

SALADIN AHMED

Throne of the Crescent Moon





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Crescent Moon**

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Book One of *The Crescent Moon Kingdoms*



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To my parents, Ismael Ahmed, and the late Mary O'Leary,
who introduced me to the fantastic world of books;

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who supported me in countless ways as I wrote this one;

and to my children, Malcolm and Naima, who make this broken
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I

NINE DAYS. Beneficent God, I beg you, let this be the day I die!

The guardsman's spine and neck were warped and bent but still he lived. He'd been locked in the red lacquered box for nine days. He'd seen the days' light come and go through the lid-crack. *Nine days.*

He held them close as a handful of dinars. Counted them over and over. *Nine days. Nine days. Nine days.* If he could remember this until he died he could keep his soul whole for God's sheltering embrace.

He had given up on remembering his name.

The guardsman heard soft footsteps approach, and he began to cry. Every day for nine days the gaunt, black-bearded man in the dirty white kaftan had appeared. Every day he cut the guardsman, or burned him. But worst was when the guardsman was made to taste the others' pain.

The gaunt man had flayed a young marsh girl, pinning the guardsman's eyes open so he had to see the girl's skin curl out under the knife. He'd burned a Badawi boy alive and held back the guardsman's head so the choking smoke would enter his nostrils. The guardsman had been forced to watch the broken and burned bodies being ripped apart as the gaunt man's ghuls fed on heart-flesh. He'd watched as the gaunt man's servant-creature, that thing made of shadows and jackal skin, had sucked something shimmering from those freshly dead corpses, leaving them with their hearts torn out and their empty eyes glowing red.

These things had almost shaken the guardsman's mind loose. Almost. But he would remember. *Nine days. Nine.... All-Merciful God, take me from this world!*

The guardsman tried to steady himself. He'd never been a man to whine and wish for death. He'd taken beatings and blade wounds with gritted teeth. He was a strong man. Hadn't he guarded the Khalif himself once? What matter that his name was lost to him now?

Though I walk a wilderness of ghuls and wicked djenn, no fear can...no fear can... He couldn't remember the rest of the scripture. Even the Heavenly Chapters had slipped from him.

The box opened in a painful blaze of light. The gaunt man in the filthy kaftan appeared before him. Beside the gaunt man stood his servant, that thing—part shadow, part jackal, part cruel man—that called itself Mouw Awa. The guardsman screamed.

As always the gaunt man said nothing. But the shadow-thing's voice echoed in the guardsman's head.

Listen to Mouw Awa, who speaketh for his blessed friend. Thou art an honored guardsman. Begat and born in the Crescent Moon Palace. Thou art sworn in the name of God to defend it. All of those beneath thee shall serve.

The words were a slow, probing drone in his skull. His mind swooned in a terror-trance.

Yea, thy fear is sacred! Thy pain shall feed his blessed friend's spells. Thy beating heart shall feed his blessed friend's ghuls. Then Mouw Awa the manjackal shall suck thy soul from thy body! Thou

hast seen the screaming and begging and bleeding the others have done. Thou hast seen what will happen to thee soon.

From somewhere a remembered scrap of a grandmother's voice came to the guardsman. Old tales of the power cruel men could cull from a captive's fear or an innocent's gruesome slaying. *Fear-spells. Pain-spells.* He tried to calm himself, to deny the man in the dirty kaftan this power.

Then he saw the knife. The guardsman had come to see the gaunt man's sacrifice knife as a living thing, its blade-curve an angry eye. He soiled himself and smelled his own filth. He'd done so many times already in these nine days.

The gaunt man, still saying nothing, began making small cuts. The knife bit into the guardsman's chest and neck, and he screamed again, pulling against bonds he'd forgotten were there.

As the gaunt man cut him, the shadow-thing whispered in the guardsman's mind. It recalled to him all the people and places that he loved, restored whole scrolls of his memory. Then it told stories of what would soon come. Ghuls in the streets. All the guardsman's family and friends, all of Dhamsawaat, drowning in a river of blood. The guardsman knew these were not lies.

He could feel the gaunt man feeding off of his fear, but he couldn't help himself. He felt the knife dig into his skin and heard whispered plans to take the Throne of the Crescent Moon, and he forgot how many days he'd been there. Who was he? Where was he? There was nothing within him but fear—for himself and his city.

