's hand crept again for the knife, but it froze at a high-pitched voice from behind: “You live

by our mercy! By our will! Show proper concern!”

“Of course,” said the thief, searching for the speaker, “of course. But if I may ask for a moment's sympathy—”

“You may ask for nothing,” said another. “If a hand is disobedient, it is chopped away. A new hand takes its place. Such is the way of things.”

Several in the crowd voiced their approval. “He must be taught,” said one of them.

“He must be taught,” the others echoed in unison.

Ghazi tried to will Gilgamesh to appear, but the floor remained empty. He glanced quickly back at the wooden door. He knew it was impenetrable. The stones of the gallery's ledge were smooth, laid too flush to climb. And besides that, these sorcerers outnumbered him twenty to one. He breathed deeply. His stomach tightened. “My friends,” he said, forcing a chuckle, “I am no murderer.”

The speaker aimed the golden scepter down at the thief. Raw lightning shot from the jeweled end and struck Ghazi in the left shoulder. The blow spun him, and he collapsed to his knees. His teeth chattered and his fingers felt numb as he clawed the empty air involuntarily. Another blast struck him in the back.

His chest spasmed, and he dropped, smashing his mouth against the stone floor. Blood and spittle dripped from his lips and wisps of smoke hovered, stinking of burnt flesh. His body was numb; his vision was blurred, and his mind cloudy.

The congregation above was silent. He thought he heard one speak and then others laughed. They waited for the speaker to proceed.

“Do you understand the necessity now?” asked their leader.

Slowly, Ghazi's arms and legs stopped trembling. He righted himself to lie on his back and he stared up at the robed figures with torches dimly wavering behind them. He spat blood and his mouth throbbed. “Yes,” he said.

The speaker nodded, his face pooled in shadow.

One who stood by him spoke with agitation. “The matter at hand!”

“Yes,” said the speaker. “The fugitives hide from their death in the mountains north of the city. Find them quickly, Ghazi, Thrice-Cursed. Find them and kill them.” He laid the scepter down. “When you are finished, you will report to the one who sent you to us. He will have further instruction. Now leave us.”

Ghazi crawled to the wooden door. It opened for him.

~

Night came. Above Mount Qassioun, thin clouds spread across the dark sky, and a bright, full moon shined behind them. Four of the Marxists slept, but Abdullah stayed awake. The stars twinkled above, and he could have counted a hundred of them, but his eyes were cast to the river running through the valley and to the road alongside it. He watched two jackals drink the running water. One stood guard while the other drank. Eventually they left, scampering and playing along the river's path.

Abdullah searched for other creatures of the night. He was bored and cold. His body was filthy from travel, and his chest and back itched. Behind him, Humfrid and Alima began to snore. He knew it was them. They were always the first to fall asleep, and they were always the first to start snoring. He thought them lucky to be married. He liked them both, especially the man from Scandinavia. The boy enjoyed listening to his strange words, and in secret, he enjoyed imitating them.

Daria slept between them and Delarum. The cold of night had made her plum nose red. She was a mystery to the boy. She was young, but not nearly as young as he. Often she was pleasant, but she could be morose and speak words that stung. Sometimes, she worked harder than the others, gave sound advice, and zealously believed in fair judgment and conduct. Other times she was so lazy she wouldn't move for anything. She confused the boy, and when he spoke to her, he never knew whether

to put on a smile or the stoic face of his childhood heroes. He spent much time avoiding her.

At the end of the row was Delarum. She was eldest of the comrades, and save for Humfrid, the tallest. The others respected her greatly. She had been a revolutionary longer than any of them, and was wise and brave. She elicited trust and fondness, but Abdullah worried for her. The expedition was a trying ordeal for all of them, and he saw how the others depended on her for strength. He did not know how one could give so much. He turned back to spy on the valley below.

Just in time, he caught a dark figure proceeding slowly along the river road. The boy squinted to focus. It was a single rider, cloaked and hooded upon a small horse. Abdullah jumped and went to fetch Delarum.

He grabbed her shoulder, shaking her as gently as he could manage. "Delarum," he whispered, "wake up."

Her eyes tensed, and slowly, she opened them. Abdullah brought a finger to his lips, and she nodded. He helped her to her feet.

They crept quietly back to the flat rock where the boy had kept watch, and although he knew she could not see, he pointed below to the river in the valley. "There is movement," he told her.

"How many?"

"One on horseback, walking along the river."

"What do you think?" she asked. "A scout for the Royal Guard?"

He shook his head. "I can't tell you. It's too dark."

Delarum sat cross-legged upon the boulder and rubbed her eyes. She was half asleep and her head thumped with pain. She longed for her humble bed back in Homs. Abdullah stared at her, waiting.

"We've been at camp for days," she said. "Only Yusef returned yesterday. I doubt the others will come."

"I suspect they're dead," said the boy. "I did not wish to say it with the others awake."

Delarum stared down at her lap with a rueful smile. "You're probably right. This mission was a mistake, no matter what prize King Dimashq captured."

"How do you know?" asked Abdullah.

"We are Marxists," she said. "We do not chase fairytale treasures. Now go and see what new danger we must face tonight."

Abdullah stood. "Gladly."

He handed the older woman his spear and then his clothing, piece by piece, as he undressed himself. When he was nude, he peeked over the edge of the rock. "Delarum," he said, "about Yusef and the others—"

"I know," she said. "Stay alert and keep your eyes open. Do not engage the enemy."

The boy nodded and closed his eyes. A wind blew up over the rock's edge, and he shivered. He breathed deeply, raising his arms.

"Do you hear me?" said Delarum.

Abdullah smiled. "Of course I hear you. I will keep safe." Small openings appeared all along his arms and shoulders and long, colorful feathers sprouted forth. "But I might take my time in the open air."

The skin on his face stretched back and curled at his ears, his smile becoming grotesque. His teeth jutted forward, beyond his lips, growing greatly. He stifled a scream of pain and bent forward. More feathers pushed out along his back, down to his rear. His elongated teeth melded into two solid shapes, one above the other, until his mouth was gone and in its place was a long, black beak. The boy shivered. "The hours on this rock," he croaked, "have driven me mad."

His human face was gone; it disappeared beneath a great plume. His body shrunk and his toes became talons at the end of fragile legs. His fingers sunk into the bones of his wings, and great feathers of red, purple, and blue covered him completely. He hopped toward the edge of the boulder, and in eagle form, he plummeted into the darkness.

Delarum watched him catch a draft and fly away.

~

In the valley below, Soha rode along the river upon her small, unruly horse. It wasn't raining here as it had been in Damascus, but the cold wind was growing stronger. She was thankful for the thick cloak Grandmother had given her. It was still wet from the rain, but it had kept the layers of clothing beneath completely dry and she was warm.

The horse was both her mount and her guide, and she was thankful for that, too. She had never known darkness as deep as the country at night. The full moon shined above but seemed to afford little sight. There was nothing except for the chirping, chattering, and howling of the nocturnal creatures of Mount Qassioun. She pet the horse's neck and held the reins tightly. She hoped the animal was as tired as she was, and she hoped they would soon stop. The six hours from the city had exhausted her, and although she feared she might fall from the saddle, she would welcome the rest.

Then, she saw something in the middle the road. It glowed with the light of the moon. It was a massive, old tree with huge roots, a thick trunk, and long branches, now dead and leafless. There was no bark on the tree. Its skin was a light gray, smooth as marble, and the stout roots grew right up to the river bed.

When Soha drew close, she tugged once on the horse's reins. Nothing happened. She pulled the reins taut and held them. And then the animal slowed and stopped beside the tree.

Relieved, Soha sighed, dropped the reins and slowly dismounted. When her feet touched the ground, she gasped. Her sore legs wobbled and burned. She needed to sit, but she looked around warily. Nothing stirred in the darkness. She was alone with a dead tree and a horse. The river had gone quiet, and the animals in the distance couldn't be heard. She looked above, and there at least was the moon. That gave her the small comfort that the world had not vanished.

She pulled the wet cloak from her shoulders, found a low branch, and hung the garment to dry. For a moment, the wind sighed and whistled as it stirred the garment. The noise was queer. Soha shrugged and limped weakly to the saddlebags, where she pulled a blanket free and wrapped it around her shoulders. She found a spot to sit nestled between two large roots and leaned against the smooth trunk. Her entire body ached. Her feet were swollen and her head buzzed with fatigue. She promised herself only two hours of sleep. With her eyes already closing, she pulled out the jeweled dagger the assassin had left her to cut her bonds and concealed it under the blanket. She let herself sleep.

~

Abdullah glided through the air with his wings spread and his gaze downward. He tilted his body and slowly circled the girl below. It seemed as though she would fall asleep soon. Her movements had seemed sluggish as she left the horse and sat by the tree. Her eyes were now closed, and in the cold air of the night, her face was flushed and beautiful. He followed the line of her jaw to her soft skin and lips. He swooped closer. Her head tilted to the side, revealing her neck, and his heart pounded in his chest. He would have laughed at himself if he'd still had a human throat and tongue.

He would have to wake her, he decided. His comrades were depending on him.

He landed on a branch just above where her cloak hung, and he considered how best to get her attention. He buffeted his wings vigorously, but that did not wake her; he clawed at the branch with his sharp talons, but that did not wake her either. He took a moment to study her. She was covered by the dust of the road. It was on her tunic, on her hair. He doubted she could smell like anything but a dirty traveler, but she was beautiful to him. *This must be her first stop*, he thought. *She must have felt it unsafe to clean herself in the river at night, or perhaps the cold prevented her.*

His curiosity quickly grew unbearable and he mustered as deep a voice as he could. "It will be

very cold tonight. You'll need a fire to stay warm.”

Soha did not wake up.

He waited. Still, she slept.

He hopped down and landed on the wet cloak, shaking droplets loose. “A fire will do you good if you shiver in the night.”

The girl did not stir.

He continued to wait, watching her closely. He tried to will her eyelids to open or flutter, but when that did not work, he fluttered down and landed right in front of her. She was calm and her chest rose and fell with a slow rhythm. All that could be heard was the subdued whistle of the wind. That was his cue. He flapped his wings three times and screeched as loudly as he could.

~

Soha awoke with a start. She hit the back of her head against the trunk and grunted in pain. Her neck seized. She pulled the dagger free from the blanket and slashed the air this way and that, cursing and looking about.

“My apologies,” said the bird. “I’ll wait for you to regain your senses.”

“Who is there?” she asked.

“Look to your feet. Do you see me?”

And there, a few inches from her toes, was a small eagle with colorful feathers, gripping the earth with its talons.

“Greetings,” it said.

The girl’s lips trembled. The bird hopped, and the girl scrambled backward, standing against the tree trunk, and pointing the dagger down incredulously. “You speak!” she whispered.

“Yes,” it said, its voice breaking. “My name is Abdullah. It is a pleasure to meet you.”

The bird stretched its wings in an attempt to bow.

“Are you jinn?” said Soha, “or am I dreaming?”

“You are not dreaming,” said the bird. “I am really here and I am no demon of smokeless flame. Nor am I any other ghost come to haunt you.”

“But you do come to haunt,” she said, her wits returning. She advanced with the dagger forward and the blanket fell from her shoulders. The bird hopped a few paces away.

“Curiosity brings me,” it said, and it raised its beak to the clouds. “There is always danger in the valley. I must know if you mean me harm.”

Soha shrugged. “I wish harm upon no one.”

“Not even those from whom you flee?”

The girl scowled. “Who are you?”

“I am a bird who speaks and a boy who sees what others cannot.”

“What?” she said.

“I shall show you, but if you get scared, please don’t stab me.”

Slowly, Soha nodded.

Abdullah glanced to his rear, and seeing nothing, he tucked in his wings and huddled close to the earth. He closed his eyes. His small body began to shake, his feathers quivering, and a moment later, he screeched in pain. Soha watched in horror as the bird doubled, then tripled in size. Feathers fell from its body. Its talons became soft flesh and several digits extended from the ends of its wings. Olive skin appeared where the feathers fell, black hair sprouting from it. The eagle’s beak splintered and shrunk, transforming into two rows of teeth. Lips unfurled to cover them. The creature’s head grew larger, and as a full mop of hair grew on top, bloodshot human eyes rose to gaze at Soha.

The girl gasped. The dagger almost fell out of her hand. “If you come close,” she said, “I shall kill you.”

The boy only raised his finger to ask for a moment and began to cough. He doubled over, shaking violently, his face turning red. He groped with two fingers into his mouth, and gagging, he pulled free a large, wet feather. "How do they get in there?" he asked.

Soha slowly shook her head.

He smiled and wiped tears from his eyes. "From whom do you flee?"

"I am a traveler," she told him, staring at the discarded feathers surrounding his feet. "I do not flee."

"Yet your weary eyes, that fur at your feet, the jeweled dagger in your hand—they speak the truth."

"Truth?" she scoffed. "Truly you must be a ghost, to stand in the nude paying no mind to the cold, telling me my own story."

Abdullah's cheeks flushed. He covered his genitals. "I tell you again—I am no ghost. I am Abdullah of the House of Habash, and I do feel the cold."

Soha tightened her grip on the dagger.

"Your name, my lady?"

"My name is my own," she told the boy. "I come from no house."

The boy stammered. "I— I meant . . . I'm only curious."

He turned his gaze, to the horse by her side. From the saddle hung four large bags. If they were full of food and nothing else, the boy estimated her journey would last a week.

"May I sit?" he asked, extending his hand to the ground between them. She did not respond. He waited, briefly, then sat down. "Please," he said, "join me."