Then there was nothing but darkness.



Chapter 1

*Dhamsawaat, King of Cities, Jewel of Abassen
A thousand thousand men pass through and pass in
Packed patchwork of avenues, alleys, and walls
Such bookshops and brothels, such schools and such stalls
I've wed all your streets, made your night air my wife
For he who tires of Dhamsawaat tires of life*

DOCTOR ADOULLA MAKHSLOOD, the last real ghul hunter in the great city of Dhamsawaat, sighed as he read the lines. His own case, it seemed, was the opposite. He often felt tired of life, but he was not quite done with Dhamsawaat. After threescore and more years on God's great earth, Adoulla found that his beloved birth city was one of the few things he was not d pthi>

To be reading the familiar lines early in the morning in this newly crafted book made Adoulla feel younger—a welcome feeling. The smallish tome was bound with brown sheepleather, and *Ismi Shihab's Leaves of Palm* was etched into the cover with good golden acid. It was a very expensive book, but Hafi the bookbinder had given it to Adoulla free of charge. It had been two years since Adoulla saved the man's wife from a cruel magus's water ghuls, but Hafi was still effusively thankful.

Adoulla closed the book gently and set it aside. He sat outside of Yehyeh's, his favorite teahouse in the world, alone at a long stone table. His dreams last night had been grisly and vivid—blood-rivers, burning corpses, horrible voices—but the edge of their details had dulled upon waking. Sitting in this favorite place, face over a bowl of cardamom tea, reading *Ismi Shihab*, Adoulla almost managed to forget his nightmares entirely.

The table was hard against Dhamsawaat's great Mainway, the broadest and busiest thoroughfare in all the Crescent Moon Kingdoms. Even at this early hour, people half-crowded the Mainway. A few of them glanced at Adoulla's impossibly white kaftan as they passed, but most took no notice of him. Nor did he pay them much mind. He was focused on something more important.

Tea.

Adoulla leaned his face farther over the small bowl and inhaled deeply, needing its aromatic cure for the fatigue of life. The spicy-sweet cardamom steam enveloped him, moistening his face and his beard, and for the first time that groggy morning he felt truly alive.

When he was outside of Dhamsawaat, stalking bone ghuls through cobwebbed catacombs or sand ghuls across dusty plains, he often had to settle for chewing sweet-tea root. Such campfireless times were hard, but as a ghul hunter Adoulla was used to working within limits. *When one faces two ghuls,*

waste no time wishing for fewer was one of the adages of his antiquated order. But here at home, in civilized Dhamsawaat, he felt he was not really a part of the world until he'd had his cardamom tea.

He raised the bowl to his lips and sipped, relishing the piquant sweetness. He heard Yehyeh's shuffling approach, smelled the pastries his friend was bringing. This, Adoulla thought, was life as Beneficent God intended it.

Yehyeh set his own teabowl and a plate of pastries on the stone table with two loud clinks, then slid his wiry frame onto the bench beside Adoulla. Adoulla had long marveled that the cross-eyed, limping teahouse owner could whisk and clatter bowls and platters about with such efficiency and so few shatterings. A matter of practice, he supposed. Adoulla knew better than most that habit could train a man to do anything.

Yehyeh smiled broadly, revealing the few teeth left to him.

He gestured at the sweets. "Almond nests—the first of the day, before I've even opened my doors. And God save us from fat friends who wake us too early!"

Adoulla waved a hand dismissively. "When men reach our age, my friend, we should wake before the sun. Sleep is too close to death for us."

Yehyeh grunted. "So says the master of the half-day nap! And why this dire talk again, huh? You've been even gloomier than usual since your last adventupar haYehyeh gre."

Adoulla plucked up an almond nest and bit it in half. He chewed loudly and swallowed, staring into his teabowl while Yehyeh waited for his reply. Finally Adoulla spoke, though he did not look up.

"Gloomy? Hmph. I have cause to be. Adventure, you say? A fortnight ago I was face-to-face with a living bronze statue that was trying to kill me with an axe. An *axe*, Yehyeh!" He shook his head at his own wavering tea-reflection. "Threescore years old, and still I'm getting involved in such madness. Why?" he asked, looking up.