~

The throne room of Palace Dimashq was large. Its walls were adorned with illustrations of the French master, Dulac, who was a favorite of King Dimashq. The scenes depicted were from stories of old, from the Tale of the Mermaid, to the story of King Yunan and the sage Duban, to the story of the Fisherman and the Bottled Devil. Some pieces were reproductions, but Dimashq loved them all. The throne room also boasted a thick, woven carpet of vivid purple and gold. It was so comfortable that the king permitted guests to walk barefoot in the hall. In the center was the throne, large, carved of dark wood, and inlaid with gold.

On this day the king ate lunch there. He sat upon the throne and ate from a small table laid by a court attendant. Squash was served. It had been hollowed and stuffed with rice, beef, and spices, all boiled in a savory tomato sauce. Next to it was a plate of yogurt topped with bits of cucumber and dried, ground mint. Village food. The king sampled such fare from time to time, and with it, always, he had anise tea.

A servant stood a few paces away, and behind them stood two others: an accountant and Ibn Khaldun. They studied records of state while the king ate his meal.

"Not bad," he said, chewing a piece of squash dipped in yogurt. "Pity you won't join me." He cocked his eye back toward the wazir. "I feel indulgent when I eat alone."

"Forgive me," said the tall man.

The king handed the wazir his fork with a piece of squash at the end, covered in yogurt. "Take it before it drips."

"Thank you."

Ibn Khaldun swallowed the food quickly. A bit did drip onto the carpet, but he rubbed it in with the sole of his shoe. As he handed the fork back to King Dimashq, the heavy doors of the throne room opened and a young chamberlain dressed in gilded finery walked through. He bowed before the king and announced the arrival of Sir Henry of Amreeka. King Dimashq dismissed him.

Henry and Tim walked in. They were shoulder-to-shoulder, and behind them came the scribe, Alexander. The three stopped before the throne and bowed to King Dimashq. He gestured back in

greeting.

Henry smiled. "Tell me, King Dimashq—"

The king interrupted him. "Honored elder," he said, "you returned to my realm on King's Day, my day, and you celebrated well into the night. You have spent the days since eating fine food and resting long hours in my garden. And now, you stand before me smiling, but your eyes are wary and your voice quivers."

Henry bowed again. "Yes, Great King. You are right."

The king sighed. "If you're worried about something, try the dip. It's quite good."

"Great King," said Henry, "It is Emperor Amreeka who is worried. Your people are angry. They complain, and some refuse labor. While they are few in number now, how many more will strike in the days to come? And there are militant dissidents among them."

"I know."

"They call themselves Marxists and Anarchists."

"I know what they call themselves."

"They have a network that spans the empire."

King Dimashq laughed. "Such is the modern age, Sir Henry. I must say, I'm happy to see your face again." He winked at Tim. "Learn from him, young one. Others fill my ear with chatter and chatter before they get to their business. But Henry hates these meetings so much, he never wastes time getting to the point. This is simply an inconvenience between one bottle and the next, eh?"

Tim smirked.

"Yet, you are right, Henry," continued the king. "My people are angry. My people are always angry. If we are to discuss some empire-spanning network, I must remind you that your people are your own problem."

"What then, Great King?"

King Dimashq cut the last portion of squash into small pieces. He carefully dolloped yogurt onto each one. The mixture of the mint and cucumber smelled refreshing. He signaled for the servant to refill his tea.

"King Dimashq?" said Henry.

The king ate more. "Southwest," he said, swallowing. "As always, the solution lies southwest of my borders." He poked at another piece of squash and took a bite.

"The Palestinians are a temporary solution," said Henry. "How often will you depend on this ploy of yours? What will you do if it doesn't work?"

The king stopped chewing. "My ploy? They are your vassals who invaded Palestine. They are your vassals who murdered the people and drove the children from the land. And they are your vassals who occupy Palestine still, yes?"

"Yes," said Henry. "Of course."

"Then it is your ploy," said King Dimashq. "I use it begrudgingly."

"You have used it, Great King, from the beginning of your reign."

"I have," said the king. He spat a chunk of squash back onto his plate. "And it is no secret your generals in Palestine wish to clear more land for themselves. Let them. They are gifted at making war on peasants."

Sir Henry looked down and stared at the carpet. He rubbed his cheeks. "Our vassals already plan to demolish more houses this week. The occupation continues as it should."

"So there is the solution to your worries. But there is no solution to this humble meal." The king waved his hand, annoyed, and the servant took the small table of food away.

"But what do we do after?" asked Henry.

"Nothing more."

Henry took a step forward. "Great King, we cannot remain still. We must guarantee the continuation of trade. When the disease of rebellion spreads, it spreads quickly."

The king stood. He placed one hand on his hip and pointed at Sir Henry. "Listen to me, dignitary. When your generals have demolished those houses and when the Palestinians have dug their dead children from the rubble, I will turn to my subjects and say, 'Look! Look at what they do to your brothers and sisters!' For the Arab people are great, truly, but their attention is easily swayed. Their anger will turn from us to the occupation and they will cry horror. But they are powerless to act. Their conviction will weaken and their rage will cool."

Henry shook his head. "No, Great King. I beg your pardon, but you're wrong. Their rage will not cool. These dissidents are organizing with the workers."

"They are the damn workers!"

"Yes, Great King. That is why the emperor is worried for you."

The king laughed again. "You have deceived me, Sir Henry. You have indeed chattered in my ears and now you begin with your true business. What, then, do you suggest? What do you know so well?"

Sir Henry stepped back. "Again, my pardon."

The king waved his hand, and Henry continued: "Our trade has made you quite wealthy, Great King."

"And you have taken my oil at a bargain."

"But that is not the matter at hand," said Henry. "The point remains: chaos will not be tolerated. Our Legions are here, yes, but only to aid you in construction of the wells. If this arrangement of ours is to continue, it is your responsibility to maintain order."

"Make your point, diplomat."

"You are in breach of our contract. You are to purchase arms twice in a year and you have not done so since . . ." Sir Henry glanced at the scroll Alexander held in his hands. "You are long overdue."

The king sat back down. "So that is why you have come. The empire needs my oil and my gold."

"Your swords are rusted and your shields are bent. Your cavalry cannot boast one healthy horse. Your archers wield bows of warped wood and they haven't fletched an arrow since you took the city. Do you deny this?"

The king was silent.

"Great King?"

After a moment, the king spoke, and Sir Henry sighed. "It is I who will speak the truth. Those peasants you fear, those who organize for revolt, they tremble at the approach of my Royal Guard. No other king can boast a single guardsman as thorough, as efficient, and as well-armed as mine."

"True," said Henry, "but the Guard are your police. They are few. And as it stands, the peasants could defeat your Royal Army taking up only their sickles and hammers."

"Farmers need spines to lift arms against soldiers. Is that not true?"

"You are avoiding the matter at hand."

"No, I am not."

Henry sneered. "Tell me," he said, "do you believe the emperor would hesitate to bring the Imperial Legion into the city itself? Do you believe he would allow them to sit by while disaster looms? As I have told you, he is quite worried. You are not helping to relieve his distress."

King Dimashq shot back, his face trembling: "You threaten me?"

Henry almost chuckled. "No. Of course not, Great King. You are the ruler of Shem. You are the wisest of Arab monarchs. I would not dare to threaten you if the angels flew down and demanded it. The Imperial Legion is best left at the wells outside your wondrous city. I insist the sovereignty of Damascus lie in the hands of its ruler—of you, my king. But the emperor has commanded me not to leave your realm until there is a military here capable of proper defense. Either yours or ours."

"He's left you no choice."

"Relieve his worries, my king. It has been so long since your last purchase."

The red in the king's cheeks drained and his face grew somber. He glanced back at Ibn Khaldun.

"It pains me to know I have troubled the emperor so."

"You must buy new weapons," continued Henry. "We should start, at the very least, with your armored cavalry. The local divisions."

"But soon you will ask for the rest."

Henry smiled. "Our prices are reasonable, and they are discounted for trusted allies."

The king chortled. "I wonder which of us is the greater fool."

"I don't understand," said Henry, but the king ignored him, turning back to glance again at Ibn Khaldun. He found the wazir rigid and silent, as ever. King Dimashq chuckled again.

"I will buy your weapons," he said to Henry, "but not now. I'm tired of negotiating. Would you grant me a small wish and return tomorrow?"

"Of course," said Henry. "I will return as soon as you ask. Your words have reassured me."

The king nodded and Henry signaled his two companions to leave, but before following them out, he turned briefly back to face the throne. "I apologize for upsetting his highness during his meal."

"All is forgiven," said King Dimashq with a courteous smile. "I was merely snacking."

The three foreigners left the chamber, and King Dimashq steeled himself for the attack he knew would soon come. It came quickly.

"Why do you play this game?" came Ibn Khaldun's sharp voice. "You mock them as you negotiate."

"They mock me."

"You appeared as a lunatic."

"Yes, so? They hold all the power here. They know this. Why shouldn't I have fun with them? They will always fear my lunacy, for they fear the disruption of trade. They fear their masters will punish them for it. So be it. If all life will grant me is to leverage those fears, I will find my pleasure in it."

"Your pleasure?"

"Yes. My pleasure, wazir. Now be quiet."

"As you wish," said the wazir.

"As I wish," answered the king.

~

Ghazi rode into the valley of Mount Qassioun on a horse given to him by the Circle. The full moon glowed in the dark sky and a cool breeze tickled his bruised face. His back was still sore. He held one hand out, palm upward, and a small flame danced over it. It warmed his fingers.

Gilgamesh glided through the air beside him, so ethereal in form he was almost invisible. "You light our way," he said.

"Yes," replied Ghazi.

"Why?"

Ghazi reined his horse. "How else shall we see?"

"I see by the sun or the stars, in daylight or darkness."

"I don't."

The horse slowed and Gilgamesh followed suit. The apparition's form grew more substantial. He raised a hand, beckoning for Ghazi's attention. "You have guided yourself by moonlight before, even when you were younger."

"Not now."

"Let me guide you, then. Put out that flame and I will navigate. You are aware of my abilities."

Ghazi scoffed. "If I banish this light, your voice will signal our enemies instead."

"In the night," said Gilgamesh, "a fire is seen for a great distance. Even a flame that small. I shall whisper my words of warning."

“No. Be quiet. I need to consider my options.” But Ghazi knew strategy was futile. His eyes flickered with the small flame and his mind raced with the sound of the river beside them. His shoulders drooped.

“You have no options,” the creature said to him. “Stop fooling, and find a cave to hide in.”

Ghazi turned away from the apparition. He did not want to hide. The caves of these mountains held rats, brigands, or worse—old ghosts.

“You’re right,” he told Gilgamesh. “But what hiding place is there from the Circle? Where can I hide from those magicians?”

“If you cannot hide, what are you going to do?”

But then Gilgamesh understood.

“Ah!” he said. “Your fire will alert your enemies, and when they flee, you will chase them, slowly.”

“Something like that.”

“For how long?” asked the creature.

“I don’t know. I’ve lived on the road before. It always gives me time to think of something better. Perhaps I will follow these criminals forever, or until the Circle forgets about me.”

“It’s a stupid plan,” said Gilgamesh. “You must face what you have done. You cannot delay the conclusion of things.”

Ghazi scowled and spat at the creature’s feet. “The conclusion of things? What of the scar around my neck? What of my mother and father, and my sister? I can delay anything but the chatter of the statue bound to me by sorcery.”

“There is no sorcery here, boy. Only madness.”

Ghazi gave a muffled chuckle, and suddenly saw the absurd creature beside him as though for the first time. He laughed again and again and Gilgamesh stared blankly ahead. Ghazi’s laughter turned maniacal until his sides hurt and tears ran down his cheeks. The sound filled the night, and the creatures in the darkness answered his call.

“It will be difficult, what you plan,” said his friend.

When Ghazi calmed down a bit, he remembered their situation. “Yes,” he said, still smiling. “I know.”

~

Tim was eager to meet Nadine again. He had learned quickly why Henry despised the daily procedures and meetings of palace life. The negotiation with the king had further soured the old diplomat’s disposition. Gladly, Tim undertook his secondary duties, and he was thankful Henry was no longer fit for them himself.

He left the palace to search for the young woman. They had already met a second time, drinking coffee at a cafe near her father’s house, and their conversation had been pleasant and energetic. Now, they were to meet again, in the same park where they had first talked. Tim walked more swiftly. The air cooled with the setting of the sun, and he found himself almost jogging over the gray cobblestones. When he reached the grass, he saw her at a distance, sitting alone on a bench with her back turned. He crept from behind, and when he came close, he bent down to her ear. “Were you frightened I would not come?”

She laughed with delight. “I was frightened you’d be stinking of sweat by the time you ran over.”

“Don’t worry. I don’t stink too badly.” He walked around the bench and sat down. “Go ahead. Sniff me and make sure.”

Nadine laughed again, and bent her head to the side of his neck and inhaled. She smiled. “You smell fine.”

“You do, too,” said Tim, putting his arm around her shoulders and pulling her closer to him. “But

where will you take me tonight? You promised me something special when we first met.”

“I want to take you to Plum Hill. You can see everything from the top. You'll love it.”

~

They left the park and took a carriage to Plum Hill, on the edge of the royal district, where the large factories of the industrial quarter loomed beyond the walls. The grass on the hill was damp and soft, and the two climbed quickly to the top. There were no trees, only small shrubs with stiff, purple leaves. The stars in the quiet sky shined above them, staring in silence at the city below.