Yehyeh shrugged. "Because God the All-Knowing made it so. You've faced such threats and worse before, my friend. You may look like the son of the bear who screwed the buzzard, but you're the only real ghul hunter left in this whole damned-by-God city, O Great and Virtuous Doctor."

Yehyeh was baiting him by using the pompous honorifics ascribed to a physician. The ghul hunters had shared the title of "Doctor" but little else with the "Great and Virtuous" menders of the body. No leech-wielding charlatan of a physician could stop the fanged horrors that Adoulla had battled.

"How would you know what I look like, Six Teeth? You whose crossed eyes can see nothing but the bridge of your own nose!" Despite Adoulla's dark thoughts, trading the familiar insults with Yehyeh felt comfortable, like a pair of old, well made sandals. He brushed almond crumbs from his fingers onto his spotless kaftan. Magically, the crumbs and honey spots slid from his blessedly unstainable garment to the ground.

"You are right, though," he continued, "I have faced worse. But this...this..." Adoulla slurped his tea. The battle against the bronzeman had unnerved him. The fact that he had needed his assistant Raseed's sword arm to save him was proof that he was getting old. Even more disturbing was the fact that he'd been daydreaming of death during the fight. He was tired. And when one was hunting monsters, tired was a step away from dead. "The boy saved my fat ass. I'd be dead if not for him." It wasn't easy to admit.

“Your young assistant? No shame in that. He’s a dervish of the Order! That’s why you took him in, right? For his forked sword—‘cleaving the right from the wrong’ and all that?”

“It’s happened too many times of late,” Adoulla said. “I ought to be retired. Like Dawoud and his wife.” He sipped and then was quiet for a long moment. “I froze, Yehyeh. Before the boy came to my rescue. I froze. And do you know what I was thinking? I was thinking that I would never get to do this again—sit at this table with my face over a bowl of good cardamom tea.”

Yehyeh bowed his head, and Adoulla thought his friend’s eyes might be moist. “You would have been missed. But the point is that you did make it back here, praise be to God.”

“Aye. And why, Six Teeth, don’t you say to me ‘Now stay home, you old fart?’ That is what a real friend would say to me!”

“There are things you can do, O Buzzard-Beaked Bear, that others can’t. And people need your help. God has called you to this life. What can I say that will change that?” Yehyeh’s mouth tigh. & I& He was tened and his brows drew down. “Besides, who says home is safe? That madman the Falcon Prince is going to burn this city down around our ears any day now, mark my words.”

They had covered this subject before. Yehyeh had little use for the treasonous theatrics of the mysterious master thief who called himself the Falcon Prince. Adoulla agreed that the “Prince” was likely mad, but he still found himself approving of the would-be usurper. The man had stolen a great deal from the coffers of the Khalif and rich merchants, and much of that money found its way into the hands of Dhamsawaat’s poorest—sometimes hand delivered by the Falcon Prince himself.

Yehyeh sipped his tea and went on. “He killed another of the Khalif’s headsmen last week, you know. That’s two now.” He shook his head. “Two agents of the Khalif’s justice, murdered.”

Adoulla snorted. “‘Khalif’s justice’? Now there are two words that refuse to share a tent! That piece of shit isn’t half as smart a ruler as his father was, but he’s twice as cruel. Is it justice to let half the city starve while that greedy son of a whore sits on his brocaded cushions eating peeled grapes? Is it justice to—”

Yehyeh rolled his crossed eyes, a grotesque sight. “No speeches, please. No wonder you like the villain—you’ve both got big mouths! But I tell you, my friend, I’m serious. This city can’t hold a man like that and one like the new Khalif at the same time. We are heading for battle in the streets. Another civil war.”

Adoulla scowled. “May it please God to forbid it.”

Yehyeh stood up, stretched, and clapped Adoulla on the back. “Aye. May All-Merciful God put old men like us quietly in our graves before this storm hits.” The cross-eyed man did not look particularly hopeful of this. He squeezed Adoulla’s shoulder. “Well. I’ll let you get back to your book, O Gamal of the Golden Glasses.”

Adoulla groaned. Back when he’d been a street brawling youth on Dead Donkey Lane, he himself had used the folktale hero’s name to tease boys who read. He’d learned better in the decades since. He placed a hand protectively over his book. “You should not condemn poetry, my friend. There’s wisdom in these lines. About life, death, one’s own fate.”