“It's peaceful here,” said Tim.

“It is,” answered Nadine. She sighed and turned to him, taking his hands in hers. The moonlight shined in her untroubled eyes.

“Why do they call it Plum Hill?” he asked.

She chuckled. “I don't know.”

Tim bent forward and brushed his lips against hers, and when she closed her eyes, he kissed her. The breeze blew on them as they embraced tightly, and she pulled him down by the elbows. Their knees matted the soft grass, the blades tickling them both. Nadine laughed once more, playfully, and they lay in silence.

~

Afterward, they slept. Their skin was bare and sweaty, but the breeze cooled them. Tim snored and Nadine woke first. She rolled onto Tim's chest, and resting her chin on his shoulder, she watched the city streets below Plum Hill.

The royal district was asleep, but among the factories beyond the wall, there was a busy mass of bodies in the street. The crowd was dotted with fire. People marched, some carrying banners, some carrying torches. Others beat drums in unison as the crowd chanted. Nadine could not hear them well.

She sat up and shook Tim awake.

“What is it?” he whispered.

“Look,” she said, pointing to the scene.

Slowly, he sat up and squinted. “What is it?”

“Shouldn't you know? It's a solidarity march with the striking oil workers.”

“Oh, yes,” he said. “I was supposed to be there. To observe.” He kissed her lightly on her bare shoulder. “I wanted to be with you, instead.”

“Aren't you lucky then? You are here with me, and you can claim you observed the march. It wouldn't be a lie.”

Tim stared down at the mass of people. “No, it wouldn't.”

“The strike has begun in earnest.”

“The strike began when the miners stopped working, Nadine.”

“What will happen now?” she asked.

“I don't know. We should negotiate, I suppose. Hear them out. But if their demands are outlandish, and they usually are, the king will send his army and the workers will be smashed. It will be an easy thing. We just sold him enough barding for five hundred horses.” Tim stretched his arms. “But if somehow his army fails, the Imperial Legion will not.”

Nadine frowned. “They're still people, Tim. They're still human beings. It's true, they should not break the law, but all they want are a few comforts.”

“A few comforts? When you see how greedy they become, your patience will run more thin than the emperor's.”

“What do you mean?”

“You won't like those Old City cafes so much when you have to share the tables with their kind.”

“Oh? You know me so well?”

“I don't know,” he said, turning. “Perhaps I don't.”

Nadine stood and began to dress herself. “I want to see it from a closer view.”

“Fine,” said Tim.

“Don't you?”

“No.”

“Why not?” she said, pulling her sweater over her shoulders.

“I've seen it before. Besides, there's no reason for both of us to get arrested.”

Nadine scowled. She turned away and began to climb down the hill.

“When will we meet next?” Tim asked.

She stopped for a moment. “I don't know. Bail me out of jail and we'll figure it out.”

He laughed and watched her go. When he was alone, he tried again to fall asleep.

~

“Gilgamesh?” whispered the thief.

The statue's voice was gruff. “What is it?”

“Do you remember our adventure in Thebes? When I was barely still a boy?”

“Yes.”

“Do you remember the cleric I robbed? The one who had a son?”

“Yes.”

Ghazi breathed deeply. “I remember the boy well.”

“We have met many in our travels,” said the ghost.

“Yes, but not like him. I have spent my life looking on at people like him. But my path always leads me another way.”

“You've had opportunities.”

“For what? Escape? No, my friend. There have been none. I'm still looking.”

Gilgamesh growled. “Do not hide behind the conceit of destiny. There is no excuse for what you have done.”

“I know that,” spat the thief. He sighed. “I had a dream last night. I was there again in the cleric's house. It was just as it happened. I crept to the boy's room under glamour—disguised as a guardsman.”

“I remember,” said the ghost.

Ghazi reined up and the horse slowed. “I watched him for a while as he slept. He breathed softly. There was a water jug set on a small table by his bed. He slept undisturbed. He was calm and safe.”

“He was,” said the ghost.

“He was beautiful. I wanted to lift his sheets and rest beside him. I wanted to hold him against me, and I wanted to see if he felt as warm as he appeared.”

“You almost did.”

“I imagined how long I might keep his body against my own before he woke and screamed for the guards. But what if he did not wake? Would I fall asleep holding him—only to be woken by the butcher's axe?” Ghazi turned away from the statue and stared down at the small flame lighting their way. “I already had his father's jewels. I knelt down to pull the rings from his fingers. They were large, and they still had the warmth of his flesh.”

Gilgamesh nodded. “I know, young one. I saw it all.”

~

The boy Abdullah sat naked before Soha. She still leaned back against the tree with her dagger out before her, but her grip on the weapon had relaxed. The two waited in silence. The boy stared at the dirt, then at her horse, then at the tree branch with the dripping cloak. He couldn't look at her. He picked up a rock and tossed it. She spoke. "How do you change from the form of an eagle to that of a boy?"

"A young man, you mean?"

She chuckled. "Yes."

"With magic," he said.

"You are a sorcerer."

Abdullah smacked his lips. "My parents taught me a few tricks. I know the spell of metamorphosis and I can see and hear better than anyone I know."

"Your parents are sorcerers? Do they work for the government?"

"No," he said. "They would never work for the government. They own their own farm—a rare thing in Syria."

Soha shrugged. "I didn't know."

He smiled and spoke quickly. "Oh, yes."

"Do you see them often?"

"No," said Abdullah. "I haven't seen them for more than a year. They want me to put aside the struggle and return to the farm, but I told them I already have a job in Homs. Besides, I prefer life in the city. You would think farm life is intolerable because of the boredom, but it's the harassment. Only one-tenth of their land is arable and they're pressured every week to sell that little bit. But they would starve on the rest."

Soha's eyes focused. "What struggle?"

"Pardon?"

She waved her dagger. "What struggle do your parents want you to put aside?"

"Oh! My friends and I, we have joined the struggle of the oppressed. We are—" Abdullah shut his mouth and smiled sheepishly. "I'm sorry," he said, scratching his head. "I don't know why I'm telling you this. I don't know why I'm sitting here talking to you."

Soha smirked. "I don't know either. I barely know why I'm sitting here myself."

The boy laughed nervously and looked for another rock to throw. "I suppose I should leave you alone. You're clearly no threat."

"No, not yet," she said. "I love stories. Stay and tell me more of yours."

"Alright," he grinned.

"Tell me of your family. Why do they not fight alongside you, if they are only left with an inch of farmland?"

"They did, once. They were members of the Free League. They helped free Damascus, before King Dimashq came to power. But you are right—now they only struggle for crops."

"Why?"

"When my mother was pregnant, they decided to flee and hide. They feared what would happen to me if they were caught."

"It is frightening to revolt," mumbled Soha.

"Yes," said the boy. "They've given up, and I am the one who fights. They fear I will die."

The boy smiled, and again, there was silence. A jackal bayed in the distance, and Soha tightened her grip on her dagger, but she saw nothing beyond the river.

Abdullah coughed. "You now know my story, and I know nothing about you. Not even your name. Tell me something about you."

But a shadowed frown came to Soha's face. The boy raised his hands defensively. "At least tell me your name."

"Soha," she whispered. "My name is Soha."

“Soha,” he repeated. “And what of your parents? What do they do? Do they know you're gone?”

“They're dead,” she answered.

The boy's eyes widened. He stuttered an apology.

Soha shook her head. “The Royal Guard executed them for treason when I was young.”

“Why?” he asked.

“They were members of the Free League as well.”

Abdullah's eyes fell in shame. “What happened to you?” he asked.

“I was made a slave, and when I was old enough they put me in a brothel.” She glanced down at her dagger. “It's not polite conversation, I suppose.”

“I don't care about that,” said Abdullah. He thought for a while. “Do you flee from your brothel master?”

“No.”

“Then from whom?”

Soha looked away.

“What is it?”

“You ask me to trust you and I cannot. I'm sorry.”

She seemed on the verge of tears. Abdullah stared at her for a moment, and then turned his head. He was not sure what to say next. He stared out across the dark valley, and somewhere in the distance, the jackal bayed again. This time, its mate answered the call. Abdullah tried to find the two creatures in the darkness, but instead saw something else. “Soha,” he said quickly, turning back to face her.

She saw the dread in his eyes. “What is it?”

“A horseman approaches from the south.”

They both stood.

Soha put the dagger back into her belt and picked the blanket up from the ground, wrapping it quickly. “How far?” she asked, stuffing the bundle into her saddlebag.

“Far enough. Every jackal in the valley must have seen his approach. He is considerate enough to carry a flame.”

“I must leave,” she said, stumbling back to her horse.

“Yes, I know,” answered the boy.

Shivering, he helped her mount the animal.

“You are human after all,” she said.

“Perhaps I am,” he smiled. “Ride until morning, then hide and sleep. My friends and I will delay your pursuer.”

She nodded. “Thank you.”

“Don't mention it,” he said, smiling up to her, and when she smiled back, he blushed and looked away, laughing. Taking a heroic pose, he turned to survey the approach of this new villain, but when he heard Soha's horse gallop away, he turned back to watch her go.

~

“You took a long time,” said Delarum.

Abdullah landed at her feet and flapped his wings. He morphed back into a human being and stood as she handed him his pants. “I apologize. I was delayed.”

He pulled the trousers up to his waist and smiled at the woman, but when he saw the cold expression on her face, he looked down and concentrated on buckling his belt. “Thank you,” he said, when she handed him his shirt.

“Are you hurt?” she asked.

“No. The rider I saw poses no danger, but another approaches after her.”

Delarum gritted her teeth. “You spoke with her?”

“Yes,” he said, pulling the shirt over his head. “We spoke briefly. I had to ascertain what danger she posed.”

“What danger she posed? I told you not to engage the enemy.”

“I’m sorry,” said the boy. “I knew she meant no harm.”

She grimaced. “You knew? Knew what? I told you to be careful.”

He lifted his hands. “I was. I truly was.”

He tried smiling again, but fire burned in Delarum's eyes. “Did Yusef know the journey would kill him? Did he know the ambush would fail? Do we know what the hell we're going to do next? Well, we do now. We can just ask you, because you know so well.”

“I’m sorry, Delarum.”

“What am I supposed to tell your parents when you die? Should I tell them to have another child? Perhaps they should have one too stupid to know. They already have one too stupid to live.”

Delarum clenched her fist. The boy stared blankly at her. She resisted striking him, instead closing her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he said, again.

“Very well. What of the other rider?”

“I don't know. He holds a torch.” The boy paused to scratch his shoulder. He always itched after the feathers fell from his flesh. “He moves slowly. I'm not sure if he follows the girl or someone else.”

Delarum nodded sullenly in the direction of Yusef's fresh grave.

“It would be my guess as well,” said Abdullah.

“There was no one else with him?”

“I saw no one else.”

~

Ghazi dismounted when he reached the dead tree with the smooth, ashen branches. Soha's wet cloak still hung from one of them. Ghazi held the flame in his palm close to the fabric and inspected the garment. Then, he inspected the tracks in the dirt. “Tell me, Gilgamesh—what do you see?”

“Two met here,” said the creature, “but they did not stay long.”

“Where are they now?”

“One took a horse farther down the valley; the other I cannot tell you.”

“I have such luck,” said Ghazi, “set to this heinous task with my quarry dispersed.”

“Return me, then, where you found me,” said the ghost. “Break my bonds. Find your family. Be free of this life.”

“And the Circle?”

Ghazi brought the flame closer to the fabric's edge, and the wet cloak hissed.

“The sorcerers hold little sway outside the walls of Damascus. Their kingdom is agitated, and they are too busy to hunt one lost errand boy.”

Ghazi chuckled. “Your optimism clouds your mind, but not mine.”

“Yet your flame is still lit,” said Gilgamesh with his eternal smile. “Does a hunter not seek to ambush his prey?”

“I do not know. I do not want to hunt.” He bent down and ran his fingers over the dirt between the large roots of the tree and stood.

“You are bold enough to invite your prey to strike you, but not bold enough to break the yoke with which your masters keep you.”

“Quiet,” said Ghazi.

“The yoke your lust for gold has won you.” Ghazi held the flame out into the darkness and peered as far as he could in each direction.

“A man who would fight the Circle,” said Gilgamesh, “what qualities does he possess? Honor?”

Courage?”

“Quiet, I said!” Ghazi glared at the creature.

“Perhaps it is selflessness? Caring more for others the Circle would violate or oppress than for his own handsome profit.”

“Enough!” snapped the thief. “I made my choice, now shut your mouth!” Ghazi closed his hand around the flame. Light flashed briefly from between his fingers, but then the flame was gone and the two friends were swallowed by darkness.

~

“His fire is out,” said Delarum.

Abdullah nodded and continued to watch the man standing by the old, dead tree. Behind the boy, the other Marxists armed themselves with composite bows. Curved swords and daggers hung from their belts. Fear was on their faces and they glanced at the grave of their fallen comrade more than once.

“I hear whispers,” said the boy, indicating the man by the tree. “He speaks to someone, or perhaps he speaks to the wind, for no one answers him.”

~

Ghazi's pupils widened. Moonlight shined down upon the grinning leer of the apparition by his side. The statue's back was straight, his spear held forward. “Fool, do you know what you do?”

“I always know,” said Ghazi.

“This is murder,” Gilgamesh reminded him.

Ghazi laughed. “I have never been so dull as that, have I? You have a most grievous fault for a friend, monster. After many years together you still cannot give the benefit of the doubt.” Ghazi smiled a bit. “You have never given me the chance—”

“Get down!” said Gilgamesh.