“No doubt!” Yehyeh aped the act of reading a nonexistent book in the air before him, running a finger over the imaginary words and speaking in a grumble that was an imitation of Adoulla’s own.

“O, how hard it is to be so fat! O, how hard it is to have so large a nose! O Beneficent God, why do the children run a-screaming when I come a-walking?”

Before Adoulla could come up with a rejoinder on the fear Yehyeh’s own crossed eyes inspired in children, the teahouse owner limped off, chuckling obscenities to himself.

His friend was right about one thing: Adoulla was, praise God, alive and back home—back in the Jewel of Abassen, the city with the best tea in the world. Alone again at the long stone table, he sat and sipped and watched early morning Dhamsawaat come to life and roll by. A thick necked cobbler walked past, two long poles strung with shoes over his shoulder. A woman from Rughal-ba strode by, a bouquet in her hands, and the long trail of her veil flapgheted.ck ping behind. A lanky young man with a large book in his arms and patches in his kaftan moved idly eastward.

As he stared out onto the street, Adoulla’s nightmare suddenly reasserted itself with such force that he could not move or speak. He was walking—wading—through Dhamsawaat’s streets, waist high in a river of blood. His kaftan was soiled with gore and filth. Everything was tinted red—the color of the Traitorous Angel. An unseen voice, like a jackal howling human words, clawed at his mind. And all about him the people of Dhamsawaat lay dead and disemboweled.

Name of God!

He forced himself to breathe. He watched the men and women on the Mainway, very much alive and going about their business. There were no rivers of blood. No jackal howls. His kaftan was clean.

Adoulla took another deep breath. *Just a dream. The world of sleep invading my days*, he told himself. *I need a nap.*

He took a second-to-last slurp of tea, savoring all of the subtle spices that Yehyeh layered beneath the cardamom. He shook off his grim thoughts as best he could and stretched his legs for the long walk home.

He was still stretching when he saw his assistant, Raseed, emerge from the alley on the teahouse’s left. Raseed strode toward him, dressed as always in the impeccable blue silk habit of the Order of Dervishes. The holy warrior pulled a large parcel behind him, something wrapped in gray rags.

No, not something. Someone. A long-haired little boy of perhaps eight years. With blood on his clothes. *O please, no.* Adoulla’s stomach clenched up. *Merciful God help me, what now?* Adoulla reached deep and somehow found the strength to set down his teabowl and rise to his feet.



Chapter 2

ADOULLA WATCHED RASEED weave between the teahouse tables, pulling the child gently along. They came to a halt before him, their backs to the Mainway's throng of people. Raseed bowed his blue-turbaned head. Looking more closely, Adoulla did not think the frightened-looking, long-haired child was wounded. The blood on his clothing seemed to be someone else's.

"God's peace, Doctor," said Raseed. "This is Faisal. He needs our help." The dervish's hand rested on the hilt of the curved, fork-tipped sword at his hip. He stood five lithe feet, not much bigger than the child beside him. His fine-boned yellow features were delicate and highlighted by tilted eyes. But Adoulla knew better than anyone that Raseed's slender frame and clean-shaven face hid a zealous killer's skill.

"God's peace, boy. And to you, Faisal. What is the problem?" he asked the dervish.

Raseed's expression was grim. "The boy's parents have been murdered." He darted his dark eyes at Faisal but made no attempt to soften his tone. "With apologies, Doctor, my knowledge is insufficient. But from Faisal's description, I believe ghuls attacked the boy's family. Also—"

Two porters passed, each shouting at the other to go screw a pickle barrel, and the soft-spoken dervish's words were drowned out. "What was that?" Adoulla asked.

"I said that I was sent here by...Faisal is..." He hesitated.

"What? What is it?" Adoulla asked.

"Faisal's aunt is known to you, Doctor. It was she who brought him to your townhouse." Adoulla looked down at Faisal, but the child said nothing.

"Stop this mysterious monkeyshit, you stuttering dervish! Who is the child's aunt?"

Raseed's birdlike mouth tightened in distaste. "Mistress Miri Almoussa is the boy's aunt."

God damn me.

"Her courier brought the boy and this note, Doctor." He drew a rolled piece of rough paper from his blue silk tunic and handed it over.