The thief ducked quickly. A fiery arrow streaked through the air above his head, a flaming trail behind it. It buried itself in the tree and sparks burst out. The trunk instantly caught flame, throwing shadows across Ghazi's face.

“How many?” he asked.

“Five,” answered his friend.

The Marxists stormed Ghazi's position. He stood and watched them come. Daria and Alima held bows with arrows nocked; Abdullah wielded his spear; and Delarum unsheathed her scimitar. Humfrid reached back and pulled free another arrow.

Ghazi smiled. He held his hands behind his back and bowed to the Marxists in greeting. His fingers beckoned to the shadows upon the tree behind him. They came to life, tearing free from the trunk and streaming through the air to his waiting hands. He nodded at Delarum, for she seemed eager to speak.

“Where is the other one?” she said quickly. “Tell your friend to come out of hiding.”

“My lady,” said Ghazi, “there is only one of me, and there are five of you. If friends are what I need—and I do need them—they are standing in front of me right now.”

Humfrid nocked his second arrow.

“We heard you speaking,” the woman continued. “With whom?”

“I sing to El,” said Ghazi, pulling one hand away from the shadows and pointed upward. “He is lord of the sky. I hope he will grant me swift journey.”

“You pray to a god of Canaan?”

“To the highest one, on his mountaintop somewhere, above everything else in this world.”

Delarum kept her gaze steady. "I didn't know there were any Canaanites left."

Ghazi winked. "We're a few, here and there."

"Why are you in the valley?" she asked. "Whom do you seek?"

"I seek no one," said Ghazi. "I only travel."

Behind him, the shadows climbed, draping over his back, and mingling with his black hair.

"But you stopped to examine the tracks at the base of that tree. Do not deceive us."

"I'm only stopping to rest," said the thief, "and gods be praised your arrow missed. It seems you are in need of more light . . ."

Delarum spat. "Enough! Who sent you on this hunt?"

". . . but for my tastes," continued Ghazi, "I've always preferred the shadow."

He flung his arms forward and the shadows shot forth, painting the air before him an opaque, pitch black. He smiled wickedly.

"Flee!" said Gilgamesh. "I beg you to flee!"

Ghazi replied with an even tone. "You've had your say. No more."

To the others, he shouted with a sneer. "Flee like the dogs you are, or die!"

Delarum growled. She brought the scimitar to her lips and spoke a word of power. Almost instantly, the blade turned red and blazed with fire and light.

"Take him quickly," said the woman. They all tensed, and the three archers took aim.

Ghazi stretched the shadow forms into a shield before him, and the arrows plunged through with a hiss. He flinched with a start, but the arrowheads stopped inches from his body. The thief laughed and coaxed more darkness into the shadow shield, making it larger and stronger. He hid behind and heard another volley of arrows loose, but they bounced harmlessly off the shadow's hardened skin.

~

Delarum signaled to Humfrid, and the Norseman dropped his bow and drew a curved sword like hers. Daria and Alima did the same. The five comrades spread out, making a semicircle around Ghazi's great shield.

The dark shape towered over the Marxists, and inky tentacles swirled at its edges. Ghazi disappeared into it. Some tentacles floated in the air while others sank to the ground, feeling for prey. A low, horrible laugh boomed from its emerging head. It had inhuman, pupil-less eyes cracked with red and yellow. They glistened in the moonlight and fixed on each of the Marxists. The creature's mouth split open, and from it sprouted two rows of dripping black fangs.

Humfrid raised his sword in defiance and again the creature's awful laugh echoed. The man charged with his sword, but a shadow shot out over the dirt and struck his feet from under him. The creature bellowed.

Humfrid landed on his stomach, the wind knocked from his lungs. He wheezed and gasped. Heavy limbs dropped on him, pummeling his back and holding him down. He saw his comrades running to his aid, but an instant later, his head was wrapped in hot shadow. Sight and sound were gone, and the scalding pressure on his brow was terrible. He struggled, clawing at the greasy blackness, and felt himself lifted off the ground.

The creature flung the large Norseman. He crashed into Daria, knocking her down, and Alima, trying to catch her falling comrades, lost her balance and tumbled with them. The monster advanced on the three.

It smiled widely, and its bloody eyes caught Daria, who was first to stand. She raised her sword, shaking with fright as dark arms encircled her. They seemed as heavy as the arms of a bear. She forced a growl and sliced deeply into the closest, but the gash disappeared immediately. The creature showed no sign of pain.

"You're in there somewhere!" Daria shouted as her comrades rose up beside her, blades in hand.

“Yes,” the creature mocked. “I’m in here somewhere. Come find me!”

But fire slashed down where Daria’s sword had struck and the creature screamed. A black limb fell to the ground, and writhing at the woman’s feet, it hissed and dissipated into the air.

Delarum raised her fiery blade for another strike. The creature retreated.

Abdullah ran from behind and helped Alima with Humfrid, who was still dazed.

“We strike together,” said Delarum.

“Strike however you like!” spat the monster. “My arms outnumber yours.” Another grew to replace the severed limb.

“Distract it,” ordered Delarum, and the others began again to spread out. She pointed her flaming sword at the beast. “I will find the weasel inside this monster.”

~

The five comrades struck together. Abdullah dropped his spear and quickly took to the sky. His talons tore at the shadow-flesh, seeking the red and yellow eyes, but the monster’s head swayed to avoid him.

Alima, Humfrid, and Daria encircled the monster and jabbed its body with their swords. The wounds they cut healed quickly, but Delarum darted between her three friends, striking with arcs of fire, and they had the monster on wary, clumsy footing.

Then, the woman leaped onto the beast, gripping the black flesh for purchase. She hacked tentacles clean from the monster’s body and clambered up to the beast’s hideous face. She roared into its eyes and plunged her sword where the heart might beat. She cut downward, opening a wide wound. The creature howled and its jaws snapped at Delarum, missing her face by an inch.

The wound began to close, as all its wounds seemed to heal where fire did not burn. A tentacle wrapped around Delarum’s sword arm and yanked savagely. The woman cried. Her sword went flying out of sight.

She cursed and thrust her bare hand in, groping as deeply as she could. The creature’s fangs dripped from above.

The wound closed around her shoulder, seizing her tightly, trapping her arm. Her fingers searched frantically inside the guts of the monster as the shadow-flesh around her stretched to pull her inside. The creature wanted to swallow her. When she felt it grasp her belly and thigh, she almost screamed, but clenched her teeth. Her comrades needed no distraction.

Her body inched further into the monstrosity and the shadows wrapped around her neck. Her leg had sunk in. She was going to disappear. She groped more, but all she felt was nothingness. But then her fingertips brushed against something else—something more solid, like rough skin. With a final reach she cried and gripped a scarred human neck. She squeezed like a vice.