Doullie

You know how things stand between us. I wouldn't have bothered you if the need weren't great. But my niece is dead, Doullie! Murdered! Her and her fool marshman husband. To hear Faisal speak, it was neither a man nor an animal that killed them. That means you will know more than anyone in this city about what to do. I need your help. Faisal here will tell you all that happened. Send him back to my house when you have learned what you must from him.

*God's peace be with you,
Miri*

“‘God’s peace be with you?’” Adoulla read the words aloud, a bit incredulous. Such a passionless, formulaic closing from his old heart’s-flame! Mistress Miri Almuoussa, Seller of Silks and Sweets. Known to a select few as Miri of the Hundred Ears. Adoulla pictured her, middle-aged and still able to fill him with more lust than a girl of half her years, sitting in her brothel office among a hundred scraps of paper and a half dozen letter pigeons.

It was true that their last meeting had not been a happy one. But was she really so fed up with him that, even in such a dire situation, she had sent a *note* instead of coming herself? The rosewater-scented memory of her threatened to overwhelm him, but he shoved it to the side. He needed analysis now, not heartsick nostalgia.

The dried blood on Faisal’s rough spun shirt must have been from one of his parents. Miri had not even wasted time changing the child’s clothes before sending him over. “So you are Miri’s grand-nephew? I remember her speaking of a niece who lived out near the marshdocks.”

“Yes, Doctor.” The boy’s tone was hard and flat—the voice of one who has refused to let his mind absorb what his eyes have seen.

“And why, Faisal, have you come all the way to the city for help? There’s a large watchmen’s barracks at the marshdocks—the Khalif has treasure-houses there, after all. Did you not tell the watchmen what happened?”

The child’s features twisted with bitterness that belied his, perhaps, ten years. “I tried. But the watchmen don’t listen to marsh boys. They don’t care what happens outside the treasure house walls, long as the Khalid a As the Khif’s gold and gemthread are safe. My mama told me that my Auntie Miri in the city had a friend who was a real ghul hunter, like in the stories. So I come to Dhamsawaat.”

Adoulla smiled sadly. “Very little in life is like the stories, Faisal.”

“But my mama...and my Da...” Faisal’s tough marsh boy mask slipped and tears fell.

Adoulla was not at his ease with children. He stroked the boy’s long black hair, hoping this was the right thing to do. “I know, little one, I know. But I need you to be strong right now, Faisal. I need you to tell me exactly what happened.”

Adoulla sat back down, seating the child opposite him. Raseed remained standing, hand on hilt, his tilted eyes watching the crowds that walked past the teahouse.

Faisal told his story. Adoulla sorted through babbling, sobs, and the exaggerations of fear, trying to isolate useful information. There was little to isolate. Faisal lived with his parents in the marshes a day’s ride from the city. While out spearfishing with another family they had been set upon by hissing, gray-skinned monsters, man-shaped but not human. Bone ghuls, unless Adoulla missed his guess—strong as half a dozen men and as hard to kill, with gruesome claws besides. Faisal had fled, but not before he’d seen the ghuls start to eat the heart muscle of his still living parents.

The blood on his shirt was his father’s. Faisal was the only one who’d escaped. Adoulla had seen grisly things in his work, but sometimes it was worse seeing the effect such things had on others.

“I ran away and left them.... Mama said ‘run’ and I did! It’s my fault they’re dead!” He began bawling again. “My fault!”

Adoulla wrapped an arm awkwardly around the boy. He felt like a great ape coddling a new hatched chick. “It is not your fault, Faisal. A *man* made those ghuls. Almighty God willing, we will find this man and keep his creatures from hurting others. Now I need you to tell me just once more what happened—everything, every detail you can remember.”

Adoulla extracted another telling of the incident. He didn’t like doing it—making the child relive this horror twice and thrice over. But he had to, if he was going to do his job. Frightened people often remembered things falsely, even when they meant to be honest. He listened for new details and inconsistencies, not because he distrusted the boy, but because people never remembered things exactly the same way twice.

Still, Adoulla found Faisal a better source of information than most grown men who’d laid eyes on a ghul. He was a marshman after all, and they were tough and observant folk. No people—not even the Badawi of the desert—lived closer to starvation. Adoulla could remember Miri’s disgust a dozen years ago when she’d learned that her niece was marrying a marshman. “What is there for her out there?” she’d asked Adoulla over a game of bakgam. He had been unable to answer; he was as thoroughly a city creature as she was. But there was no denying that where life itself depended on spearing quick fish and raising fragile golden rice, attentiveness flourished.

Faisal’s retellings informed Adoulla that three creatures had attacked, and that no man had been visible at the time. Adoulla turned to Raseed. “*Three* of the things! Commanded outside of the line of sight. This is not the usual half-dinar magus, heady with the power of his first ghul-raising. Troubling.”

The Heavenly Chapters decreed that ghul-makers were damned to the Lake of Flame. The Chapters spoke of an ancient, corrupted age when wicked men commanded whole legions of the things from miles away. But those times were past. In all his years of ghul hunting, Adoulla had never seen a man make more than two of the monsters at a time—and this always from a few hundred yards away at most. “Troubling,” he said again.

He instructed Raseed to cut a small scrap from the boy’s scarlet-stained shirt. Other than the name of its maker, the blood of a ghul’s victim was the best component for a tracking spell. The creatures themselves would likely prove easy enough to find. But he would need to head closer to the scene of the slaying, and get away from the city’s teeming, confusing life-energies, to cast an effective tracking spell.

Adoulla only prayed that he would be able to find the creatures before they fed again. As the silent prayer echoed in his mind, he felt a weary determination rising in his heart. There was more bloody work to be done. *O God, why must it be me every time?* Adoulla had paid his “fare for the festival of this world,” as the poets say, many times over. It was some younger man’s turn to do this.

But there was no younger man that could do it without him, Adoulla knew. He had fought beside many men, but had never had the wherewithal to train another in the ways of his near-dead order—had never been able to bring himself to set another on his own thankless road. Two years ago he’d reluctantly agreed to take Raseed as an assistant. But while the boy’s martial powers were unmatched, he had no talent for invocations. He was an excellent apprentice in the ends of ghul hunting, but his means to those ends were his own, and they were different than Adoulla’s.

In ages past, the makers and the hunters of ghuls alike were more plentiful. Old Doctor Boujali, Adoulla’s own mentor, had explained it early in Adoulla’s apprenticeship. *It’s an almost dead art I’m teaching you here, young one*, he had said. *Once the ghul-makers ran rampant over God’s great earth,*

and more of our order were needed. These days...well, few men use ghuls to prey on one another. The Khalif has his soldiers and his court magi to keep what he calls order. And if a few fiendish men still follow the Traitorous Angel's ways and gain their power through the death and dismembering of poor people, well, that's of little concern to those who rule from the Palace of the Crescent Moon. Even in other lands the ghul hunters are not what we once were. The Soo Pashas have their mercenaries and their Glorious Guardians. The High Sultaan of Rughal-ba controls those few who still know our ways. They are part of his Heavenly Army, whether they wish it or not. Our work is not like the heroism of the old stories. No vast armies of abominations stand before us. These days we save a fishmonger here, a porter's wife there. But it is still God's work. Never forget that.

But in the many years since Doctor Boujali had first said these words to Adoulla it sometimes seemed that the scale arm was swinging back in the old direction. Adoulla and his friends had dispatched enough fiendish creatures over the decades to make him suspect that the old threats were starting to regain a foothold on God's great earth. Yet He had not deigned to raise scores of new ghul hunters. Instead, for reasons known only to He Who Holds All Answers, God had seen fit to pile trouble after trouble onto the stooped shoulders of a few old folks. One day—one day very soon—Adoulla feared his spine would snap under the strain.

Why was Adoulla made to bear so big a burden alone? When would others learn to defend themselves from the servants of the Traitorous Angel? What would happen after he was gone? Adoulla had asked Almighty God these questions ten thousand times in his life, but He Who Holds All Answers had never deigned to respond. It seemed that Adoulla's gifts were always just enough to keep the creatures he faced in check, but he wondered again why God had made his life in this world such a tiring, lonely chore.

Still, as tired of life as he sometimes felt, and as foolish as he found most men to be, he could never quite manage to leave people to their cruelest fate. He drew in a resigned breath, let it out again, and stood. His teabowl was empty. Digging into the seemingly endless folds of his moonlight white kaftan, Adoulla drew forth a copper fals and slapped it onto the table.