~

That night, King Dimashq was in a pensive mood. He stood on a balcony in a high tower of the royal palace, and before him lay Damascus. The moon was large, shining silver, and below, the street lamps in the royal district shined gold. He ran his hand along the banister, imagining young ones in love, skipping beneath the lamps, running through the forested parks, holding each other tightly. He imagined sweaty laborers working through the night, filling the larders of groceries and restaurants. And he imagined the Royal Guard as they patrolled the street, joked with each other, and glanced with pride at the palace on the hill in the center of the royal district of Old City. The king smiled and reached for a slice of apple.

It was juicy and crisp. He lifted a small glass filled with ice and Arak, sipping slowly from the licorice alcohol. He was content, and silently he gazed again at his most prized wonder.

"My king?" spoke a voice from behind, solemn and even. It was the wazir, Ibn Khaldun. He parted the balcony curtain and stepped forward to stand at the king's back.

"I am here," said King Dimashq, "standing before your eyes."

Ibn Khaldun bowed, though the king could not see him. "Yes, my king."

"You bring news of the Palestinians?"

"Yes, my king."

"Then speak, Ibn Khaldun. Tell me of the day's deeds." He spoke with his glass below his lips, waiting for the wazir's story.

"Fifty-seven are dead, my king. General Dayan—"

"Dayan? He is new, isn't he?"

"Yes, my king. Emperor Amreeka appointed him two weeks ago. It has been kept quiet as there is controversy surrounding the general. He was known as a 'dependable man' in the early days, when Palestine was first invaded."

"I see. What has he done?"

"I still await intelligence on his past," said the wazir.

"No," said the king, waving his hand impatiently, "what has he done to the Palestinians?"

"Oh, yes. My apologies. He sent soldiers into a small village close to Gaza City."

"And?"

"Fifty-seven Palestinians were killed and several houses were demolished. The villagers there tended a large olive orchard. The soldiers burned it down. It will likely be a successful provocation."

"Of course it will," said the king, sipping his Arak and gripping the banister with his free hand. Slowly, he rubbed the wood. "And the Marxists? What of them? They still want me deposed, wazir. They dream of their utopia."

Ibn Khaldun nodded. "They do, my king."

"They failed their ploy at my bottle, thanks to their witless blunders."

"Yes, my king."

"But they haven't been so bold since I first took the city." The king turned and pointed insistently at the taller man. "Their numbers are growing."

Ibn Khaldun nodded again. "The Circle has sent an assassin after the Marxist agents—after the same ones who planned the theft. They hide in the mountains north of Damascus."

"That doesn't matter," said the king, plucking another slice of apple from the bowl.

"He is very good. He will surely kill them all."

"No, fool. A handful of agents is no matter." He threw the piece of fruit to the garden below. "The Amreekans are right. There is trouble. If these Marxists have the will to attack my soldiers, even my mercenaries, the disease is worse than a few wounded peasants hiding in the mountains."

"But what of the Amreekan diplomats, my king? If they learn of this mishap—if they believe you didn't put hard pressure on the rogues—you will diminish in their eyes. In this sensitive time, their opinions are paramount."

"Ha!" laughed the king. "Let me ask you, my wazir: why are you so damn loyal?"

"Life forces one to choose a side, my king. I chose yours."

"Yes, you did. And in return, I will educate you on three points."

"Oh?" said the wazir, raising his brow.

The king sipped Arak and raised his index finger. "First," he said, "You are lucky that I value your candor, Ibn Khaldun, and your quick thoughts. Although you often seem blind to the reality of this world," the king sipped again, "you are uniquely gifted at juggling the minutiae this grand adventure provides."

Ibn Khaldun smirked. "Thank you, my king."

"Second," said the king, "I will indeed apply pressure upon this foe, but as I told you, I will apply pressure where it is needed—at the throat. And I will squeeze that traitorous throat until the foe is

dead, dead, dead, and all who see him will know and fear his fate. That is how one rules.”

“You are wise,” said Ibn Khaldun.

“I have said I value candor, wazir. I have others for flattery.” The king glanced at the ice melting in his glass.

“Then, my king, I humbly ask: what is the third lesson you wish for me to learn?”

“The third lesson?”

“If it pleases you,” said the wazir.

“Our esteemed diplomats, those dignitaries of Amreeka, will always see us as fools. This is something you must learn quickly. It surprises me you have not already, for those foreigners could not hide their hatred of our people if they tried.”

“I apologize, my king. I will dwell upon this final lesson.”

“Do so,” said King Dimashq. “They are arrogant, the Amreekans, but rightly so. In this game, they hold all the power. They make all the rules. We bargain at the edge of oblivion.”

“I know this too well, my king.”

The king shook his head. “You know our own machinations, Ibn Khaldun. And you do know them very well, but you do not know the souls of these Amreekans, their conceit. They have all the strength, so they don't bother with cleverness. We have no power, but we have our guile. In this lies our hope.”

“How so?” asked the wazir, stepping forward to stand beside his king.

“Consider our fine Sir Henry. He enters and we negotiate. He knows he has won the moment he steps into my throne room. But there is advantage for us in that presumption.”

“I have thought we might seize that advantage, my king.”

“Yes, I have as well. But the moment must be right. We must be sure. Meanwhile we don our masks and play our roles. We will be all they want: loud, angry, even stupid. Just like our neighbor to the south, King Saud. He has played this game longer than we, and he is their favorite vassal. One wonders if he wears a mask at all, yet they do love him.”

Ibn Khaldun picked up a single grape. “They bare teeth and smiles curl on their lips.”

“Indeed,” said King Dimashq. He shook the naked ice cubes in his drained glass.

“My king?”

“Yes, wazir.”

“King's Day celebrations are gone, and I have not had an opportunity to compliment your good taste in the diversions and decor, in the music and the theater. The day's beauty awed us all. It is a shame the festival ended so quickly.”

The king upended his glass and crunched the ice. “Nothing has ended,” he said. “I am the monarch of Damascus and the ruler of Shem. I still live.”

Ibn Khaldun nodded and popped the grape in his mouth. The king dismissed him.

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King Dimashq stood alone on the balcony for only a few more minutes. The Arak was gone and the air was cold. He brushed past the curtains and headed for his bedchamber. He sought his queen, but she was not in bed. He looked in her favorite places in the palace but she was nowhere. So he donned more comfortable clothing and went to the lower chambers of the palace.

End of Excerpt of Damascus: Book One of The Syrian Revolution

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Jad Ziade is a fiction writer living in Portland, Oregon. He is the author of the acclaimed four-part graphic novel series POISON THE CURE, illustrated by Alex Cahill and published by The New Radio. He enjoys reading, flipping through old illustration books, and fantasizing about Dungeons & Dragons characters he no longer has the time to play. He is busy writing HOMS, the next novel in this series.

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