As if he'd been summoned by the sound, Yehyeh appeared. He exchanged God's peaces with Raseed, then cast a cross-eyed frown at Faisal's bloody clothes. But all he said as he and Adoulla embraced and kissed on both cheeks in the familiar parting gesture was, "Stay safe, Buzzard Beak."

"I will try, Six Teeth," Adoulla replied. He turned to Raseed and Faisal. "Come on, you two."

Raseed stepped silently out from where he leaned against the teahouse wall. It was like watching a shadow come to life and peel itself from the sandstone. They joined the flow of the Mainway, Adoulla and the dervish keeping the child between them.

At the corner Adoulla waved over Camelback, a porter he'd known for years. Camelback was nearly a foot shorter than Adoulla but had shoulders enough for two men.

The men exchanged God's peaces and cheek kisses. Adoulla pressed a coin into the porter's palm. "Take Faisal here to Mistress Miri Almuoussa's place in the Singers' Quarter." He had to speak loudly to be heard over a braying donkey half a block ahead.

The child panicked all over again. "But...but...don't you need me to come with you, Doctor? To show you the way?"

"No, child," Adoulla said, leaning down. "I will use my magic to track the ghuls. You would slow us down. And, besides, I will not put you in danger."

“I’m not afraid.”

Looking into his eyes, Adoulla believed him. If Faisal came across the ghuls again, he would not run a second time. And that could only mean a little boy’s death. Adoulla had seen such before. He had no desire to bear witness to it again.

“I promise you, Faisal, we will avenge your family. But your mother gave everything so that you could live. Do not throw that away so quickly. You will make her happiest by being a good boy and living a long life.” Adoulla paused, letting the words sink in.

The child nodded, though he was clearly unconvinced. He went with Camelback, and they were soon swallowed by the crowd. Adoulla turned to Raseed only to find the dervish glaring at him.

“What? Why are you scowling so, boy?” Somewhere behind them on the street someone dropped something that broke loudly and gave off a vinegared scent.

Raseed glanced back, glanced at Adoulla, and sniffed. “You just sent a child barely ten back to a house of ill repute.” He pursed his thin lips in disapproval.

The little holy man could be so thick sometimes. “I sent him to his *Auntie*’s house. To one of the few places in the city where a penniless little orphan would be well-treated even were he not related to the proprietress. Miri and her girls always have need of an errand boy or two.”

“O believer! If a man asks you to chose between virtue and your brother, choose virtue!” Raseed quoted from the Heavenly Chapters. “There are charitable orders where the boy would be better served. To grow up among such degenerate women is...”

Adoulla felt his fire rise at the boy’s words. The last time he’d seen her—almost two years ago now—Miri Almoussa had made it clear that she wanted nothing more to do with him. Nonetheless, he’d be damned if he’d stand for her being insulted. He made his voice dangerous. “About whom exactly are you speaking, boy?”

The dervish clearly thought better of elaborating. His blue turban bobbed in a bow. “My apologies, Doctor. I meant only that a virtuous upbringing in one of the city’s orphan halls, where the boy could learn a trade, would—”

“Would doom the boy to six nights a week of under-the-sheets *upbringing* by some drunken ‘Godly servant of children.’ They’d leave him alone on Prayersday. Hmph. He’d learn a trade all right.”

“Doctor! I can’t believe—” Raseed’s words were cut off when a big bull of a woman shouldered her way between the pair, cursing them for standing idle in the street. Adoulla started walking again, and the dervish followed.

“Please, boy,” Adoulla said, “spare me your solemn protestations regarding that which you know nothing of. He’d be more likely to become a whore in one of those terror houses than he would if he’d been living at Miri’s from the day of his birth. In my orphan days, I dodged such places for the dungeons they were. Nothing’s changed. Now!” Adoulla half-shouted, clapping his hands together in an effort to disperse the argument. “I need to go home to gather some spell supplies. Then we head out of the city. Let’s get moving. If we linger too long, I’ll end up thinking better of this.”

They quickened their pace as much as the press of people would allow. The sun shone clearly as they stepped out of the street and its building-shadows and crossed the open space of Angels’ Square. Adoulla did not stop and marvel yet again at the almost-living expressions on the ancient statuary

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